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Books for Lent on Francis, the Passion

Diane Scharper | Feb. 26, 2014

FRANCIS OF ASSISI: THE LIFE
By Augustine Thompson, OP
Published by Cornell University Press, $14.95

St. Francis of Assisi loved animals and seemed to have a special affinity for larks. But there's no record of his preaching to the birds. Ditto the story of Francis holding the paw of the wolf from Gubbio. That tale didn't appear until 150 years after the saint's death. If Francis actually had tamed a killer wolf, wouldn't someone have noticed this event at the time?

Dominican Fr. Augustine Thompson disputes those and other stories in *Francis of Assisi: The Life*, his latest biography of the saint. Thompson, a professor of history at the Graduate Theological Union, studied archives in Assisi, the writings of Francis and his followers, as well as early biographies and hagiographies. If it could not be proven, Thompson left it out. This latest biography of Francis is a more reader-friendly version of his earlier book. Even so, Thompson sometimes goes into more detail than seems necessary. The bottom line is that Francis (1181-1226) was not born a saint.

For starters, he was not born into great wealth as some suggest. His was only a moderately wealthy family. Nor was Francis' baptismal name Giovanni, or John. According to Thompson, early biographers, in their zeal to promote the saint, tried to set up a parallel between Francis and John the Baptist, but there's no evidence for such a connection. He was baptized Francis, or Francesco in Italian. (The name was not a novelty as some claim.)

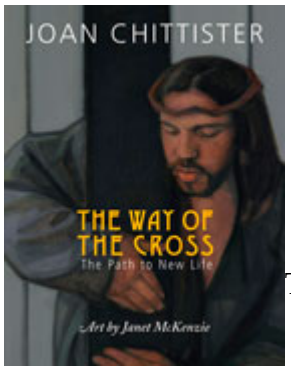
Francis was a high-spirited, extremely sensitive individual given to poetry. He loved to sing but may have been tone-deaf since he often sang off-key. He was not especially handsome, nor was he studious. He loved languages, especially French. But he had difficulty with grammar and spelling. At 22, Francis joined the militia. After he and his men were vanquished in a fierce battle, he spent a year in prison. When he was freed, he was subject to depression.

He left home and took refuge in derelict chapels, including the one at San Damiano. While there, he had a conversion experience in which he felt the impact of Christ's passion and crucifixion. Thompson does not mention a voice speaking to Francis, but suggests the experience was so profound that he wept copiously.

Afterward, he became intensely devoted to the crucifix and kept vigil before it -- weeping and praying. Francis abandoned his own banal life and devoted himself to helping others. Although his good works -- aiding lepers, helping the poor and homeless, and tending the sick -- became the stuff of legend, Francis was essentially a mystic whose love for the crucified Christ developed into a love for others.

Shortly before his death, Francis received the stigmata. One interesting aspect of his stigmata, which Thompson notes, is that although Francis had a hole in his side, the marks on his hands and feet were not holes so much as nail-shaped protrusions of flesh. Francis' devotion to the passion of Christ led him to great reverence for the Eucharist and the Mass, which then led to respect for priests, vestments, altar cloths and the accouterments of the Mass. It was not the objects that had meaning. (Francis disdained materialism.) It was their connection to the crucified Christ.

The downside was Francis' intense anger when the Eucharist or anything associated with it was not treated with the greatest respect. This included inept sermons, hurried prayers of consecration, as well as dirty vestments, altar cloths, chalice, patent or anything coming into contact with the host. Francis didn't just seethe quietly either. As Thompson portrays him, Francis was not the cloying saint given to grand gestures as depicted by filmmaker Franco Zeffirelli and others. He was a human being who has been embellished nearly out of existence. This expert biography sets the record straight.

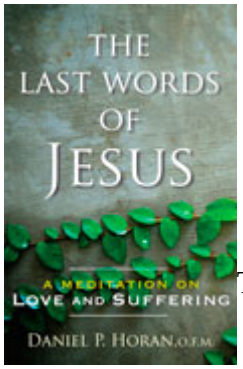


THE WAY OF THE CROSS: THE PATH TO NEW LIFE

By Joan Chittister with art by Janet McKenzie
Published by Orbis Books, $25

What do the Stations of the Cross mean to you? What should they mean? Joan Chittister answers both questions in the exquisite book *The Way of the Cross: The Path to New Life*. A columnist for *NCR*, a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pa., and author of several bestselling books, Chittister muses on the stations as depicted by artist Janet McKenzie. Mc-Kenzie's evocative paintings feature a young, light-skinned black man posing as a contemporary Jesus. Both Chittister and McKenzie hope to promote a deeper understanding of the Roman Catholic practice of praying the stations -- one, they believe, that could be used not only during Lent, but throughout the year. (Chittister also speaks of Mary as deeply committed to her son and empathetic toward his suffering -- a refreshing counterbalance to the depiction in Colm Tóibín's recent novel *The Testament of Mary*.)

Chittister says that the stations are not exercises in petitioning God so much as they are excursions into the hard moments of life. They should be a model showing people how to live amid suffering. As she explains, the stations -- ending as they do with the burial of Jesus -- leave one bereft. Yet Jesus' passion, crucifixion and death lead to the stark reality of the tomb. His death is the central fact of the stations. It's ugly and terrifying. If nothing else, people need to confront Jesus' experience with honesty and without trying to gloss over the tragedy of it. The book's overall theme is that if Jesus is the Son of God, as Christians believe, then his crucifixion and its ramifications must be grappled with in all their terror and profundity.



THE LAST WORDS OF JESUS: A MEDITATION ON LOVE AND SUFFERING

By Daniel P. Horan, OFM
Published by Franciscan Media, $12.99

Fr. Daniel Horan gave a series of homilies on the seven last words of Christ and has now published his talks as this book. *The Last Words of Jesus: A Meditation on Love and Suffering* is a compelling look at a horrific moment in history and one that is central to the establishment of Christianity. A Franciscan friar, columnist for *America*, and author of several books, Horan believes that homilies must be grounded in Scripture. This mindset adds authenticity to his observations. Readers know he's done his homework and hasn't just parroted clichés. Good preaching, he says, starts with a study of the history, meaning and context of a passage. It cannot rely on one's own reading of the text.

Horan believes that profound truths wait beneath the surface of Christ's last words. Those truths can empower people to develop the intimate relationship with God experienced by St. Francis of Assisi and others. Horan devotes a chapter to each of Christ's seven final statements. The setup includes Scripture, Horan's reflections with references to Thomas Merton and other religious luminaries, a Franciscan take on the Scripture, questions, and a prayer. Horan writes in a warm, reader-friendly style that combines the personal and the personable. Although his book's preface and introduction seem long while some of the chapters meditating on Christ's last words seem short, one comes away with a deeper appreciation of Christ's final hours.

Horan's bottom line is that the Gospels -- including the events of Good Friday -- have become "too domesticated." Their message (to forgive the unforgivable, heal the broken, clothe the naked, and love the enemy) isn't the theme of a fairy tale. Nothing brings that point home like the crucifixion of the Lord. In order to contemplate Christ's death and his last words, Christians must strip away the goo that's adhered to them and think about what actually happened on Good Friday as opposed to just going through the motions.

Ultimately, all three of these books -- in one way or another -- attempt to inspire reverence for the fact of Christ's passion. And, despite a few quibbles, they succeed.

[Diane Scharper teaches at Towson University. She is the author of several books, including *Radiant, Prayer Poems*.]

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