

## Francis and Jesus

Bodo, Murray

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More than forty years ago Fr Murray Bodo OFM went on a journey to Assisi in search of a dream and there found St Francis of Assisi. As a result *Francis: the Journey and the Dream* almost wrote itself as one thought flowed after another in a poetic, readable and profound modern spiritual classic. Since its publication in 1971, *Francis: The Journey and the Dream* has sold more than 200,000 copies across the world, has been reprinted several times and, in 2011, appeared in a special 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. It has touched hearts and helped to bring peace on countless occasions. For many, it is a book to read and re-read, to take away for periods of quiet prayer and contemplation and, for others, an essential companion on a visit to Assisi.

*Francis and Jesus* is both separate and inseparable from *Francis: the Journey and the Dream*. Both books tell the life story of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Italian saint who set the world on fire with his love for his Crucified Lord and for his bride, Lady Poverty. The big difference is that forty years lie between the two publications and in that period, Bodo himself has journeyed through life. As a result, *Francis and Jesus* shows the maturity of thought, accumulated experience and increasing insight of those years.

It is not that *Francis: the Journey and the Dream* lacked maturity. Far from it. However, precisely because *Francis and Jesus* is also an account of the life of St Francis, Bodo has approached his theme with the accumulated wisdom of many years as a Franciscan friar, poet, writer, spiritual guide and story teller. During the forty years between the two books, he has travelled annually to Assisi, leading pilgrims around the same roads and hills which were familiar to the saint. He has reflected, written and spoken about St Francis on innumerable occasions, leading to his becoming a member of the Franciscan Academy and probably one of the best-known Franciscan writers in the English language. It is inevitable that his understanding of St Francis has grown and developed after working for so long to show the relevance of the Franciscan dream to today's society. Neither Francis nor Fr Murray could be the same person at both the start and a later milestone of their journey, and so, if *Francis and Jesus* did not succeed in portraying the 'Little Poor Man of Assisi' at a greater depth and different perspective from that of *Francis: the Journey and the Dream*, then the book would have failed.

Bodo himself says of this book, "I wondered at first if I was simply going over material that had been perhaps better articulated before; but try as I would to stop the emerging words, the voice would not stop but pressed hard upon my consciousness to record the words and to shape them into some kind of coherent narrative."

*Francis and Jesus* is a story, written in simple language accessible even to a child. At the same time, it is profound and thought-provoking. Take, for instance, the life-changing meeting between the young Francis and the leper, which Bodo must have considered on more occasions than he can remember. For those not familiar with the story, the young Francis embraced a leper on the road to Assisi at what suddenly and unexpectedly became the spiritual turning point of his life. As he continued on his way, Francis turned back to see the leper and found that he had disappeared from sight. At that moment, Francis realised that in embracing the leper, he had embraced Christ.

Bodo writes, 'God is where we least expect to find God. God is among those we despise or fear or find repulsive. God is a leper.' This insight is not part of the story but is, rather, the result of Fr Murray's own prayer and reflection on the significance of a real-life encounter which took place 800 years ago. It is something, perhaps, that he could not have written forty years ago. Then, perhaps, he might have said that God is *like* a leper. It is only through the lived experience of helplessness, rejection and despair that God, the Crucified and the leper become one and the same.

'God is where we least expect to find God. God is among those we despise or fear or find repulsive. God is a leper.' These three sentences summarise the quintessential difference between *Francis: the Journey and the Dream* and *Francis and Jesus*. Yet one does not replace the other. The two books complement each other. Interestingly, the Franciscan poet, Fr Murray Bodo, found the words to describe Francis' overwhelming love for Jesus in the words of the Jesuit poet, Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins, perhaps showing, yet again, the unique harmony and overlap of so much of Franciscan and Ignatian spirituality. Hopkins called Francis "Christ's lovescape crucified". His image of divine love, not as a landscape, but as a Christscape, gave his Franciscan brother the essence of all that Bodo wanted to portray in *Francis and Jesus*.

Fr Murray says that in writing *Francis and Jesus*, he felt overcome by the reality and power of Francis' loving relationship and intimacy with Jesus in such a way that the book is also a love story. He portrays "a very human Francis" who does not quite fit the dove-carrying, wolf-stroking popular image of the saint who is, after all, the patron saint of ecology. Instead we see the sufferings, difficulties, doubts, uncertainties and conflicts of someone with whom we can identify because we have all 'Been there. Done that.' "It was only in Christ that Francis, little by little, discovered who he was." Similarly, most of us have long discovered that sanctity is not an overnight event, but a daily plodding along a road which, perhaps, we would sometimes like to avoid.

*Francis and Jesus* is a book which could take an hour or a lifetime to read. It is for those just starting on their journey towards Jesus and also for those who have spent many years following the Franciscan way of life. "Francis shows us how to imitate Christ in every age, in every walk of life."

In his introduction, fellow Franciscan Fr Richard Rohr writes, "In this lovely book, we can stand and walk in the light of perhaps two of the greatest spotlights the world has ever received: Jesus and Francis; and you will see that they create one bright beam of light, more than enough to conquer any darkness (see John 1:5). As William Blake put it, "We are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love."

*Francis and Jesus* is one Franciscan's humble effort to help us 'to bear the beams of love'.