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FRANCIS OF ASSISI,
MOVEMENT MAKER

The Unconventional Leadership of a Simple Saint

Howard A. Snyder

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Introduction

In the early days of his movement, Francis and his small band of brothers lived briefly in an abandoned shack along a stream in the valley below Assisi. It was summer. Francis and the brothers were walking along on a sunlit day.

Suddenly Brother Leo started feeling ill. A vineyard was nearby, so Francis gathered a few clusters of grapes and shared them with Leo and the others. Brother Leo immediately felt better. But then the vineyard owner came after Francis with a stick and began hitting him. As usual, Francis thanked God. The brothers went on their way, Francis singing,

Leo had his grapes to eat;
But poor Francis, he got beat!
Leo had a choice tidbit,
Brother Francis paid for it!¹

This was Francis—joyful, singing, spontaneous, sometimes funny, always watching out for his brothers.

In 1907, historian James Walsh published a provocative book, *The Thirteenth: Greatest of Centuries*. Walsh highlighted the many remarkable achievements of the 1200s: Rise of the first universities and Gothic cathedrals, age of the Troubadours, the art of Giotto and other masters, and in England, *Magna Carta* and the world's first Parliament (1215). This was the age of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and of Dante Alighieri, the great Italian poet born in Florence in 1265 who later authored *The Divine Comedy*.²

All this in the thirteenth century. Yet the most famous person of the 1200s was a simple, lightly educated youth named Francis in the Italian

¹ Paraphrased from Omer Englebert, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, 2nd English ed., trans. Eve Marie Cooper (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965), 124–25.

² James J. Walsh, *The Thirteenth: Greatest of Centuries* (New York: Catholic Summer School Press, 1907).

hill town of Assisi, a slight young man who embraced total poverty, wrote little, died in his forties—and has more books written about him than anyone else except Jesus. Thousands of young men flocked to follow Francis. A movement quickly sprouted. Franciscan brothers reawakened the church and would later make historic discoveries in astronomy, chemistry, physics, and other fields.³ Charles Freeman, in his monumental *Reopening of the Western Mind*, credits Franciscan scholars, such as Roger Bacon, Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham, as among the intellectual influences that lead to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.⁴

It's a puzzle. That puzzle, especially the puzzle of the movement itself, is the focus of this book. The key to the puzzle, I think, can help catalyze genuine movements of the Spirit today and can benefit each of us.

In some ways, the saint of Assisi was a failed leader. "Francis wasn't an organizer. He didn't strategize or plan. He was thoroughly Spirit-inspired in his approach to life."⁵ Yet a movement sprang from his hands and heart that increasingly even today touches lives all around the globe.

In fact, Francis showed a kind of movement genius. There are different kinds of genius, as there are of intelligence. Francis's genius was more organic than organizational, more intuitive than cogitated, more spontaneous than studied. A little like Jesus, perhaps. In hindsight, Francis's leadership looks surprisingly shrewd.

Today, solid sources on Francis and his movement are rich and growing. The year 2026 will mark the eight hundredth year of Francis's death. Anticipating this, Franciscan scholars have issued a comprehensive three-volume set of newly translated and edited early sources and a companion volume on Francis's soul-friend, Clare: *The Lady—Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*.⁶ One really can't write about

³ Seb Falk, *The Light Ages: The Surprising Story of Medieval Science* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020).

⁴ Charles Freeman, *The Reopening of the Western Mind: The Resurgence of Intellectual Life from the End of Antiquity to the Dawn of the Enlightenment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023).

⁵ Jon M. Sweeney, *When Saint Francis Saved the Church: How a Converted Medieval Troubadour Created a Spiritual Vision for the Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2014), 152.

⁶ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellmann, OFM Conv., and William J. Short, OFM, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2001); Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., *The Lady—Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3rd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006).

the Franciscan movement without including Clare, so this book tells her story as well.

As I have dug into the earliest Francis sources, two things surprised me. First, I was surprised at the central place of the Bible in Francis's life and witness. Contrary to stereotypes of medieval Christianity, Francis knew the Bible very well indeed. He quoted it constantly. Second is the centrality of Jesus Christ. I knew Francis sought to imitate Jesus, especially in serving the poor and living simply. But I was surprised how much Francis, in his preaching and in guiding his poor brothers, constantly pointed to Jesus as example, Savior, and Lord in a fully orthodox sense.

Through the years, the most popular account of Francis has been *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. This is a delightful collection of stories about the saint and his brothers, but it's often not historically reliable. So, I use *The Little Flowers* hardly at all. My book draws on many sources, but the foundational ones are the very first Francis biography, written by Thomas of Celano, and two accounts compiled by some of Francis's earliest brothers, now known as *The Anonymous of Perugia* and *The Legend of the Three Companions*.⁷ I also use several sources that highlight the internal dynamics of the Franciscans as a movement of renewal.

Things New and Old?

Is there anything new to be learned from Francis? Of course! God still wisely brings "out of his treasure things new and old" (Matt. 13:42).

What can we learn?

- How Francis received and responded to God's grace—was awakened to Jesus, the world, and all its creatures.
- How the gospel, lived like Jesus, reshapes society, human culture, and personal lives—the very course of history.
- How renewal movements actually work.

Along the way, we should glance briefly at some other questions. Was Francis a forerunner of the Renaissance and Reformation, as some say? Was he trying to undermine church authority? Was he anticapitalist? Did he abuse his own body through his rigorous asceticism? Was he really up to leading the movement he birthed?

⁷ Some of the key early accounts of Francis are called "legends," but that does not mean they are mere fables or myths. The word "legend" here simply translates the Latin word *legenda*, meaning an account to be read. The Latin verb meaning "to read" is *legere*.

This book explores these questions in three sections. *Part I* is all about Francis himself—how the son of a rich medieval merchant marked out a new way of life, becoming Francis of Assisi and birthing an unparalleled movement.

Part II uncovers the inner dynamics of this movement, the society of Franciscan Brothers (*fratres*, brothers, friars). Here we find system-shaking dynamics that resonate still.

Part III draws lessons for faith communities today and our own spiritual journeys. We are not Francis or Clare. But we learn by watching them as they humbly follow Jesus.

Some of this book's readers likely know a lot about Francis, while others know very little. So, I begin by telling Francis's own story, but always with an eye to the way Francis's life and calling birthed an amazing movement.

Francis is of course *Saint* Francis. But we aim here to see Francis not through the warm glow of sainthood, but rather to see sainthood through the glow of Francis. Francis, the fully human person, with his faith and failures, is quite fascinating and winsome enough. We don't need to supply a halo or multiply miracles. Francis simply wanted to follow Jesus simply, humbly, nakedly; in the flesh as much as in the Spirit; in the world with its marvelous creatures, even while already dwelling in heaven. This is what Francis did. We explore how a movement sprang up, seemingly spontaneously.

My aim here is to explain Francis as best I can as the maker of a movement, and to show the relevance of that for the church and Christian discipleship now. This means we must look closely at Francis's world, his context—not just religious but also political, economic, sociological, even geographical, realities that intertwine with and help us understand the Francis movement. I focus more on these contextual dynamics than do many books on Francis and his brothers. The goal is not just inspiration, but understanding. The story thus becomes immensely richer, yet all the more startling.

So here we look at the man and the woman (Francis and Clare), the movement and the motives, and the message and meaning for today.