

MR. CHESTERTON INTERPRETS ST. FRANCIS

By James J. Daly, S. J.

MR. CHESTERTON must have enjoyed the writing of this little book about St. Francis of Assisi. All his prodigious exuberance of mental energy seems to find here congenial conditions for grateful release and exercise. He tells us, by way of apology for his shortcomings as an interpreter of St. Francis, that it takes a saint to write intelligently of a saint. Well, perhaps it does. But it might just as reasonably be maintained that it takes a saint to read intelligently about a saint. If both these proposi-

tions are equally true, and were to be accepted as practical canons in hagiography, the supply and demand would hardly create anything like a market for books about the saints. Mr. Chesterton has at least one virtue which qualifies him to write about a saint. He is a poet. There is what might be called a high poetic potential in the saints which makes them kin to the poet. Scratch a saint and you will find a poet. The saints are usually so engrossed in pouring their poetry into life that they forget to pour it into art. St. Francis of Assisi happened to let some of his flow over into art.

Mr. Chesterton has another qualification which fits him for the task of explaining the great Umbrian Saint to the modern mind—the type which understands Tolstoy and does not love him, and loves Francis and does not understand him. Mr. Chesterton informs us in a prefatory statement that he addresses himself “to that part of the modern world which finds in St. Francis a certain modern difficulty; which can admire him yet hardly accept him, or which can appreciate the saint almost without the sanctity”. And he goes on to say that his only claim to attempt his present task is “that I myself have for so long been in various stages of such a condition. Many thousand things that I now partly comprehend I should have thought utterly incomprehensible, many things I now hold sacred I should have scouted as utterly superstitious, many things that seem to me lucid and enlightened now they are seen from the inside I should honestly have called dark and barbarous seen from the outside, when long ago in those days of boyhood my fancy first caught fire with the glory of Francis of Assisi.”

There is no attempt to give a biog-

raphy. The author wishes to provide an introduction to the life of the Saint, to furnish a commentary on some standard biography-like Father Cuthbert's, which may serve to throw the light of a sweet reasonableness over what to many modern minds are eccentricities and disconcerting displays of fanaticism. He rightly insists on the reality of a saint's love of God as the solution of all the modern difficulties about the so called extravagances of the saints. “Critics”, he says, “will not believe that a heavenly love can be as real as an earthly love. The moment it is treated as real, like an earthly love, their whole riddle is easily solved.” Since science moved us out of our snug mediæval quarters into a more spacious cosmos, we seem to have lost our heads in the stress of a sudden prosperity. The hypothesis that God can love and be loved with a real personal love is about the only hypothesis that does not occur to the mind that calls itself modern. One might suppose that scientific revelations of divine intelligence and power would naturally suggest enlarged ideas of God's love of the individual soul. It is a curious phenomenon that the unrolling of the scroll of God's grandeur, instead of preparing the human mind for corresponding revelations of His love, should lead it only into sweeping denials of His love.

Mr. Chesterton has the moral earnestness of a prophet. If his prophecies are delivered in the lightning flashes of wit and genial humor, without the terrifying accompaniment of thunder, sensitive readers ought to be duly grateful. But we are afraid it is not so. Already the word has been passed that Mr. Chesterton's skill in logic and mastery of words furnish grounds for suspicion rather

than for confidence. Cardinal Newman suffered similarly for his virtues. As a matter of fact, a false assumption or a slip of memory is more glaring when it glitters than when it is dull. When, for instance, in the present volume Mr. Chesterton, groping about for the nearest peg on which to hang an idea, tells us that "it is a curiosity of language that courage actually means running", we are much more startled than would be the case if anyone but Mr. Chesterton had said it.

St. Francis of Assisi. By Gilbert K. Chesterton. George H. Doran Company. (Modern Readers' Bookshelf Series.)