

M. SABATIER'S LIFE OF S. FRANCIS.¹

M. PAUL SABATIER is one of those men of letters, unhappily rare in France, in whom ripe learning and fine critical sagacity are not divorced from a reasonable Christian faith. Trained in the "Faculté de théologie protestante de Paris," he has grown into the most brilliant scholar of his Church. No commentary on the *Didaché*, for instance, is more illuminating than the edition of that treasure trove which he published in 1885. And now he has given us a Life of S. Francis which may stand on the same shelf with Villari's Life of Savonarola.

In such a work, one main problem must obviously be to disentangle history from legend. M. Sabatier has devoted himself for several years past to an exhaustive study and collation of the original documents, among the scenes where they were first composed. He has ransacked Italian libraries, and especially the archives of Assisi. He has pilgrimaged over those Umbrian and Tuscan hills where the Order was cradled, exploring the traces of its beginning, and visiting whatever cells and convents shelter its remnants to-day. And he has written a book which can hardly fail to be monumental, because it collects and condenses the results of this patient and learned research, not only with a delicate acumen and sense of perspective characteristic of the best French scholarship, but also with a penetrating and impassioned sympathy for S. Francis himself.

M. Sabatier prefixes to his biography proper an elaborate "Étude critique des sources" (pp. xxx-cxxiv). This had already been attempted by Dr. Thode, in the appendix to his *Franz von Assisi*,² where, for instance, the critical value

¹ *Vie de S. François d'Assise*, par Paul Sabatier. Paris: Libraire Fischbacher, 1894.

² *Franz von Assisi, und die Anfang der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien*. v. H. Thode. Berlin, 1885. It works out with great learning the theory—first

of Celano's "Second Life" was first pointed out. But the German wrote from a different standpoint, and bent his research towards another goal: moreover, he lacked the *finesse* of the French scholar, who discriminates, as no one had done hitherto, between the early lives of the Saint, by distinguishing the aim and bias of their several authors. M. Sabatier pronounces them all to be more or less *Tendenz-Schriften*, evoked by the struggles and divisions which convulsed the Order for half a century after its founder's death.

Even in the lifetime of Francis two opposing parties emerged from the extraordinary success of the new movement. It drew into its ranks a mass of more or less indifferent recruits, who soon lost or never possessed any true zeal for their vocation. But beyond these, the Franciscan spirit proper ran into two very different channels. On the one hand, there were the mystical enthusiasts for absolute poverty, who appealed to the authority of the Saint and his personal disciples, as well as to the strictness of the original Rule. On the other hand, the more moderate and practical men sought to make the Order an instrument of that Church reform which they sincerely desired; these were willing to relax the severer precepts against corporate wealth, and to employ all lawful influences, especially the human wisdom which Francis deprecated, to attain their object. This party, which was strongest among the Brethren outside Italy, was consistently favoured by the popes. Indeed, the papal policy has always been fatally successful in capturing whatever fresh spiritual energies it was unable or unwilling to suppress, and in subduing them to its own ecclesiastical ends. Nothing in the life of Francis is so pathetic as his persistent, unavailing struggle for his ideal of simplicity and poverty, against the counsels of astute church-

broached early in this century by Goerres, and developed by Ozanam and historians of painting like Crowe and Cavalcaselle—that the renaissance art in Italy owed its real origin to the Franciscan movement.

men like Cardinal Hugolin and worldly Brothers like Elias of Cortona, who, when Francis died in 1226, remained the most commanding figure in the Order.

Briefly, M. Sabatier distinguishes his chief authorities as follows. The "First Life," by Thomas of Celano, written in 1228 by command of Gregory IX., is as a whole shaped and coloured to favour Elias, whom it represents as the natural successor of Francis. Eight years later Elias had been degraded through a re-action in favour of the pure and simple Rule. Accordingly, in 1246, there appeared the *Legenda trium sociorum*, by Ruffino, Angelo and Leo, close friends and intimates of the Saint. It amounts to a panegyric of poverty, a manifesto on behalf of fidelity to the letter and spirit of the primitive Rule. This finest of Franciscan documents has come to us sadly mutilated towards its close. M. Sabatier finds, however, important fragments of its suppressed portion embedded in the later *Speculum Vitæ S. Francesci*. In 1247 the "enthusiastic" party was strong enough to elect as minister-general John of Parma, who resembled Francis more than any other of his successors. Thomas of Celano was then commissioned to compose a "Second Life," which so far reflects the internal conflicts of the Order that its history becomes a thesis against those who would relax the strict rule of poverty.

In 1257 the tide had turned again, and Bonaventura was elected minister-general. An orthodox mystic, he moderated the extremes of both parties, reforming laxity and suppressing fanaticism. He was charged to write a fresh life of Francis, which was accepted in 1263 as the official and canonical biography. It is a storehouse of legend and miracle, amid which the personal human character of Francis almost disappears; his soul becomes a mere "theatre for visions," and his will a passive instrument of God.

M. Sabatier thus differs profoundly from the Bollandists

and Wadding in his estimate of Bonaventura's work. On the other hand, he sets high value on the celebrated *Fioretti* (1330-1380), which the Bollandists disdained. With all its disregard for facts, it embalms the popular local traditions of Umbria; and these, however fantastic in form, have fixed, with unerring instinct, on the crucial points in the Saint's character; they preserve to us that indescribable atmosphere, "half-childish, half-angelic," which Francis breathed. The *Liber Conformitatum* (1385-1389), of Bartholomew of Pisa, draws an elaborate parallel between the lives of Francis and of Christ. The more fanatical Franciscans had not been slow to develop out of the mystical apocalypse of Abbot Joachim the idea that Francis was really a re-incarnation of Jesus Himself, inaugurating the final era of the world. But the *Liber Conformitatum*, though tedious, is full of careful research; its numerous and exact quotations preserve long fragments of lost works on the Saint. M. Sabatier goes so far as to declare of this neglected book: "Je n'hésite cependant pas à y voir l'ouvrage le plus important qui ait été fait sur la vie de S. François."

M. Sabatier goes on to enumerate and sift every scrap of what can be called evidence bearing on his subject; but we have given his verdict on the really decisive documents. As one follows this study in criticism, one is irresistibly reminded of similar attempts, with a far slenderer basis, to estimate the relative values of the Evangelical "sources." We have been at some pains to mark the acumen and originality of M. Sabatier's appreciation of his authorities, because it leads him to transform the idea of the Saint which was presented by such weighty biographers as Wadding and Papini, who were content to harmonize their materials without due discrimination. It is very striking, and certainly refreshing, to find that we now arrive at a picture of the real S. Francis, much more like that which

has been fondly enshrined in the popular imagination of Italy.

We hasten to add that M. Sabatier's erudition never chokes his work with dry-as-dust details. His learned discussions are confined to the introduction, the appendices, and the notes; while the life itself is written with artistic skill. As we read it, we are brought into touch with a living man, in organic connection with his age. We come face to face with a real personality, so divinely inspired, and yet so endearingly human, that we begin to understand the secret of his power to sway and subdue the souls of men.

We have no space to follow M. Sabatier in his suggestive analysis of the social and religious world into which Francis was born—a world in some respects more remote from us than the world of Socrates or of Cicero. He describes the wide-spread spiritual revolt against clerical corruption at the close of the twelfth century, which showed itself in such different forms as the Poor Men of Lyons, the Manichean Catharists, and the mystic prophets of the "Eternal Gospel." These all ploughed the furrows in which Francis sowed.

No one before has brought out so clearly the fact that Francis was essentially a man of the people. He was the typical mediæval saint, who, like the Hebrew prophet, always stood contrasted with the priest, by virtue of the perpetual antithesis between new inspiration and old authority. Francis himself simply accepted such authorities as he found in Church and State. For his work was not with principalities and powers, but with the common multitude of humble men and women. Society in Italian cities was then divided into the "Majores" and the "Minores"—as we now say, the upper and the lower orders, the classes and the masses. So that the very name with which Francis baptized his "Fрати Minores" bore

eloquent witness as to where he felt that his vocation lay. He brought home to an astonished world the great forgotten fact that Christ had lived and died in poverty, preaching good news to the poor.

Yet the real test of M. Sabatier's book lies, not in his estimate of authorities nor in his analysis of environment, but in his treatment of the inner history of the Saint. And here, though there is still something to be desired, we are at least thankful for a frank and explicit recognition of spiritual realities. For such a life as this is simply inexplicable on any mere naturalistic hypothesis. A great new moral force breaks out among men: how can we account for it, unless we admit that it was "born from above," as it passionately professed to be? M. Sabatier does not hesitate to sum up the experience of Francis before the crucifix at St. Damien, which sealed his conversion, in words like these: "Pour le premier fois sans doute François venait d'être mis en contact, direct, personnel, intime avec Jésus Christ." Surely this is but to assign the true supernatural cause for that supernatural effect, which, beginning in one soul, quickened multitudes into a new life with God.

But with this faith in the powers of the world to come, M. Sabatier is very far removed from superstition, whether mystical or ecclesiastical. He feels that his subject need not be invested with any artificial aureole. He keeps as closely as possible to the facts of his history, and he draws with especial freedom on the actual words which come to us written by Francis himself. The book reprints the Italian original (which M. Renan declared non-existent) of the famous *Cantico delle Creature*, which Mrs. Oliphant has translated into English verse, in her charming book that has done so much to introduce and endear Francis to ordinary English readers. M. Sabatier does not admit that the other two Canticles *Amor di Caritate*, and *In foco l'amor mi mise*, can be attributed to the Saint, in their

present form. But he strongly defends the Testament of Francis as authentic, in spite of M. Renan's adverse verdict, and transcribes its most important paragraphs.

Nothing else admits us so closely into the sanctuary and secret of the heart of the dying man; just as the *Cantico* illustrates, better than any possible description, the exquisite naturalness and gaiety of spirit of this "poverello di Dio." His renunciation was for Francis no ascetic abstinence, but a vow of liberty. What other man enjoyed so fully the franchise of God's world and God's creatures? For it remains true, as à Kempis declared, that "he who seeks his own, loses those things which are common." And Francis could resign all personal aims and possessions with "the glad detachment of one whose heart and treasure are elsewhere."

Many other points rise up for notice in this fascinating biography—the relations of Francis with S. Dominic and S. Clare; his simple sagacity in founding his "Third Order"; the gift of song which made him a minstrel of God; the fragrance of the fields and woods which kept his devotion "aussi différent de la piété des sacristies, que de celle des salons"; and, above all, his supreme and touching humility, unsoiled amid the popular reverence which had practically canonized him before he died.

But there is one question which M. Sabatier's book is certain to provoke. Has not Francis his special message for our own generation? Nothing could be less like his attitude towards poverty than the attitude of modern prophets and reformers. The results of industrial civilization, and the characters which it breeds, are not so satisfactory that we can expect it, or perhaps even desire it, to prove permanent. But the present revolt against it aims chiefly at a more equal sharing of material goods. We are told constantly that economic must precede moral reform.

Now it is true, and M. Sabatier has admirably brought

out the neglected fact, that Francis did not contemplate a mere mendicant Order. By his original intention and rule, each brother was required, if possible, to learn and ply some trade and to work habitually for a subsistence. But if we know anything of his ideal, we know he would have recoiled, heart-sick, from any gospel of the greatest comfort for the greatest number. His remedy for poverty was not to abolish it, but to embrace it, to glory in it, and so to triumph over it. That mystical marriage which Giotto painted and Dante hymned points at least towards a nobler solution of our social problems than any "millennium of cakes and ale."

Moreover, Francis was singular not only in his ideals, but in his methods. He accepted unquestioningly the creed and discipline of the Church as he found it; he never attempted to be a theologian, and he was innocent of any plan of ecclesiastical reform. Reformers there were in his day, as there have been since, with "root-and-branch" schemes to reorganize the Church and the State. But that divine vocation which led Francis to the bottom of society bade him lay aside all the aids and instruments in which other men have put their trust. He turned away, not only from wealth, but from learning too. And what is learning after all but a kind of intellectual wealth? Have we a single word in the Gospels to show that Christ Himself set any greater value on education than He set on money? Francis at any rate was led into such literal imitation of his Lord, that he emptied himself of all that this world esteems, and went about among the wretched,¹ giving them only his own abounding love, and the good news of the love of God. And we see him, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possessing all things. If "the

¹ Has not M. Sabatier omitted one factor in the mediæval feeling for lepers? Should he not quote the Vulgate of Isaiah liii. 4: "Nos putavimus Eum quasi leprosum."

greatest gift a hero leaves his race is to have been a hero," we may affirm the same thing still more confidently of a saint. Not what he did, but what he himself was, constitutes the undying lesson, the invincible charm of the Saint of Assisi.

Emerson used to say that his judgment on any man depended on that man's judgment on John Brown of Harper's Ferry. There are surer touchstones of spiritual perception than the Abolitionist martyr; and perhaps our inward sympathy with Christianity is measured not unfairly by our appreciation of Francis. M. Renan goes so far as to declare that since Jesus Himself, Francis of Assisi has been the one perfect Christian. We cannot lay down M. Sabatier's book without feeling fresh point in M. Renan's further confession: "Francis has always been one of my strongest reasons for believing that Jesus was very nearly such as the Synoptic Gospels describe Him."

The story of the stigmata may, or may not be explained away. M. Sabatier is driven by the sheer weight of evidence to accept it as historic, though he does not discuss possible solutions of the phenomena.¹ The real miracle in any case lay in the inward likeness of which outward stigmata could be, at best, only a shadow. For this man did actually bear about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus was manifested in his mortal flesh. In the midst of a brutal age and a corrupt and superstitious Church, Christ was realized and revealed afresh in the lineaments of one, who, having seen His face, and heard His voice, arose, and forsook all, and followed Him.

I have already quoted M. Sabatier's verdict on the *Liber Conformatum*. I can only, in conclusion, repeat his words,

¹ *E.g.*, were the marks imprinted by Francis himself, in his spirit of child-like literal imitation? Were they one of those rare physical results of a spiritual ecstasy of which we had had some well-known and undeniable modern instances?

as the best sentence upon his own book: "Je n'hésite pas à y voir l'ouvrage le plus important qui ait été fait sur la vie de S. François."

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TRACHONITIS AND THE ITURÆANS.

IN the last two numbers of THE EXPOSITOR, Prof. Ramsay has discussed St. Luke's phrase: τῆς Ἰτουραίας καὶ Τραχωνιτιδὸς χώρας,¹ with the view of disproving Mr. Chase's interpretation, that Luke meant two distinct provinces, Ituræa and Trachonitis. Prof. Ramsay takes Ἰτουραίας as an adjective, and as overflowing Trachonitis, and maintains, in opposition to Prof. Schürer,² that the Ituræan territory and Trachonitis were partly the same region. I have nothing to say on the grammatical side of the question. But having had occasion (after a recent journey through parts of the districts discussed) to examine the authorities for the geography, I may be allowed not only to respond to Prof. Ramsay's request for a discussion on the limits of Trachonitis itself,³ but to go into the whole question at issue between him on the one side, and Mr. Chase and Prof. Schürer on the other.

Two preliminary remarks are necessary. *First*, every one who has worked at the geography of Eastern Palestine knows that it is characteristic of the names applied to the different parts of this region to have always been extremely elastic. This is not only true of the popular use of the names—for example, the use in the Old Testament of the names Bashan and Gilead, the use by Josephus of

¹ Luke iii. 1.

² *History of the Jewish People*. English Edition. Div. i., vol. i., Appendix i. *History of Chalcis, Ituræa and Abilene*.

³ EXPOSITOR for February, p. 148, note.