



The Mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi

D H S Nicholson, Brother Hermenegild TOSF

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The state of affairs of Franciscan literature at the present day is such as to cause some . hesitation in the mind of any lover of St. Francis who may feel moved to add to Its already enormous bulk. Both the saint himself and the far reaching movement to which he gave rise have been treated from so many and so different Standpoints, and with so vast an expenditure of erudition and enthusiasm, that at first sight the field of research would seem to have been exhausted. And so far as actual biography-the consideration of the events of St. Francis' life and the general character that they evidence-is concerned, it is clear that the three great biographies of M. Sabatier, M. Joergensen, and Father Cuthbert have left unnoticed nothing of importance to our understanding of St. Francis and his times. They are authoritative in the best sense, in that they combine a sympathy for the personality of their subject with a precise and profound knowledge of the yet discovered facts concerning him. To have attempted another biography, therefore, would have been both impertinent and superfluous, and in preparing this Study of St. Francis' mysticism I have not attempted to cover again the well-explored ground. This being so, it may be well to prepare the reader for what I have attempted to do. It has long seemed to me that the literature which concerns St. Francis has been deficient in one respect, and that a respect which touches most deeply the reality of any presentation of him and therefore its value for the present day. At the side of the detailed biographies there have been offered to the reading public studies which show him from a countless number of Standpoints: he has been considered as an impassioned and far-sighted social reformer, as a great Statesman, as an obedient son of the Church, as a semi-rebel whose mission was to reform its more salient abuses, as a tender-hearted lover of animals and of all things that live, as an inspired poet, as a man deeply imbued with the knightly tradition, as a rather weak-minded if amiable enthusiast who did no great harm but certainly no great good, as a fanatic, as a mentally deranged neurasthenic; but, except for passing references, I have not been able to discover that he has been treated as a mystic. And yet, if mysticism Stand for the most real aspect of the individual, if it represent the relation between him and the Absolute, it is in this supremely that lies the key to his character and so to his actions. It will provide the clue to the main direction of his life as well as to its details, if it be once conceded that mysticism was a real and living force for him. It is in the belief that this was eminently the case with St. Francis that I have, with much diffidence, approached the subject. For those who are unable to believe that mysticism is a vital and fundamental thing, I shall seem to have added but one more to the many one-sided and partial Studies of St. Francis: to those for whom mysticism is, or is becoming, an indispensable part of life I would offer this consideration of one of the greatest: of those who have realized that all things are within.. For one of the peculiarities of man's search for God is that though the details of its method may vary, its essentials remain· unchanged throughout the centuries. The principles which guided St. Francis are as true for us now and as applicable to our needs as they were for him, and it is his amazing success in the sempiternal quest which constitutes his chief claim to value in the present. He has always been-perhaps vaguely at times-an inspiration: he may also be guide.

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