



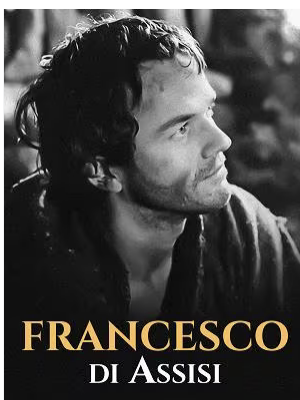
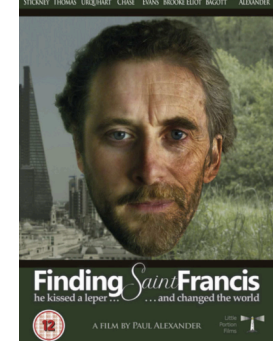
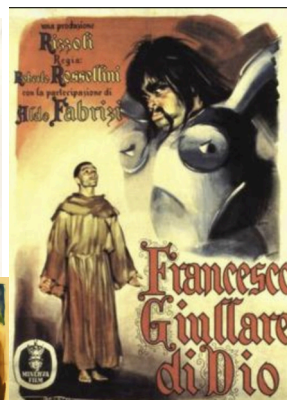
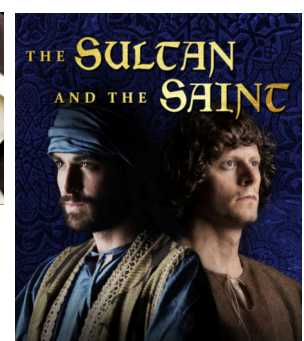
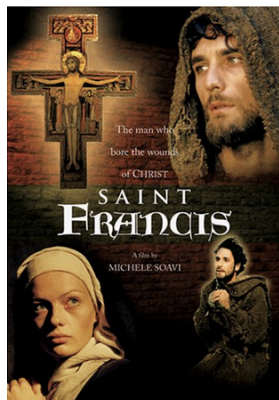
The Franciscan Times

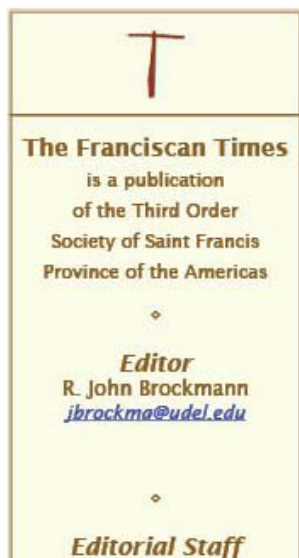
A Publication of the Third Order
Society of St. Francis
Province of the Americas

Pace e bene

Special Issue

113 Years of Movies About Saint Francis: The Silents to TV Miniseries (1911-2024)





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Francis of Assisi: The Cinematographic Saint

If you ask the AI-amplified Google search engine: “What saint has had the most movies created about them?” it will answer with 14 movies about Joan of Arc (a Franciscan tertiary). Yet surely Francis of Assisi is the most cinematographic saint, arising from the fact that much of his message was dramatically visual in the first place:

- When Francis wanted to communicate that he had only one father, his father God in heaven, he didn’t argue the point in words; he disrobed in front of the bishop and gave his clothes to Pietro;
- Francis’s voice from God through the cross of San Damiano told him, “Francis, go and rebuild my church, which as you see, is falling into ruin”, and immediately Francis acted by begging townspeople for stones and rebuilding three churches;
- When Francis wanted to relate the Christmas story to illiterate peasants in Greccio, he created the participatory drama of the creche;
- Francis’s confrontation and reconciliation with the wolf in front of the walls of Gubbio was another dramatic action;
- When seeking to communicate what is “True Joy” to Brother Leo, he told a dramatic story of vainly seeking entrance on a winter’s night to a friary and being refused; and
- Francis’s union with Jesus on Mt. Alverna was communicated by the first stigmata.

Although “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words” has been misattributed to Francis, it does have more than a grain of truth in the way he visually and dramatically presented his message.

More Than Just *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*?

Many in Formation mention that the first time they fell in love with the Poor Man of Assisi was while viewing Franco Zeffirelli’s 1972 movie, ***Brother Sun, Sister Moon***.

In the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans (OEF) home website, in a section entitled “Feeling Called?” there is this parallel observation:

...why twenty-first century people would spend their time and energy on such nonsense. Perhaps they are simply intrigued by the romantic image of Francis after watching Fratello Sole, Sorella Luna (Brother Sun, Sister Moon).

(<https://oeffranciscans.org/about/feeling-called/>)

And, when Gasnick’s classic *THE Francis Book: 800 Years with the Saint from Assisi* (1980) described Francis in the movies, he only choose Zeffirelli’s movie.

Yet, Francis’s story has appeared on film more than 15 times over the last 113 years ranging from silent movies to TV miniseries to plush Hollywood technicolor features. If Zeffirelli’s single movie could cause so many to fall in love with Francis, imagine what a film festival of different movies about Francis could do! This review, along with pictures of these movies and how you can access them (many from the Provincial Library), can give you and your Fellowship the means to create just such a film festival.

In addition to describing these 15 movies or TV series, there are also short 100-word reviews of 10 of these movies contributed primarily by the Provincial Library librarians (John Brockmann, Janice Syedullah, and Neil Tumber) along with special European Province Guest, Paul Alexander — director and star of *Finding Francis* (2015), and other American Province tertiaries.

You will also find an extensive list of reference materials along with a page of *lagniappe* (Cajun for a little something added) offering ways to compare and contrast the individual movies.

Four Silent Movies About Francis: 1911 to 1938

San Francesco il poverello d'Assisi (*The Poor Man of Assisi*) (1911)

This is the first known film about Francis. It was directed by Enrico Guazzoni, shot in Assisi, and made for the International Exhibition of Turin. (Two years later, Guazzoni created a two-hour movie, *Quo Vadis*, which was one of the first “blockbusters” of movies.) Harty's *The Reel Middle Ages* offers this plot summary:

In a dream, Francis has a vision of poverty personified. He breaks with his rich family and founds an order of friars. He visits the Sultan of Damietta, who respects him but refuses to convert to Christianity. The Pope accepts his order, and there is a scene in which Francis dictates his celebrated “Canticle to the Sun.” The film closes with Francis blessing Assisi right before his death while surrounded by his beloved monks, his longtime friend Clare, and her order of nuns. (215)



A single frame from this movie was preserved in the 1960s by film historian David Turconi. From a collection of decomposing old nitrate films, he saved what he could by cutting frames from some of the films to at least preserve parts of this collection. This particular frame here seems to have been taken from Francis's visit to the Sultan of Damietta (Sultan right, Francis holding cross to his lips on the left.) We'll see that the visit of Francis to the Sultan becomes a mainstay of most subsequent movies perhaps because it offers the screenwriter an exotic setting, but it becomes a crucial aspect of Francis's story post-9/11 when new interpretations of this event become known. (Moses, 2009)

The Passion of St. Francis (1927)— (lost)

This movie originally titled *Frate Francisco* (1927) was directed by Giulio Antamoro and intended to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the birth of Francis. However, when it arrived in New York movie houses, it was greatly shortened.

Christensen describes the original version of the plot as follows:

...treats the entire life of St. Francis from birth to death. It covers the most famous events of his early life: participation in his father's cloth business, involvement in the Perugian war, the decision to set out to Apulia as a knight, rejection of war, obedience to the command from the cross of Christ at San Damiano, renunciation and disrobement before the bishop (Guido II of Assisi), welcoming of the run-away Clare to a life of poverty, and travel to Rome (to the Lateran) with his first followers for approval of his way of life by Pope Innocent III. The key events of his later life in this film are the audience with the Sultan, the receiving of the Stigmata, and death at the Portiuncula in Assisi after much illness. To the life of St. Francis is added a long, melodramatic subplot, which provides a villain, Monaldo, the uncle of St. Clare. (p. 75)



Van Yperen also observed some “Francis-as-the-new-Christ” scene staging in the film:

- After a battle with the Perugians when Francis is wounded, Pica holds Francis in a way that echoes Mary holding Christ in Michelangelo’s The Pietà.

- Francis is presented as the new Christ corpus, arms outstretched facing the audience in the foreground before the San Damiano crucifix.



- At the end of the film, Francis returns to Assisi to die riding on a donkey, hailed by the crowd to remind viewers of Christ entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

- Van Yperen also includes 17 publicity shots from the movie, one is included here which illustrates the “Francis-as-the-new-Christ” element.

You can still see some snippets of this movie on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/vFr9xj7---g?si=VhGZelbr04atjocZ>,

***Saint Francis: Dreams and Nightmares* (1933-8)—lost** Between 1933 and 1938, Berthold Bartosch created a 25-minute animated film entitled *Saint Francis: Dreams and Nightmares*. This anti-war film was destroyed by the Nazis when they occupied Paris. A black-and-white frame from the film shows Francis towering above a city (Moritz, 1998).



***Frate Sole* (Brother Sun) (1918, restored in 1998)—available on YouTube**

“Frate Sole” is an Italian silent film written by Mario Corsi and directed by Ugo Falena. Corsi’s screenplay traces the life of the saint through four episodes or “cantos”: The Kiss of the Leper; On the Footsteps of the Poverello of Assisi; The Temple; and The Stigmata. Here’s how Corsi described announced the premiere:

A Franciscan recreation in 4 cantos by Mario Corsi, with a sacred poem for orchestra and choruses by Luigi Mancinelli... (Cinema magazine (1938)

(Structuring a film about Francis as a variety of disconnected episodes is a technique that would later be used by Rossellini in 1950.)



The YouTube version presents the film with the organ “commentary” by Robert Kovács, performed on November 16, 2019, in the Church of St. Francis in Aleppo (Syria). Use this version with Arabic and English subtitles- <https://youtu.be/qGcRNL9SzBA> Or <https://youtu.be/9jyZKVp4-o8> **Page 5**

Reviews of *Brother Sun* (1918) by Tertiaries

John Brockmann—I was surprised at the role reversal of “Claire” [sic] and Francis. Clare takes the moral high ground and even teaches Francis: shaming Francis into treating a beggar with kindness, praying for Francis’s conversion, and even explaining to Francis what happens when he hugs the leper. Her spiritual conversion seems both independent from and simultaneous with Francis’s, and when Francis has the Stigmata experience on Mt Alverna, Clare has a vision of it in her distant convent cell. Is this role-reversal Corsi’s reaction to the male-centric violence in which he was wounded in WWI?

Janice Syedullah—Inspired by the prayers of Clare and his strange sense of melancholy, Francesco embarks on a spiritual journey that leads him to seek solace in giving to the poor and embracing the leper. As he does this, his heart is receptive to the voice of God directing him to rebuild his church. The film, through what I see as somewhat disjointed vignettes, follows Francis and Clare’s journey as they offer themselves to God in a spirit of devotion, love, and joy.

Neil Tumber—A beautiful film that brings to life many Renaissance paintings accompanied by operatic music for pipe organ and choir. The scenes are not a continuous narrative and while this means that, perhaps, you won’t see your favorite episode of Francis’ life, you will be granted a deeper insight into other aspects of his spiritual journey. This telling of his life focuses on Francis as an individual and does not explore how the order of brothers and sisters grew from his example. It was filmed in 1918.

Victoria Tester—*Frate Sole* draws from medieval and Renaissance visual art. Its credits introduce costumed actors with moving ‘stills,’ imitative of sculptures flanking portals of Gothic cathedrals. Later tableaux reflect a direct study of Giotto’s work — Francis with the sultan, the appearance of the seraph to Francis, and Clare’s farewell to the saint. The mandorla features in the shape of the entrance to the Portiuncula to sanctify both Francis and Clare. Scenes of Francis’s Canticle of the Creatures offer us triptychs — not of typical religious subjects, but of nature — and often the eyes of the actors portraying the blessed roll heavenwards, a representation born in Renaissance painting.

Carolyn Banks—60 years professed—My observation at first was amazement at the continual inference that Clare was the source of Francis’s inspiration and her prayer was his strength. Whether this was true or just the idea of the scriptwriter remains a question. I was struck by the care they took to make the costumes and scenery match Giotto’s murals. One has to overlook the antique style of overacting and appreciate this century’s view of the life of Francis.

The Contrast Between Big Costume Movies and Rossellini's Neorealism (1941–61)

Francisco de Asis (1944) — Provincial Library has a copy. Also on YouTube <https://youtu.be/W73pY6HH9F4?si=MFHTMSBA4SlyulPy>

This first sound feature film about Francis was directed by Mexican director Alberto Gout. He began with the *Stalletta* (stable), a non-canonical legend:

The film begins with a mysterious visitor in black who comes to Lady Pica's impressive home and tells her that she must have her baby in a stable. She does so, and the visitor returns after his birth and blesses the baby Francis, saying that two boys have been born on the same day, the best in the world and the worst. The evil boy's name is not mentioned and in the legend was never clearly identified. The film makes him the villain, Hugolino. (Christensen, 2004, p. 79)

Critics have been mixed in their review of the film with Vega Alfaro (*Alberto Gout (1907-1966)*. México City: Cineteca Nacional, 1988) claiming the film has the pomposity of Mexican religious cinema and is solemnly hagiographical. However, when the film was released in the US in March 1944, *Motion Picture Herald's* reviewer (April 1, 1944) called it “an ambitious costume project,” and added “at this moment in history [just prior to D-Day in Normandy France] with civilization bitterly contesting the savagery of barbarians, and the democracies fighting the forces of evil, turning to the spiritual for solace makes its showing particularly appropriate.”



Francis of Assisi (1961)—Provincial Library has a copy. (Also available on YouTube)

Between 1949 and the mid-1960's, Hollywood produced a genre of Biblical and religious epics beginning with Cecil B. DeMille's *Sampson and Delilah* (1949's highest grossing film), and including *The Ten Commandments* (1956, second-highest-grossing film of the decade), and *Ben-Hur* (1959 winner of 11 Academy Awards). This 1961 entry into this genre is the penultimate creation of director Michael Curtiz who had made his mark over four decades with 167 films. He is especially known for 1938's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and 1942's *Casablanca* for which he received the Oscar for Best Director.



The problem with this version of Francis's life is Scorsese's issue of “reverence” (“Scorsese on Rossellini”) for this somber Francis already has his halo. Philip K. Scheuer of the *Los Angeles Times* concurred:

The treatment is reverent and apparently unusually faithful to history, the color and CinemaScope production often eye-filling and the performances, while hardly exceptional, will hardly raise dissent. But the picture's appeal is limited decidedly to the devout and to those who would seek serene affirmation of their Christian faith. It is what I call a church film, pure and simple—ecclesiastical and eclectic.

Franciscans Felice and Gasnick (*Good News*, May 1973) concur observing:

Hollywood's Saint Francis of Assisi...wound up being patronized mostly by Catholic school groups who probably felt an obligation to support a movie about a saint; this was a Francis so watered down that his life seemed a rivulet instead of the torrent it really was.

The Monthly Film Bulletin (28 (332): 128. September 1961) amusingly suggested that it was “*Ben-Hur* without the chariot race.”

Reviews of *Francis of Assisi* (1961) by Provincial Librarians

John Brockmann—Eisenhower faced many military challenges before becoming president. Yet beneath the “calm” of his presidential years, there were deep problems of Jim Crow and other social inequities stewing. This movie, coming in Eisenhower’s presidential final year, exemplifies that time. On the surface, the film delivers superb sound, color, costuming, sets, and lighting that only a seasoned director like Curtiz with full studio backing could deliver. Yet, it’s all too perfect, too cut and colored with spoken lines given without authentic sweat and blood. It’s a theatric production for an audience to admire, leaving their souls untouched.

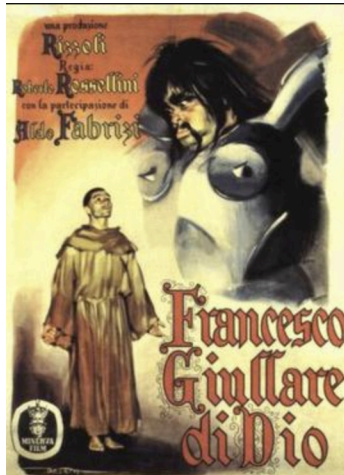
Janice Syedullah— This was a kind of classic retelling of the story of St. Francis. The cinematography, the acting, and the directing were better than other versions of movies about Francis in my opinion. The director, Michael Curtiz, was also the director for one of the greatest films of all times, *Casablanca*. What captured my attention was the portrayal of Francis as a charismatic young man very popular in his hometown. It highlighted St. Francis, the man, as opposed to St. Francis, the legend. The film, being fiction, takes a lot of liberties but successfully captures the essence of the man’s humility and simplicity. This is a great movie to introduce the story of St. Francis to those who don’t know much about him.

Neil Tumber— This film uses Paolo, a knight, to contrast St Francis’ life of *agape* with that of a crusader. Both achieve things in line with their calling but the difference is extreme when they meet at Damiatta: Francis caring for the injured of both sides; Paolo encouraging his men to rape and pillage. The film includes Francis’ visit to the Sultan. Francis’ ability to present Christ as the full revelation of God while not insulting the Prophet nor denigrating the religion of Islam is amazing. Watch this film to be inspired to follow Jesus in the footsteps of St Francis.

Francesco giullare di Dio (Francis, Jester of God) (1950)— Provincial Library has the Criterion (2005) version. (It is also available on YouTube and Amazon Prime

(Also released as *The Adventures of Saint Francis* in the United Kingdom and *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* (1952) in the US, but this later version left out key scenes (Francis’s encounter with the leper and the “perfect joy” episode). The Criterion (2005) version in the Provincial Library presents the original Italian theatrical version.)

Keep two contexts in mind when viewing this film by Roberto Rossellini. First, when Rossellini directed this film in 1950, he was immersed in inventing a neorealism approach to film. In fact, neorealism had only become globally famous in 1946 with his own *Rome, Open City*, when it won the Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.



Rossellini's neorealism was an explicit reaction to the "Hollywood Style" (epitomized by Cecil B. DeMille's 1949 Biblical epic *Samson and Delilah* which had come out the previous year):

- Rather than DeMille's focus on important people such as Samson, neorealism focused on the poor and working class;
- Rather than spend \$150,000 to create a pagan temple, Rossellini's neorealism used everyday locations that were not "touched-up";
- Rather than three-strip Technicolor, Rossellini used black and white;
- Rather than hiring veteran actors like Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr, Rossellini used non-professional actors. The roles of St. Francis and the friars were played by Franciscan monks from the nearby Franciscan Nocere Inferiore monastery. In fact, the monk who played St. Francis, Br. Nazario Gerardi, was not listed in the film credits.
- Rather than DeMille's linear arc to the plot based upon the Bible, research, and the rights to a novel, Rossellini and Federico Fellini talked through the film's sketches, vignettes, and anecdotes but did not create an overall plot arc, but a variety of disconnected episodes. (In this he was following the lead of *Frate Sole* (1918).)
- Rather than tightly track the actions of the celebrated main character (Samson), Rossellini intermixes the focus of his episodes from being centered on Francis (deriving from *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*) with the comic adventures of Br. Ginepro (a.k.a. Juniper) (based on an appendix to the *Little Flowers*, *The Life of Br. Juniper*).

The neorealism approach and the content of the movie coincide such that Rossellini observed in his "Message of the *Flowers of St. Francis*" (*Epoca*, 1950):

...my film wants to focus on the merrier aspect of the Franciscan experience, on the playfulness, the "perfect delight," the freedom that the spirit finds in poverty and in an absolute detachment from material things. I have tried to rend this particular aspect of the great Franciscan spirit following the model of the Fioretti, where I still find, intact, the perfume of the most primitive Franciscanism.

Second, Rossellini envisioned *Francis, Jester of God* as the second part of a Franciscan trilogy nestled between *Stromboli, terra di Dio* (*Stromboli, Land of God*) (1950) and *Europa '51* (1952). In *Stromboli, terra di Dio*, Ingrid Bergman plays a displaced person after World War II who marries an Italian fisherman in order to remain in Italy, and goes with him to his home on Stromboli, a volcanic island. The island's volcano begins to erupt, rejecting her, and the surrounding sea traps her so she hopes for a miracle of escape. Eventually, she comes to understand that a miracle has already happened and she "understands the power of those who possess nothing, the lure of freedom, and becomes a sort of Saint Francis." (*Moralizing*, p. 119) In *Europa '51*, Rossellini decided to place a person with Francis's character (Ingrid Bergman) in post-war Italy and explore what would be the consequences. Would they would be held as a saint, a fool as someone insane? (*Moralizing Cinema*, p. 123). Rossellini wrote in 1950:

I believe that certain aspects of primitive Franciscanism could best satisfy the deepest aspirations and needs of a humanity that, enslaved by its greed and having totally forgotten the Poverello's lesson, has also lost its joy of life. (Rossellini, 1950)

When *Francis, Jester of God* premiered in America in October, 1952, Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times*, wrote a review that said “it has no form or dramatic theme, but thanks to the simplicity of its filming and the sympathetic musical score Renzo Rossellini has affixed, it sends one forth from the theatre feeling kindlier towards his fellow man.”

One of the critical responses of the time to *Francis, Jester of God* was directly the reverse of the responses of Gout’s film: six years earlier:



Francis and Brothers in the Rain:
Uncredited Franciscan Br. Nazario Gerardi is in center as Francis, and other friars from the Nocere Inferiore monastery surround him.

The main complaint was that Francis of Assisi had not been presented in a respectful, hagiographic manner. (Moralizing, p. 123)

However,

At a screening in Paris with Monsignor Roncalli (later to become Pope John XXIII) sitting next to Rossellini, the former stroked the latter’s sleeve and said, “Poor man, you don’t know what you’ve done.” (Doebler, 2011, footnote 12)

Reviews of *Francis, Jester of God* (1950) by Provincial Librarians

John Brockmann—Rossellini’s film is Janus-faced: using inter-titles for exposition underscored with

organ music, it looks back to the silents. However, beginning in media res and ending long before the Stigmata, and Francis’s death, it’s a tremendous leap forward to a nearly Virtual Reality (VR) experience inviting viewers to imbibe fully the life of Francis and his first companions during the span of a few summer weeks. One leaves with the scent of blossoms laid before Clare and her sisters, the squeal of a pig Juniper has accosted, and the dampness of the mud all accompanying the pressure of Francis’s arm tight around my shoulder.

Janice Syedullah—This neorealist version of the story of St. Francis veers from a linear telling into something more abstract. A series of vignettes, as in the book, *The Flowers of St. Francis*, exposes the simplicity of the spirituality while portraying Francis as a jester of sorts. What comes across is what I think of as a stylized portrayal of how Francis impacted a period of history where violence and corruption permeated society and the Church. His message and actions of peace, love, and nonviolence overcomes the practices of hatred, greediness and misuse of power. In this way, it is an effective film of Franciscan Spirituality.

Neil Tumber—Oh what joy! This exploration of Franciscan humility, love and joy has no plot. In many short scenes, we see the little brothers supporting each other in childlike ways; sharing their wonder in creation and rejoicing in all that God provides. The simplicity of their life provides many opportunities to praise God with all their soul and to love all creation as themselves. Their excitement made me breathless as I was caught up in their way of life. This film won’t give you a history of our Order, but do watch it to experience the benefits our Rule of Life!

48 Years of Liliana Cavani's Francis: *Francis of Assisi* (1966), *Francesco* (1989) and *Francesco* (2014)

In 2015, Liliana Cavani was interviewed about all three of her Francis movies. Here are three questions-and-answers from that interview. (Pisanello, 2015)

What is it about the figure of Francis that has driven you to make three films on him?

The fact that Francis never pretended to teach anything to anyone. Out of his immense love for Jesus, he simply tried to live Gospel values as best he could by loving all of God's creatures. It is an extraordinary thing when a human being no longer desires to excel above his brothers and sisters; when a human being actually prefers to be 'the last'.

I know many people who use the gift of intelligence to gain status for themselves, and sometimes, when they actually do achieve high standing in society, they become very vain and arrogant. They put their heart and soul into climbing the social ladder without realizing that they are losing something of the utmost importance, which, however, seems without any value to them, but which is, instead, the deeper meaning of their lives.

Francis, on the other hand, wishes to remain faithful to his relationship of love to Jesus, and goes on a deep search for life's real meaning. For him the Gospel is the "discovery within the discovery," because it is the annunciation of the meaning of life for all creatures. This faith-certainty becomes the drive behind all his deeds. All creatures form a fraternal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Pope John Paul II invited you to the Vatican when he wanted to see your second film on St. Francis. What do you remember of that event?

It was during the Feast of the Epiphany in 1990, and I remember it was a very rainy day. I was admitted into a hall where I saw the Pope with a few of his closest aides. I was seated next to him, and every now and then it was clear that he was feeling deeply moved by the film. He would touch my arm from time to time during the screening. At the end, we parted with a big hug.

What sources did you draw from in making this latest film?

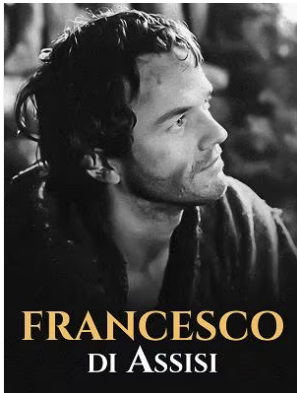
I made my first film back in 1966 after stumbling across the figure of Francis almost by chance. Somebody had given me the book *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* by Paul Sabatier, published in 1894. It was such a wonderful introduction into the life of St. Francis that I felt compelled to know more about him, so I read *A Unique Saint*, a 1952 book by Joseph Lortz, a more modern account of his life. However, when I made that first film even the historical documents on Francis, the *Franciscan Sources*, had still to be published in their entirety, and, in 1966, interest in St. Francis was not as great as it is now.

I have, by now, read dozens of books on St. Francis. One of the latest writers on the saint is Chiara Frugoni, who has given a very interesting description of the relationship between Francis and Clare. Other interesting studies have recently been conducted by Jacques Le Goff and other scholars of the Middle Ages.

On the subject of the Crusades, which are described in my latest film, I studied, along with my colleagues, the highly informative book *The Saint and the Sultan* by Paul Moses, the veteran American journalist.

With all this new knowledge bubbling inside of me, I just knew I had to make a third film on my hero.

***Francis of Assisi* (1966) — television movie available on YouTube in Italian**



Francis of Assisi was Cavani's first feature film and the first film produced by the RAI (Italy's national broadcasting network). It incorporates a realism and visual weight that Cavani had developed in her earlier documentary work. The film enjoyed enormous success because it reflected the cultural and societal changes occurring in Italy in the 1960s. Cavani's 1966 Francis is a youth challenging authority in all its forms — family, church, state — awakening to the new and often destabilizing forces at work in the world. (Gariff, 2018).

Reviews of *Francis of Assisi* (1966) by Tertiaries

John Brockmann — Not understanding Italian (there are no subtitles), yet being familiar with Francis's story and its key figures, and concentrating on Cavani's many closeups on faces, I learned much. I came to understand Francis's sociological contexts: "the villagers" of Assisi and his band of early followers. His context with the poor is not romanticized; they sometimes bully Francis or riot over his meager alms.

This Francis is not an isolated saint, but a man deeply anchored in his contexts. This Francis struggling to the end with even the words to say to a crowd of his brothers passes Scorsese's "reverential test." There is no halo.

Neil Tumber — Dark, brooding black and white film that shows St. Francis as he struggles with his call to devote his life to following Jesus. For much of the film, Francis says almost nothing: all his emotion is conveyed by facial expression — a combination of fear, frustration, and failure. Very occasionally do we see any joy. Those moments are uplifting! I don't think the film maker understood Francis, and it is the film maker's emotions that the actor playing Francis shows us.

Paul Alexander — This may not be the film to entice newcomers to the Franciscan story, but it is an absolute must for those wanting to extend their understanding of Francis because the film is beautifully constructed. A slow moving, black and white journey through the life of Francis starting in the brutal workshop of his father's cloth factory through to Francis's death outside the Portiuncula does not sound like an appealing way to spend two hours when the dialogue is Italian with no subtitles. Its slow episodic scenes allow the viewer to make up their own minds about what Francis is thinking.

**Francesco
(1989) —
Provincial
Library has a
copy (also
available on
YouTube)**

Cavani's screenplay for this second version of Francis's biography was adapted from Hermann Hesse's 1904 book, *Francis of Assisi*. Hesse focused on Francis as the initiator of a religious movement and wrote:

*Those who disdain to drink from murky waters, who are not satisfied with simulacra, who are not satisfied with a name instead of substance, nor with an image instead of reality, are also those who want to return to the first sources of all energy and of every life: they are the great initiates on the path of wisdom.***

Dark and gothic, *Francesco* is a complete reversal of the traditional religious biopic. This version of Francis's biography focuses on his struggle with the growth, leadership, and management of his movement that he neither sought nor wanted. The movie also focuses on the struggle Francis faced with holding to his gospel ideal in the face of calls for a "more realistic" approach to this life. Any spiritual aspects are portrayed through emotional growth of the characters and the expressions visible in their faces. Cavani doesn't shy away from the more unpleasant aspects of Francesco's life, including the ugliest aspects of poverty and behavior bordering on insanity. (*Francesco*, Mondo Digital)

Francesco received multiple awards, including substantial recognition for Cavani, who was nominated for the Palm D'Or at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival.

Reviews of *Francesco* (1989) by Tertiaries

John Brockmann — Cavani's 1966 version, as in all previous movies, presented Francis's story as an unvarnished documentary. In this second version, Cavani pulls the curtain back on those who interpreted and shaped the "Francis" we know. The movie does this by jumping out of the chronological narrative eight times to a tent where we see a few of the first brothers and Clare recall, interpret, and shape memories of Francis, which Br. Leone (Leo?) writes in a book, ostensibly *The Legend of the Three Companions* — one of the first documents that "captured" the earliest oral recollections of Francis. Is this the first Franciscan meta-cinema?

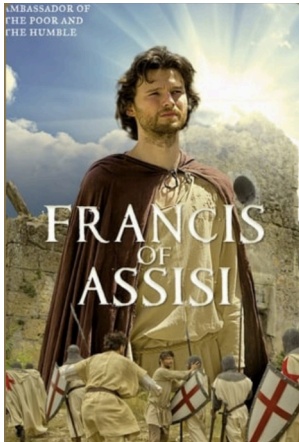
Neil Tumber — Francis, dirty, covered in sores, struggling to find his God. Francis barely speaking, hardly praying, fighting his calling. Clare sits on a hillside with some of Francis's companions to remember and write down stories from his life. I found this rugged realism tough to watch; very difficult to see Franciscan love and joy in this portrayal and yet, this is Francis's story, too: contending with hunger, illness, and spiritual agonies. Very important, I think, to watch this film to balance the idealistic, air-brushed, clean and happy "poverty" given in other images of St. Francis.

Paul Alexander — In this film Francis, played by the handsome American film star Mickey Rourke, looks like a boxer and Clare, played by the beautiful English rose, Helena Bonham Carter, looks like a bemused angel. The film is episodic, without always providing links, is historically inaccurate in its account of Clare, and



whimsical in its not quite touching on a romantic attachment between the two of them. Yet for all this, the film is magical. It made me fall in love with Francis and, if you view Clare as his Lady Poverty, her strange presence throughout becomes, at the very end, heartbreaking.

**Francesco
(2014)—TV
movie**



The 2014 version, a two-part miniseries for RAI (like her first Francis project), repositions the tale for young, contemporary audiences. It narrates the saint's life through the eyes of two of those who were closest to him, Saint Claire of Assisi and Brother Elias. Like the earlier versions, it chronicles Francis's wealthy upbringing, his conversion, his embracing of poverty, his turbulent relationship with his father, the birth of the Franciscan movement, the problems with its organization, and his death.

Unlike earlier versions, this one dedicates significant screen time to Francis's part in the Fifth Crusade, his meeting with Sultan Al Malik-Al Kamil, and his failed efforts to stop the battles between Muslims and Christians. This additional material draws on new research (Moses et al.) about Francis's travels and implicitly repositions the saint's plea for peace between religions in the context of contemporary post-9/11 Muslim-Christian tensions. (Brooks, 2019, 77)

Unfortunately, it is not currently available except in snippets on YouTube in Italian.

“The Hippie Saint” — *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*

***Brother Sun,
Sister Moon*
(1972)
Provincial Library
has English
version**

(This film exists in two different versions. There is the original Italian version of *Fratello sole sorella luna* (137 minutes), which premiered in Italy at Easter 1972. More widely available is the English version of 120 minutes, which premiered in New York City on Christmas 1972. The Italian version is longer and has better continuity and character development than the English version. (Christensen, Part 2, pp. 46-9))

The ultimate popular-culture expression of Francis as hippie is this movie. The director, Franco Zeffirelli, intended it that way. “Francis had everything from the Establishment...[but he] didn't want any part of all this,” he explained. And elsewhere: “The words Francis says to his father are echoed by many young people



to their parents nowadays, in Italy, Europe, America...” Indeed, Zeffirelli and several early collaborators had initially wanted to engage the Beatles for the film, with Paul McCartney starring as St. Francis. Although that plan fell through — perhaps fortunately — they claimed that the Beatles ‘were fascinated with the figure of St. Francis, whose philosophies struck a deep chord with them.’” (Appelbaum, 126)

The movie analysis website, *Rotten Tomatoes*, reveals a large split on this film, with reviewers giving it 42% (out of 100) and the Audience Score being 77% (out of 100). The *New York Times*'s critic, Vincent Canby, described it as: “a big, absurd doodad, a



movie that confuses simplicity with simple-mindedness and that makes saintliness look like an extreme form of Asian flu." Critic Roger Ebert wrote in the *Chicago Sun-Times*: "*Brother Sun, Sister Moon* is a big, limp Valentine of a movie, filled with an excess of sweetness and light." The sweetness and light may derive from the fact that the movie only covers the early part of Francis's life up to the time he brings his rule to be approved by the pope (played by Alec Guinness who five years later would reappear as Obi-Wan Kenobi). Missing is the Stigmata, his blindness, the diseases of his later years, and the organizational struggles that

Cavani details.

However, as a representative of the audience that has enjoyed the film for years giving it a 77%, here is the recollection of the long-time editor of *Sojourners* magazine, Jim Wallis:

"I was completely unprepared for my first meeting with the saint. I left the theater stunned and speechless. On the way home in the dark car, I quietly began to weep. Never before have I encountered a life so consumed with the gospel...His utter obedience to Christ was radiant in exposing the places where my commitment was still compromised... I cried that night because my faith seems so small and weak when compared to his." (Wallis, 3)

Reviews of *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972) by Tertiaries

John Brockmann — This St. Francis "opera" is visually stunning, and painstakingly crafted with music. Sadly, such visual and audio emphases seem to have left imaginative space only for stereotypical characterizations. For example, Pietro, "The Father," yells, mocks, sobs, and is violent within his household, and the leader of Assisi hierarchy, "The Bishop," is a fat glutton and a liar lacking nearly all Christian graces. Lacking space for complex character development, Francesco who begins as a stereotypical PTSD, catatonic war veteran soon becomes a highly-verbal, anti-war hippie stereotypically accused of "subverting the established order of society", and as "a menace to society". Zeffirelli helmed dozens of opera videos, and this St. Francis "opera" stereotypically ends in a visual and audio triumph with the Pope's blessing of the creation of a new Order. Francis's encounter with the Sultan, the disorder in the Order as it grew, the Stigmata, and his death are all missing.

Neil Tumber — For every era there is a Francis! This is the Francis of the flower people! It's almost, *Francis: The Musical*. [Editor's Note: Such a musical was performed but not for another 10 years (book by Joseph Leonardo; lyrics by Kenny Morris; music by Steve Jankowski), and there was a subsequent production in 2000.] Glorious colors and wonderful outdoor scenes. Whoever saw so many poppies? It is a film of its time, with dreamy people drifting through the countryside with music by Donovan adding to the almost psychedelic experience. This is the era that also saw the first productions of *Godspell*.

The film does, however, have its dark side, particularly in the character of Francis's father, who becomes increasingly frustrated with and violent towards his otherworldly (mad) son. The church too, in the character of the bishop of Assisi, is very worldly and to my eyes, repugnant. Only in the closing scenes when Francis has his audience with the Pope do we see the layers of worldly protection

being stripped away to celebrate the workings of the Holy Spirit in the little brothers of Assisi.

My favorite scene is the brothers in the streets of Assisi, in the pouring rain, joyfully singing thanks to God for Lady Poverty and Sister Want.

Janice Syedullah — While Zeffirelli's portrayal of the life of Francis is often criticized for being romantic and fluffy, it still rates number one on my list of movies about St. Francis. The reason is that it succeeds in getting to the heart of the Franciscan charisma. It highlights the unparalleled relationship between Francis and Clare, both of whom share a radical devotion to Christ. Francis's conversion is accurately retold. There are scenes that stunningly convey how Francis's eyes hold in love both the pulchritudinous and the grotesque in people. Beautiful cinematography, authentic costuming, and a great soundtrack come together to produce one of the best movies about St. Francis that has ever been made.

Paul Alexander — There are two scenes in this stunningly beautiful film that epitomize the message Zeffirelli wants to make. Francis, on a rooftop, watched by Clare, tries to fly as free as a bird, and Alec Guinness, as Pope Innocent the Third in the Vatican, weighed down by excessive wealth, pomp, and glory, tells Francis that, in his poverty, he puts the church to shame. It is a tragedy there are two things that prevent the film from being a great classic, such as, for example *Lawrence Of Arabia*: the excessively sentimental singing of Donovan and the storybook ending halfway through Francis's life.

Two Italian Miniseries 2002 & 2008

Clare and Francis

(2008) — (Provincial From a reviewer on Amazon.com (Phillip T, 2010)

Library has a copy, I've seen them all. *Francis of Assisi* (1961), *Brother Sun Sister Moon*, and it is on (1972), *Francesco* (1989), even the Italian shorts "Little Flowers of Saint YouTube dubbed in Francis". But this is the best of them all. It isn't perfect, and neither will it appeal to everyone. However, as one who has been a Franciscan devotee English) for most of his life, I give this two-part Italian tv movie two thumbs up. It lasts 3 hours and 15 minutes.

Actors: Ettore Bassi is the best St. Francis yet. His interpretation has more warmth and range than Dillman's [1961], conveys "jesterhood" authentically without looking spaced-out like Graham Faulkner [1972], and is just simply more believable in his interactions with the poor than Mickey Rourke [1989]. Mary

Petruolo shows us many aspects of St. Clare, from an innocent youth to motherly abbess, without the audience having to suspend one's intellect too much.



History: One can divide this movie into two concurrent biographies: Clare and Francis. Each biography (or should I say hagiography?) can be divided into stages, and each stage is close enough to traditional source versions that I can safely call this film the most historically

accurate. Most movies talk about the Church of San Damiano, but this is the first one I know to mention Our Lady of the Angels.

Mood: When I think of the various St. Francis movies, I can always pinpoint what “mood” the producers are after. *Clare and Francis*, to me, presents a balanced view. He is also presented as ever obedient to the Church, something lacking in many presentations of the character. I especially love that first line that Francis says to a young Clare, “Go and don’t look back.” It sets the tone of the whole film as going through one’s path and never looking back.

From Brother Charles’s A Minor Friar’s Blog

The greatest success of the film is the effort to be true to history and the sources we have for the life of Francis. It covers a huge amount of material and historical territory, beginning (laudably) with the civil wars and insurrections of the Assisiani in 1198-9 and the battle of Collestrada in 1202, both of which are critical to understanding Francis’s background. From there we pass through Francis’s imprisonment, conversion, the growth of the early fraternity, the rebuilding of San Damiano, the approval of the primitive *Rule*, the escape of Clare from her family, Francis’s trip to the east and the crisis of leadership upon his return, his illness, stigmata, and death.

... *Clare and Francis* is clearly presenting itself as an effort to lift up Clare to her proper place within the early Franciscan movement. On this count the film is partially successful. But to be really true to this ambition, it would have had to go on for another two hours in order to cover the rest of Clare’s life, the twenty-seven years she outlived Francis, providing both a charismatic authority within the movement and an incontrovertible connection with Francis and the genius of the early fraternity.

Reviews of *Clare and Francis* (2008) by Provincial Librarians

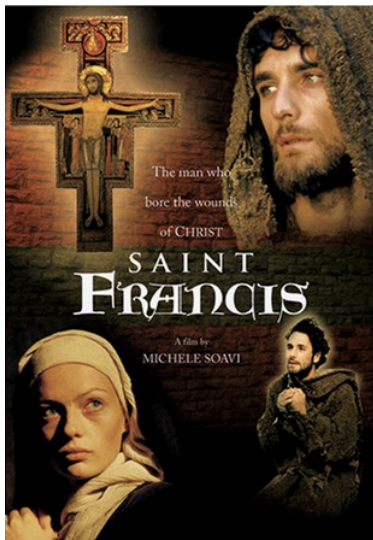
Janice Syedullah — The story of Francis and Clare is primarily a love story. The movie released in 2008, starring Ettore Bassi, Mary Petruolo, and directed by Fabrizio Costa is an ambitious attempt to retell that love story in its original setting with sets and costumes effectively depicting that era. This story is not just another love story but it is a story about two people who make a decision to devote their lives to Christ in the way of prayer and action. This movie covers most of the events in the lives of Francis and Clare and for the most part does so with historical accuracy. What I found lacking was the film’s inability to connect with me on a spiritual level. I think it lacked the heart and passion of who Francis and Clare were. Nevertheless, if you are looking for a well-done story of the saints, this film does do the job nicely.

Neil Tumber — And Illuminato! Saint Francis’s faithful friend who follows him to the wars as his squire then into a life of poverty and then to the conversation with the Sultan. Within this beautifully made, historically accurate film, the devotion of Illuminato is a witness to the power of humility, love and joy. Be faithful in small acts of kindness my dear brothers and sisters for then the love of God is shown forth in our lives. Watch this film to renew your commitment to live joyfully and lead a life of simplicity and humble service after the example of Saints Clare and Francis!

John Brockmann — This RAI Italian project (a TV mini-series) tells the stories of Francis and Clare very realistically. It interweaves their stories revealing many shared experiences despite their Assisi class differences. It is the first

post-Bonaventure depiction of the encounter with the Sultan in which there is no confrontation, but rather a sincere sharing of ideas. Its 300 minutes shows all the major events of their lives from unusual angles: the Greccio creche, the wolf, events of the Perfect Joy story, and the stigmata, while much backstory and psychological motivation is provided. (It's also the first version to feature Br. Illuminato, Francis's Sancho Panza.)

Saint Francis (2002) — (Provincial Library has a copy, and it is also on YouTube in Italian but you can get YouTube to auto-translate the subtitles into English)



From a reviewer on Amazon.com (Transcendental Thomist, 2014)

This three-hour Italian miniseries on St. Francis of Assisi, broken into two parts on one DVD with credits in between, is the best film I've ever seen on perhaps the most popular Catholic saint in history. Played by Raoul Bova as a live wire whose inner freedom makes him appear crazy to others, the Franciscan founder emerges here in all of his holiness and personal charisma. This 2002 film with English subtitles is the one to get. [The Rotten Tomatoes Audience Score of 100% bolsters this claim.]

...It's a big, handsome, well-financed movie that looks good and is acted exceptionally well. What makes this film great, though, is its persuasively sincere portrayal of the staple moments in the life of Francis that are always included in movies on his life. The 15-minute sequence of Francis giving away his father's things to the poor, and of his being hauled before the bishop by his enraged father Pietro in the town square, is the most brilliant of all the versions of this famous story. The dialogue and wild behavior of a young man who has found God in the poor are believably portrayed here, not hokey as in other film versions.

The film is insightful in showing how St. Francis's idealistic movement grew quickly among wealthy young Italians as a way of embracing God's love in rebellion against the worldliness of their parents, while also showing the limits of this idealism as Francis gives his followers an almost impossible standard of poverty to follow. Standout sequences here include Clare's running away from home to join Francis, who tonsures her (haircut indicating religious consecration) on a rock in the woods as her father closes in on her trail. After his startling conversion experience in a wartime Italian prison, Bova plays Francis in these scenes as a force of nature whom wealthy young people in medieval Italy would believably follow into voluntary poverty.

As a nod to the legends of this saint, the wolf of Gubbio even makes an appearance, walking up to Francis in his church in a powerfully mystical scene. The later scenes of Francis before the pope and the death of Francis are beautifully done, milking more drama out of the material than similar scenes in the mini-series *Clare and Francis*. The French actress who plays Clare is particularly good, giving a compassionate world-weary tone to the young saint rather than the smiling schoolgirl depicted in other films. It's not overtly a feminist interpretation, but one gets the sense that this Clare recognizes in Francis a kindred spirit

of genius, as she likewise makes an informed decision to reject the money-grubbing materialism that surround her in 12th century Italy.

From *Visible Parables* (McNulty, 2020)

... Director Michele Soavi's version is very different from the others I've reviewed (*Brother Sun, Sister Moon* and *Francesco* (1989)). The introduction of class conflict in Assisi made me wonder if at least one of the five credited scriptwriters was a Marxist. Their script is reverential toward the saint but does not take a mystical approach to any of the famous miracles. ...Lovers of the saint will want to see this version giving us a fresh slant on him, one that emphasizes more than any other the impact of Jesus' teaching on wealth, poverty, and serving the poor.

Reviews of *Saint Francis* (2002) by Provincial Librarians

Neil Tumber — It is strange that while the biographers who use the written word focus more on the spiritual journey, those who work with pictures go for drama. Michele Soave, who is better known for his horror films, shows us much more of the ugly truth of medieval battle than of joy in Christ's service. Nonetheless, this film makes us starkly aware of the perceived madness of Francis who abandons all material goods and human desires. Soave is not shy either of showing us Francis's fear, loneliness and despair as his brothers move away from truly following the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

John Brockmann — "It's heaven that holds up the earth," a secret perspective shared aloud by Clare and Francis both in the beginning and in the end of the movie. It's into such a perspective that the movie endeavors to immerse viewers. It immerses viewers by remaining very intimate and personal and eschewing spectacle seen from a distance. The wolf, the pope's dream of the basilica falling down, the Stigmata, the occurrence of "True happiness" are all here grounded very much in reality with no supernatural aspects. The movie also includes Br. Elias and the organizational struggles of the evolution of the Rule.

Janice Syedullah — For those of us who can't get enough of watching films about St. Francis, you need to see this one; a beautiful and inspirational film. This film on the life of St. Francis still manages to convey a portrait of the saint as an impetuous and hot-headed young man who is greatly transformed by his time as a crusader. Beginning with scenes of Francis as a young boy playing with Clare, it establishes the intimacy of their relationship and how Francis is guided and molded to follow Clare's purity of spirit. It's almost as if he regards Clare as part of his better self.

The acting is authentic, and the cinematography is well done, pulling us into the action and providing beautiful scenes of his transformation and conversion (reminiscent of the earlier film, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*). The musical score is well done also providing an appropriate backdrop throughout the telling of the story.

This is a film worthy of viewing since it gives us another insight into the life of this favorite saint.

Post-Bonaventure, Post 9/11, *The Sultan and the Saint* (2017)

In 2009, based upon new information, Paul Moses wrote a book, *The Saint and the Sultan*, that reinterpreted the perennial episode in many of the movies about Francis, the meeting with Sultan Malik al-Kamil outside the Crusader-besieged city of Damietta in 1219. Moses sums up his argument as follows:

The truth about Francis's devotion to peacemaking, which glimmered through a number of the early accounts of the saint's life, was concealed in an influential biography that the great medieval theologian Saint Bonaventure wrote while minister general of the Franciscan order.

Bonaventure was named leader of the Order's feuding friars at a time of crisis. The pope had forced out the previous Minister General when some Franciscans fell into a heresy based on supposed biblical prophecies. These dissidents believed, among other things, that Francis was the harbinger of a new spiritual age in which Christians would unite with nonbelievers, and the church hierarchy would no longer be needed. Bonaventure faced a difficult task in writing about Francis, needing to unite the feuding factions within the Franciscan Order in a common vision of their founder and to purge dissent in an effort to win back the pope's approval. In the

Coppo di
Marcovaldo,
1245



process, the story of Francis as peacemaker was virtually eliminated from the pages of Bonaventure's The Major Legend of Saint Francis and a much more confrontational version of the saint's encounter with the sultan was added. Then in 1266, the General Chapter of the Franciscans voted to make The Major Legend the authorized history of Francis and to destroy all previous accounts. Bonaventure's version, elevated above all others, would set the tone for centuries to come. (Moses, 5-6)

The effect of this textual addition by Bonaventure can be seen in a visual contrast of two different frescoes, one finished prior to Bonaventure's addition, and one after. The former is by Coppo di Marcovaldo and was completed around 1245. It's part of *St. Francis and Twenty Stories from his Life* (a.k.a. the "Bardi Altarpiece") (Santa Croce Opera; see also Musicco, 2019). The latter by Giotto,

Giotto, 1297

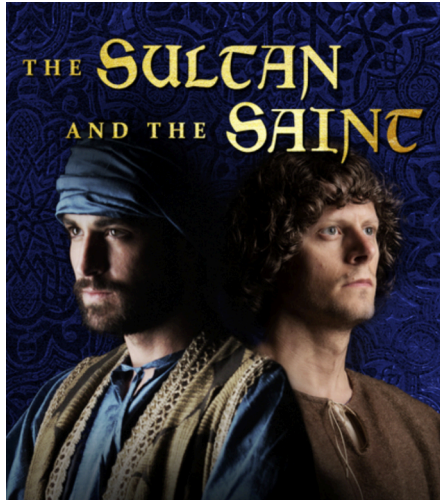


created some 50 years later, is one of the 28 frescoes depicting Francis's life in the upper church of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. It is this latter one which became the standard visual representation of this episode across Christendom.

In the former, there is no fire, the eyes of the Sultan and Francis meet and are on an equal elevated plane, and the position of Francis and the imams and others sitting suggests a sermon or textual, intellectual debate. In the Bonaventure-influenced Giotto later painting, there is a fire, the eyes of the Sultan and Francis do not meet and are not on an equal elevated plane. The positioning of the Sultan's arm suggests a command, and the imams do not look at Francis and seem to shy away.

Which of the movies thus far reiterate Bonaventure's addition and Giotto's depiction? Certainly Curtiz's 1961 version in its opening credit sequence which pans the frescoes, and later includes an episode where Francis challenges the Sultan to the Bonaventure-influenced fire challenge. And we do know that Cavani was motivated to create a third movie about Francis (2014) after reading Moses's book: "With all this new knowledge bubbling inside of me, I just knew I had to make a third film on my hero."

The ultimate expression of this Post-Bonaventure, Post 9/11 depiction of the meeting of Francis with Sultan Malik al-Kamil is the *The Sultan and the Saint* (2017).



The Sultan and the Saint (2017) —

(Provincial Library has a copy and it is available on Amazon Prime Video for rent)

From # Friar Friday: A Weekly Franciscan Reflection from usfranciscans.org (McIntosh, 2017)

Last Saturday, I attended the Philadelphia premier of a movie with a very different approach to mission: *The Sultan and the Saint*. It concerns the meeting of St. Francis and the Sultan of Egypt, Malik Al-Kamil in 1219.

To be honest, I was a bit wary of seeing the movie. In my experience, there can be two extremes in the telling of this story. One is the triumphant Christian one, as exemplified by St. Bonaventure saying Francis "proclaimed the triune God and Jesus Christ, the Savior of all, with such steadfastness, with such courage and spirit, that it was clear the promise of the Gospel had been fulfilled in him." The other is the "hippy" Francis, who sets out preach non-violence to both the crusaders and the Muslims.

I think that the reality lies somewhere in between these two. As well presented in the movie—notably through what was explained by my brothers Michael Calabria OFM and Michael Cusato OFM—the reality is more nuanced. The Francis who went to Damietta is not the Francis who left Damietta.

Francis met with the sultan and, at the same time, encountered a deeply religious people. The crusaders besieging Damietta were the coarse Europeans of the Middle Ages; the Moslems he encountered were people of learning and refinement, and also, most importantly, a people of prayer.

Francis could not have missed noticing the dedication to prayer five times a day that was vastly more devotional than the Christian more relaxed approach. It was a moment of conversion for Francis—not to Islam, but rather to a manner in which a people could be dedicated to prayer throughout their day.

Francis left Damietta to spend a time in Jerusalem. He returned to tell the friars, in the Rule of 1221, that there were two ways they could approach mission *ad gentes* (to the world). He wrote:

The brothers... who go may conduct themselves in two ways spiritually among them. One way is not to make disputes or contentions; but let them be "subject to every human creature for God's sake," yet confessing themselves to be Christians. The other way is that when "they see it is

pleasing to God, they announce the Word of God, that they may believe in Almighty God."

One way is the way of St. Francis. Living in peace among them but remaining openly Christian. The other way is that of St. Bernard and crusader companions.



From an Amazon.com Reviewer:

I watched this with an interfaith group involving my local Mosque and a local Church. We are Muslims (Sunni), they are Christians (mostly Lutheran). We had the pleasure of having a former head of one the Franciscan orders with us who was one of the most enthusiastic in the group about this film and had no qualms with the depictions of the characters. Everyone present liked the film and felt the depictions of Al-Kamil and Francis were good and fairly accurate. Everyone thought it was a beneficial

film with a message that many people would benefit in our modern times. Many expressed their desire to have local churches, mosques, and other communities show the film, watch together, and have discussions similar to our own. I do think the film treated both sides fairly equally and didn't focus too much on either side. It spends about the same amount of time talking about Al-Kamil/Muslims as it does talking about St. Francis/Christians. I also felt it was largely respectful to both Muslims and Christians though it does show the church as power hungry and perhaps corrupt (which many Medieval/Crusade historians and religious authorities do agree with). If that is something you find offensive, I have a feeling you will not enjoy this film.

Reviews of The Sultan and the Saint (2017) By Provincial Librarians

Neil Tumber — We know the outline of this historic event so well but here is a new perspective. This film uses the results of new research to include more of the Muslim side of the story and suggests that, possibly, Saint Francis was inspired to greater and deeper prayer after witnessing the Islamic pattern of daily prayer and devotion to God. The contrast of the devout leader of the Muslim force, the sultan, with the scheming, belligerent and materialistic papal envoy is stark, yet Saint Francis is respectful to both leaders while seeking to follow Christ's call. A lesson in humility.

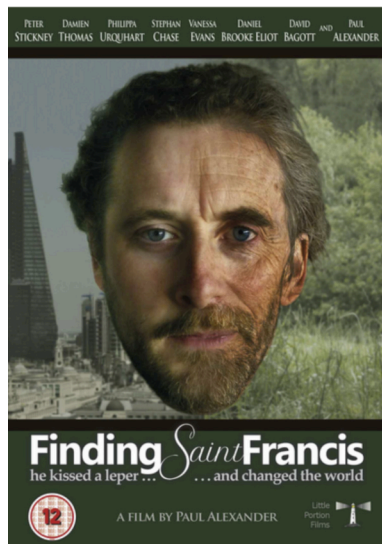
John Brockmann — Focusing on a 1218 Crusade event, this movie uses neuropsychology, first-hand records, and a more comprehensive sense of Crusader history to explore motivations. Thus, this movie seems designed for a contemporary, Western, humanitarian audience seeking peaceful solutions in a post-9/11 world. The solution offered by this movie is embodied in the *careful parallel depictions* of Sultan Al-Kamil's and Francis's biographies, spiritual backgrounds, and methods of prayer revealing their common humanity and spirituality. The movie ends suggesting that *The 99 Names of Allah* that Francis probably observed in 1218 influenced his own composition of "The Praises of God" two years before his death.

Janice Syedullah — *The Sultan and The Saint* is an excellent movie about the historic event of St. Francis of Assisi meeting with Al-Kamil, the Sultan of Egypt, to find common ground and bring peace during a time when the Crusades were tearing the world apart.

The movie offers the background stories of both Francis and Al-Kamil so the audience can appreciate how significant this meeting was.

Narrated by and starring Jeremy Irons, the film flows with rapid action, keeping the audience locked into the story as it unfolds and as it is brilliantly portrayed by the cinematographer. Anyone who is interested in cross-culture dialogue should see this film. Anyone wanting to know more about St. Francis of Assisi and the impact he has had on the world must see this film!

From Our Own Order: *Finding Saint Francis* (2015)



Paul Alexander, "About the Film"

Peter, a young executive in his early thirties, arrives at a Franciscan Friary dressed in a city suit but looking as though he hasn't slept for several days. He stands in an empty car park with no one in sight. He walks across the road into a courtyard where he sees a series of paintings hanging in a cloister. As he looks at them, he hears a door opening on the other side of the courtyard but when he turns to see who is there, all he sees is the door closing.

He crosses the courtyard and goes through the doorway into an empty annex. On the right are some glass doors. He goes through into an oblong room with windows down one side. The room is dense with the smoke of incense. It is a chapel. No one is there. He walks the length of the chapel into another empty room that has rush matting on the floor and a colourful wooden cross on the far wall. As he approaches it, he hears a voice behind him. Alarmed, he turns round to see a Franciscan friar sitting on a bench against the wall. It is Brother William, the guest master of the Friary.

Finding Saint Francis (2015) — Provincial Library has a copy; also available on Vimeo
<https://vimeo.com/200338190>

William shows Peter where he is staying, when a bell rings in the courtyard announcing that afternoon tea is available. When they enter the courtyard, Peter finds that it is now full of people surrounded with film gear who are obviously about to set up for filming a scene. William informs Peter that the film crew are spending a fortnight at the friary filming a modern version of 'The Life of St. Francis'. As they stand in the courtyard looking at a statue of St. Francis, we hear a 'voice-over' beginning the story.

The film ends with a scene of Francis lying on the ground dying, surrounded by people, in the same place that we first saw Peter at the beginning of the film. The penultimate shot is of Peter standing alone in the empty car park, remembering all the scenes he has seen and experienced over the past two weeks. It is a very different Peter whom we see walking away from the Friary.

The feel of the film is Brechtian, with the director, as actor and storyteller, commenting on the scenes that are played for real but kept in a modern, simple setting with sparse symbols for costume and scenes that epitomize character and place. Actors play multiple roles, creating a montage effect of scenes that build a film in which the audience is aware they are watching a story of contrast and contradictions but are swept up into the story.

The aim of the film is threefold:

- To tell the Franciscan story as accurately as possible in a way that makes Francis a colourful three-dimensional character, revealing details that are sometimes funny, sometimes tragic. We see his humility as well as his fiery character and his deep commitment to following in the footsteps of Christ;
- To bring the story alive and make it relevant to a modern audience who may not be familiar with Francis, by placing his story in a modern context;
- To show that Peter, the cast, the crew and the audience are all on a journey of 'Finding Saint Francis.'



Review by Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (Australian Province) (2021)

This film takes a different tack. It is set in a Franciscan house in the English countryside. A middle-aged man undergoing something of a personal search, arrives at the friary and encounters a group of the lay associates and friars. They are listening to a talk on St Francis by the director, Paul Alexander. He sees something in the man, discusses his situation with him and offers him the role of Francis in the forthcoming film. He accepts and, as he undertakes the role, he sees parallels with his own life.

The budget was limited but several actors and amateurs are used in the film to present the equivalent of Francis's life but in a contemporary setting and with contemporary costumes. For the pictorial background of Assisi and the surrounding countryside as well as visits to Rome, colour sketches are used effectively. And there is the musical score.

The screenplay traces the details of Francis's life, many of which are familiar, but important and interesting to hear again: the background and the wealth of his merchant father, his French mother, his early and rather carefree life, his military service. This includes giving away his armour and horse to a needy soldier, but his father supplying substitutes.

Review by Stephen Brown in the *Church Times* (2016)

Alexander uses techniques more normally associated with theatre than film. Actors playing multiple roles wear items (such as a skull cap) that are mere tokens of who and what their characters represent. This kind of distancing from the past helps viewers to be part of the on-screen story. This is especially true of Stone's character, as he becomes transformed into a Francis for today.

In another film, *Jesus of Montreal*, performers of a Passion play become the very people whom they are portraying. *Finding Saint Francis* could have no greater compliment than being compared to that remarkable Canadian film.

Reviews from Tertiaries

Neil Tumber — Humility, love and joy, the three notes of the Third Order — are fully on display in this delightful rendering of the Saint Francis story made by our own Paul Alexander, a tertiary based in South London, UK. Filmed in and around the Society of St Francis First Order friary at Hilfield and using many First Order brothers and Third Order visitors as actors, this Franciscan experience is an example of the power of simplicity because the events of Francis' life lose nothing of their impact and convey the healing that comes from finding Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis.

John Brockmann — This is guerilla movie-making; actors playing multiple roles; a curious mixture of costuming; a large portion of the exposition carried by voiceovers and close-scanning of Assisi watercolors; and at times, we are watching the movie with a sense of willing disbelief, and, at other times, we are behind the scenes watching the actors drink coffee in the kitchen. Such radical movie-making is the message of the film; the medieval life of Francis needs to erupt into our present and produce changes in us by being closer to God in the way of Francis. My only quibble with the film is that the depiction of the meeting of Francis and the Sultan is very Bonaventure-ish and does not incorporate recent research such as presented in *The Sultan and the Saint*.

Janice Syedullah — This is a very creative film with a fresh and innovative rendition of the life of St. Francis. Basically, it is the director, in a storytelling approach, giving an overview of the life of Francis while actors act it out. It is interspersed with works of art and natural settings as the backdrop for the storyteller. It provides another perspective to the phenomenon of Francis, the saint and brother.

A Decade After: Paul Alexander, the Director

Well, it is now 11 years since making the film, and I have moved on to writing three novels and starting a new business as an environmental land manager of a 50-acres farm on the edge of the Dartmoor National Park wilderness. This might seem a long way from *Finding Saint Francis* and films, but in reality that episode was the beginning of a transformative process leading to the practical implementation of thinking through a modern Franciscan way of life. The booklet, *History of the Young Franciscan Movement*, has been very much a part of the process, along with another booklet TSSF has kindly published for me titled, *A Joyful Celebration of Contemplation for All*.

I'm considering writing another booklet exploring, more in story form, how anyone who is feeling trapped in this current climate can embark on a Franciscan lifestyle. In a way this would be a follow on from the film but would be less about finding Saint Francis and more about logically coming to the conclusions that a Franciscan way of life makes complete sense in a world that is going topsy turvy.

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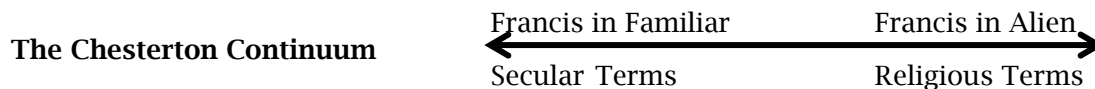
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Lagniappe: Comparing Franciscan Movies Along Continuums

In “Cajun” Louisiana, *lagniappe* is a little something added when an order is delivered to show appreciation to the buyer or diner. In that light, consider this addendum to be a little something added to show our appreciation for you, our readers.

Now that we have examined each of the 15 films individually, it might be time to compare and contrast the variety of films in this review. To that end we offer two continuums.



The Chesterton continuum comes from the first chapter of his *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923) entitled “The Problem of St. Francis.” In this chapter, Chesterton distinguishes between how he will portray Francis in his book and how others have portrayed him in the past:

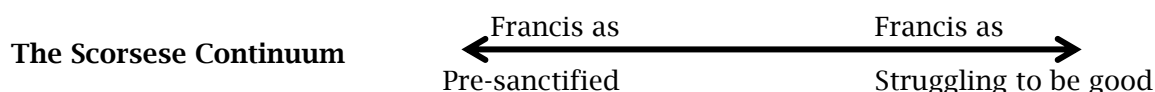
The first way, Chesterton says, is to portray Francis as “a figure in secular history and a model of secular virtues,” ignoring or downplaying his uncompromisingly ascetical and authoritarian religious practice and beliefs. This approach, says Chesterton, is characteristic of many of Francis’s a-religious admirers (e.g., Matthew Arnold), and is comparable to trying to write the life of Nansen (a Norwegian famed for his Arctic expeditions) while omitting the North Pole.

The “opposite extreme” focuses on Francis’s religion in a “defiantly devotional” way, with all the “theological enthusiasm” of the first Franciscans. The trouble here, of course, is that such an approach would be impenetrable and unmoving to most audiences today.

The third way, the one that Chesterton attempted, is to “put himself in the position of the ordinary modern outsider and enquirer, “one who finds the real Francis at once admirable and incomprehensible, and to begin with what is admirable and go on to try to better understand the incomprehensible.” (Chesterton, 1923; SDG Reviews)

If we were to compare movies about Jesus on this continuum, *Godspell* (1973) would be placed on the extreme left because it used hippies of the 1970s to depict Gospel parables. *Godspell* was popular because it translated the Gospel into a presentation accessible by contemporary audiences. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) (without any subtitles to translate the film’s Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin) would be placed on the other end in being so historically authentic that contemporary audiences would not understand the movie.

Zeffirelli’s 1972 move, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, with its soundtrack from Donovan, and an original casting plan for Beatle Paul McCartney to play Francis, would probably place this movie to the left side with *Godspell*. (Appelbaum, 126)



The Scorsese continuum derives from his 2005 assessment of Rossellini’s *Flowers of St. Francis* (1950), and his problem with films about saints. The problem with most films about saints, Scorsese observed, is the issue of “reverence”:

The aura of reverence is almost always at odds with the way the saints must have felt about themselves. It’s as if they’d already been declared saints in their own lifetime, as if every word out of their mouths had been pre-sanctified. (Messerli, 2014)

I’ve never seen the life of a saint treated on film with so little solemnity. ...his [Rossellini’s] Saint Francis is just the opposite of the somber saints with halos that we’re used to seeing in other movies. Rossellini made a film about a human being, but a human being, who is struggling to be good. (Reed 2010)

One could place Charlton Heston’s Moses in the *Ten Commandments* when he confronts the pharaoh as the implacable, messiah figure in the later part of the movie on the left, and, on the right, the Charlton Heston Moses of the first quarter of the movie as the Moses evolves. As we can see from Scorsese’s comments, Rossellini’s 1950 movie should be located on the extreme right on this continuum. *Page 28*