

*Francis of Assisi*, by Augustine Thompson

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue

## In Review



### **Francis of Assisi**

By Augustine Thompson  
Cornell University Press

When we think of the hagiography of Francis of Assisi, Qohelet's wry musing comes to mind: "Of making many books there is no end."

Not long after Francis died, aspirations, fantasies, power plays and all kinds of spiritualities began to attach themselves to his life. No greater flattery can be imagined than this, and yet the very allure of the saint's story frustrates our modern impulse to know the real Francis. The average Christian would rank him as the best-known, most important Christian of the entire Middle Ages, and yet scholarly works on things medieval barely give him a mention.

Now we're getting some help. Critical editions of Francis's few writings and of the earliest biographies of him have appeared, and level-headed reconstructions of his life are being published. At the top of my list is this volume by Augustine Thompson, who has also published works on Thomism, the Roman emperor Gratian and the culture of medieval Italian communes. He is a Dominican—a member of the Franciscans' rival order—but no piety bleeds into his work.

Thompson's portrayal of Francis is intriguing and inspirational, but without the customary fluff and ideology. The author is gentle when debunking pop images of Francis, like the silliness of the biopic *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* and the idea that Francis wrote "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace" and said "Preach at all times; use words if necessary." I might quibble with some of Thompson's conclusions, but the net effect is informative and even lovely. Thompson displays occasional eloquence and his narrative is constantly clear, unencumbered by scholarly jargon.

The structure of the book is exemplary, a model of communication from a scholar to a broad, nonacademic audience. The first 141 pages tell the reconstructed story of Francis's life. Then Thompson graces us with 130 pages of the scholarly rationale for the story, presented in paragraph-length accounts of debates over whether a source is reliable and explanations for why Thompson drew this or that conclusion, with references for further exploration. Even here he doesn't get bogged down in minutiae, and he doesn't strive to impress with an overload of bibliographical citations.

Thompson knows the lay of the land in Italy, including the buildings of Francis's time, some of which are still standing. He reveals that Francis didn't appear out of nowhere; he lived in a familiar though remarkable way, given medieval piety and the cultural movements of his day. And yet we do get glimpses into the humble brilliance and sheer magnetism that enabled a single person to start a movement that altered European culture.

But to say Francis started a movement suggests that he was a clever strategist who unfurled a plan we might follow ourselves to reform today's church. Far from it. Thompson argues that Francis "seemed to have none of the qualities usually found in a leader, religious or otherwise. He seemed positively averse to the responsibilities that his movement's success forced upon him." He refused to assume a position of authority in his own new order; instead, laser-like, he focused on each individual person he encountered, whether a new friar or a wretched leper.

Almost allergic to structure, Francis jotted down some loose rules only under duress. His call to leave the world "was so intense, so personal, that he never could explain it fully, much less sketch out a program to make it practical or concrete." His expanding projects were undertaken

more out of a sense of obedience to the pope than out of personal conviction that it was the right thing to do. Francis founded his movement in spite of himself.

Whether the brotherhood should grow or not seems never to have crossed his mind . . . One senses that Francis cared little about success or failure.

Ironically, this lack of intentionality might be the hope of the church—something Elaine Heath, in her compelling *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, helps us understand. In the face of structural tinkering and aggressive plotting for how to be a better-run machine, Heath suggests that the church finds itself in a "dark night of the soul" and in "the kind of trouble that requires leadership from those who are holy." Institutions will be timid about embracing such a risky angle, but holiness has stood the test of time, and it is, after all, what Jesus came to create in us and among us. Francis was holy and bereft of slick leadership ability, yet we are still talking about him and his movement and writing new biographies about him eight centuries later.

If anything resembling this plan is part of Thompson's agenda, he does not tip his hand. The highest form of biography may be one that inspires simple awe, a gawking admiration for a life beautifully or quirkily lived. Thompson gets in the vicinity. My favorite on this score will forever be G. K. Chesterton's little book about Francis, not because Chesterton was an incisive reader of medieval texts but because of his felicity of expression. Chesterton wrote with a cheeky, pithy cleverness that was entirely fitting to the puckish, playful manner of life that was the secret of Francis's appeal. Not pretending to have the story right historically,

Chesterton got to the core of why Francis's life was such a delight.

Thompson's stellar engagement with the "real" Francis doesn't dampen that delight at all, and it provides a substantial foundation in reality for our inner hankerings to follow Francis.