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## SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI, 13TH CENTURY

Reviewed by Gary Potter



It is doubtful many who see these lines will have heard of Emilia Pardo Bazan. The present writer has spent fifty years reading Catholic books, and more than forty reading them in a professional way, and I had never heard of her until a copy of her book, *Saint Francis of Assisi, 13th Century*, recently came into my hands. I still know nothing of her except this book, but with this one, first published in the author's native Spain in 1881, she produced something marvelous.

The English translation I have read, published by Loreto Publications, includes a Prologue written in 1885 evidently for an edition of the work meant for Latin American readers, but it is singularly uninformative as regards the book's author. Penned by somebody named M. Menendez y Pelayo, it provides no biographical information, and says practically nothing - there is merely a passing reference - of other things she wrote. One wishes one knew more about her.

Disconcertingly, Menendez does liken the book to *St. Elizabeth of Hungary*, by Charles de Montalembert, and indeed Pardo Bazan herself in a note "To The Reader" acknowledges being inspired by the Frenchman. Montalembert, of course, was a leading light of liberal Catholicism in 19th-century France, birthplace of the form of the religion that became dominant in the Church in Western Europe, the U.S. and other places after Vatican II, was a champion of "religious freedom," and a founder with Lamennais and Lacordaire of the newspaper *Avenir*, condemned by Pope Gregory XVI in 1831 (Gregory being the first of the popes who would continue to condemn liberalism throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th).

What needs to be kept in mind here is that *St. Elizabeth* was not a polemical work, no more than is Pardo Bazan's *Saint Francis*. Montalembert was attempting to produce what is still too rare when it comes to biographies of saints: instead of a pious tract a work that tries to give the reader a feel for the actual person and the world, or corner of it, in which he lived and in his living succeeded in becoming a saint. This is also what Pardo Bazan does with *Saint Francis*.

The first and most important thing to note about how she does it is her language, her style. Opulent, lavish, colorful, vigorous, lively - these are some adjectives that come to mind in wishing to describe it. To be sure, this Loreto Publications edition of *Saint Francis* is a translation. In that regard Pardo Bazan is more than well served by her translator, Terry Kennis. If you read much and in more than one language, and I have, you learn to tell when a translation is poor, sufficient, good or better than good without needing to look at the original text. Terry Kennis's translation of *Saint Francis* is brilliant.

The interests of full disclosure require I report that Kennis and I worship together, along with 300 others, at Mass said according to the extraordinary rite at St. Mary Mother of God Church in Washington, D.C. However, when I opened *Saint Francis*, thinking I would at first give it no more than a skimming, I became immediately so caught up, I read a long way without wondering about the identity of the translator, assuming it would be that of an utter stranger. That is, my opinion of the translation was formed before I knew who did the work. In any event, it is true, as Kennis remarked when I told her how much I admired what she had done, no translator can be better than his material. That said, I think Terry probably did bring a special quality to her labor: that of love. She is a Third Order Franciscan.

A few lines ago, I spoke of getting caught up in *Saint Francis* as soon as I began to read it. The first thing we read in a book is its Introduction. It is to risk being crass to say it, but Pardo Bazan's 101-page Introduction to *Saint Francis* by itself is worth the price of the entire volume. Scholarship during the 130 years since she wrote has uncovered facts not known in her day even as it has disproved some matters that then seemed settled, but she was correct in her general view, one whose correctness many mainstream - i.e., non-Catholic - historians are only now coming to share. It is that the so-called Dark Ages were in many ways not as "dark" as was once commonly held, and that the centuries we call Medieval may really be seen as a kind of early Renaissance or, more precisely, a Christian Renaissance - a Renaissance before the period to which we give that name divorced itself from God and made Man the measure of nearly all it did, thus preparing the ground for the following disastrous epoch that we think of as no more but in which in fact, in many important respects, we still live, the Enlightenment.

Pardo Bazan writes at such length of the Dark Ages and Medieval time because she wants her readers to see and fully appreciate the historical background against which the figure of her subject, St. Francis, finally emerges. However - and this is where a reader begins to sense how valuable her work is - she also wants us, men and women of the modern age, to see ourselves against the same background. After all, the history that preceded St. Francis is also our history. But let Pardo Bazan explain this in her words:

“Just as the 13th century is the culmination of the middle ages, it is also that of the saints. No other epoch produced saints that occupy such an exalted place in history in such a way that there is scarcely a single sphere of human activity in the 13th century that did not depend on the personality and deeds of a notable saint. St. Louis, St. Ferdinand, Sts. Elizabeth of Hungary and of Portugal, for the monarchy; St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, for science; St. Dominic and St. Francis of Assisi for society - an army of giants that fill a century with their names. To write the chronicles of its saints is to write that of the 13th century.”

Then came the 14th, when reform was desperately needed. “Such retrocession in the 14th century demonstrates how great was the epoch that preceded it. We must not, therefore, consider it unique, irreplaceable and perfect, nor believe that the program of Christianity was fully realized. The Middle ages are gone forever, without its being humanly possible to restore them. God set their time and, when they ended, they fell into the abyss of times. We are free to love them and admire them, but we will never resurrect them. It is licit to undertake their vindication, denying that humanity went about groping and sunk in the shadows of ignorance until the classic torch of the Renaissance gleamed; just as it is fair to declare that, in no other period does history honor so many exalted and sublime personages than in the medieval.... To go from this to praising the Middle ages without restriction, to imagining that solely by returning to its institutions and customs the law of Christ would rule universally, there is a great distance. If something stands out in the sketch we have made of the Middle ages it is nothing less than the continued modification, the endless progress that was realized in it. To those who might try to go back to the middle centuries, we will ask them, to what moment? To what period?... Because, if it is considered closely, each century, each decade, each lustrum comprised a distinct phase, a consecutive course, if you will, but different, of humanity. In that series of transformations we find just one fixed point, one invariable bearing, like the one that indicates the polar star. That course was Christianity....

“The modern age offers a contradiction to what we observe in the Middle ages.... [It] has much that is good about it, but it will lose everything if it is not convinced that it received it from Christianity.”

Lose everything? We may recall here a prediction remembered by Pope John Paul II at the end of his little book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. It was that of Andre Malraux, the novelist and Minister of Culture in France under General DeGaulle. He was no Catholic, but forecast that the 21st century would be the century of religion or it would not be at all.

These lines on Saint Francis of Assisi, 13th Century are coming close to as long as a review of a book should be without having arrived yet at the figure of St. Francis as portrayed by Pardo Bazan. Perhaps all she relates of him across 400 pages can be summarized by stating what kind of saint Pardo Bazan's St. Francis is not. He is not, thank Heaven, a wispy fellow who walked around with a squirrel on his shoulder talking to birds.

Actually, the reality of him, as with so many of the saints, can be hard to take. Consider the fact that is the best-known about him, his stigmata. To this day, the stigmata of St. Francis are the only instance of this mysterious phenomenon that has been officially recognized by the Church. But what were they really like, these wounds his body bore? Were they simply neat little holes from which a little blood now and then ran, that maybe itched a bit but caused no great inconvenience? That is a nice way to think of them if we want to be as comfortable in our piety as most of are in our physical lives. The picture fits the prim statue of the saint (with the squirrel and birds) that can be seen standing in suburban backyards.

“In truth, the wounds were...open, deep, his hands and feet pierced through and through, each by a dark rust-colored nail. The heads protruded, the points inside were as though bent and hammered, in such a way that one could insert a finger within the hook. The cluster of nerves, muscles and tendons were left free, but on setting his foot on the ground they caused excruciating torture and, for that reason, from then on Francis had to use a staff and, for his journeys, a donkey. St. Clare devised some ingenious grooved shoes to mitigate the Saint's pains.

“The nails were like sinewy flesh, hard, tough, solid and so much a single piece that, by pushing on the head, the point stuck out more.. Fresh and copious blood flowed from all the wounds. Leo was the one assigned to staunch it, applying cloths he changed frequently. The wound in his side, that had abundant hemorrhages, measured three fingers in width. These details, so dramatically realistic and recorded by authors contemporary with Francis, help one to understand the state of physical annihilation he suffered until his death...”

If anyone is wondering, Pardo cites sources for what she reports.

A final note: Lovers of art and culture will find in this book much, apart from Pardo Bazan's writing, of special interest to them in such chapters as “Franciscan Inspiration in the Arts,” “Saint Francis and Poetry,” and even “The Franciscan Philosophers”.

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