My God and My All

The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi

ELIZABETH GOUDGE

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Author's Note

Such a number of books have been written about Saint Francis, and so many of them works of scholarship, that a writer who is not a scholar should apologize for the presumption of attempting yet another. My only excuse is that I wanted to write it so much that I had to do so; my hope is that it may serve to introduce Saint Francis to a few who do not know him well and perhaps make them want to know him better. At the end of this book they will find a short list of books which will give them a deeper knowledge of him than this one can do. Though some are out of print they are all to be found in the public libraries. Where I have quoted from the *Fioretti* I have used the translation of Dr. Hugh Martin. The translation of The Canticle of the Sun is that of Matthew Arnold. The chapter headings from the *Laude* of Jacopone da Todi are from the translation of Mrs. Theodore Beck. The quotation at the end of the book is from Saint Bonaventure's *Life of Saint Francis.*

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Part I

Francesco Bernadone

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Chapter 1

The Beginning

O why didst thou create me,
Great God of heaven above?
Redeem me, and await me,
Through Jesus Christ my love?

JACOPONE DA TODI
LAUDA XCVIII

IT IS NEVER THE BEGINNING of the story to say a child is born, nor is it the end to say a man has died, for long preparation leads up to every birth, and a death leaves behind it a power for good or evil that works on in the world for longer than the span of life from which it grew. In the case of those whom we call the saints, this power is immeasurable. They are the true makers of men. Other great men may alter the material aspect of life for millions, for generations, but the saints make us for eternity. By emptying themselves, by getting rid of self altogether, they become the channels of God's creative power and by him, through them, we are made. Not alone through them, we know, for every occasion in life makes us, and sometimes the touch of God comes directly upon us, but through them more than we realize. In this life we cannot know how much we owe to saints we have never heard of, or to saints who live with us unrecognized, but there are a few saints whose light sends such a beam through the darkness of this world that the darkness not only cannot extinguish it but is forced to recognize it and cannot forget it.

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Francis of Assisi is one of these. He lived eight centuries ago and he died in early middle age, yet few of us in the Western world today, even if we know little about him, are not aware of him. Like a fresh stream springing up in the desert he is the source of so many good things. His influence upon European music, art, drama, and politics has been a study for many scholars, yet it is as a Christian that he matters to us, as a humble poor man who set himself to tread as closely as he could in the footsteps of Christ, perhaps as closely as any man has ever done, and by so doing shames us. Looking at him we see what it means to be a Christian, and what it costs. His story is not only endearing, it is terrifying. Yet without the fear and shame he would not have so much power over us, for we know in our hearts that what is worth having costs everything. And so his power lives on and we cannot measure it because it is nowhere near its end.

He was born in Assisi in 1182, but we do not know in what season of the year, though it is good to imagine that he who so loved light and fire was born in summer, in the days of the pride and beauty of the Italian sun, and that his mother, as she waited for his birth, looked out from some green bower upon her rooftop over the vast landscape of plain, forest, and mountain that was to be the setting for her son's life and death. The Italian ladies of the Middle Ages spent much time upon the flat roofs, for their houses were dark, with small windows that in the absence of glass had to be closed with shutters against wind and weather. Their turbulent menfolk lived mostly in the streets, when they were not riding out to fight their neighbors, and upon the roofs the women had peace and quiet to do their spinning and weaving and to sing their songs. All the people of Assisi sang a great deal, for this was a century of song. The country people had their *laude,* centuries-old litanies and hymns befitting the different seasons, and twenty years before the birth of Francis the singing bards of Provence, the troubadours, began to invade Italy, and their songs were sung everywhere in the castles of the nobles, the houses of the merchants, and up and down the streets of the city.

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According to tradition the Lady Pica Bernadone was a lady of Provence, of gentle birth, the daughter of the Count of Boulement. Provence was at this time the most civilized of the provinces of Europe, and the Lady Pica was probably more cultured than the other ladies of Assisi, gentler and more fastidious and sensitive, and perhaps for this reason lonely in her fine house, in exile from her native land, and lonely too in her husband's long absences. Pietro Bernadone was a cloth merchant and much of his life was spent in commercial journeys. The richest of the merchants were those who dealt in textile stuffs. They were also the bankers of the time, and their wagons were often laden with the sums levied by the popes in England and France. They traveled to the great fairs in Europe in stately cavalcades that were strongly guarded. At these fairs they did business with merchants from every country in the known world, even from Africa, Egypt, and Greece, for the crusades had done much to break down the barriers between one country and another, and this was an age of travel. They talked to each other in the lingua franca, the international language of Europe. They were cosmopolitan men, and at this time they were fast becoming almost the equals of the nobles in importance, merchant princes whose arrival at a castle was a major event. In Provence they were considered nobles of a second order and when Pietro Bernadone came to the castle of the Count of Boulement, and wooed and won the Lady Pica, her marriage would not have been considered a *mésalliance* for her. As our story goes on we shall think that Francis was more like his mother than his father. He was sensitive as she was, gentle and fastidious, and perhaps from her he inherited his capacity for fruitful loneliness, but it was probably from his father that he inherited his courage and determination, for success such as Pietro Bernadone enjoyed is not built up without these qualities, and certainly it was from his father that he inherited his early extravagance and love of ostentation.

The house where Pica waited for her child was built near the marketplace, in the center of the hum and stir of the city's life. Assisi in those days was not the quiet city that we know today but

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full of turmoil and excitement, rent at intervals by savage feuds with neighboring cities, and by the struggle against the German nobles that was convulsing nearly all Italian cities at this time. For seven hundred years Italy had endured one Teutonic invasion after another. This barbarous people passed over the country like a recurring pestilence, leaving each time not only devastation behind them but also new deposits of their hated selves. The German nobles built themselves strong castles on mountain crags, seized the lands about them, enslaved the peasants and assaulted the cities. But they never succeeded in subduing the cities in any social sense; they usually ended in being thrown out or absorbed. At the time of Francis's birth Assisi, after a hard struggle, had lost her independence to Conrad of Lutzen, now Duke of Spoleto and Count of Assisi. From his castle on the mountain above he looked down upon her and she lay at his feet in apparent subjection. But she was only biding her time. In the background of her life was the great continuing struggle between the pope and the emperor, between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, of which her own small struggle was an echo. On the whole the Ghibellines were the party of the nobles, who upheld the emperor and were opposed to the growing power of the papacy. The Guelfs represented the indigenous Italians and included the merchants and the middle classes, who looked to the pope for support in their fight for civic liberty. Later Francis was to fight his own hard battle for freedom, deliverance from the bondage of the world and of himself, but the love of freedom, that of all things seems to raise men and nations to the noblest endeavor of which they are capable, came to him in part from the spirit of the time.

Assisi, built on a spur of Monte Subasio, was an old city even in those days, though all the new building that had taken place in her had given her a colorful appearance. The Emperor Charlemagne had destroyed most of the Roman town with its colonnades and temples, though the old walls had stood up against his assaults for so long that he had had to enter the city at last by a ruse. The gate had been opened to him by one of his own men, who had climbed

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into the town through a drain during the night. Having got inside he razed the city and put the population to the sword for having resisted him, and one wonders that Francis had such a love for Charlemagne. He did however order the rebuilding of the city, and the new Assisi rose in beauty from the ruins of the old buildings. The ground floors of the new houses, up to a height of ten or twelve feet, were built of stone, the rosy stone that was quarried from Monte Subasio, and supported the timbered walls and balconies above, which were plastered over and painted with bright colors. The cathedral of San Ruffino in which Francis preached was not yet completed but the bells of the episcopal church of Santa Maria Maggiore, and of the churches of San Giorgio and San Nicholas, rang out over the city and over the city walls to the countryside beyond. In the thickness of the walls were ancient gateways, opening upon views of incomparable beauty.

From all the small windows and from the roofs of the city there were glorious views, for the name Assisi that was once Ascesi, Ascent, describes it well. The crowded houses climb up the hill one beyond the other and look over each other's shoulders. The Lady Pica, in the days before her child's birth, watched anxiously from her windows or her roof, hoping that her husband, away on his travels, would come back in time so that she would not be alone in her ordeal. In the morning, as the sun rose over the crest of the mountain behind her, she saw the forested plain of Umbria bathed in golden light, the river Tescio flashing like glass, the castled villages on their fortified heights surrounded by terraced vines, olives, and cypress trees and small bright fields, the whole glorious scene ringed round with cloudlike mountains. There were distant cities built on the spurs of the mountains and on a clear morning she saw the terrible Perugia rising up on her great isolated hills as though to search out her enemies. Assisi was one of them and to Assisians she was not a reassuring sight in the early morning, when the rising sun lit up her invincible Etruscan walls and her seven hundred strong towers. At evening, when the sun dropped behind the mountains at her back, she disappeared into the deepening

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shadows and in the starlit sapphire night she disappeared altogether. Winding across the plain through the forest were the rough roads that followed the tracks of the old Roman ways, but though Pica knew where they were and watched them she did not see her husband's train of guarded wagons lumbering home, and he was not with her when her labor came upon her.

Tradition says it was long and hard and that as the hours passed and her child was not born she asked to be taken to the stable that adjoined the house, that she might feel a little nearer to Mary, the Mother of God, and that in the stable her child was born. Today the little place is a chapel, the Chapel of the Infant Francis.

The babe was christened in Santa Maria Maggiore and was called Giovanni after John the Baptist. Pica could not have chosen a better name for him, for in the years to come he was a man who made ready in the hearts of men a highway for his God. But Pietro Bernadone, when he came home to delight in his firstborn son, called him Francesco, the little Frenchman, because of his love for France and his French-born wife. And Francis all his life loved all things French, and in moments of deep emotion it was always the French tongue that came to his lips. No two names could have suited him better, symbolizing as they do the two sides of his nature, the knightly and the ascetic.

With his father so much away the great influence upon Francis in his childhood was that of his mother. He learned Latin and his letters from the priests of San Giorgio, who kept a school next to the church at the eastern gate of the city, but from Pica he learned French, and the legends of chivalry that the minstrels were singing all around Europe at the courts and fairs, the stories of Charlemagne and Roland, of Tristram and King Arthur, stories of heroism and knightly deeds that lit up the little boy's lively imagination and appealed to the courage and gaiety that were a part of him from the beginning. Like all sensitive and imaginative children he lived in a world of vivid daydream and was himself by turns knight, troubadour, crusader and lover of a fair lady, and he organized all the other children in many wonderful games.

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For he was always a leader and whatever he did others flocked after him. He had that unconscious sense of drama which all great men possess, that sixth sense which has been called the sense of theater. In his life of Saint Francis, Sabatier draws an attractive picture of the children playing in the streets that were their playground when their fathers were out of the way at business or war. By day they played at soldiers and processions up and down the steep narrow ways, and at evening they went singing and dancing to one of the open squares of the city, those terraces that occur so often in Assisi and that are like lookout towers from which you can gaze out at the great and frightening distances that are beyond and below. Here perhaps Francis sometimes grew silent, his chin propped on some parapet, looking at the distant mountains and dreaming of the great world beyond them. Rome was there, and the fair land of France, and the Holy Land where men fought and died to win back the Holy Places for Christ. He would be a knight and ride to all those fabulous places, and fight great battles and win undying fame. He longed for knighthood more than he longed for anything else.

With his mother he went for walks outside the city walls, but they did not go far because it was unsafe to go beyond the circle of cultivated land that surrounded each town and village and abbey; beyond in the forests were robbers and wolves ready to pounce upon unwary children. Close to Assisi were numerous chapels and wayside shrines, and it is said that Pica took him to the little church of San Damiano and that they prayed there together. Built on the mountain slope not far from the city, and facing them as they turned homeward, was the Benedictine abbey of Monte Subasio with its fields, olive groves, and vineyards spread about it, a symbol of the wealth and power of the Church at this time.

Yet all was not well with this powerful Church. The wayside chapels were often ruinous and neglected and in the wealthy abbeys were many men who had gone there to escape from the danger and turmoil of the times rather than to worship God. Many of the clergy had become corrupt and ballads ridiculing them

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were sung all over Europe. Benefices were put up to the highest bidders and bishops extorted money from simple priests. There was much superstition and heresy and the pope himself declared that only fire and sword could cleanse the corruption of the times. Sermons were preached in Latin which the poor folk could not always understand. They longed for God but they were confused, ignorant, and suffering. They needed a poor man like themselves, humble and simple as they were, to come out from among them and preach to them repentance and the love of God. The times were ripe for that resurgence of the saints that was on its way.

2

THE YEARS PASSED UNEVENTFULLY until Francis was sixteen years old and then they lifted him on the flood of great events. In January 1198 the great Pope Innocent III ascended the pontifical throne, confronting a new emperor less vigorous than his predecessors, and a fresh passion for liberty spread over the country. The pope's policy was to increase the power of the papacy by welding the Christian states into a confederacy under his rule, and he set himself to eject the German nobles from those provinces over which the pope had formerly claimed overlordship. He demanded that Conrad of Lutzen should deliver up his fortress, the Rocca Maggiore of Assisi, and surrender all his holdings to the pope. The old Duke knew he could do nothing else and he set out for Narni, a city to the south of Assisi, to make his submission to the cardinals there. It was for this that the people of Assisi had been waiting for so long. As soon as he had gone they stormed out of the city up the mountain to the castle, and battered it into ruins. Then they attacked the houses of the nobles within the city and set most of them on fire; built so largely of wood they burned easily, and Perugia, the city of Imperial sympathies, saw the leap of the flames with her terrible watching eyes. And she too bided her time. Vengeance accomplished, the people of Assisi set to work to rebuild

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the ruinous old walls of the city. The whole population labored on these walls, Francis without doubt among them, learning the trick of carrying stones and wielding a trowel that later stood him in good stead. One can picture the scene in winter sunshine, the great panorama below the city perhaps snow-covered, the distant mountains looking as though cut out of crystal, the laughter and the singing carrying far in the clear frosty air. One can imagine the excitement, the surge of joy in freedom, and one can picture too the boy Francis, his thin brown face alight with eagerness, his dark eyes flashing, not caring if his shoulders ached with the weight of the stones he carried on them or that his hands were bruised and torn. The storming and destruction of the Rocca, the burning of the houses, and the rebuilding of the walls, was probably the most exciting thing that had yet happened to him. It was his initiation into manhood.

As the eldest son he was destined for his father's business and worked with his father, learning the art of money-getting. One cannot imagine that he was very proficient at this, but he loved getting rid of it, for he was both generous and extravagant. Once a beggar came to the warehouse and begged alms for the love of Christ. At first Francis refused him, for his father had probably brought him up to regard poverty as disaster and beggars as contemptible, but the beggar had not been gone for very long before he suffered one of those quick revulsions of feeling that were typical of him, and reproached himself bitterly. "He asked me in the name of Christ, how could I have been so hardhearted?" he reproached himself, and ran out of the warehouse and down the street and did not rest until he had found the beggar and made him a generous gift; and from that day he never turned away anyone who begged in the name of Christ.

As once he had been prince among the children, so now he was prince of the young men and boys of Assisi. Even the sons of the nobles recognized the born leader in him and followed him delightedly. He outdid them all in extravagance, in wild fantasies, in largesse and laughter. Once the dancing, singing children were

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in bed the streets were theirs, and when their feastings were over they would pour out into the narrow ways carrying their torches, a torrent of noise and light and color that kept the citizens awake until the dawn came, the Assisian love of processions as strong in them as when they were children. Pietro Bernadone protested at the princely expenditure, for Francis spent an inordinate amount of money on the fantastic clothes he designed for himself, and on the wine for the feasts, but he loved the boy and was proud of this son of his, who not only took his place as easily with young men of rank as though he were himself of noble birth, but was also their accepted leader.

Yet he did not dominate them, and that he should always have been able to lead men without having in his character one trace of that love of power which mars the character of so many leaders of men is one of the remarkable things about him. He had ambition, but it was a romantic and chivalrous ambition and had even then an otherworldliness about it. He was determined to be a great man, but a man after the pattern of Galahad and Roland rather than Alexander, a champion of great causes and a lover of Christ. For even now he was passing beneath the dominion of Christ, even if he did not know it. When the name of Christ was mentioned he was always suddenly quiet. If he heard an obscene word he would turn his head away and he did not succumb to the grosser temptations. Perhaps it was partly in this fastidiousness that his power over his companions lay; without the slightest affectation of superiority he was yet a little different from themselves. And then they must have delighted in his abounding vitality, his brilliant fantastic imagination, "the charm of his gentleness and his courtly bearing." He had a clear and musical voice and like all young men of that time knew how to play the viol and sing to it the songs of the troubadours that he loved so well. And he was immensely generous, both as friend and host, prodigal of himself as well as of his possessions. Altogether an unusually attractive young man, even if he had no good looks to commend him except his slender

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grace of body and his large dark shining eyes. Pica, when her neighbors commented upon these things, and being Italian they no doubt commented with much vociferation and reiteration, replied quietly, "I will tell you how this son of mine will turn out; he will become a son of God."

Perugia did not wait for long. Some of the German nobles who had had their homes destroyed became émigrés within her walls, and the remainder of the Imperial party still living in Assisi spent their time intriguing against her and finally appealed to Perugia for help. Perugia was delighted to give it and four years after the destruction of the Rocca the two cities were at war. Foligno joined Perugia, and the smaller cities, Nocera, Spello, Rosciano and Bastia, allied themselves under the red and blue flag of Assisi. All the men of Assisi, from eighteen to sixty years of age, joined the army, Francis serving in the cavalry and providing his own horse and equipment. The city hummed with the noise of preparation, the ring of hammer on anvil as armor and weapons were forged and repaired, the shouting of commands, singing and laughter, the yells of excited children, and the neighing of the war horses being exercised outside the walls. Then they were ready and in all their glory streamed out of the city gates with trumpets sounding and banners floating in the wind.

From the city walls the old people, the women and children watched them go. Pica would have been there, and Pietro if he was at home, full of mixed pride and dread like other parents of young sons. From Perugia the cavalry and infantry streamed out, and the two armies met each other not far from Perugia, where an old Roman bridge that had known the tramp of the Legions crossed the Tiber at Ponte San Giovanni. Uccello's picture of the rout of San Romano in the National Gallery in London, though it is of later date, nevertheless gives one the feeling of this little battle. There are the floating banners and the long thin trumpets, the knights in their heavy armor wielding battle-axes and pikes, the plunging horses with their bright trappings, and to one side of

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the picture a bareheaded boy, whose helmet must have fallen from his head, riding along as peacefully and quietly as though the battle were no more than a tourney, a boy who might be Francis himself. In the distance is the Italian landscape, a little hill, a terraced field, an apple tree, and a hedge of roses in full bloom. By the standard of the Legions, by the standard of our fearful battles of today, this battle was a very small affair, but it was a savage little fight all the same. A Perugian poet wrote of it:

> Fallen are the lords of Assisi, and their limbs are all mangled,
> Torn apart and defaced, so their own cannot know them;
> There is no head where the foot is, their entrails are scattered,
> The eye no longer looks from the socket, its one-time window.

Perugia with her greater power won the fight with ease and Francis was among those who were taken prisoner. Perugia was never very merciful to prisoners and Francis and his companions had to march bound through the streets of the grim city, dragging their conquered banners in the dirt behind them to the Palace of the Captain, to be thrust into the dungeon there. The imprisonment lasted for nearly a year, while negotiations for peace dragged on between Assisi and Perugia, and through the whole ordeal Francis was merry amongst his depressed and irritable companions, for he had his private country of escape, his daydreams in which he was the hero of every story that his picturesque imagination could weave about himself. The men with him thought he was mad to be so merry. "Would you know why I am merry?" he retorted. "I see the day when all the world will bow in homage before me." But he was not too absorbed in his dreams to be unaware of the suffering near him. One of the prisoners had in some way injured one of the others and the rest of them would have nothing to do with him. He was left by himself, miserable and bitter. Francis was always so beloved and popular himself that he could not bear it. He sought him out, won him by gentle compassion, and finally healed the breach and brought him back into the circle of comradeship.

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And so the year dragged on and they were set free at last. They came out into the sunlight again, rode home across the plain and saw Assisi on her hill among the tall cypress trees, the vineyards and the olives. They rode in through the gate of the city and were at home.

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