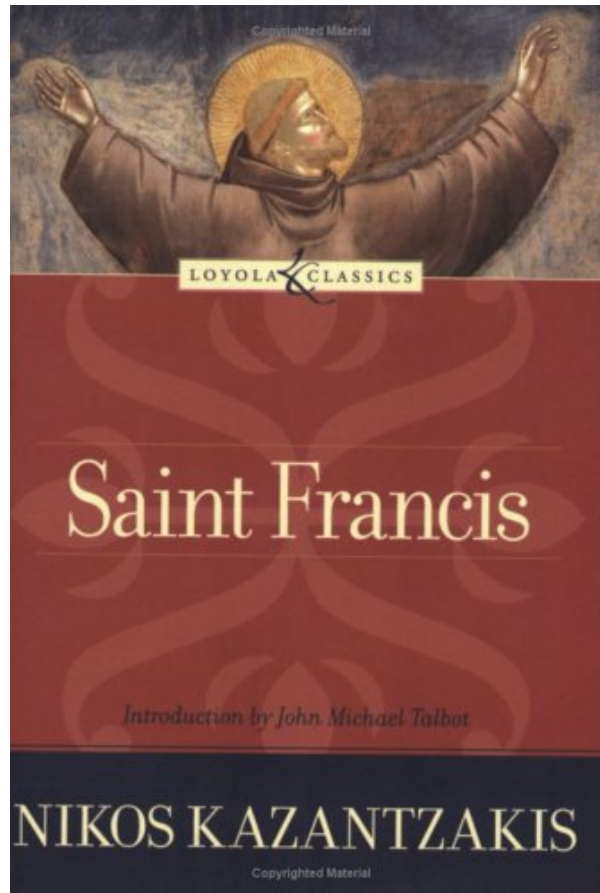
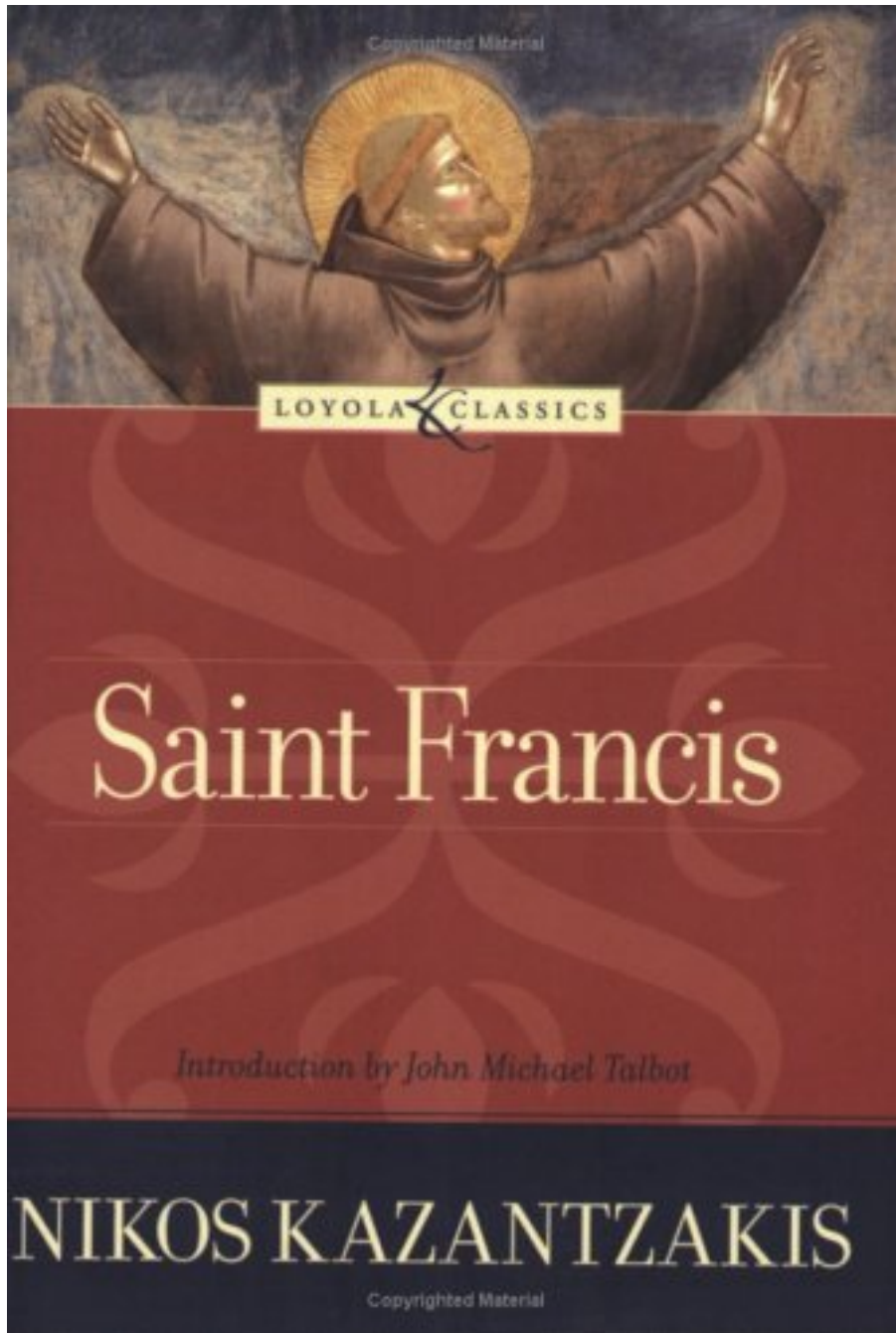


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- Sales Rank: #533253 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Loyola Classics
- Published on: 2005-04-01
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
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- Dimensions: 7.00" h x 1.50" w x 5.00" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 624 pages

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Makes St. Francis into a Raving Lunatic

By T. Johnson

Ugh, I really wanted to like this book. The author makes Saint Francis out to be a raving lunatic and some of the chapters go on and on. I am trying to finish up the last 20 pages of the book, and based on what was written, Francis should have been dead 50 pages ago. I understand that this is an acclaimed book, but if you are accustomed to biographical type writing (very analytical, etc.) this won't work well for you. The prose is flowery and I am not sure it lends well to credibility.

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An inspirational classic !

By jane

This book is an inspirational classic. I was sad when it went out of print and extremely grateful to find copies available at Amazon. I don't know if folks might have been concerned about reading this book due to the author's very controversial "last Temptation of Christ". I would say that all that he might have done "wrong" in "Last Temptation" he did right in this one ! He really got the "spirit" of St. Francis' life and struggle. I can't imagine anyone reading this without getting tears as well as a lot of deep reflection. Beautifully written, and incredibly inspiring. I would sure like to see this come back into print.

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One of the best fiction life of St Francis

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What did Kazantzakis believe? Though he left the Orthodox faith of his childhood behind as an adult, he never abandoned God. His intellectual quest was a search for the meaning of human life, which he came to understand as embodied in the persistence, vitality, creativity, and beauty of the human spirit. Human existence was for him a struggle to discover and nurture this spirit against its many enemies, including the limitations of the flesh and the reality of death. In his book of essays *The Saviors of God*, published in 1960 by Simon and Schuster, he wrote, "Life is a crusade in the service of God. Whether we wished to or not, we set out as crusaders to free—not the Holy Sepulcher—but that God buried in matter and in our souls." Theologian Carnegie Samuel Calian says of Kazantzakis that his "quest for God was actually his deep and abiding commitment to the human spirit which he came so imperfectly to designate as 'God.' . . . The essence of God is this unceasing struggle which rages within man."

The story of St. Francis struck a chord in Kazantzakis. He wrote in a letter that "in Assisi I lived once more with the great martyr and hero whom I love so much, St. Francis. And now I'm gripped by a desire to write a book about him. Will I write it? I don't know yet. I'm waiting for a sign, and then I'll begin. Always, as you know, the struggle within me between man and God, between substance and spirit, is the stable leitmotif of my life and work."

Reading St. Francis, one sees how true this is. Kazantzakis's Francis is a man in the midst of a battle between flesh and spirit, a battle that few others can recognize or appreciate mostly because they have, religious and lay alike, succumbed to the flesh. At times, Kazantzakis's own philosophy threatens to overwhelm, as when his St. Francis tells his companion and narrator of the tale, Brother Leo, to "leap above the mud that is man!" (p. 270) or, in a moment that weaves together Kazantzakis's existential and Buddhist strains, that "perfect poverty" requires him to "renounce even the hope that one day you will see God . . . [which is] what it means to be a perfect ascetic. That is the highest form of sainthood" (p. 242–43).

But more often, Kazantzakis's unique take on Francis helps the modern reader see with great clarity certain elements of the story that we have forgotten: the great suffering that Francis endured, the sacrifices he made, and the truly radical nature of his life. Kazantzakis's work emphasized the human drive to live life fully and deeply—his great character Zorba the Greek continues to embody this ideal, as does, in a completely different way, St. Francis. At one point in the novel, Francis tells Brother Leo of witnessing a Passion play in Assisi, and the dissonance he experienced as a child discovering that the actor playing Christ was, indeed, only an actor and had not been crucified at all: "Now I've grown older, Brother Leo, I've grown older, and I do understand. Instead of being crucified, I simply think about crucifixion. Is it possible, Brother Leo, that we too are actors?" (p. 211).

The story of St. Francis is a universal and almost archetypal paradox. As an unquestionably radical obedient son of Roman Catholicism in a time of tumult and reform, Francis is beloved by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, Christians and non-Christians. Protestants love him because of his love for living the gospel, the word, in a literal fashion. Buddhist monks will sometimes say that, while they find the monastic Cistercians more like themselves in their meditation, it is the wandering monastic beggars, St. Francis and the first Franciscans, whom they are closest to in actual lifestyle. The same could be said of the Hindu sannyasin or the Confucian-Taoist sage. Sufis and Jewish mystics also love him. So the radical Roman Catholic from thirteenth century remains the most universally loved of all Roman Catholic saints all around the world.

Most of us are not called to literally give up everything and take to the highways, doing odd jobs or begging for our living. Most of us are called to "bloom where we're planted" in the midst of our modern world. We are called to marry, raise a family, and do a good job in building up society through good honest work and moral lives. Most of us eventually accept this role as not only inescapable, but also a quite desirable way to fulfill one's earthly duty.

And yet, the figure of St. Francis and those like him continue to captivate our imagination and move our deeper religious aspirations. From time to time we find ourselves fantasizing about selling everything, donning the sackcloth of the Poverello (little poor man), and leaving the whole crazy world behind. Most of us will never, and should never, do such a thing. But the inspiration of Francis remains powerful, for he calls us, even in the midst of the chaos and clutter of our consumerist modern world, to simplify our interior and exterior lives and focus unquestionably on God and the things of infinity and eternity.

Francis calls us, both from the historical record and from the pages of Kazantzakis's novel, to lives of poverty in the midst of modern consumerism, chastity in the midst of modern sexual promiscuity, and obedience in the midst of modern individualism. He is also the great symbol of caring for creation in the midst of our modern abuse of the environment, and of peace in the midst of the timeless scourge of war. Francis speaks powerfully to all of these modern issues, and many, many more.

But for Francis these things were not "issues." They were simply expressions of his all-consuming love for Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Father God who created and loves all. It was simply about loving God and giving up everything to follow that love everywhere and anywhere. Some have said that Francis was

mad with divine love—in the novel he asked people to come listen to “the new madness”—and he hoped to make the entire world mad with this divine love.

I believe that this is where Kazantzakis’s Francis is so powerful. His Francis is one of love and mystery and not of intellectual debate, one of mystic rapture, not of reason and logic.

As the great Franciscan mystic, theologian, and minister general of the troubled new community in the thirteenth century said, “If you want to know how such things come about, consult grace, not doctrine; desire, not understanding; prayerful groaning, not studious reading; the Spouse, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity. Consult not the light but the fire that completely inflames the mind and carries it over

to God in transports of fervor and blazes of love. This fire is God.???. Christ starts the flame with the fiery heat of his intense suffering.???. Whoever loves this death may...

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