

FOREWORD

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hen he thought of God and saw the marvelous creations of God's overflowing love, Saint Francis would pick up a stick from the ground and draw it like a violin bow over his left arm. Then he would break into song, praising God in French, the language of his mother and of the troubadours he'd heard at the fairs of Champagne when he accompanied his father on cloth-buying trips. Blessed Thomas of Celano, Saint Francis' first biographer, himself a poet who wrote the apocalyptic medieval poem, "Dies Irae," writes of Saint Francis that he

...praised the Artist in every one of his works; whatever he found in things made, he referred to their Maker. He rejoiced in all the works of the Lord's hands, and with joyful vision saw into the reason and cause that gave them life. In beautiful things he came to know Beauty itself. To him all things were good. They cried out to him, "The One who made us is infinitely good." By tracing God's footprints in things Francis followed the Beloved wherever he led. He made from created things a ladder to God's throne.¹

The ladder Francis made he often sang of, because he considered himself God's troubadour. He embraced his Lady as a Knight of the Round Table would embrace his Lady of the castle; only Francis' Lady was Gospel Poverty, which he dubbed Lady Poverty, serving her unselfishly and with the devotion of a Knight, the eloquence of a Troubadour. Like King Arthur's Knights and the Paladins of Charlemagne, Francis tested his spiritual prowess and

devotion to the Lady Poverty by venturing into the wildwood to do battle with the enemies of his Lord.

Thus begins the long tradition of Romance in the Franciscan Movement. And by Romance here is not meant Romantic in the modern sense, but the Romance of the Middle Ages of Saint Francis, who lived from 1182 to 1226. Medieval Romance located the hero's struggle against evil "within the heart and soul of each protagonist. The Education of the hero in the virtues appropriate for both Christian and courtly life lay at the center of the Romance plot. The development of character, requiring self-testing, reflection, and emerging self-knowledge now came into focus."²

Not only did Francis act out his life like a Knight and Troubadour of Christ, but like the Troubadours whose songs he knew, he summed up his life in a Swan Song, his "Canticle of the Creatures," an Incarnational poem that praises God through, with, for, in and on behalf of all creatures. Francis sang this poem two years before he died; and though we no longer have the music (if it was ever written down), we do have the words of this first great Italian poem sung in the Umbrian dialect and rendered in English as the final poem of this anthology.

It is Francis himself, then, who sings the first Franciscan poem; and he is followed by others of the early Franciscans, including Jacopone da Todi, who wrote in the generation after Francis and who gave us among other classic poems, the "Stabat Mater," still sung on Good Friday throughout the world. Other friars composed popular spiritual poems and songs for the edification of the Faithful. And in time these Franciscan songs and poems became songs and poems about Saint Francis. A literature of homage began to grow steadily, from Henri d'Avranche's versified "Life of Saint Francis" to the poems contained in this anthology.

In modern times Saint Clare, too, has begun to emerge, not only in connection with Saint Francis, but as a writer and a subject of writings in her own right, she the first Franciscan woman and Foundress of the Second Order, the Poor Clares. Poems of her are here as well, and Saint Francis himself wrote a poetic exhortation for Saint Clare and the other Poor Ladies of San Damiano, as Francis dubbed them:

Hear, little poor ones, called by the Lord,
 sisters from many places and provinces:
 Live always in truth so you may die
 in obedience. Do not long for life
 outside; that of the spirit is better.
 With love, I pray you, use discreetly
 the alms which the Lord lends you.
 You heavy with sickness and you
 tired of their sickness, all of you,
 bear it in peace. This fatigue you will
 sell for a dear sum, and be crowned
 in heaven with the Virgin Mary.³

And Clare herself pens beautiful poetic passages in her Letters to St. Agnes of Prague, who had relinquished royalty to take the hand of Christ as a Poor Clare. The Fourth Letter to Agnes, especially, is, in its images and style, much like a prose poem. The editors have selected this extraordinary letter as the penultimate poem in this anthology.

All of which is to say that the lives and writings of Francis and Clare are the very stuff of poetry. As the poems in this anthology demonstrate, Francis and Clare are icons that call from poets, ancient and new, songs of homage, songs of veneration, songs that try to understand something of the mystery of their love of God and all God's creatures, a mystery hinted at in

these beautiful words of Thomas Traherne, the English poet and clergyman who died in 1674:

You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in
your veins,
till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the
stars: and
perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world: and
more than so,
because men are in it who are everyone sole heirs, as well as
you. Till
you can sing and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and
kings in
sceptres, you can never enjoy the world.

—Murray Bodo, O.F.M.
Casa Papa Giovanni
Assisi, Italy

NOTES

- ¹ Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, 165, author's translation from *Through the Year with Francis of Assisi*, Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1987.
- ² Hester Goodenough Gelber, "Revisiting the Theater of Virtue," *Franciscan Studies* 58 (2000).
- ³ Author's translation.