PHILIP HOARE

User-friendly saint for our time

For eight centuries, St Francis of Assisi has had a popular appeal matched by few other saints, his life inspiring artists, film-makers and writers as well as politicians and environmentalists. A literary critic here examines the abiding impact of the saint on culture, both high and low

Few saints have as extensive a cultural legacy as Francis – a symbolic life beyond their canonised status. He barely needs his honorific: like a medieval artist, it is enough to know him as Francis of Assisi. As a boy, I had a real affection for Francis. He wasn't a stern moralist. Rather, he seemed a gentle, animal-loving soul; handsome, intelligent, appealing. If I ever wanted to be a saint, it was Francis.

The enduring power of St Francis owes much to the visual nature of his story. His life is a series of set pieces and paradoxes: the renegade soldier who loved fine clothes and high living, yet whose questioning spirit led him to give it all away. His inspiration to St Clare, his preaching to the birds and taming the wolf of Gubbio – all these feed a lasting iconography. Francis is a man for all ages. In contemporary jargon, he is an accessible, user-friendly saint.

The Francis legend began four years after his death, when, in 1230, his body – said to be uncorrupted – was laid in the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. The chapel was subsequently adorned by 28 frescoes by Giotto in a narrative of the saint's life. Here, too, is Cimabue's more sombre work, said to be the nearest likeness to the saint.

After these works came many representations of the saint, from Bellini to Caravaggio and Zurbarán and beyond. Yet as creator of the first Nativity scene, Francis was himself an adept manipulator of the visual. His own body became a symbol of sanctity when, in 1224, on La Verna in Tuscany, a mountain given to him as a retreat for prayer, Francis received the stigmata. From then on, La Verna itself was, in the words of the historian Simon Schama, "an alternative Calvary".

St Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds **by Giotto (*c*.1266-1337), Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman**

According to Schama, writing in *Landscape and Memory* (1995), Franciscans saw La Verna as the "Seraphic Theatre of the Stigmata of Christ" – a notion which owes something to both Francis' career as a performer (as a court troubadour and storyteller) and to the future dramatisations of his life. La Verna became a Franciscan emblem, promulgated in prints by Jacopo Ligozzi published in 1612, complete with "astonishing effects (including movable paper flaps and hinges) to suggest the precipitous experience of the saint on the mountain".

But it was in the nineteenth century that Francis' legend truly became part of popular cultural discourse. The saint appealed to Victorian sentiment and love of parable – a whimsical nineteenth-century print of Francis shows birds fluttering around his tonsured head. Yet his legacy spoke to the intellect, too – nowhere more so than to the period's most extraordinary critic, John Ruskin.

Ruskin's visit to Assisi in 1874 came at a point in his life when he was vulnerable. He was suffering from unrequited love for a young Irish woman, Rose La Touche. With Rose's parents vehemently opposing the match, the distraught Ruskin took solace that summer in travel, in art and faith.

He arrived at the Basilica of San Francesco in June. During his stay there – which stretched to several weeks – Ruskin felt himself drawn ever closer to the saint. As his friend and editor E.T. Cook observed, Ruskin "entered into a communion of spirit with St Francis". Ruskin was allowed to stay in the sacristan's cell, "and there's the lower church, with Giotto's fresco of Poverty in it, between me and any 'mortal' disturbance. St Francis in his grave a few yards away." There the critic came physically close to the saint; he was even allowed to handle Francis' "hair shirt" – in fact a belt of hair, worn as a reminder of Christ's sufferings.

Ruskin copied Giotto's frescoes, contrasting them with his own age of "cotton and iron mills". But it was his copy of Cimabue's *Madonna with Angels* and St Francis in which his identification with the saint was made shockingly plain: Ruskin gave Francis his own features. Such was Ruskin's obsession with the saint that he felt haunted by "the storm cloud of the nineteenth century", the metaphysical evils of the Industrial Revolution.

Francis' message of poverty was a potent antidote to an age obsessed with material advancement at the cost of both human lives and earthly resources. This was nowhere more noticeable than in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*", published a year after Ruskin's visit to Assisi. It dwelt upon the fate of five German Franciscan nuns fleeing anti-Catholic laws and who drowned together as their ship sank in a storm off Harwich, the sisters holding hands as their leader called out, "O Christ, come quickly!" In his exquisite verse, Hopkins elided the nuns' fate with their founder's, "With the gnarls of the nails in thee, niche of the lance/his/ Lovescape crucified." In Hopkins' words, St Francis' stigmatic

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body became a landscape of Christ's love.

Throughout the twentieth century, Francis remained an inspiration to artists and dramatists. In 1922, Laurence Housman, brother of A.E. Housman and a socialist and pacifist, wrote a series of playlets based on the life of St Francis. In 1950, Roberto Rossellini directed the beautifully shot *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (Francis, God's Jester). By the 1960s, Francis was recast as a radical, the Che Guevara of the faith. Franco Zeffirelli portrayed him in his 1972 film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, as a proto-hippie in soft focus – complete with a poster displaying the naked saint and a soundtrack by Donovan. In 1989, a tougher Francis was played by the New York-born Catholic Mickey Rourke, in *Francesco*, a film by Liliana Cavani based on a novel by Hermann Hesse.

Yet even as a new generation embraced Francis' proto-ecological message, welcoming his recognition as patron saint of the environment, Francis' words were being invoked to herald an era of materialism. When Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street on 4 May 1979, she intoned the saint's prayer: "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope." Recently, critics of Barack Obama's tax plans have also quoted Francis at the president: "It is not lawful to take the things of others to give to the poor." More optimistically, Francis' embrace of change may be seen in the ambitions of the new leader – who, as a boy, attended the St Francis of Assisi school in Jakarta.

Francis' powerful hold on contemporary culture is noticeable today in pop culture. At least two indie bands cite the saint: Baltimore's psychedelic rockers Celebration quote Francis on their website, and Philadelphia's mewithoutYou took their album title from Francis' moving "The Canticle of Brother Sun". The contemporary feminist artist Linder Sterling has produced work inspired by the story of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

This week Francis has no less than two theatrical premieres, Dario Fo's one-man show, and Clare Goddard's new play, opening at Park Place in Hampshire, a Georgian mansion used by Indian Franciscan sisters (for whom the play is being produced as a vital fund-raiser). Goddard's ambitious play employs dramatic *son et lumière* effects to underline the visual aspects of Francis' story. It is resolutely set in the present day – a device which seeks to underline her belief "that Francis never really died. More than any other saint, he lives on, in all of us." Although none of Goddard's six-strong cast is Catholic, all knew who St Francis was. Even today, the saint's message remains potent. It is no small measure of the power of art that it should be so.

■ **Philip Hoare is a writer and critic. His latest book is *Leviathan*, published by Fourth Estate.**

(***See Robert Thicknesse, page 30.***)

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