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THE  
CATHOLIC  
HOUR

Assisi: The Goodness of  
Creation

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CARTWRIGHT

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## ASSISI: THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

In the Carthusian order which was our subject last week we considered one aspect of our Catholic faith which is to teach us the littleness of the world in comparison with eternity. Today at Assisi we shall see the other side of the picture and shall come to realize with what wholesomeness, balance and sanity the Church regards the world. The Church insists that our life here is not all and that it is not final. One way of insisting on this is to sanction the Carthusian austerity and to have us reverence the Carthusian vocation. But the Church understands that we have nevertheless to live in this world and in this world to prepare for heaven. And so she teaches us to value this world as made for us by God and to rank its values according to their order and importance. One way in which she teaches us this is by sanctioning the Franciscan ideals and by authorizing men to live by the rule of St. Francis.

Of the many citadels that the faith has built there are few that so endear themselves to the Christian mind as Assisi, the home of St. Francis. The loveliest of Italian hill-towns it is visited by millions



as one of the principal points of interest. And almost all who go there catch something of the spirit of St. Francis and through him of Christ. It is as if there were two Holy Lands: the first where passed "the sinless years beside the Galilean blue," and the second where he, whom some have seen as the most Christ-like of the saints, re-enacted in Umbria the tenderness of Bethlehem and the sacrifice and strength of Calvary. As Bethlehem and Calvary compass the meaning of the Palestinian Holy Land, so Greccio and Alverna compass that of the Umbrian. On the hill of Assisi we live again those venerable traditions, we breathe again those exquisite fragrances reminiscent of a diviner air.

St. Francis is in several ways unique in our Christian calendar. It has been said of him that he entered glory even in his lifetime; and this is true, not only of the seraphic moment "nel crudo sasso intra Tevere ed Arno" when he embraced the Crucified, but of his conversation among men, when reverence akin to the honors of the altar was paid in his living presence.

In another way he is unique among the saints for having captured the admiration of those who do not usually admire saints. His was a personality so vivid, so wide in its interests, so rich in "expression

unexpected yet never inappropriate," that he has held the sympathetic imagination of all the representatives of the secularism of our time. In the abundance of biographical detail that we possess about him there is a wealth of fascinating secondary traits. His gaiety, his humor, his love of nature and of the creatures of the wild have endeared him to all who have in our day what his contemporaries called a "gentil cuore" — a gentle heart. On the other hand, his "philanthropy," his freedom from hierarchical vestment and gesture, his development of his plans outside the formal framework provided by canonical tradition, his alleged independence, ecclesiastical control — these things have made him the darling theme of descendant of our intelligentsia ardent for revolution and aspiring after anarchy. The sentimentalist, the nature-worshipper, the libertarian, the Christian-without-God turn to words of benediction when they speak of the poor man of Assisi.

It is well that all these should admire St. Francis, even though they fail to admire the sanctity which was the *fountain* of all that they admire. St. Francis really had the gifts and qualities they reverence and is fully entitled to the rank of hero in their *Legenda Aurea*. He was "everybody's St. Francis" in very fact.

Yet he was "everybody's" not in just

any way that anybody wanted him. He was everybody's on his own terms and those were Catholic terms. He gained (and merited) the enthusiasm of the multitudes, but he was no demagogue to thrive by flattering them. His gains (and merits) the enthusiasm of some modern literati; but, were he here, he would not hold their esteem by condescending to their sentimentality, their intellectual looseness, their social irresponsibility. St. Francis was a Catholic; Catholic in his concept of society, Catholic in the total habit of his thought, Catholic in that very charity which embraced the whole creation and for which he is so celebrated.

He was Catholic in his concept of society. He had a penetrating sense of what we now call "social justice." He perceived the follies and crimes of one part of mankind and the wounds and blood of the other. He did what he could to expiate the one and to ally the other. Yet neither his indignation at wrong nor his ardor for the right made him oblivious to the enjuring values in the social structure. He was neither an anarchist, nor a communist, nor a socialist, nor in any other sense a revolutionary. His vision of goodness embraced, as our Lord's did, the total social scene, but transcended the political framework as though it were an irrelevance. But on the other hand, both

his actions and his writings prove beyond any doubt that he not only tolerated but esteemed and loved the social structure of Christendom which was the effective framework of his time. Would that it were of ours!

St. Francis was Catholic in his thought. For him the reaches of the mind did not fade off on vague and ever-receding horizons. He had the innocent conviction of the value of human reason which is the mark of healthy minds. And for him where human reason ended Faith began. Faith was then a known and living thing. It had not degenerated into a sentimental confidence, a sickly optimism, an insistence on the opposite of experience as it is for so many moderns. Neither was it, as it is for so many others today a foolish loyalty to Utopian dreams, still less to all-promising politicians. Because this is the meaning of faith to so many of our contemporaries, and because this is contemptible, many of our contemporaries condemn it. But faith was to the man of the thirteenth century — and was to St. Francis — a reasonable conviction which had for its object explicit truths revealed by Christ and preserved through His church. St. Francis believed in the Church, believed in the Mass, believed in the Holy Eucharist, believed in the sacred priesthood (though he shrank from accepting its

honors.) For him therefore faith was a "reasonable service," faith was the foundation of things hoped-for and the persuasion of things unseen.

St. Francis was Catholic in his love. Our age abounds in praise of love, but the things it praises under this name range from a putrid sensuality glorified by Freud to a sentimentality as ineffectual as it is meaningless.

Real love differs from sensuality, as I need not declare. Also it differs from sentimentality by a difference as wide as the world. Sentimentality is feeling felt for the sake of feeling. Love is feeling directed by reason to an object which reason acknowledges and sanctions as worthy of love. For love there must be a constant heart and also a clear sound mind. Sentimentality sprawls over the universe. Love marches to its object and pays its tribute in the order of the hierarchy of excellence of all being. It rises from the inanimate to the animate, from the animal to the human in orderly degree. And in the human order its intensity is enhanced in harmony with the just claims of society. It proceeds from the tempered love of the good citizen for his fellows through the love of friendship to that love which St. Paul compared to the love of Christ for His Church, or to that which a true apostle has for souls. All these forms of love



finally rise and have their completion in the love which the saint fixes upon God through whose love the whole creation moves.

St. Francis was thus Catholic in that love of his for everything and everybody. His strange and childlike Canticle celebrates the glory of sun and moon, the magnificence of hills, the freshness of fountains by bidding them to praise the Lord. He loved the wild creatures with which God has peopled the earth and air and water, and he loved them precisely *as* creatures. He did not make friends with beasts as an act of protest against society, nor as a refuge from loneliness. He made his compact with Brother Wolf because God would wish him to live in friendship with mankind. His tenderness for the birds made him think of them as his rivals who should take their turn with him in heralding God's goodness.

How much St. Francis has to teach the world today if only the world would listen, as the birds did, to what he really wants to say. If only many of its leaders and thinkers would desist from their endless vanity and come to learn from him. They have given their followers much in the things that serve life's minor uses. But they have taken away the faith in the meaning of life itself. If they could only be disciples of St. Francis he would say

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to them, as he once did to one of his intellectual brethren: "May God confound you by your own wisdom and learning — and send you back to your vocation whether you will or no."

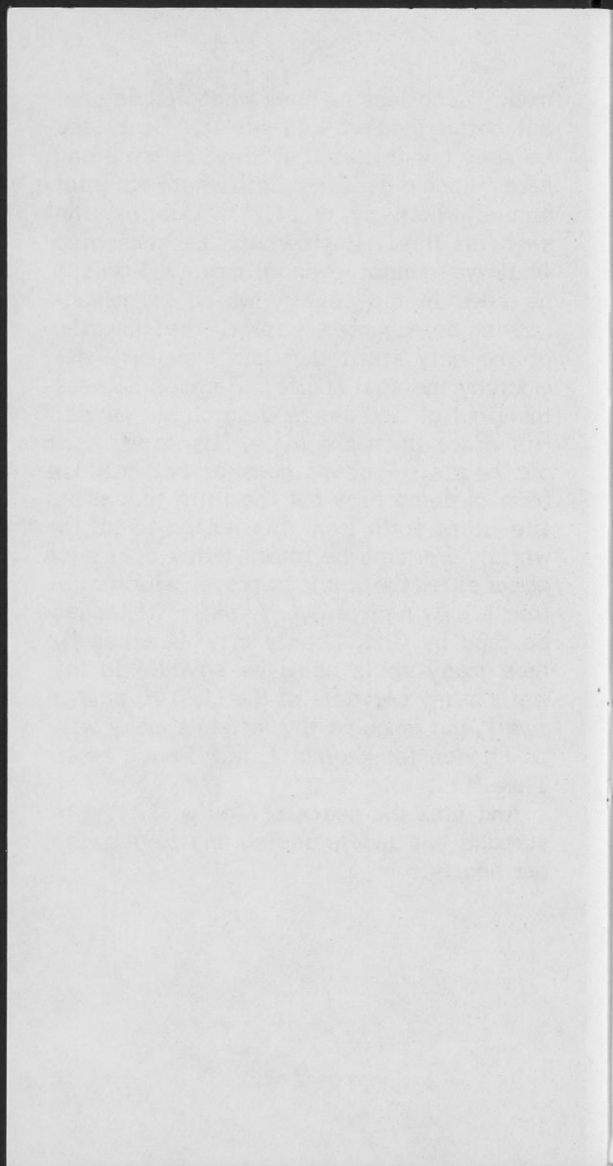
What more splendid and charitable prayer for the leaders of the world of this darkness. What a glorious thing if St. Francis could obtain from God the effect of that kind imprecation; if the intelligences which are so guilty of the world's present sorrow might be confounded into their true vocation "whether they will or no."

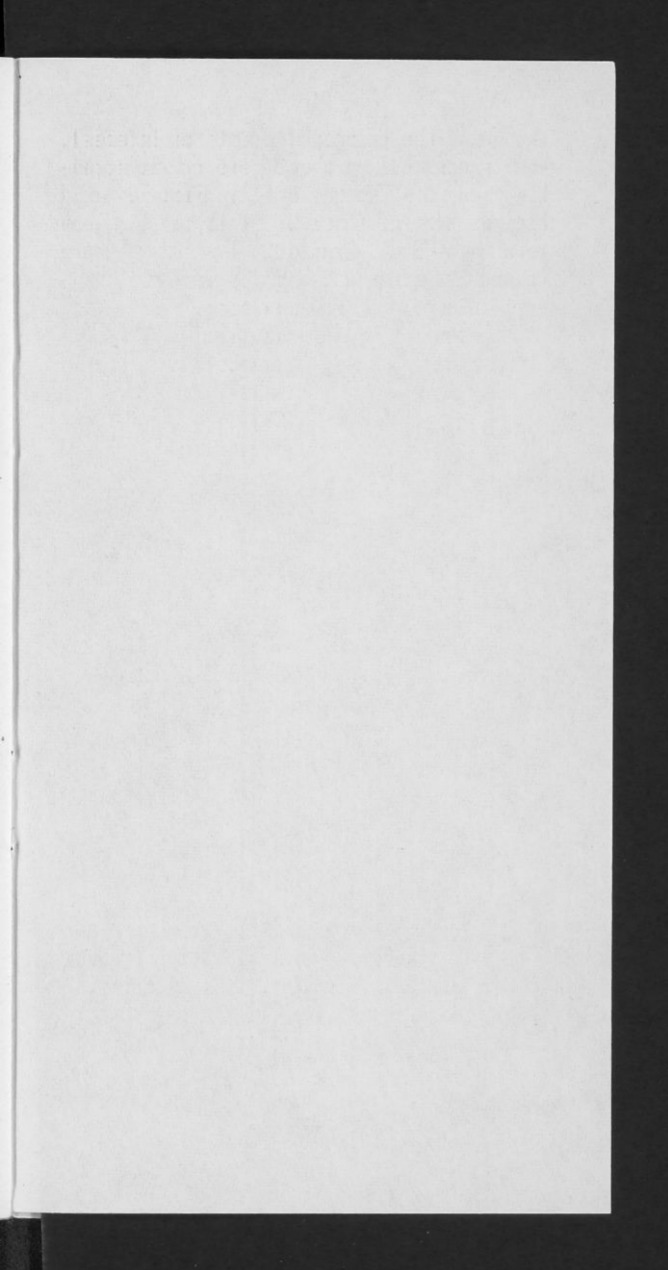
Just at present we are in a time of much disaster abroad and of uncertain domestic omen. The democracy which seemed to be the secure possession of our day, which seemed to bear the fairest promise of the world's future, which seemed to be the aegis of all human values which seemed to pledge its bounties to the whole spreading world of men, that democracy has shrunk from frontier after frontier. Even here it bristles with preparation for war that may destroy what it would defend. God only knows what future years of guidance by only human virtue and only human wisdom may bring us.

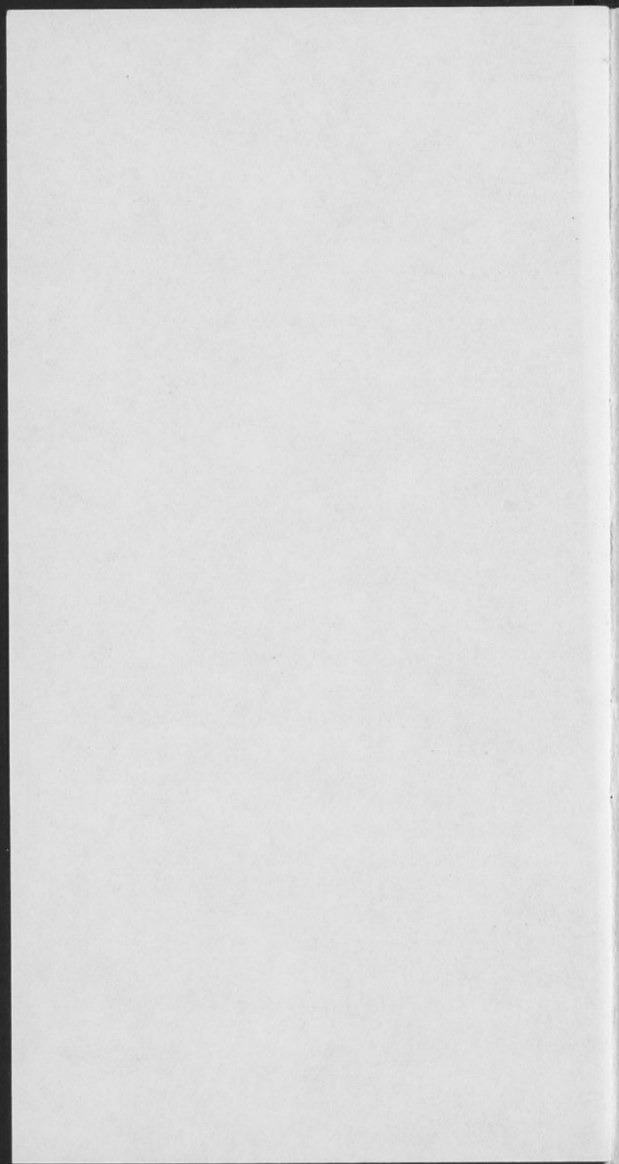
Yet somehow today I picture the real St. Francis turning from the fluttering birds, those images of pity and laughter, to look down in our American cities upon the pity and laughter in the fluttering hearts of

men. Doubtless he sees what we can see, but better than we can see it. Doubtless he sees our follies, our sins, as we stand here "upon a darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night." Doubtless he sees all this. But perhaps he sees also what we cannot even glimpse. Perhaps he sees in the country which is democracy's beleaguered capital the dawning of the only spirit that can ever give democracy the soul of life. Perhaps he sees the light of God descending on our minds, His grace upon our wills, His peace upon our hearts. Perhaps he sees not only the form of democracy but the faith that is its life going forth from this nation to all the world. Perhaps he utters today over each of our cities the gracious prayer which came from his dying lips over Assisi: "Blessed be thou by God, O holy city; because by thee many souls shall be saved. In thy walls many servants of the Most High will dwell, and amongst thy citizens many will be chosen for Eternal Life. Peace be to Thee."

And thus the peace of God will come to surpass our understanding and to assuage our hearts.









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