

WHY THE PAST MATTERS

Where we see how the past illuminates the present and how the spirit of Francis still invigorates the Church.

“I don’t read many books about history,” a friend told me recently over breakfast at our favorite local diner. He was peppering his hard-boiled eggs as he said it, and the look on his face added, *Give me something I can use. Not a history book.*

He wasn’t interested in reading about long-dead people, historical movements, or bygone eras. He wasn’t jazzed by “pivotal moments” of the past. None of that seemed relevant to my friend, no matter how sexy the marketing copy.

I had just finished answering the question that I am often asked: “What are you working on?” My friend was overstating his position, for sure—although he likes to mouth off a bit, he also reads a lot. But his reaction made me quickly rethink my answer and try again.

“It isn’t a ‘history book,’” I started, emphasizing the phrase I knew he disliked. “It’s a great story of a strange, violent, and uncertain time about eight centuries ago, and one particularly fascinating character. I’m writing about how a

distinct way of belief, behavior, and being got started by the conversion of a singular man named Francis, and how his optimistic faith resonates with and even shapes what I hear people saying they want more of today. . . .”

He was still listening, so I continued. “Okay, so it *is* history. But it’s also about how well-meaning Christians almost killed the faith eight hundred years ago.”

“Is that right?” Now I really had his attention.

“Yeah. And Francis of Assisi saw it coming and turned everything around. In many ways, he was an extremely normal guy. I mean, he had father problems, woman problems, expectations-of-others problems, but one day he began to listen more carefully to what his heart told him despite and beyond those problems. And as he got better at listening to his heart he realized that he was hearing God there.

“This ordinary guy began hearing God talking. That made him think he might be crazy. Maybe he was. But it turned out to be a good kind of crazy.”

“There are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ kinds of crazy?” my friend asked with a smile.

“History proves it out—yes.” I smiled.

“Francis never stopped being an ordinary guy, even when unusual religious things were happening to him, like hearing God’s ‘voice.’ He questioned what he was hearing; he questioned whether he might be a complete fraud. And long after he vowed to remain single, focusing on God instead of women, he wondered if it had all been a mistake; maybe he should have just gotten married and raised a family like everyone else. I like that about him—how he kept doubting. I can relate to that.

“But the majority of people who met him, and heard him talk about faith, and watched what he did with his life, judged him to be sincere and sincerely inspired. For twenty years, thousands of men and women wanted to drop ev-

everything and walk the same path he chose. Though they followed a similar calling, they didn't simply pick up and imitate everything Francis did—following him around like the nitwits in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*—mostly because Francis wouldn't let them. Instead, he showed them how to change their lives where they lived. He was only trying to do what he thought God wanted him to do and encouraging others to do the same. Soon he saw that these followers, in the ways they were tapping into his spiritual vision, were—I realize that it sounds grandiose—well on their way to saving the faith.

“So,” I wrapped up, “that’s what I’m writing about. I want to tell that story.”

“Interesting,” he said. “We could use some of that today. Actually . . . maybe we are sort of in the midst of some of that now, too?”

“Exactly.”

THE PAST LIVES ON IN THE PRESENT

Isn't that why we read and talk about history? Because we are drawn to good stories. And because we hope we might discover how to make our story better today.

Our lives, whether we realize it or not, are wrapped up in about a dozen good stories at any given time, with trajectories and plots much larger than ourselves. Some of them reach back thousands of years, maybe even to the beginning of time.

We talk about history because it can illuminate our present times. This is different from saying what many people believe: that what happened in the past will be repeated in the future, but with different personalities and dates. Har-

vard philosopher George Santayana implied such a cyclic theory of history when he famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” That was in 1905, and the line was quoted again and again in the 1940s and ’50s after our grandparents watched the mistakes of the First World War bring about the Second. But if the saying were really true, if there were truly nothing new under the sun, we’d never witness singular, seemingly inexplicable, events. We’d have to conclude that singular people—such as Gandhi, Van Gogh, Joan of Arc, Galileo, or, yes, Francis of Assisi—fit a mold. It doesn’t take a genius to see that neither proposition is right. A cyclical view of history is a pretext for interpreting the past to mean whatever one wants it to mean.

This book approaches the story of Francis through a different understanding of the past.

The past lives in us, whether we are conscious of it or not. The past never leaves us. We carry it around in our memories, in our knowledge, even in our bones. Have you ever hurt a finger or toe and then, weeks later, perhaps even years later, suddenly felt that pain once again in precisely the same place where it first occurred, even while sitting still? We carry the past with us just like that, whether we want to or not. It was the Mississippi novelist William Faulkner who said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”¹ So we occasionally read or study historical narratives in order to gain insight into what already, in some small way, animates our lives. In the reading, thinking, and discussing we come to understand better what lies deep within us.

Some stories have the ability to illuminate the present more than others. Sometimes we can identify clear moments, people, or events that stand out from the rest. Every era is chock full of detail because life is always full and complicated—so when history seems boring it is not so much

because we can't see the forest for the trees, but because we have trouble seeing the seed that generated the forest or the spark that brought the forest down.

History easily becomes clogged. Yet there are signal figures who are catalysts for rapid change. They are worth focusing on, not only because examining their lives closely helps us understand a previous era, but because understanding them can tell us something important about who we are today. Francis of Assisi was such a figure: extraordinary, seemingly unlike and inaccessible to us normal people. Yet studying his life offers us a way to understand ourselves and our place on this planet better. Francis originated a spirit that still animates us, nearly eight hundred years after his death.

SEEKING THE *WHY*

So what do we talk about when we talk about history? We talk about people, conflict, words, actions, consequential decisions, results, evil, goodness, wars, and “winners” and “losers.” We find them all in the story of Francis. But if we left it at that, we might as well read a middle school textbook or Wikipedia page. *Good* history seeks deep causes. *Why* did he do it? Why did his actions, words, decisions, or indecision result in *that*?

When we look at the events of Francis's life, we can easily see what he did, but it's more difficult to explain why. Every person in human history has been possessed of passions, motives, irrationalities, and the like, and few have left sure clues for deciphering them. Francis certainly didn't. Nevertheless, I believe that we can know a good deal about Francis's *why*.

Francis occasionally reveals his motives in his writings, but we have very few letters and bits of personal correspondence from his own hand. What we do have is often didactic though sometimes personal and even intimate. Still, it's tempting to imagine what has been lost. No one would have thought twice about tossing a note from the crazy young man from Assisi, written in 1205, 1208, or 1209, straight into the fireplace. One prominent medievalist puts it best when he yearningly speculates about Francis's beautiful but rare poem-songs: "Had we conserved the others, some of which we know were in Latin and some in Italian, still others perhaps in French, we would have a more complete picture."² Nevertheless, we know a good amount through what we do have.

Francis was not one to quickly and freely reveal his feelings. In that regard he was in step with every other man and woman of his era. Writing itself was unusual, and confessional writing almost unheard of. For key events in his life, such as calming the wolf in Gubbio, hearing the voice of God at San Damiano, and creating the first live crèche in Greccio, most of what we have are stories told by others. Francis didn't jot down what happened or what he felt. Instead, we have accounts written by those who knew Francis well, but weren't necessarily there to experience these events firsthand. Some of the stories seem too good to be possible. Other times, they ring true. Beyond these bare sources, we are left to conjecture; ultimately historians must use their imaginations, which should be tutored by a close familiarity with the subject and the sources.

Like every human being, Francis was full of emotions, confidence and self-doubts, strengths and "hang-ups," as well as motivations both conscious and unconscious. When we tell his story, we wade into these deep waters and do our best to see clearly. As with most historical figures who lived

before the fifteenth century, we have to navigate through the fully formed and refined personae left to us by the early, adoring “biographers.” Our understanding of Francis is mediated and affected, for good or bad, by the viewpoint of those who first told his story. Therefore, this book would have no spirit—and really no body—without my forming some psychological hypotheses. Without attempting to understand Francis’s desires and motivations, I would have no hope of making sense of his life.

It is easy to follow his steps to see what Francis did on his personal road of conversion. Like a writer of suspense thrillers, I could describe our main character only or primarily through his actions, but that wouldn’t get us very far. What motivated him? Why did he do what he did? Why didn’t he do what he didn’t do? These are the important questions we also need to attempt to answer. Along the way, you will see how Francis’s conversion led prophetically and organically to a conversion of the Christian faith itself.

A FRESH WIND BLOWING

It was once said about an obscure Victorian novelist that the opinions he expressed were so original that few of his contemporaries took them seriously.³ That almost sounds absurd, doesn’t it? In our era, we’ve come to believe that original ideas bring recognition and success. Think Steve Jobs or Bill Gates. But those are only the ideas that we’ve been able to recognize, grasp, and implement, or the ones that create marketable commodities. Francis’s ideas captivated thousands of people, in fact, hundreds of thousands across Europe and in the Middle East by the end of the first decade of his spiritual revolution. But, like the original ideas

of that Victorian novelist, it would be easy to conclude that Francis's weren't taken very seriously. One gets the feeling from studying the life of Francis that, other than a few close friends, his contemporaries ultimately thought of him as a rather extraordinary idealist. Francis felt that there were few who really understood him, or were willing to follow, his lead to the letter.

Finally, before we begin to explore Francis's big ideas, let's pause to consider that his spiritual vision from eight centuries ago is already familiar to anyone paying attention to Pope Francis and the changing atmosphere in the Catholic Church today. Since he was elected in March 2013, there has been fresh air blowing into old and staid ways of doing things. Addressing the cardinals who elected him, Pope Francis said: "[O]ur life is a journey, and when we stop moving, things go wrong."⁴ Isn't the Church supposed to be mainly about protecting what's forever good and true? Not so, said the Pope on the first day of his papacy. If we forget the past, take our eyes off the horizon, or if we value institutions over seeking the real goals of the Christian life, "things go wrong."

Something is happening. Is it too bold to suggest that another Francis may just be saving the Church again in the twenty-first century? There is plenty of idealistic hope in the air just now. After the Pope's trip to Rio de Janeiro in July 2013, one reporter put it this way: "Pope Francis is rescuing the faith from those who hunker down in gilded cathedrals and wield doctrine like a sword. The edifice of fortress Catholicism . . . is starting to crumble."⁵ Many of us are watching carefully, and participating willingly, as that edifice softens into something less predictable, more godly. If something monumental happened eight hundred years ago to revive the Church, then it can happen again today; and the spirit that animated the earlier conversion may be

quite similar to the spirit at work in the Church today. Much depends on what we ourselves will do.