

Seeing St Francis **Michael Manktelow**

'I saw St Francis', exclaimed John Moorman in an article for *franciscan* in January 1979. For a scholar who, as he said, had 'spent a lot of time during the last fifty years reading and thinking about St Francis and spent some hours in the crypt at Assisi looking at the stone coffin in which his body was said to lie', it was very moving to have been present the previous year when the saint's body was exhumed and re-encased before being replaced in the sarcophagus. 'I never thought for one moment that one day I should actually see and touch his bones.' This moment was to crown his life's work in bringing St Francis before the eyes of his contemporaries.

John Moorman (1905-89) was an Anglican clergyman who served in both urban and rural parishes of the north of England before spending ten years training men for the priesthood as Principal of Chichester Theological College. Finally he was Bishop of Ripon in his native Yorkshire, up to his retirement in 1975. A keen ecumenist, he was Senior Anglican Observer at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and then co-Chairman of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission until 1981 when its *Agreed Statement on the Eucharist, Ministry and Authority* was published. A constant thread throughout his life, however, was the study of St Francis and of the early history of the Franciscan Order.

Three people in his early years influenced him in this direction. In his teens his mother gave him a copy of *The Little Flowers of St Francis*. Then, as an undergraduate at Cambridge where he read the lives of the saint by Sabatier, Chesterton, Fr Cuthbert and St Bonaventure, he was enabled by Professor F. C. Burkitt to spend three weeks in Assisi, where he stayed with the Poor Clares at San Quirico and soaked himself in the atmosphere of the Franciscan holy places. Thirdly, he met Brother Douglas SSF, whose ministry among wayfarers and vagrants made a deep impression upon him - a perfect modern example of St Francis' simplicity in living out the precepts of the Gospel.

Moorman's youthful idealism was thus fired, but his devotion to St Francis was never sentimental: in fact he saw him as 'a terrifying person' who still today throws down a challenge to the standards and values of a materialistic society. So, having written *Sources for the Life of St Francis* in 1940 and *A New Fioretti* six years later (a collection of early stories of St Francis hitherto untranslated), he followed these with his own life of the saint, making no apology for adding to the already numerous biographies available in English. *St Francis of Assisi*, published in 1950, is a scholarly but eminently readable study of just over one hundred pages. It still sells well, over fifty years later, having appeared in a new edition in 1976 to mark the 750th anniversary of the saint's death. Seeing, like Renan, St Francis as 'the one perfect Christian', far from otherworldly, he insists the call of Francis was 'not to escape from the world, but to give oneself to the world, asking nothing for oneself and ready to suffer and die for the souls of men.'

This biography was later matched by a penetrating study of the saint's spirituality in *Richest of Poor Men* (1977). Moorman owed this title to Thomas of Celano in his 'First Life' where Francis is called "ditissimus pauper". He finds "The Mirror of Perfection" a succinct summary of Francis' character in Brother Leo's four foundation-stones: humility, simplicity, poverty and prayer. To these Moorman added obedience and joy. The former ensured that the rapidly growing numbers of followers of Francis all over Europe did not become fragmented or slack; it was essential to have a Rule and that this Rule should be obeyed. But it was through obedience that Francis himself had found joy - the inner joy of knowing that he was doing the will of God. The friars were to go about showing joy - a joy that comes from forgiveness and service. He nicknamed the friars "joculatores Domini" (the Lord's minstrels) as they went about singing the praises of God, yet this was to be a hard-won and inner joy which came from a triumph over weariness, mockery and hostility, misunderstanding and even betrayal. Then, quoting "the most moving chapter" ('Patience is the source of perfect joy') of *The Little Flowers*, Moorman adds, 'In spite, therefore, of all his troubles and tribulations, of the agony of his wounds, the pain of his sicknesses and the sadness of his heart, Francis could say on his deathbed "I have done my duty: may Christ teach you yours" and, Celano tells us, "he accepted death, singing."'

In this book, then, we see Moorman himself, soaked after a lifetime's study of St Francis, interpreting the timeless appeal of the saint. It had led him also, as a Church historian, to write his magnum opus, *A History of the Franciscan Order, from its Origins to the year 1517*. When this appeared in 1968 Moorman was in the midst of his time as a busy diocesan bishop, causing Archbishop Michael Ramsey to exclaim with admiration that in his case the dictum that 'a mitre is an extinguisher' had been so admirably belied. Reprinted thirty years later, it was supplemented by his last and most painstaking work, *Mediaeval Franciscan Houses*, published in 1983. Hailed by a leading Franciscan scholar as 'le travail de géant', this collated in one volume a list of some 4,500 Franciscan establishments for friars and Clares, from Peking in the east to Cuba in the west, up to the year 1517. It was the final homage of a scholar whose love of St Francis and all things Franciscan had dominated his life. Appropriately, then, as he himself lay dying in a Durham hospital, his parish priest read to him - in Italian - the 'Canticum of the Sun.'

Moorman left his library of over 2000 books on St Francis and Franciscan history to St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, where also he endowed a scholarship in Franciscan studies, thus enabling future generations to see St Francis. **f**