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## Francis of Assisi: A Reputation Marred Beyond Recognition

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## Francis of Assisi: A Reputation Marred Beyond Recognition

### Abstract

Francis of Assisi believed his mission was to preach the gospel, and his reputation shortly after his death was that of a prolific preacher. However, members of his Order eventually began to present his life differently due to controversies that developed after his death. They began to de-emphasize his preaching ministry to instead focus on his holiness, miracles, or reformed mindedness. In the twentieth century, these works served as the foundation of Francis studies, resulting in scholars neglecting his reputation as a preacher. Francis became caricatured as anti-oracular, most notably by his association with an apocryphal quote: "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words."

### Keywords

Francis of Assisi, Preaching, Sermons, Bonaventure, G. K. Chesterton

### Cover Page Footnote

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### **Francis of Assisi: A Reputation Marred Beyond Recognition**

Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226)<sup>1</sup> began his ministry in 1206, believing he heard the voice of Jesus speaking to him from a crucifix in the church of San Damiano. “Francis,” called the voice of Christ, “go and repair my house which, as you see, is all being destroyed.” Francis took the command literally. Seeing that the church of San Damiano was in ruins, Francis began collecting supplies to repair the building. He would soon renovate two more churches near his home. Later, though, Francis recognized that his call had a deeper meaning. Bonaventure, his chief biographer, explained: “...the principal intention of the words referred to that which Christ purchased with his own blood, as the Holy Spirit later taught him.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Francis realized that he was called to rebuild not physical church buildings, but the spiritual ethos of the church in his day.

Francis answered this call in a plethora of ways, most importantly through his preaching. Early biographies and papal documents written shortly after his death highlight that Francis had a reputation of being a powerful preacher. This fact is often overlooked today. In the twentieth century, there was a boom in Francis studies.<sup>3</sup> Biographers in this era largely failed to recognize what a prolific preacher Francis was. In fact, his name became attached to an apocryphal quote: “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” This statement seemingly implies that verbal preaching is optional and not ideal: One should preach through his or her actions, and this is usually sufficient for evangelism. This essay criticizes this popular anti-oracular interpretation of Francis by demonstrating that Francis’s reputation was intrinsically tied to his preaching career in the decades following his death. After establishing this claim, I will show how Francis’s reputation underwent two radical transformations, once in the High Middle Ages and finally in the previous century. These combined to produce the faulty caricature of Francis so prevalent today.

#### **“Francis-as-Preacher” in Early Documents**

Early documents by and about Francis present a strong and recurring “Francis-as-preacher” motif. His own writings show that he believed his

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<sup>1</sup> It is unclear exactly when Francis was born, but it was either late in 1181 or early in 1182.

<sup>2</sup> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. Armstrong, Hellman, Short (New York, NY: New City Press, 1999), 2:536. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* will be abbreviated *FAED* throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this work, I will distinguish between Francis studies and Franciscan studies. The former refers to scholarship regarding Francis of Assisi; the latter refers to studies on the Franciscan Order.

primary job as a friar was to preach, and his contemporaries remembered him as a strong and adamant preacher as they reflected on his life and career.

### Francis's Writings

Francis's writings reveal that he believed his call to rebuild God's house was a call to preach. Francis's corpus is admittedly scant, but it does contain several references to his preaching ministry.<sup>4</sup> His *Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance* (1220?)<sup>5</sup> opens as follows: "I am obliged to serve all and to administer the fragrant words of my Lord to them."<sup>6</sup> Francis explains that he wrote the letter in lieu of preaching sermons to each person individually since the latter would be impossible. Thus, we must conclude that (1) Francis felt an obligation to preach "the fragrant words" of God, and (2) the *Later Admonition and Exhortation* must be understood as sermonic literature, containing the content he would have preached to his audience verbally if he had been able.<sup>7</sup> Francis understood God's call as a command to preach, and words—whether written or spoken—were necessary.

In 1220, Francis wrote his *First Letter to the Custodians*. Speaking to members of his Order, Francis encouraged,

In every sermon you give, remind people about penance and that no one can be saved unless he receives the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord... May you announce and preach His praise to all nations in such a way that praise and thanks may always be given to the all-powerful God by all people throughout the world at every hour and whenever bells are wrung.<sup>8</sup>

This letter reveals that Francis believed preaching was a chief priority of at least certain members of his Order.

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<sup>4</sup> All primary sources in this section are from *FAED* vol. 1. Some of Francis's works are sermonic but do not contain references to preaching within them (e.g., *The Canticle of Exhortation for the Ladies of San Damiano*, 1:115). I have chosen not to offer comments on such works; however, they do support the central claim that sermonic activity was at the center of his life and ministry.

<sup>5</sup> The dates offered for Francis's works all come from *FAED* vol. 1. Debated dates are marked by a question mark. At times, dates are hyphenated. This hyphenation shows that either (1) Francis composed the document sometime between the two given dates, or (2) its composition took time and began with the first date and ended with the second.

<sup>6</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, *FAED*, 1:45.

<sup>7</sup> Francis's *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance* (*FAED*, 1:41-44) should likewise be seen as sermonic.

<sup>8</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The First Letter to the Custodians*, *FAED*, 1:57.

The next significant work is Francis's *The Earlier Rule* (1209/10-1221).<sup>9</sup> *The Earlier Rule* developed over the span of roughly a decade, and it outlines Francis's vision and goal for his Order. Eventually, it was rejected because of its rambling nature and strictness. *The Later Rule* (1223) eventually won papal approval. While Francis also had a hand in its composition, scholars are agreed that it reflects other ecclesiastical influences, making it less purely "Franciscan" than *The Earlier Rule*.<sup>10</sup>

Chapters 16 and 17 of *The Early Rule* both give rules that friars must abide by as they preach. Chapter 16 deals with foreign missions to Saracens (Muslims). Friars who felt called to bear gospel witness to Muslims had to gain permission from a minister. After that, they could live among the Muslims in one of two ways: "One way is not to engage in argumentation or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians."<sup>11</sup> Note that while Francis gave these friars freedom to quietly preach through their deeds, he also expected that they "acknowledge that they are Christians," implying some form of verbal communication concerning their religious convictions.<sup>12</sup> Francis explained the second way: "The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe in almighty God... and become Christians because no one can enter the kingdom of God without being reborn of the water and the Holy Spirit."<sup>13</sup> The question was not whether friars should evangelize or not, but instead whether they should do so quietly or publicly. In either case, the conversion of unbelievers was the goal.

Chapter 17 gives instructions for friars who preached in areas already controlled by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> One line in the first paragraph of the chapter deserves special attention. After explaining that ministers should only grant qualified friars the right to preach, Francis wrote, "Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds."<sup>15</sup> This is the closest Francis ever came to writing, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." Francis's meaning, however, is quite different than that of the popular quote. In context, Francis discussed how some friars were not sufficiently trained, spiritually mature, or intelligent enough to preach sermons. However, all of them—whether preachers or not—were called to model Christian virtues and live gospel-centered, renewed lives. Francis wrote this chapter about

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<sup>9</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, *FAED* 1:63-86.

<sup>10</sup> See William J. Short, "The Rule and Life of the Friars Minor," in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J. P. Robson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 50-67. This work will be abbreviated *CCFA* throughout. Francis of Assisi, *The Later Rule*, *FAED* 1:99-106.

<sup>11</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, *FAED* 1:74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, *FAED* 1:74.

<sup>14</sup> Much of the same information is repeated in the fragments of Francis's sayings found in the Worcester Cathedral in England (*FAED* 1:89).

<sup>15</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, *FAED* 1:75. See also the fragments of Francis's sayings compiled by Hugh of Digne (*FAED* 1:95).

preaching because he believed oracular sermons were necessary. However, he sought to encourage his brothers who lacked the skills to preach, reminding them that they, too, could bear witness to the gospel of Christ through their lives. Francis's words do not discount the importance of preaching—quite the opposite! Friars disappointed that they could not do the important work of preaching needed encouragement that they, too, could testify to the gospel.

This becomes even clearer in Chapter 21, which begins, “Whenever it pleases them, all my brothers can announce this or similar exhortation and praise among all peoples with the blessing of God.”<sup>16</sup> The rest of the chapter includes a short sermon that calls listeners to repentance and thanksgiving. It is noteworthy that Francis allowed all his brothers to make this announcement. Perhaps this short sermon was meant to be memorized so that even the least of the friars could preach the gospel. Either way, Francis wanted this sermon to be declared quite often, again highlighting that preaching was one of the primary callings of his friars.<sup>17</sup>

*The Later Rule* (1223) also contains rules for preachers (Chapter 9) and Muslim missions (Chapter 12). It is a highly condensed version of *The Early Rule*, so it demands no attention here. Interestingly, Francis's command for friars to preach by their deeds was omitted.

This brings us to Francis's most famous work, *The Cantic of the Creatures* (1225).<sup>18</sup> Francis told the friars to sing the *Cantic* after they finished their sermons. In fact, his early biographers mention that Francis had the song preached to settle a dispute between religious and political authorities in Assisi near the time of his death, using it bring them to the point of reconciliation.<sup>19</sup> Francis intended even his poetry to aid him as he proclaimed the gospel.

The final significant document is *A Letter to the Entire Order* (1225-1226). Though preaching is not a central topic in this work, Francis does explain the vocation of his friars in terms of evangelism: “...for this reason He has sent you into the whole world: that you may bear witness to His voice in word and deed and bring everyone to know that there is no one who is all-powerful except Him.”<sup>20</sup> The friars were commissioned by God to preach not only in deed, but through words. The goal, once again, was to bring about conversion. Preaching played an important role in Francis's vision for his

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<sup>16</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, FAED 1:78.

<sup>17</sup> Chapters 22-23 of *The Early Rule* may possibly be sermonic material as well (Francis of Assisi, *The Earlier Rule*, 1:79-86).

<sup>18</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Cantic of the Creatures*, FAED 1:113-114.

<sup>19</sup> It seems likely that the lines “Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love, / and bear infirmity and tribulation. / Blessed are those who endure in peace / for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned” may have been composed specifically for this occasion (Francis of Assisi, *The Cantic of the Creatures*, 1:114). See David Spoto, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York, NY: Penguin Compass, 2002), 205-207.

<sup>20</sup> Francis of Assisi, *A Letter to the Entire Order*, FAED 1:117.

Order. If he and his followers were to rebuild God's house, preaching was not optional, but necessary.

### Papal Documents

Francis's reputation as a preacher is evident in early papal documents published during his life and shortly after his death. Pope Innocent III originally commissioned Francis and his followers to begin a new Order within the Roman Catholic Church, and he understood that they would preach penance.<sup>21</sup> This was seconded by Pope Honorius III in *Cum Dilecti* (1219). After mentioning that the Franciscans travel to preach, he urged clergymen to receive them warmly.<sup>22</sup> In a 1225 bull entitled *Vineae Domini*, Honorius III also commissioned the Franciscans to send missionaries to Muslim lands to preach the gospel and make converts, again highlighting the centrality of preaching among the early Franciscans.<sup>23</sup>

The next pope, Gregory IX, likewise praised the preaching of Francis and his early followers.<sup>24</sup> In *Mira Circa Nos* (1228), he presented Francis as a new Sampson. Sampson destroyed the Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:13-17). This was clearly miraculous: The brittle jawbone should not have been an effective weapon. In the same way, Francis's preaching was weak and simple, yet God used it to bring many to the faith.<sup>25</sup> In a 1237 bull, Pope Gregory IX praised the whole Order in the same way: "...the Lesser Brothers...have dedicated themselves to preaching the Good News of the Word of God in the abjection of voluntary poverty, overthrowing heresies and expelling other fatal vices."<sup>26</sup> The early reputation of Francis and his followers centered on their powerful preaching.

### Early Biographies

The "Francis-as-Preacher" motif is also littered throughout his earliest biographies. In Thomas of Celano's *The Life of Saint Francis* (1229), Francis immediately began preaching the gospel after he received his call to rebuild God's house.<sup>27</sup> The official Roman Catholic biography on Francis is Bonaventure's *The Major Legend of Saint Francis* (1260-1263). The opening pages praise Francis's clear preaching, stating that he was "a herald of gospel perfection" who "preached to the people the gospel of peace and

<sup>21</sup> See Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, FAED 2:542-549.

<sup>22</sup> Honorius III, *Cum Dilecti*, FAED 1:558.

<sup>23</sup> Honorius III, *Vineae Domini*, FAED 1:563-564.

<sup>24</sup> Before becoming pope, Gregory IX (Ugolino) was the cardinal protector of the Franciscan Order. He was a close friend of Francis.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory IX, *Mira Circa Nos*, FAED 1:566-567.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory IX, *Quoniam Abundavit*, FAED 1:576.

<sup>27</sup> In Chapter 8, Thomas recorded Francis's commission from the Lord. In Chapter 9, he began to rightly understand Christ's words. Following this, Chapters 10-11 focus on his initial preaching ministry. See Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, FAED 1:196-207.

salvation...like John the Baptist” and “in the spirit and power of Elijah.”<sup>28</sup> In *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* (post-1337), the saint is praised for his powerful sermons that were preached in the common language and brought many to faith and repentance in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

The “Francis-as-preacher” theme continued in every other early biography to some extent. However, other perspectives on Francis emerged alongside the preacher motif. Michael W. Blastie argues that in Julian of Speyer’s *Life of Saint Francis* (1232-1235)<sup>30</sup> and *Divine Office of Saint Francis* (1228-1232),<sup>31</sup> Francis was presented primarily as a miracle-man, though Francis’s mighty works often occurred in the context of his preaching ministry, bearing witness to the veracity and power of his message.<sup>32</sup> This miraculous theme also appeared in Thomas of Celano’s later writings about Francis.<sup>33</sup> As time progressed, the Franciscan Order found itself on the brink of schism between the conservative Spirituals and more progressive Conventuals. The Spirituals, eager to maintain what they considered “true Franciscanism,” wrote new chronicles about Francis. These emphasized that Francis was a moral exemplar, the founder of the Order whose voice should be heeded and obeyed, and the guarantor of true Franciscanism. By his holiness, Francis had become a mirror of Christ, displaying Jesus’s holiness, and calling the friars to walk in it.<sup>34</sup> For some Spirituals, Francis was a second Christ. This phrase had a variety of meanings, all of them radical.<sup>35</sup> As the Order perceived that it had new needs, its presentation of Francis shifted. The “Francis-as-preacher” motif faded into the background to some extent, setting the stage for an unfortunate phenomenon in Francis studies in the twentieth century.

### The “Francis Question” in the Twentieth Century

The rise in Francis studies in the twentieth century largely occurred due to the scholarly and controversial work of the French Protestant Paul Sabatier.<sup>36</sup> Sabatier published his *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* 1894, and it was

<sup>28</sup> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, *FAED* 2:526.

<sup>29</sup> *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, in *FAED* 3:566-670.

<sup>30</sup> Julian of Speyer, *The Life of Saint Francis*, *FAED* 1:180-308.

<sup>31</sup> Julian of Speyer, *The Divine Office of Saint Francis*, *FAED* 1:327-345.

<sup>32</sup> Michael W. Blastie, “Francis and His Hagiographical Tradition,” in *CCFA*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Blastie, “Francis and His Hagiographical Tradition,” 74-74, 79-81.

<sup>34</sup> For these themes in Francis’s earliest biographies, see Blastie, “Francis and his Hagiographical Tradition,” 75-79. See also Annette Kehnel, “Francis and His Historiographical Tradition,” in *CCFA*, 108-113.

<sup>35</sup> At its most innocent, this was shorthand for saying that Francis mirrored Christ almost perfectly (or perfectly). However, there was a heretical group called the Fraticelli that suggested that either (1) Francis was a “re-incarnation” of Christ, or (2) Francis was a second Messiah figure who had eschatological significance.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Appelbaum shows that Francis studies had already blossomed in the nineteenth century, prior to Sabatier. Despite this, she, too, argues that the publication of Sabatier’s biography was a watershed moment in this discipline’s history (*St. Francis of*



made available to the English-speaking world in 1906.<sup>37</sup> Published in at least fifty-five languages, Sabatier's biography might still be the most widely circulated book related to Francis to date. As Bert Roest notes, Sabatier based much of his information off early biographies written by the Spirituals.<sup>38</sup> This was problematic: As noted above, the Franciscan Order was on the brink of schism following its founder's death. The Spirituals represented the conservative Franciscans who worried that lax friars were seeking to compromise Francis's vision for the Order. However, these so-called "lax friars" (the Conventuals) largely had the support of the Roman curia.

The Spirituals began to feel that the curia threatened authentic Franciscanism. Their biographies became increasingly apocalyptic, depicting Francis as a morning star who shone against the darkness of the Catholic world in his day.<sup>39</sup> As Sabatier studied these sources, the Francis that emerged seemed anti-clerical, anti-academic,<sup>40</sup> and anti-institutional. This, of course, reflected the thoughts and feelings of the Spirituals. The Spirituals's Francis seemed like a man against the world. Sabatier, who was himself skeptical of organized religion (despite being a pastor), celebrated Francis's perceived convictions, casting him against the Medieval church on the basis of the Spirituals's writings:

There was a genuine attempt (by Francis) at a religious revolution, which, if it had succeeded, would have ended in a universal priesthood, in the proclamation of the rights of the individual conscious... The priest of the thirteenth century is the antithesis of the saint, he is almost always his enemy... When the priest sees himself vanquished by the prophet he suddenly changes his method. He takes him under his protection, he introduces his harangues into the sacred canon, he throws over his shoulders the priestly chasuble... if [Francis] did not perceive the revolutionary bearing of his preaching, he at least refused to be ordained a priest. He divined the superiority of the spiritual priesthood.<sup>41</sup>

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*America: How a Thirteenth-Century Friar Became America's Most Popular Saint* [Chapel Hill, NC: 2015], 11-16).

<sup>37</sup> Paul Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi: Biography of a Great Christian Saint and Preacher of God's Holy Gospel* (Adansonia Press, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Bert Roest, "Francis and the Pursuit of Learning," in *CCFA*, 162-164.

<sup>39</sup> See Blastic, "Francis and His Hagiographical Tradition," in *CCFA*, 75-76.

<sup>40</sup> This was particularly due to controversies between Franciscans and Dominicans that spanned 1240-1280. The Dominicans were known for being more academically inclined, meaning that they often held prestigious positions at universities. As Roest shows, the Spirituals's biographies indicate that Francis was more anti-education than his actual writings suggest ("Francis and the Pursuit of Learning," in *CCFA*, 164-165, 169-174).

<sup>41</sup> Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis*, 7-8.

Sabatier makes three rather surprising claims here: (1) Francis's revolutionary preaching centered on a universal priesthood of all believers;<sup>42</sup> (2) The Roman Catholic Church only accepted Francis because it knew that if he went rogue there would be no stopping him or his movement; and (3) Francis intuitively sensed this trickery and rebelled against it to some extent by refusing ordination. Sabatier's Francis sounds rather Protestant.

Patricia Appelbaum argues that this is one of the main reasons Francis gained such popularity in the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> Many Protestants began believing that Francis was a forerunner to the Reformation and that they could thus lay claim to him.<sup>44</sup> Sabatier felt responsible for this development and apologized to his Roman Catholic colleagues, reminding the historical community that Francis was an ardent Roman Catholic.<sup>45</sup> Still, the "Francis-as-Reformer" motif could not be ignored. He did undoubtedly live as a rebuke against the immorality exercised in the Roman Catholic Church of his day, and his constant call to repentance was a call for not only reformed lives, but also a reformed church. This reform theme played prominently in Pope Pius XI's *Rite Expiatis*, which commemorated the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Francis's death.<sup>46</sup>

Soon, though, the "Francis-as-Reformer" motif was stretched even further. In 1923, G. K. Chesterton published his biography, *St. Francis of Assisi*. He spent the opening pages complaining that Francis had been taken captive by secularists who exalted him as a "morning star of the Renaissance."<sup>47</sup> While I have argued that there is a strong historical connection between Francis and the Renaissance,<sup>48</sup> it is important to understand the context of Chesterton's complaint. Twentieth-century scholarship usually viewed the Renaissance as a secular movement where the glory of humanity and the beauty of nature were emphasized, leaving little room for the glory of God and the beauty of heaven. Chesterton was offended

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<sup>42</sup> I have argued that Francis's ministry anticipated Luther's priesthood of all believers ("In Darkness, Light: Francis of Assisi, Proto-Reformer," *Ad Fontes Journal* 6.3 [2022], 4-5).

<sup>43</sup> Appelbaum, *St. Francis of America*, 14-17. See also her extensive notes on page 191. Appelbaum acknowledges that several scholars argued Francis was a proto-Reformer pre-Sabatier, but his work helped popularize the notion.

<sup>44</sup> Some leading Protestant scholars expressed dissent against this notion. Among them was the great scholar of the Reformation's forerunners, Heiko Oberman (*Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981], 13-17).

<sup>45</sup> See Paul Sabatier, "The Originality of St. Francis of Assisi," in *The Sewanee Review* 17.1, trans. W. Lloyd Bevan (1909), 51-65.

<sup>46</sup> Pius XI, *Rite Expiatis*, in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, ed. Kajetan Esser (Franciscan Archive, 1999), 7-14.

<sup>47</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York, NY: George H. Doran, 1924), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Gravitt, "In Darkness, Light," 7-8.

that the godly Francis had become the patron saint of the ungodly Renaissance.<sup>49</sup>

How had this happened? There were three causes. First, Francis's democratic fervor led him to see every human being as having inherent dignity and worth.<sup>50</sup> The Renaissance shared similar democratic urges, seemingly linking the two. Francis's exaltation of individuals paved the way for the movement's radical egalitarianism. Second, Francis was known for his love of nature. The Renaissance (supposedly) put Europe's focus on this present world and age, leading the populace to forget heaven. Francis's unique love for the natural world supposedly foreshadowed this later shift. Third and most importantly, Francis's reform efforts started to be interpreted not as proto-Protestant, but as proto-secular. Francis did not want to reform the church; he wanted to provide alternatives to the church's theology and piety.<sup>51</sup>

The sentiments mentioned in the third point have often been expressed in confusing and inconsistent ways. A modern example can be taken from David Spoto's biography, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*. Spoto acknowledges that Francis was committed to the Roman Catholic Church and honored the Pope's authority. However, he implies throughout his biography that Francis held surprisingly anti-Catholic beliefs. For example, Spoto posits that Francis emphasized God's grace and love in his preaching, rarely mentioning God's judgment or damnation.<sup>52</sup> Though not stating it explicitly, Spoto seems to imply that Francis leaned towards some form of universalism. The earliest letter we have from Francis refutes Spoto's claims: "All those men and women who are not living in penance... have nothing in this world or the one to come... Worms eat his body and so body and soul perish in this brief world, and they will go to hell where they will be tortured forever."<sup>53</sup>

This presentation of Francis as a soft pluralist or universalist gained popularity when faith leaders from several different religions met in Assisi for a day of mutual fellowship and prayer in 2002 following the events of 9/11.<sup>54</sup> They chose Assisi because of an interesting story from Francis's life. In 1219,

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<sup>49</sup> This view of the Renaissance is wrong on two counts. First, it fails to grapple with the fact that the Renaissance was a large and diverse movement. While there might have been secular elements in certain regions, Renaissance Humanism produced a new appreciation for the biblical languages and led to breakthroughs in theological studies. Second, there is little evidence that the Renaissance brought a wave of atheism or anti-Christian sentiment to Europe. During the Renaissance and beyond, Europe continued to show a strong commitment to the Christian faith. However, this was not Chesterton's perspective of the movement, as he explains in *St. Francis of Assisi*, 11-24.

<sup>50</sup> Chesterton called Francis "the world's one quite sincere democrat" (Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 11).

<sup>51</sup> This was already present in Sabatier's biography, and Appelbaum chronicles its further development in *St. Francis of America*, 22-26.

<sup>52</sup> See especially Spoto, *Reluctant Saint*, 74, 98.

<sup>53</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, in *FAED* 1:43-44.

<sup>54</sup> See Steven J. McMichael, "Francis and the Encounter with the Sultan (1219)", in *CCFA*, 127.

he decided to sail for the Fifth Crusade so that he could preach to Muslims on the battlefield. He eventually gained an audience with the Muslim Sultan al-Kamil. This unusual event has been interpreted as a great moment of religious pluralism that helped pave the way for modern inter-religious movements and universalistic beliefs. Interpretations of Francis present him as pro-Muslim and often suggest that he believed Islam and Christianity were compatible religions, allowing their adherents to peacefully worship their one God together.<sup>55</sup> While the portions of Francis's *Rule* cited above are enough to dismiss such claims, the events of 9/11 nonetheless led to a boom in secular and liberal scholarly literature that focused on Francis's interaction with the Muslim Sultan during the Fifth Crusade.

Roman Catholics in the late twentieth century fought back against these trends. They re-examined primary source documents to present a more historic (and Roman Catholic!) Francis.<sup>56</sup> Noteworthy work was done by Kajetan Esser (O.F.M.), who edited and prioritized the corpus of Francis, giving a much different perspective of the saint than the one offered by Sabatier. The Dominican Augustine Thompson has been the most important modern Catholic scholar on Francis. His 2012 book *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* may very well become the new standard work on the life of the saint.<sup>57</sup> The publication of *Grayfriars Journal* also promoted Catholic interpretations of Francis over and against secularists. Interestingly, the journal focused on Francis's social ministry, love of nature, and distinct Catholicism. All this combated prominent secular interpretations of the saint. Only a handful of articles focused explicitly on Francis's preaching ministry,<sup>58</sup> leaving a large lacuna in Francis studies that allowed the anti-oracular caricature to develop.

### **Conclusion: Francis the Preacher Recovered**

This study has shown that Francis believed preaching the gospel was an essential part of fulfilling his call to rebuild God's house. Early popes and biographers highlighted his prolific preaching ministry. However, as time progressed, the Spirituals began to emphasize other themes from Francis's life and ministry to combat the Conventuals. The literature of the Spirituals was emphasized in the twentieth century, meaning that other motifs from Francis's life were elevated over the "Francis-as-preacher" theme. Even when Catholic writers explored the historic Francis and offered rebukes to secular

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<sup>55</sup> For a better treatment, see Laurent Gallant, "Francis of Assisi: Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue: Chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule Revisited," in *Franciscan Studies* vol. 64 (2006), 53-82.

<sup>56</sup> See Appelbaum, *St. Francis of America*, 47-51.

<sup>57</sup> Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> The most noteworthy is Julio Micò, "The Spirituality of St. Francis: The Franciscan Apostolate," *Grayfriars* 10.1 (1996), 1-25.

interpretations of the saint, they rarely highlighted his preaching ministry in their scholarly literature since that was not one of the topics at the forefront of debates regarding the saint. This allowed anti-oracular caricatures about Francis to develop unchallenged. It is time for the record to be set straight. Francis belongs not to the secularist or pluralist but is instead the forefather of all whose hearts are set ablaze by the word of God preached.

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