Who was Francis of Assisi Syllabus

Instructor: Robert J Porwoll
Email: RJPorwoll@uchicago.edu
Modality: Remote learning

Quarter: Summer 2022
Seminar date: Aug 6th
Session day/time: Saturday, 10:00am – 4:00pm
Course Code and Section: HUAS2800122U1

Course Overview

Francis of Assisi is one of the most recognizable and famous persons of the Middle Ages—yet who he really was remains one of the greatest puzzles. Was he aiming to critique a corrupt and wealthy church? Or was he a supporter and reformer of the church? Was he an early ecumenist, seeking peace with Muslims? Or did he seek to convert all humans? Was Francis a genius of nature spirituality and a model of religious environmental thought? Or was Francis primarily motivated by poverty and service?

Just as scholars have undertaken famous ‘searches for the historical Jesus’, so medieval scholars have searched for the historical Francis.

This course will put into focus the person of Francis of Assisi, his life and spirituality. The course will offer broader scale contextualization before focusing on Francis’ own words about himself, then, the early biographies of Francis by his admirers, and finally the course will address Francis’ legacies. We shall examine Bonaventure’s (a learned Franciscan leader) interpretation of Francis, the vision of the radical Francis (from the radical Franciscans, Fraticelli), and a contemporary interpretation of Francis as a model of environmental spirituality (Pope Francis).

Required texts

ISBN 978-1565481107

Excerpts from Bonaventure, Fraticelli, and Pope Francis (pdf, in Files on Canvas).

Books can be purchased online through the University of Chicago Bookstore.

Course Schedule

Week Before

An online activity (introductory video and response) will be set up a week in advance giving the context of Francis’ world.

Students should watch a video introducing the mechanics of the course, course expectations and methods.
Session 1: 10:00-11:30am    Retreat into the Desert

- Francis of Assisi, “The Writings of Francis, 1205-1226” pg 35-57, 63-106, 108-127
- Reading Guidance: Many of the texts from Francis are shorter and only give us glimpses of a man who was reluctant to put very much in writing.
  - Select a document you find that gives important details and clues about Francis and his priorities.
  - Canticles of the Creatures: Francis’ most famous text expresses an attitude toward Nature. How do you interpret it? What details/ideas stand out to you?
  - Letter to the Entire Order: Francis speaks to his followers and directs them on how to imitate him. What priorities do you see him expressing?
  - The Testament: Francis gives the closest to an autobiographical statement here, nearing the end of his life. How do you see Francis interpreting his own life?

Lunch 11:30-12:30pm

Session 2: 12:30pm-2:00pm    Francis’ Life: The First Biography

- Francis of Assisi: The Saint: “The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano” 171-310
- Reading Guidance: Thomas’ biography is the earliest biography and gives an overall picture of his life from the eyes of an early follower. What anecdotes of Francis’s life stand out to you as very important? How does Thomas set us readers up to interpret Francis?

Break 2:00-2:15pm

Session 3: 2:15pm-4:00pm    Reformer, Radical Critic, Environmentalist?

- Packet: Documents from Bonaventure, Fraticelli, and Pope Francis (excerpts, pdf, Canvas)

NOTE: Course Schedule and precise readings are liable to changes.

Accessing remote courses

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If you, or another student you know, wishes to speak to a confidential resource who does not have this reporting responsibility, please contact the Sexual Assault Dean on Call through the UChicago Safe App or at 773.834-HELP.

Questions? Contact Zoë Eisenman at zme1@uchicago.edu.