

Francis of Assisi: A New Biography

By Augustine Thompson

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Among the most beloved saints in the Catholic tradition, Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) is popularly remembered for his dedication to poverty, his love of animals and nature, and his desire to follow perfectly the teachings and example of Christ. During his lifetime and after his death, followers collected, for their own purposes, numerous stories, anecdotes, and reports about Francis. As a result, the man himself and his own concerns became lost in legend.

In this authoritative and engaging new biography, Augustine Thompson, O.P., sifts through the surviving evidence for the life of Francis using modern historical methods. The result is a complex yet sympathetic portrait of the man and the saint. Francis emerges from this account as very much a typical thirteenth-century Italian layman, but one who, when faced with unexpected crises in his personal life, made decisions so radical that they challenge his own society?and ours. Unlike the saint of legend, this Francis never had a unique divine inspiration to provide him with rules for following the teachings of Jesus. Rather, he spent his life reacting to unexpected challenges, before which he often found himself unprepared and uncertain. The Francis who emerges here is both more complex and more conflicted than that of older biographies. His famed devotion to poverty is found to be more nuanced than expected, perhaps not even his principal spiritual concern. Thompson revisits events small and large in Francis's life, including his troubled relations with his father, his contacts with Clare of Assisi, his encounter with the Muslim sultan, and his receiving the Stigmata, to uncover the man behind the legends and popular images.

A tour de force of historical research and biographical writing, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* is divided into two complementary parts?a stand alone biographical narrative and a close, annotated examination of the historical sources about Francis. Taken together, the narrative and the survey of the sources provide a much-needed fresh perspective on this iconic figure. "As I have worked on this biography," Thompson writes, "my respect for Francis and his vision has increased, and I hope that this book will speak to modern people, believers and unbelievers alike, and that the Francis I have come to know will have something to say to them today."

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is not a typical biography of Francis of Assisi (1181–1226). Thompson, a Dominican priest and church historian, bases his biography solidly on verifiable material. He seeks the historical Francis, not the Francis of legend, and succeeds admirably in this task. Anyone interested in Francis will like the first part: a well-written, straightforward biography. In the second part, which will appeal to scholars and more serious readers, Thompson discusses in some detail the sources for Francis's life, weighing one against another, and makes some judgments on the work of previous biographers. He also tries to distinguish practices instituted by Francis himself from those instituted later. A well-written, scholarly portrait of a saint whose biography has been based too often on legends. This one is accessible to the lay reader and a treasure for historians."?*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Among Thompson's many keen yet painful insights into the historical Francis, one stands out and serves to bind together the entire narrative and to shed light on the discordant history of the Franciscan order: Leadership was an 'intolerable burden' to Francis, spiritually, 'one he wished to be rid of as quickly as possible.' . . . The stripped-down, bare-bones historical Francis of this biography is at once immensely likeable and deeply disturbing. He is appealing insofar as Thompson makes him seem much more like an ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary things rather than a heaven-sent, self-assured prophet. His befuddlement, his inner turmoil, his inability to control events make him seem not just very human but also much like nearly anyone who is likely to pick up this book."?Carlos Eire, *First Things* (Spring 2012)

"Francis of Assisi so impressed the people of his own time that even before his death a rich field of stories, images, anecdotes, and reports of miracles had sprung up. These so enveloped the saint that many scholars have despaired of uncovering the man behind the legends. But this new, lucid study by Thompson largely achieves this goal. A distinctive feature of the project is its division into two complementary parts. Part 1 is an engaging, well-written new biography of the saint. Part 2 is a closely annotated examination of the sources and debates about Francis. The advantage of this division is that the biography stands alone, unencumbered by scholarly apparatus, yet in the second part the author displays the reasoning that leads him to believe that he gives a truer picture of the man Francis than other biographers do."?*Choice* (October 2012)

"I recommend this book strongly to anyone serious about understanding Francis of Assisi. I admire the clarity and brevity of the writing. With decisiveness, Thompson cuts through the conflicting medieval accounts of each event in Francis' life, adjusts for the hagiographers' spin and creates a credible chronology out of the blurry dates. His knowledge of medieval Italy allows him to provide insightful explanations of the legal, liturgical, and ecclesiastical practices of the time."?Paul Moses, *America*

"The Francis that Thompson portrays is both more complex and more conflicted than older biographies. His famed devotion to poverty was actually more nuanced, and perhaps not even his principal spiritual concern, says Thompson. . . . This new biography may be a more realistic picture of the life of this noteworthy forerunner and well-known spiritual aspirant."?*The Beacon* (January-March 2013)

"This new biography is the work of an accomplished medieval scholar and a Dominican friar, Augustine Thompson OP, who brings to his examination of the Franciscan sources a welcome freshness and objectivity which lead him to question some of the hagiographical assumptions about *il poverello d'Assisi* and the movement which he inspired."?Michael Robson, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (July 2013)

"Thompson's biography of Francis is history-writing at its modern best. It challenges and rewards the non-expert reader who is willing to leave aside holy cards and legends to glimpse one of Christianity's most familiar yet least well-known saints, the beloved, impulsive, contradictory, strange yet attractive Francis of thirteenth-century Italy."?Andrew Thornton, *American Book Review* (March 2013)

"The book's division into two sections, the biography proper followed by the critical apparatus, gives Thompson greater freedom to engage both the primary sources and the tangle of modern Franciscan scholarship more vigorously. Such an arrangement also renders the book eminently accessible to the general reader while maintaining its status as a substantial contribution to a variety of academic disciplines, including Medieval history, cultural studies, Christian spirituality, and Italian literature. . . . By contextualizing and grounding Francis in his precise historical and cultural milieu, Thompson gives us a Francis who is more human, more alive, and more relevant to our own times?and no less a saint."?Scott Surrency, *Canadian Journal of History* (Spring/Summer 2013)

"As one of the best-loved figures in the Christian tradition, Francis of Assisi has been the subjet of innumberable studies and biographies. Is another one necessary? Is there anything further to say? Are new interpretations possible? This biography, by the American Dominican medievalist Augustine Thompson, answers these questions with a resounding 'yes', and the result is a genuinely ground-breaking *tour de force* that should become the standard English language introduction to Francis and his times."?Colman O Clabaigh, OSB, *Religious Life Review* (September/October 2013)

"This is an excellent book for lay readers and professional historians alike with two distinct, albeit related, works between its covers: an elegant and highly accessible biography of St. Francis of Assisi, followed by a learned and in-depth analysis of the most important scholarship on Francis from the late nineteenth century to the present. . . . Thompson's talents as a historian are evident throughout his work. . . . This is not merely a new but also an outstanding biography of St. Francis that deserves a wide readership from scholars immersed

in the study of this legendary saint and also from the many individuals today (Christian and non-Christian alike) who continue to find deep meaning in the life and deeds of this medieval holy man from Assisi"?Bernard Schlager, *The Historian* (April 2014)

"This book earns its place in the modern scholarship bracket on this favoured subject. [Thompson] shows the deepest respect for the Saint but tests every story for the authentic character of Francis the man. . . . [T]his is a critical and masterly work, free of sentimentality, legend and the craft of saintliness"?Damian SSF, *Franciscan* (September 2014)

"A common pitfall faces all the biographers of Francis of Assisi: how reliable are the early legends about the saint? How does one find the 'historical' Francis behind sources that have theological points to make, standard hagiographical tropes to draw on, and political arguments to press? Augustine Thompson, O.P., is acutely aware of this problem and takes a very interesting and unique approach to overcoming it. In this very well-written book, he first gives us a biography of Francis based on the best use of the sources as he understands them, then assesses the biography itself in light of the sources and the scholarship about them. He brings to his examination the careful eye of a trained medieval historian."?Lawrence S. Cunningham, John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology (Emeritus), University of Notre Dame, author of *A Brief History of Saints* and *Saint Francis of Assisi*

"Augustine Thompson, O.P., presents us with a compelling Francis. This is not the heroic founder of a religious order, but an imperfect, yet sensitive individual who is trying to understand how a Christian should live in a thirteenth-century Italian town. Thanks to this impressive biography we have a very new and moving picture of St. Francis of Assisi."?Duane J. Osheim, University of Virginia, author of *A Tuscan Monastery and Its Social World, San Michele of Guamo (1156–1348)*

"Meticulously researched and beautifully written, this book will set a new standard for all studies of the famously familiar and yet deeply enigmatic Francis of Assisi. Avoiding both romantic piety and academic hypercriticism, Augustine Thompson, O.P., a master historian who knows the Italy of Francis as well as anyone, painstakingly assembles a credible portrait. His method is at once simple and sophisticated: Part One comprises a concise biography; Part Two comprises learned explorations of the evidence and of what that evidence does and does not permit us to say."?Thomas F. X. Noble, University of Notre Dame, author of *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*

About the Author

Augustine Thompson, O.P., is Professor of History at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. He is also the author of *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125-1325.*

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