

**Life of St. Francis of Assisi.** By PAUL SABATIER. Translated by Louise Seymour Houghton. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1894.

The notion that the Catholic Church, in the Middle Ages, sat serene and secure, the unquestioned mistress of unquestioning races, is one of which we are gradually weaning ourselves. We might be nearer the truth in affirming the exact opposite. That which chiefly gives the impression of undisputed dominion is, that no nation, no government, had yet detached itself from the Church, although in Albigensianism, and a good while after in Lollardism, and then in Hussism, Europe saw startling anticipations even of this. Unacknowledged sects, however, and

individual heretics swarmed everywhere, from Bulgaria to Spain and Britain. Ireland, indeed, was perhaps the only country that was free of them. The tremendous activity of the Inquisition, with the fearful divergence of its proceedings from the primary instincts of humanity and equity, was not the mere offspring of barbarism and hardness of heart, or of hierarchical anger. It bears witness to an agony of apprehension that the whole frame of Christian society might collapse at any time. We must remember that the heresies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, excepting the Waldenses, contradicted point-blank the doctrines and morals of Christianity. They all teach: two gods, good and evil; the world the work of Satan; matter and sin essentially one; all bodily appetites diabolical; suicide the supreme salvation, except as some of them took the opposite direction, and abandoned their disciples to utter dissoluteness, teaching that the soul cannot be defiled by the body.

The Cathari proper, the severer party, had a strict organization, and flourishing schools attended by the children of nobles. Their mysterious Bulgarian Pope may have flattered himself that he should yet overturn the chair of Peter, and set his own in the Lateran, for his sect was hardly less powerful in Italy than out of it. Indeed, it had even a public school in Rome, and that while Innocent III. was reigning! The terrible Albigensian crusade was a supreme effort of self-preservation. With all its atrocities, it yet, as M. Sabatier remarks, gave the victory to sound reason and good sense.

Yet this success left the Church by no means secure. Sacerdotal holiness and the claims of its magical efficacy had come to fill almost the whole field of view. The oppressed masses began to despair of finding their Redeemer in a haughty, wealthy hierarchy, claiming their obedience neither by purity, love nor beneficence, but by its possession of the keys of heaven, interpreted in the sense of the grossest superstition. Goodness was still found in every rank, from pope to peasant, but it was not in the forefront. Then suddenly, over against the official holiness of the priest, Francis of Assisi came into the field of vision, the living embodiment of the personal holiness of the saint. All men, but first, all Italy, recognized in him such an incarnation of Divine love as had not been seen since the days of Galilee, and learned that God had not forgotten them. The wretched pessimism of the Cathari, remarks the author, fled before him like bats before the sun. Francis of Assisi saved Italy to Christianity.

M. Sabatier points out that the great resurrection of the laity, not yet finally achieved, began in the thirteenth century. In the north it expressed itself in cathedrals whose building and inspiration are laical; in the south, in saints. Francis was a layman, and although bowed under the hand of the hierarchy to accept deacon's orders, never would become a priest. He profoundly venerates the sacrament of the altar, but the one sacrament of which he desires to be himself the minister is the sacra-

ment of Beneficent Love. His later life was a *via dolorosa*, because the Papacy would not let him carry out his original thought, of a lay society, dedicated to the pure service of God in the pure service of men, bound together by a rule of elastic simplicity, antagonizing neither property, learning nor government, but detached from all in order to serve as a leaven to all, its members supplying their simple wants by the labor of their hands, and accepting only so much over as might come from free gratitude and appreciation. Even under their hierarchical modification, the Minorites, as the author remarks, have retained so much of St. Francis' leaven as has made them the most storm-tossed of human societies. The *spirituales* defying the Papacy, and going to the stake in multitudes in vindication of the genuine institute of their founder, must have done much to prepare the way for the later calamities of the hierarchy. Yet, even regarding Franciscanism in its monastic aspect, it cannot be pronounced abortive. It permanently turned the face of monasticism from the desert and towards the world. Its Tertiaries have diffused through Catholic thought with new power the possibility of leading a Christian life in simplicity and devoutness without detachment from the settled relations of life. History shows with what energy in England, and we suppose elsewhere, the Franciscans threw themselves into the vindication of popular rights, as in America long afterwards all the friars passionately pleaded the cause of the Indians.

M. Sabatier thinks that St. Francis' work yet awaits a continuator. He who, identifying himself with the masses like Francis, and like the Son of Man, yet like both applying no other weapon of redress than the fusing power of Love, shall again disclose to immediate consciousness the face of the Father, may well save the twentieth century as Francis saved the thirteenth. Certainly the portrait given in this Life is as bright and distinct as if the Saint were living to-day. He cannot grow obsolete. His character is like his wonderful Canticle of the Sun, too divinely simple to be described. But the things revealed to him, and hidden from the wise and prudent, may turn out, as the author remarks, to be precisely the things for the want of which our sophisticated society is perishing. The frank and profound affection of Francis for his helper Clara completes the portrait.

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