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St. Francis of Assisi the Second Christ

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M. M. MANGASARIAN

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St. Francis of Assisi

In the lecture of this morning and in that of next Sunday we are to study the difference between classical and Christian ideals. St. Francis represents the ideal of the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church is really the founder and preserver of the Christian religion. Protestantism, as you know, is a very recent movement, and is no more than a branch of the Catholic Church. Antoninus, of whom I will speak next Sunday, may be called the flower of Paganism. He represents the height to which civilization rose before Christ. We have in these two men, the world before Christ, and the world after Christ.

The Catholic Church is very proud of St. Francis. He is one of the saints of whom it is said that he came nearer being a new Christ than any other saint in the calendar. A list of the likenesses between Jesus, the Son of God, and Francis, the son of Pietro Bernardone, has been drawn up to establish the claim that Francis was a second Christ. His biographers see in him a re-incarnation of the founder of Christianity. A Catholic scholar of Pisa has written a book called "The Golden Book of Conformities of St. Francis with the Life of Jesus Christ," giving forty points of resemblance between Christ and Francis. A more recent Spanish author has enumerated forty thousand points of resemblance between the two, and first among them is the *stigmata*, or the five wounds of Christ, transferred miraculously to the body of Francis. When Jesus was crucified he had the print of the nails in his hands and feet. You have there the four wounds, and when the Roman soldier pierced his side, that made the fifth and principal wound. The story is that Francis begged of the Lord that he too may have these five holy gashes in his body, and, as a very special favor, his prayer

was answered, which, of course, made the other saints jealous. St. Dominic, the founder of the Black Friars, is also said to have had on his body the *stigmata* of Christ. The skeptical Renan suggests that Father Elias, who succeeded Francis as the head of the Franciscan Order, either invented the story of the *stigmata*, or he, himself, imprinted them upon the corpse of Francis. The explanation is a plausible one. The heart of Francis is in a golden vessel in the Church of Assisi, to remove which, they must have made an incision upon his body. That would explain the principal wound. The other four marks in the hands and the feet could easily be imagined or invented. But we are not interested in the miracle; it makes no difference to us whether the prints on his body were real or imaginary. We neither think more nor less of him because of any incisions or prints upon his flesh.

The part of Italy, Umbria, in the province of which lies Assisi, is one of the most favored by a gentle climate, and scenery at once grand and charming. Francis was brought up in this beautiful and favored spot under very religious training. Early in life he fell violently in love with a lady "who was the most beautiful you could imagine," to use his own words. The name of the lady was Poverty. There is in one of the frescos in Assisi, painted by Giotto, a picture of young Francis slipping the wedding ring upon the finger of Lady Poverty. "She is crowned with roses although dressed in rags, and her bare feet are bruised with stones and torn with briars." The idea of making Poverty his wife occurred to him when he was visiting Rome. The sight of multitudes of beggars there, opened his eyes to the blessedness of the beggar's life and, quick as a flash, he divested himself of his tolerably good clothes and put on rags, the most tattered he could procure. He also gave up his purse and, taking his stand at the entrance of one of the gilded cathedrals, he held out his hand for alms. Thus you see he proposed to the lady and was accepted. But that lady has never been known to refuse a suitor. The next day Francis saw a leper and he turned away from him. He was willing to be poor for Christ's sake, but to be a leper—

unclean and loathsome, oh, no! But the thought stung him like a thorn in the flesh, and he ran after the leper and falling on his knees, lifted the repulsive hand to his lips and kissed it. If the story is true it would follow that lepers were at large in Italy. However, the idea is that Francis was willing to descend to any depths, and to associate with the most despised in the world, for the glory of God.

I am speaking of these details to help you form some conception of Christian ideals, or the ideals of the Catholic Church. The worth of an institution is ascertained as we ascertain that of a great mind—by studying its finest achievements. What are the masterpieces of Shakespear? It is Macbeth. It is Hamlet. It is Othello. It is King Lear. We measure the mind of Shakespear by studying the highest products of his genius. What are the masterpieces of the Catholic Church? It is St. Francis. It is St. Dominic. It is St. Catherine of Sienna! The tree is known by its fruit; the Catholic Church is judged by her saints.

It appears that Francis was something of a poet; but there was a little irregularity, I think, about his mental condition. He was frequently crossing the line that divides sanity from its opposite. Renan says that he was in a constant fever of delicious madness. Like Buddha, Francis was exceedingly compassionate. He had pity for everything that draws the breath of life. The chirp of a grasshopper put him in ecstasies. He called the swallows his little sisters, and he appealed to the emperor to protect the larks. He urged good Catholics to give a special dinner on Christmas day to their oxen and sheep. He addressed the moon and the sun as though they were members of his congregation. He preached to the birds, and when he saw a worm he wept because it had no soul. The story is told that when he was dying he remembered that he had sinned against his brother, the ass. There is also the story of a ferocious wolf in the neighborhood who was stealing property and killing cattle. St. Francis went forth and preached a sermon to the wolf, and the animal was converted, after which he became very tame and visited the people who fed him as they would a guest.

I am referring to these matters to give you an idea of the things which the Catholic Church esteems very highly. The life of Francis was a continual miracle, as the life of Jesus was. You have to satisfy the people if you are going to be their saint. The people desire wonders and miracles, and one must be able to perform them if one is to be their saint. If we explain to the masses the beautiful harmonies of nature, the rhythm, the music, the consistency of the spheres, as well as the immensities that are all about us, they will hardly be impressed with them. But the man who can cure the sick by a relic or a touch of the hand, or turn water into wine, or change a rod into a serpent, will be hailed as a saint, or even as a god! To be the people's hero, you must give them what they want.

The Franciscans, or the followers of St. Francis, were at first called the poor Catholics. They were barefooted, and bare also on the crown of their heads, which were shaven. Poverty, aggressive poverty, which was their rule of life, at first caused some dissension between the monks, and the popes who lived in elegance and luxury. The extreme poverty of the monks emphasized the comfort and affluence enjoyed by the hierarchy. At first, as already intimated, the Church refused to recognize the beggars. Many bitter words passed between the monks and the priesthood. St. Bernard, for instance, charged that the worst people in the world,—the covetous, the usurers, the sacrilegious and the licentious flocked to Rome to fill the ecclesiastical positions. He also says that formerly the apostles cast their nets to catch souls, but that now the Church casts her net to catch gold and silver. But perhaps the severest comment he makes is that "It is no longer true that the priests are as bad as the people, for the priests are very much worse." You see there was quite a conflict at first between the monks and the priests. But the two factions in the Church were reconciled by a dream of Pope Innocent III. It was during the life of this Pope that these two great Orders, the Gray and Black Friars, the one founded by St. Francis, and the other by St. Dominic, came into existence. One night the Pope dreamed that the great Cathedral of St. John,

the Lateran, was tumbling; when all of a sudden, a beggar whom he had spurned from him the day before, stepped forth and steadied the colossal edifice and it fell not. Well, that was one of the dreams that came true! Begging and beggars saved the Catholic Church from bankruptcy. These two Orders, the Gray and Black Friars, the one under St. Francis and the other under St. Dominic, helped to fill the coffers of the Catholic Church with the wealth of many nations. Dominic also established the terrible Spanish Inquisition which delivered up the intellect of Europe to the Church even as it had also its purse. To show you what powerful aids these beggars were to the church I have only to tell you that the Inquisition filled all Europe with terror and lasted until the year 1813. Yes, that dream of Innocent III came true! Matthew Arnold is not far from the truth when, in one of his discourses, he says that the Church would have perished but for those two armies of beggars which helped to renew its life. These monks, numerous as locusts, went all over the world, flying to and fro, and not leaving a stone unturned, to prevent the crash and the collapse of the great Superstition Trust!

May I pause here to explain an interesting phenomenon: An institution that is dead, often maintains for a long time, the appearance of still being alive. Is it not interesting? In other words, if I may coin a phrase, an institution frequently survives its demise; or, again, an institution dies, but is not immediately buried; its funeral is postponed. This is true, for instance, of the monarchy. The French Revolution destroyed the monarchy, but it is still at large, and it has the appearance of being alive. The monarchy is really dead, but it is not yet buried. This is particularly true of the supernatural. Voltaire in the 18th century dealt it a fatal blow. In the 19th century Darwin laid it low, but it still has the appearance of being very much alive—the appearance only! In reality it is dead, but the obsequies are postponed. This postponement is brought about by what we might call, a series of rallies. The Friar or the monkish-movement was one of these great rallies. The Crusades was another

which gave to the moribund religion the semblance of life or a mock vitality. But they only delayed the day of interment. Later on the Jesuit movement under Ignatius Loyola was another rally. The Knights of Columbus in America and similar movements in Europe have the same object in view, to revive the dead. This explanation applies also to the Protestant faith. Methodism, under John Wesley, was a revival of a dying Protestantism. The Salvation Army, with its tambourines, its lads and lassies, was another. In more recent times Christian Science, with the idea that it had discovered something new, or that it had found the lost key to the Scriptures,—that it had at last hit upon the right meaning of revelation, was still another rally, and people mistook the noise for reason, and the excitement for life, and came to think that Christianity was still young and virile, when in truth it had died long ago. It is these revivals or rallies which give to institutions that have passed the epoch of their zenith, an appearance of youth and life, neither of which they possess.

But it is also a law of nature that each rally is succeeded by a reaction which leaves the patient, as it were, in a more exhausted condition than before; that is to say,—less able to respond to the next challenge, or the next crack of the whip. That explains why modern revivals, although they have more money behind them, and are better advertised, because the facilities to advertise are greater today,—never rise to the point of heat of old time revivals. That is why Methodism, the Salvation Army, and the Christian Science movement, or The Men and Religion Forward movement, never attain the dimensions or develop the intensity of the Crusades in the Catholic Church, or of the Puritan movement in the Protestant Church. It is also a law of nature that when a thing is dead, or to return to Shakespeare's phrase, "When the brains are out the man would die." The brains are out of Catholicism and Protestantism; and all that can be done is only to postpone the funeral—but until when?

Let us return to St. Francis: The three rules of his Order were, as you already know, Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience. The Franciscan was not to touch money, much less accumulate

property. The touch of money was pollution, and the monk who was caught with money on his person was like a man caught in adultery. He had violated his marriage vow and was guilty of infidelity to his spouse—Poverty!

Why was money feared? Wealth gives one the sense of power, the sense of possession, the sense of enjoyment; in short it is a pleasure, and the spirit of Christianity is hostile to pleasure. Jesus was the "Man of Sorrows." The same is true of celibacy: If you have a wife you love, if you have children, if you have a home, you are liable to be happy, but such earthly happiness steals a man from heaven. To have a home and wife, and to retire after the day's trials into the bosom of your family, is to seek your paradise on earth, and that is treason against a religion whose heaven is beyond, far away. Hence, celibacy is nearer the monk's desire than wedlock. And the same is true with the third rule of the Order, Obedience, which means in this connection, unquestioning, that is to say, blind, obedience, which leaves no room for the free exercise of one's faculties. And why is this forbidden? Because to think, to reason, to have original ideas, to assert one's self, to say, "I think," gives pleasure, and pleasure is *taboo*. In other words, the object sought is the effacement of man, not his salvation. Christianity must needs annihilate a man before it can save him. Its aim is to reduce man to a minimum of vitality, to make him a mere shadow. God made the world out of nothing. Suppose there had been some material, some wonderful stuff which had helped God in the making of the world; he would then have to share his glory with the thing out of which he made the world. But if he made the world out of nothing, all the glory would be his. Likewise, if you have character and accomplishments, and God saves you, why, part of the honor would belong to you. But if you are nothing, and he saves you, then all the glory is his. Even today in the Protestant churches—I have told you this before—educated men and women take up their hymn books and sing: "Oh, to be Nothing! Nothing!" You have to become nothing before God will agree to have you. Such is the logic of supernaturalism.

God is everything, man is nothing. The idea is to reduce man to a cypher, to make him a mere dot, that God may have all the glory. Let me give you an illustration:

If you should happen to be unwell and you should call for help upon "a divine healer," he will not take your case unless you agree to give up everything else that you might be doing to cure yourself. If you are taking medicine, if you are taking exercise, if you are putting your trust in other things, you have to stop it before he will take your case. Or if you go to a revival meeting to be saved, you must give up helping yourself, trusting in yourself, and throw yourself altogether upon the mercy of God. Christianity is the religion of exclusiveness. It will not share honors or cooperate with anybody, or anything. If you want God to come into your heart you must first put everything else out of your heart, or else he will not come. He will not share anything with anybody, and that is why Jesus said, "You must hate your mother, your father, your wife, your child, for my name's sake." "I am a jealous God."

But it never seems to have occurred to the theologians that jealousy is the unmistakable sign of weakness. To ask for protection or monopoly is to fear competition. If Christian Science cannot cure me unless I stop taking quinine, then my quinine puts divine science to route. And think of an infinite Being who cannot compete with quinine! We want a diety who is less fastidious, less finicky than that. Why cannot divine science work together with human science? I can understand why a doctor should say to his patient, "I cannot treat your case until you give up the other doctor." He is human. He does not claim infallibility for his science. I can also understand why I could be a jealous man. I am human. Yet even then we look upon jealousy as one of our infirmities. But why should a God be jealous? Why should he object to any good that others might do? It is the small mind that is intolerant. Why should a divine healer mind competition? Is he afraid that somebody else might get some of the credit for the good accomplished?

Are not such small thoughts beneath his dignity? God will not help where there is a doctor; is it not absurd?

When St. Francis and his disciples gave up the world, the flesh and the intellect they proved not the strength but the weakness of their religion. A religion which fears the world and goes hiding in a cell or a cave; a religion which looks upon the pulses of the body and the throbs of the ruddy blood in the veins as a temptation, a religion which is scandalized at the curves and the lines of the human form and proceeds to mar and mutilate it—a religion, I say, which strangles the desires and passions which have in them all the vibrant music of nature and the glow and warmth of the sun, a religion finally, which fears the intellect and does not feel safe until it is made fast to a post,—is a religion to be ashamed of!

Let me tell you something more. Asceticism which St. Francis and St. Dominic did so much to encourage and which drove people in hordes from the cities to the desert, from homes to caves, is a fine illustration of the Darwinian law of *atavism*,—the reversion to ancestral types. Now and then a child is born who does not look like either of his parents, but is the image of some remote ancestor. *Atavism* is the past trying to steal a march upon the present. Christianity was born in the wilderness; that is why it seeks the desert. For nearly two thousand years Christianity has been in the cities, but the call of the desert is in its blood. St. Francis was born in Italy, the Italy of the Romans, the Italy whose very dust is ashes of immortals; the Italy of skies forever blue; the Italy of art and music, and yet he sighs for the wilderness! It is the call of the wild. The Jews did not feel at home in Egypt, the wilderness fascinated them; the Christians in the middle ages did not feel at home with civilization; they longed for the desert.

The supernatural is the anti-natural. The attempt to rise above nature generally makes a man fall below nature. The attempt to become God-like only succeeds in making a man less human. The veil does not make a woman more, but less womanly. It is not immoral to marry; the immoral thing is to fear marriage.

It is not unchaste for a woman to bend over a cradle; it is unchaste to flee from the child. The husband is morally a sounder man than the monk, the mother is holier a thousand times than the nun, and the home than the cloister. And I have not words enough in my vocabulary, or words strong enough to express my horror of a religion that, before it can save us, men and women, it must separate us!

The supernatural not only brings about a perversion of nature, but it is also anti-social in its tendencies. What would you think of a religion that packs its effects and moves to the wilderness? I said a moment ago that the aim of Christianity is not to save man but to efface him; and I say now that the aim of Christianity is not to save the world but to end it. Suppose all the good men and women in Chicago were to leave the city, what would become of Chicago? Or suppose all the honest, conscientious, and loyal men were to withdraw from business, what would become of business? Or suppose all the capable, efficient teachers were to give up the profession of teaching, what would become of the schools? And do we not say that politics is corrupt because good men will not assume the responsibilities of public office? Yet the attempt of the supernatural is to get the supposedly best people out of the world—into celibacy. The one institution of the conduct of which the Church is always finding fault, is marriage, marred with scandals and divorces. The priests are forever telling us how marriage has fallen from its high estate and has lost its original purity. But let us assume for the sake of argument that the institution of marriage is in a bad way: May it not be that it is so because the priests have withdrawn from it? If the priests are the most exemplary, the most conscientious, the most honorable and the most moral members of the community, would not Chicago suffer if they were to desert us? But they have deserted one of the most important and fundamental institutions of society,—marriage. Is it any wonder then that the institution is on the decline, and that divorces are increasing? The priests abandon the ship and then blame it for sinking. We could say to the celibate

priest, "If you would reform the institution of marriage and lessen the evils of divorce,—purify the home, and give to the children the proper care and atmosphere,—set us the example yourself by marrying and bringing up children. Show us how to make good husbands and fathers; assume the obligations and discharge the duties of conjugal life. You will not do that? Then you have no right to complain if the institution of marriage is degenerating." Why should it not, since you, the best people, refuse to marry?

But the ascetic or the celibate contributes in a more direct way to the demoralization of society. If the best people, or those supposed to be the best, refrain from marriage then marriage must be good only for inferior people. By withdrawing from marriage, and by declaring, as the counsel of Trent did, that the single state is holier, or as St. Paul does, that marriage is a concession to the flesh, the institution of marriage has been given, if I may use the phrase, a black eye. It has been declared not holy enough for the Christian who would follow the example of Christ. Is it any wonder then that the institution has fallen into disrepute? The priest leaves the propagation of the race in the hands of the unfit, the heretic and the laymen, and then he complains that marriage is not as it should be. If they are sincere about the matter, let them show their respect for the institution by marrying. The inconsistency of the Church is also seen in this that while on the one hand it makes a Holy Sacrament of marriage, on the other it declares that it will pollute a priest if he partakes of it. But it all goes to prove that the ultimate object of religion is to withdraw the best men, or those supposed to be the best, from the world to hasten its fall. How long would humanity last with the three best rules of the Church, poverty, celibacy and obedience or slavery, in force?

It is a matter of history that the Franciscan Order, although it started with a solemn oath not even to touch money, became in time one of the enormously rich religious associations. We sometimes speak of this or that corporation or individual as the wealthiest in the world, but the truth is that the wealth of the

monasteries and convents surpasses that of any other institution in the world. There is, for example, in Russia, the Monastery of Kieff, which has nine hundred million dollars in its collection boxes for the poor. And that is only one of the monasteries. Russia has hundreds of these institutions for men and women, and they are all fabulously rich—riches collected under the guise of poverty—riches accumulated by beggars. No other profession pays so well as religious beggary. Then there is a monastery near Moscow worth one billion, six hundred million dollars. The total wealth of the religious Orders of Russia alone, which is far from being the wealthiest country in Europe, amounts, according to official statistics, to three billion, seven hundred and thirty-five million dollars. You can realize, now, why the French Republic was compelled in self-defense to expel the religious Orders from France. Like a great sponge they were absorbing the savings of the Nation. The beggars had begged so well that there was hardly anything left in the land to give to them. They begged while rolling in wealth. One of the principal sources of income of these Orders was the traffic in indulgences, of which the monks had full charge. To prove the value of these indulgences, now and then the dead appeared to tell the people how easily they gained admission into Heaven because of the indulgences they had purchased from the monks. Another way by which the monks accumulated property was to force themselves upon the last hours of the rich lords and ladies and get them to leave their fortunes to the poor, they, themselves, being the poor. But the more lucrative trade was the terrible Inquisition. The other day a robber was captured in St. Louis. He offered a big sum of money to his captor to be released. Something like that was the source of greatest revenue to the monks during the Middle Ages. Charged with heresy the victims had to settle with the agents of the Church for their lives. Big sums of money were offered to them by the suspected to secure their liberty. When this was impossible the property of the convicted heretic was confiscated. Often the popes complained that they did not get their share of this booty and re-

sorted to strategy to secure it. When, for instance, the Franciscans of England asked the Pope for a favor, he made them first deposit forty thousand ducats in the English banks before he would enter into negotiations with them. But as soon as the money was deposited the Pope seized the amount on the ground that it was too much money for an Order professing poverty to possess.

No matter how rich the monks were they continued to pose as the beggars of Christ. By some Jesuitical reasoning they satisfied themselves and others that even should they own the whole world they would still be poor, because nothing could be considered a sufficient compensation for the services they rendered humanity. Was not this a clever dodge? "If you should sell all you have to give it to the Church you would still be indebted to the Church," said the Jesuits, "for you can never pay the Church enough." Hence the Church is always poor, compared with what she would have if we could pay her all that she is worth, or all that we owe her. Only four years after the death of Francis,—the man who had taken absolute Poverty for his bride,—it was ruled by the Pope that the oath of St. Francis in reference to holding property or handling money was not binding upon his disciples. The further fiction was resorted to that the monks when they accepted money did so not for themselves but for the Church; that they were only the agents of the Pope to whom, as the vicar of God, belongs everything. God is the real owner of all the wealth in the world, and he has made the Pope his steward, with the monks as his collectors! When one is dealing with ignorance any argument answers the purpose. If today a man were to be caught begging with rolls of money in his pocket, what a hue and cry there would be! Yet that is precisely what monks are doing today, and have been doing for hundreds of years—possessing property and begging.

But there is a philosophy behind all this: Why does the Church plead or play the part of Poverty? I will tell you. It is a bid for the suffrages of the masses. Unfortunately the great majority of people are poor, and to secure their votes or their

sympathy, the Church claims to be like the people poor and depending upon charity for support. The tattered rags of the monk and his damp and dark cell also help to bring him into closer touch with the masses which the Church is so anxious to command. Ignorance and poverty are the main supports of superstition. The Church encourages and cultivates them both because they help to make the multitude her clients. Let the people have more bread and more brains and there will be fewer priests.

The Order of St. Francis, as well as that of St. Dominic, shows how impossible are the ideals of Christ. Christianity is a profession; not a practice. Just as the miracles of Christ—the virgin birth, the resurrection, the ascension; or as the dogmas of the trinity, original sin, and infant damnation, are impossible, so is its ethics. Even in the wilderness people could not live up to them. Christianity, as also all supernatural religions teach disobedience to nature, and that is their undoing. Nature must be obeyed, whether the gods are obeyed or not. Deny Reason for God's sake, and Nature will punish you for it with stupidity for a reward; deny freedom, and slavery awaits you; abuse the body for God's sake, and nature will let you slip down to the level of the brute; deny progress, and paralysis will overtake your limbs and faculties; deny love, and you will turn into a stone; deny beauty, pleasure, life,—and the world will be your grave! The Supernatural is impossible. The history of religion shows that Christianity has never been more than a profession. The priest teaches abstinence and lives in luxury; he preaches poverty, and amasses wealth; he preaches forgiveness, and then damns everybody who will not accept his creed; he preaches peace, and he has caused more blood to be shed than all the wars of the heathen and the savages combined, since the world began; he preaches immortality, and clings to the world with desperation; he preaches love, and hunts to death the intellectual and moral nobility of the world with fire and the sword; he preaches humility and meekness, and claims infallible authority over the conscience of man!

Return to Nature! This is our messages to the impossible creeds. Come home from the desert! The world is true; heaven is only a mirage; Life is real; immortality is only a *perhaps*; humanity is at our elbow; where is God? Return to Nature! and the shams and hypocricies of life will give way to truth and courage. We too have a bible, it is nature. Its every word is inspired. Nature is our Church, and it is large enough for all the World. It is the only temple that will endure forever—with the winds and waves for its choir; its organ, the thunder; its quenchless lights, the sun and moon; its dome, the sky; and its sweet worship,—the pursuit of truth in the service of Man!



Selection read before the lecture:

All the heretics I have known have been virtuous men. They have the virtue of fortitude, or they could not venture to own their heresy; and they cannot afford to be deficient in any of the other virtues, as that would give advantage to their many enemies; and they have not, like the orthodox, such a number of friends to excuse or justify them . . . It is not to my good friend's heresy, that I attribute his honesty. On the contrary, 'tis his honesty that brought upon him the character of a heretic.—*Benjamin Franklin*.

Selection read after the lecture:

The real freedom of man does not consist in asceticism but in Rational enjoyment of all the world produces.

—*Goethe*.

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