

The Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, edited by Gianfranco Malafarina

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue

In Review



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Edited by Gianfranco Malafarina

Thames & Hudson

When I arrived at seminary, I knew nothing about church history, and I found myself instantly enthralled by the christological and trinitarian debates, the rigorous correctives formulated by Augustine and Luther, and Aquinas's and Calvin's

meticulously constructed cathedrals of thought.

But the overall impression you could easily take away would be that these centuries of church history were one long seminar conducted in a massive library, with various theologians and bumlbers filing in, joining the conversation, dying, and being hauled out—all of this indoors, an endless banter of intangible ideas, the delight of eggheads like me.

In college I'd had a course on medieval history and learned nothing of the Trinity, the nature of the Eucharist, Occam's razor, or atonement theories. Instead the professor kept us entranced by vividly depicting tooth decay, odor in the streets, the grim labor of survival, lots of mud, and cowering before petty sheriffs and, yes, priests. What was real religious life like in the Middle Ages while the theologians were jockeying for predominance in their ivory towers?

The mud and odors are no more, but we have artifacts still standing that affected real people more profoundly and directly than the theology being published. The churches and their architecture and art shaped the religious mind-set of people who could not read or hear well in worship. They gawked at images. And because they lacked technology and travel opportunities, these were the only images they knew.

The darling among splendidly artistic cathedrals is stunningly brought to life in *The Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi*. It includes text by the noted scholars Chiara Frugoni and Gianfranco Malafarina about construction, Franciscan rivalries, St. Bonaventure, and restoration of the frescoes after the earthquake of 1997. But as I read, I kept hearing Art Garfunkel singing in my head, "Don't know much about the Middle Ages, looked at the pictures and I turned the pages." But I didn't turn them too fast. Photographers Elio Ciol, Stefano Ciol, and Ghigo Roli provide a feast for the eyes and soul as they lead us on a tour of the frescoes by Giotto, Simone Martini, and Cimabue depicting scenes from the life of St. Francis, and also from the Bible and from the lives of other medieval luminaries. You cannot help but linger over the close-ups of faces, the impressive detail, and above all the emotion that seeps out of the walls and ceilings.

For medieval people, and actually for most people throughout history, this was religious formation. They knew what they knew about Francis because they had craned their necks and studied images of his life. And we can be sure that they didn't want merely the straight facts of the story. The fresco sequence that narrates

Francis's life moves from the humane—his fractured relationship with his father and his penchant for preaching to birds—to visions of a chariot of fire and Francis's long-distance banishing of demons in Arezzo, then back to the mundane. His death doesn't end the story, as the next scene is of a miraculous healing near where his corpse lay. We may be obsessed with uncovering the real Francis; but those who lived just a few years after the true real Francis were obsessed with the legendary and the miraculous. They needed a few miracles, and they showed up in church hoping and believing that the next wonder might happen to them.

Of course, to say these photos show us what medieval people saw isn't quite correct. I've stood in the Basilica of St. Francis several times, and amid the press of fellow tourists jamming the place I had to crane my neck to try to make out what's up high. Even with binoculars, it's hard to see any detail in the curved ceilings. All cathedrals feature works of art that few human beings observe—in the attics, behind pillars, at great heights. Clearly the architects and craftspeople did what they did for God; their art was solely for God's benefit. This raises questions for us regarding what we have and do in our religious places, and if it's for God or for human consumption.

Or entertainment. The images on the walls cause me to wonder about the screens and technology we use in worship today. Some old fogies are mortified that we cast images before worshipers. But St. Francis heard God's call in sanctuaries replete with images and wound up as the subject of even more images in Assisi's basilica and dozens of other churches in Western Christendom. The subject matter may be telling for us: medieval people saw in these images moments of real-life holiness, which they were to mimic or at least adore. And if we think about icons of great saints, we should imagine not merely that we look at the saints, but that they also look at us. In this basilica, Francis looks down on us and gazes toward us with St. Anthony and St. Clare, watching, loving, challenging. Can our screens today serve as two-way windows into the heavenly realm?

G. K. Chesterton wryly suggested that "it is really very enlightening to realize that Christ was like St. Francis," not just the other way around. St. Francis took the Bible literally—in that he took what he read about Jesus as his to-do list for the day. And so he brought Jesus to life in his actions. Onlookers saw a palpable incarnation of Christ—first during St. Francis's life, and then in fresco. The revolutionary, hypnotic, and transformative life of St. Francis did not need biographers or hagiographers as much as it needed artists. Cimabue, Martini, and Giotto rose to the wonder that was

Francis. Today as we look at the pictures and turn the pages, we admire and are even moved, like our ancestors in the faith.

A few years ago, in a used bookstore in Vermont, I picked up a similar coffee table book full of photos of Giotto's frescoes in Assisi and elsewhere. The book was printed in 1958, and the words are all in Italian, which I regrettably do not read. But I love the book, and I love its new friend, *The Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi*. We who smish words and voraciously gobble them up feel most secure in libraries housing billions of them. We need to look, to gawk, to linger over what we can't manage or even describe verbally. On the road to Damascus, and at Christ's nativity, transfiguration, and resurrection, nobody knew what to say anyhow.