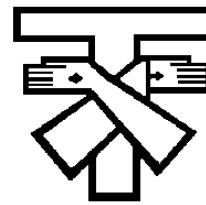




## Imaginative retelling of Francis's story paints warm portrait of Poverello

Book review by Joanita M. Nellenbach, OFS



At a retreat last May in the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region, Father Steve Gross, OFM Conv., said that we “need to know the real flesh-and-blood Francis” by reading what Francis said and wrote.

In *St. Francis of Assisi*, Bret Thoman, OFS, has presented us with just such a living, intimate portrait.

Director of St. Francis Pilgrimages and a member of Immaculate Conception Fraternity in Jonesboro, Ga., Bret based his book on Francis’s words and those of his early biographers found in such texts as the three-volume *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*.

Bret’s incorporated his imagination seamlessly into what we know from those original sources. As I read, I found that I was journeying with Francis and I felt closer to him than I had in some other Francis biographies I’ve read.

I experienced Francis’s hopes, dreams, doubts, longings – someone not so different from me (at least at the outset). Francis shows us that we all have the opportunity to grow in holiness and our love of God. – if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. He had to grow in his vocation, just as we do. It wasn’t any easier for him than it is for us.

Francis listened constantly in prayer and in all he saw around him, including what he found in hermitages and other remote locations. God and Francis, nature and Francis, were present to each other:

“During the cold months, the heat of the fire warmed his body and his inner being; he always kept the embers lit as long as possible. How he rejoiced on those first spring days when the power of the Mediterranean sun warmed the land on which he often lay. During the hot summer months, the coolness of the caves refreshed his body....

“As Francis descended into the barrenness of the caves in solitude and silence, he felt like he was entering something much bigger than himself. It was almost as if he were descending into the womb of the earth where he felt God comforting, nurturing, and protecting him. In the caves, he was

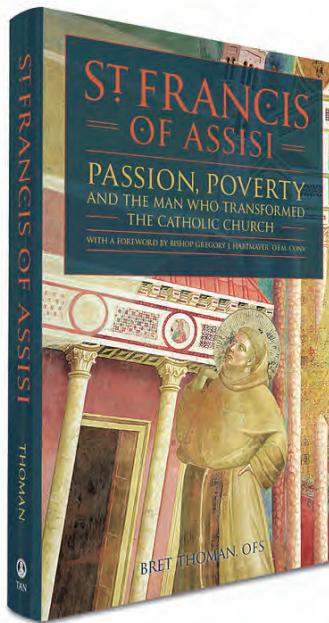
filled with a powerful – almost overwhelming – sense of God’s power, goodness, and love” (146).

I like the way Bret tells us about life in Assisi by including Francis in events, such as what happened to someone with leprosy. Francis loathed and avoided lepers, as did most people, but leprosy infected rich and poor, so one or more of Francis’s friends might have contracted the disease. Describing how lepers were expelled from Assisi, Bret imagines the tender-hearted Francis joining the procession taking a friend into his exile and living death.

Of course, no biography of Francis would be complete without the wolf of Gubbio. Bret tells the story of the wolf by having Francis recall that incident as he is captured by the Saracens.

Be sure to read the interesting footnotes, which provide much additional information and background; as in the footnote on the wolf: “It can be considered an allegory for Franciscan peacemaking. However, the bones of an actual wolf are still preserved today in a church near Gubbio. They are believed to be the same wolf that Francis tamed” (172).

Being so close to Francis, I felt that he had become my friend. That must be why the account of his death had me close to tears. The book contains eight pages of Bret’s color photos of locations important in Francis’s life. There is also an excellent index. This biography is a wonderful way to get to know Francis on a deeper level and to journey with him.



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