

CELEBRATING ST. FRANCIS

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Below left, Pope Francis signing *Fratelli Tutti* on the altar of the tomb of the saint in Assisi (Photo credit: Vatican Media). Below right, a view of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi (Photo credit: Wikipedia) Below center: *St. Francis* by Jusepe de Ribera (Photo credit: Uffizi)



October 4 is the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of Italy, ecology, animals, and tapestry makers. This year the celebrations were particularly significant and festive. Pope Francis went to Assisi on his first official trip outside Rome since the lockdown in March, to sign his third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, at his namesake's tomb in the Franciscan Basilica's crypt. The text was originally written in Spanish and in part before the COVID emergency, but it was immediately translated into Arabic, French, English, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, German and Latin. Its eight chapters and 287 points present Pope Francis' vision for a post-COVID world: its universal need for increased fraternity, dialogue, and solidarity, all for the common good. The pontiff emphasizes that the world can no longer afford to continue its "globalization of indifference." To build a peaceful world, he continues, we must eliminate the injustices of the global economy, the nuclear arms race, capital punishment, and wars, now an anachronism. Not surprisingly, he advocates tolerance for immigrants and for the believers of other religions, especially Islam, citing five times his 2019 appeal with the grand imam of Egypt Al-Azhar, the revered 1,000-year-old seat of Sunni Islam. (In 1219, St. Francis traveled to the Holy Land to meet with the Sultan Melek-al-Kamal in an attempt to convert him.)

Like his second encyclical, *Laudato Si'* ("Praised be to you," subtitled "On care for our common home"),



officially published on June 18, 2015, *Fratelli Tutti* (*All Brothers*) was inspired by the teachings of St. Francis.

Laudato Si' is a critique of consumerism, irresponsible "development," environmental degradation and global warming. The words are the opening of each verse of St. Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures*, written in 1224.

Instead, the phrase "All Brothers" is the phrase with which St. Francis began his *Admonitions*, 28 short and deeply spiritual exhortations written by the saint throughout his lifetime to encourage and guide his Franciscan brothers in their vocation.

The title's short-sighted critics should be reminded that Bergoglio's first words as Pope from St. Peter's balcony were, "*Fratelli e sorelle, buona sera.*" ("Brothers and Sisters, good evening.")

Three other recent events are connected to St. Francis. In chronological order:

- the release in English last month of the 1 hour and 22 minute cartoon for kids, *Saint Francis of Assisi*. It is viewable on YouTube like the cartoons about the lives of St. Catherine of Siena (2018) and St. Anthony of Padua (2019).

- the publication by Mondadori on September 29th of *La tunica e la tonaca: due vite straordinarie, due messaggi indelebili*, (The Tunic and the Tonic: Two Extraordinary Lives, Two Indelible Messages) by Father Enzo Fortunato, which juxtaposes the lives of

Jesus and His disciple St. Francis. Fortunato points out that Jesus was denuded and ridiculed by His Roman soldier jailers who cast lots for His clothes, whereas St. Francis, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, undressed and exchanged his expensive garments for a beggar's grimy garb.

So St. Francis' robe had first belonged to a castaway, while Jesus, not His clothes, was the castaway. Perhaps unknowingly, the book's message is similar to *Tutti Fratelli*.

For both Pope Francis and Father Enzo, St. Francis' torn robe symbolizes the sick and disoriented state of our world today. Just as St. Clare had mended St. Francis's robe, we must repair the world. The pandemic has clearly given us this opportunity. We must put aside our personal differences through dialogue, improve international relations, and diminish economic inequality. With the lives of Jesus and St. Francis as our compass, our goal must be to create a just and peaceful world. Spokesperson for the Franciscan Friary in Assisi, Father Enzo is the author of several other books about St. Francis, all available on the internet.

As for the robes worn by Christ, one tradition says that the seamless tunic of Christ was brought to Trier in Germany by St. Helena, the Emperor Constantine's mother. It was first mentioned in the 11th century, but has been documented as being in the east choir of Trier's cathedral since May 1, 1196.

Another tradition places the robe, said to have been worn by Jesus during or shortly before His crucifixion, in Argenteuil's Basilica Saint-Denys, near Paris in France. The Byzantine Empress Irene supposedly gave it to Charlemagne around 800 AD and he gave it to his daughter Theocrate, the Abbess of Argenteuil. Only four pieces have survived. Still other traditions claim the robe is in various Eastern Orthodox churches, notably in Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, Georgia.

As for St. Francis' robe, four Franciscan churches in central Italy claim they each have one. One is Assisi's Basilica; a second is in the Sanctuary of La Verna near Arezzo in Tuscany; a third in the Basilica of the Holy Cross (*Santa Croce*) in Florence, and a fourth in the Basilica of Cortona, also near Arezzo. Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) tests have shown that the robe in Florence is 100 years too young to have belonged to St. Francis; the other three date to St. Francis' lifetime.

- There are two new installations at the *Uffizi* in Flo-



Eike Schmidt and Antonio Godoli, the architect/restorer at the *Uffizi* in front of the column with St. Francis. (Photo credit: *Uffizi*). The cover of Fr. Enzo's latest book, *La Tunica e la Tonaca*



rence, one online and one *in situ*. Since the beginning of the lockdown, Director Eike Schmidt and his staff have added many virtual tours of the museum's collections to its website. The most recent, released on October 3, is entitled *Il Francesco Fratello Universale—vita e culto del poverello d'Assisi (Universal Brother Francis—the life and cult of the poor man from Assisi)* (www.uffizi.it/mostre-virtuali/san-francesco).

Even if Giotto's frescoes of St. Francis' life on the walls of Assisi's Basilica are the most famous depictions of the saint, the *Uffizi's* tour is worth a click.

Its 29 artworks dating from 1240 to 1925 include paintings, etchings, and sculptures of or with the saint or of locations important in his life. With the exception of Filippo Lippi, El Greco, and Jusepe de Ribera, however, none are by household-name artists. Also on October 3, after extensive restoration lasting almost 20 years, the *Uffizi* reopened on its ground floor an area that had been long off-limits except with special permission. Finally, once again it's on the museum's tourist itinerary.

When the Renaissance architect, painter, and art historian Giorgio Vasari built the *Uffizi* in c.1560, he incorporated this area, which once had been part of the site of an important 11th-century church, *San Pietro in Scheraggio*, itself built on the site of a pre-existing church.

Vasari reduced the size of the church and incorporated some of the church's columns in the *Uffizi's* walls.

Painted on one such column is a fresco of St. Francis with his stigmata and wearing his brown habit belted with a cord. At the column's base to the left of St. Francis are pictorial traces of the fresco's lady sponsor.

During the Middle Ages, *San Pietro in Scheraggio* (meaning St. Peter Above the Sewers) was a large building with three naves, a crypt and a cemetery.

Besides its religious obligations, it had an important role in the Florentine government's administration during those times.

The solemn swearing-in ceremony of the *Priori delle Arti*, a kind of 6-member city council or guild, took place in the church, as did its subsequent meetings. It is documented that Dante served from June 15 to August 25, 1300, and took his oath here.

The restorers' installation of a transparent floor in the one nave incorporated by Vasari has made it possible to admire the church's medieval remains below. ○