

Who then is so just and holy a priest as the only Son of God, seeing that he had no need to atone by sacrifice for his own sins, whether original sin or other sins added in the course of his human life? And what else could be so aptly received from men to offer for them as human flesh? What indeed was so suitable for such a sacrifice as mortal flesh? What so pure for the purification of the faults of mortals as flesh conceived in and born of a virgin's womb without any tarnish of fleshly concupiscence? What could be so graciously, so freely offered and received as the flesh of our sacrifice, which was the very body of our priest who offered it? Thus, there being four things to consider in every sacrifice—whom it is offered to, whom it is offered by, what is offered and whom it is offered for; he the one and only true Mediator, in reconciling us to God by the sacrifice of peace (Col. i, 21; Eph. ii, 13), remained one with him to whom he was offering it, he made one in himself those for whom he was offering it, he was himself one and the same who was offering and what he was offering.



## ST FRANCES OF ROME

MARY SHARP

**N**EAR the Arch of Titus and overlooking the Forum is the Church of St Francesca Romana, or as it is more frequently called, the Basilica di Sta Maria Nuova. In the confession is a statue of a woman with an attendant angel, and in the crypt, in a glass case, are the remains of that woman dressed in a religious habit. Every hundred years the casket is taken to an obscure convent under the Capitol Hill in the Tor di Specchi, which is the house of the order of Oblates founded in 1433. Here the sisters remove the old habit, rotten with age, and dress the skeleton of their revered and beloved founder in a new habit, and the body is then returned to its tomb in the church.

Frances was born in one of the palaces on the outskirts of Rome, in the square now named Piazza Navona and not far from the church of St Agnes, in 1384. Her parents were of noble birth and the child was brought up in a pious and prosperous household in the midst of considerable luxury. At a very early age she announced her wish to enter a convent, but her parents insisted that she should marry, in 1396 and at the age of twelve, a rich nobleman, Lorenzo Ponziani. As far as possible she carried out her accustomed religious devotions after her marriage and she always insisted that she could find God in her household affairs, though at first life with her parents-in-law was very trying. Fortunately she found in Vanozza, the wife of her husband's elder brother, a like spirit and they became firm friends and helped each other in ministering to the needs of the poor and of the sick in the hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassio. They wished to sell their jewels, but Dom Antonio, their confessor, forbade it, saying that they must avoid singularity and must dress in a style suitable to their rank. Frances became an excellent housewife and mother of three children, and, on the death of her mother-in-law, took her place as head of the household, though she pleaded with her father-in-law that this was the rightful position for Vanozza. She always considered it her duty to go from her prayers immediately her presence was needed either by her husband or by her household duties, and one day she was called away four times, at the same verse of the office of the Blessed Virgin; on her final return she found that the pages were written in gold. It was revealed to her that this was granted to impress upon her the importance of obedience.

She became noted for her charitable actions and she visited the sick both in their homes and in hospitals. She not only took them food and spiritual comfort but she actually went outside the city to gather firewood for them and carried it back herself. During a plague she was unremitting in her efforts to alleviate suffering; she and Vanozza gave away the vast stock of food held in the Palazzo Ponziani and when this was exhausted they begged for food for their invalids. It was now that their father-in-law gave permission for their jewels to be sold, and after this Frances wore only plain dresses of coarse serge.

At the time of the invasion of Rome in 1408 by Ladislas of Naples, the ally of the anti-pope, her husband was banished and

their estates confiscated; in spite of this and other severe trials she remained a gracious and pious lady, living in a corner of her ruined home. But then to her horror her eldest son, Battista, was demanded as a hostage and on the orders of her confessor she delivered him herself to Count Troja at the Capitol; she then went to pray in the nearby church of the Aracoeli. The horse on which the boy was put refused to move and so did others which were provided; acknowledging defeat, Troja ordered the boy to be returned to his mother who was still in the church.

When peace was restored Ponziani recovered his property, but he was broken in health and was attended with much devotion by his wife for many years. Some three years after Ponziani returned their second son, Evangelista, died during another plague epidemic and about a year later their daughter Agnese followed. This was foretold by Evangelista in a vision, in which he also said that, after the death of his sister, his mother's guardian angel would be visible to her but not to others. This grace was granted, but whenever Frances fell into some fault the angel faded from sight, though after contrition he reappeared. Naturally this divine favour increased Francesca's natural humility and goodness and she tried her hardest to cure her imperfections so as not to offend her angelic companion. Throughout her life she was fully convinced of the supreme importance of living with and for God.

Ponziani had one great wish, to see his son, Battista, married; unfortunately the girl he chose for him, Mobilia, took a great dislike to Frances and proved a trial to the family. But when Mobilia became ill, Frances nursed her with great care and won her over so that the two became friends. By now the fame and miracles of Frances and her reputation for kindness had spread throughout Rome and her help was sought, not only by the sick, but by those who wished to have problems settled. With the consent of her confessor, in 1425, she gathered together a group of similarly-minded women and placed them under the rule of St Benedict attached to the Olivetan Monastery of Sta Maria Nuova. In 1433 they acquired a house in the Tor di Specchi and became the Oblates of St Mary. At first the choir sisters each had a personal maid, and both then and now were drawn mainly from the noblest Italian families. The main work is the recitation of the divine office and they are assisted in their many works of charity by lay sisters, drawn from the lower ranks of society. All wear the

same habit, and make their profession as Oblates of the Order of St Benedict. Only temporary vows are taken and these are renewed at regular intervals and at the completion of each period they are free to leave the community if family circumstances or personal desires require it. Few take advantage of this.

Upon the death of her husband, after some forty years of married life, Frances joined the community which she had founded and reluctantly became its superior. Many miracles are reputed to have been performed by her—a dead child restored to life, the course of an epidemic raging in Rome arrested by her prayers.

In a vision during the summer of 1439 she was summoned by Mobilia to her son, who was ill, and she spent the day with them; at nightfall she set off to return to the Tor di Specchi but when she reached the church of Sta Maria Nuova she was so ill that she had to return to her son's house and there she died on March 9th, 1440. Her passing was mourned not only by her sisterhood, but by all Rome. She was canonized by Paul V on May 29th, 1608. Owing to alterations in the church the tomb of the saint had been out of sight for some years, and so in 1638 the combined efforts of the Oblates, the Abbot of Santa Maria Nuova and the Cardinals Borghese, Barberini and Altura resulted in its rediscovery and opening to public view in the spot where it had been placed two centuries before. It was at this time that the magnificent monument in the *confessio* was erected.

In 1925 Pope Pius XI named her patroness of those who travel by car; she had been patroness of Roman housewives for many years. Perhaps she is best regarded as a person of steadfast character in a world both politically and religiously unstable and constantly at war; she knew what was needed and how to meet the need. She combined sanctity and common sense in a remarkable degree and seems to have been specially raised up in order to counteract the prevailing spirit, in both Church and state, of unbridled extravagance and of selfish indifference to the poor.

On Sunday afternoons the sisters receive visitors and one may see the chapel used by Sta Francesca and the room in which lies the container used for the coffin each time her relics are taken from the titular church for the re-clothing. The sisters still teach the poor of Rome to read and sew, and they provide a home for a number of ladies. On March 9th, the feast day of St Frances and

within its octave, the public is admitted both to the convent and to the Casa degli Esercizi Pii—the successor to the old Palazzo Ponziani—in Trastevere. The custom grew up for those who attended the festival to bring offerings of violets and place them at the foot of the high altar in the church or at her shrine in the crypt. Relics are shown and, in the convent, the rooms whose walls are covered with scenes from her life; the colours are clear and bright, and over the years the paintings have suffered little damage. Wherever St Frances of Rome is depicted in art she is shown, as in the statuary group and in these murals, with her guardian angel by her side. The main part of the convent is very old and has a fine marble staircase, and beautifully carved and heavily gilded ceilings which give one some idea of fifteenth-century magnificence. The cell occupied by St Frances is now set apart as an oratory and an altar occupies nearly one-third of the small room. The chapel now used is a beautiful modern building; the sacristy is one of the richest in Rome and many of its treasures are the gifts of princesses and noble ladies who have entered the order.

'His angel hath been my keeper, both going hence and abiding there . . . and the Lord hath not suffered me, his handmaid, to be defiled.' (Judith xiii, 20.)



## DOMINICAN DEVOTION IN FOURTEENTH- FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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**Y**OU would hardly expect to find any remains of the effigies of the Dominican saints in England today, after the great clearance made at the time of the Reformation. From 1221, the year St Dominic died, until the end of Mary's reign in 1558, or for three hundred years, there had been a continuous Dominican life throughout the kingdom.

It is amazing how quickly it spread and took root in most of the principal towns of England and Wales. In no other country