

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

(ca. 1182 - 1226)

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money].”¹

—Luke 16:13 (see also Matthew 6:24)

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

—St. Francis of Assisi

Francis’ Childhood and Youth. Giovanni Francesco Bernardone—better known as Francis—was born in the Italian town of Assisi² in 1181 or 1182, the oldest child of a wealthy Italian merchant, Pietro Bernardone, and his French wife, Mona Pica. As a child, Francis heard the stories of the Crusades³ and dreamed of being a knight—a lofty ambition in those days for a merchant’s son. But chivalry held an endless fascination for him, and his father encouraged the dream.

Not much is known of Francis’ childhood, except that he seems to have been a natural leader with a quick temper. He grew into a youth who was adored for his wit, charm, noble manners—and his father’s wealth. Pietro envisioned greatness for his son, and spared no expense to win him important friends among the nobility of Assisi. Thus did Francis become the leader of a group of youths whose nightly entertainments included drunken revelries, such as setting fire to a haystack, spreading false rumors of war, or simply making as much noise as possible in the

town square. Although such mischief often landed Francis in trouble with the authorities, his father's money paid the fines and kept Francis out of jail.

Francis the Warrior. In 1202, when Francis was 20, he fought in a war between Assisi and a rival town, Perugia.⁴ The Perugians soundly defeated Assisi's army, and many of its combatants were captured, Francis among them. These captives were placed in chains, cast into a filthy dungeon, and held under deplorable conditions. Francis reacted strangely: he sang, remained courteous to all (even his jailers), and cared for those who were sick. After about a year, he was released, now sick himself, and was nursed back to health by his parents.

At age 23, Francis was offered a chance to serve as the squire for a knight in the service of the Pope. Leaving Assisi with the finest horse and equipment money could buy, Francis came back a short time later with none of it. He explained that he had fallen ill in the nearby town of Spoleto, and the knights left him there to recuperate. The next day, instead of rejoining them, Francis returned to Assisi. As for the horse and equipment, Francis explained that he had given them to a poor knight. Francis would not tell his family or friends his reasons for abandoning his dream of knighthood. But the explanation seems to be that he heard a voice—which he believed was from God—telling him to serve God, rather than the Pope, and to go home and await further instructions.

When he had regained his strength, Francis resumed many of his frivolous activities. But he was not quite the same. He spent considerable time with a poor friend who repaired carts for a living. He gave a sumptuous feast for the beggars of Assisi. And soon thereafter, Francis told his noble friends that he had fallen in love with a lady “lovelier, wealthier, and purer than any you know.” They thought he had lost his mind.

The Lady Poverty. Francis began to spend time with the love of his life—what he would call the “Lady Poverty.” He wandered the countryside, eating what food he could find or earn by his labors, and sleeping in the open. He also spent a lot of time at an old, long-neglected chapel in nearby San Damiano, cleaning up and serving its old priest. Here, praying before the altar, Francis found peace. He also prayed for direction. Sometime later, Francis received the guidance he sought. He experienced visions of Jesus Christ, and he received a command: “Restore My house.”

Francis interpreted the command literally. He rushed to Assisi and sold some of his father's possessions to raise funds to repair the chapel. But the honest priest at San Damiano would not accept the money after learning where it came from. So Francis went to live in a cave—at least in part to escape the wrath of his father, who beat him when he finally did return. Pietro would later sue his son for the stolen property, prompting Francis to publicly return not only the money but also the very

clothes he was wearing. Then, standing naked before the bishop and a crowd of onlookers, Francis boldly announced his desire to henceforth serve only his Heavenly Father.

Meanwhile, Francis' life of poverty brought him a newfound humility and an inner tranquility he had never known. A journey to Rome in about 1206 filled him with distress because of the tragic poverty he saw all around him, but it also inflamed him with a desire to serve. He prayed to God to show him how. Not long after, during his journey back from Rome, Francis encountered a leper. At first he fled, but soon he returned and begged the leper's forgiveness. Francis then kissed the hand he had been afraid to touch, and gave the leper what little money he had.

Now completely free of possessions, Francis devoted himself to serving others for the next 2 or 3 years. He began to rebuild the chapel at San Damiano stone by stone, and several people from Assisi came to help him. He visited the lepers outside of Assisi, trying to relieve their misery and bring them a little joy. He risked contagion daily, but did not shrink from touching them or sharing their meals. When food ran low, Francis walked into town and worked for whatever food the townspeople would give him.

The Franciscans. On February 24, 1209, Francis experienced another life-changing event. He went to hear mass at a tiny, secluded chapel⁵ at Porziuncola, and listened intently to the day's Gospel reading, from Matthew 10:7-10.⁶ In Jesus' instructions to His apostles to go out and preach the Gospel, Francis recognized his calling. He went to Assisi and began to preach—not eloquently, to be sure, but his voice was clear and his message sincere. Within days, three of his listeners⁷ asked to follow him. Francis imposed only one requirement: they must give all their possessions to the poor.

Many more soon followed. They settled at Porziuncola on a hillside near Assisi. They called each other “brother,” and became known as the “Friars Minor,” or “Little Brothers.” Later, people simply called them the Franciscans. To join the Brothers, a man had to give all of his possessions to the poor. The Brothers lived in poverty, for Francis believed that all possessions eventually possess the possessor. The Brothers wore the coarse brown tunic of a peasant, and worked for the necessities of life—food and clothing, but never for money. Nor did Francis let them beg or become lazy. They spent their free time praying, meditating, caring for the lepers, and listening to Francis. Yet he never considered himself their leader so much as their friend. When a Franciscan asked Francis why so many people followed him, he replied: “Possibly because God could find nobody as unworthy as I.”

Francis imparted to his followers something of his own deep appreciation for nature as God's creation; he loved to be with the animals and birds, and sometimes preached to them. He referred to animals and inanimate objects as his brothers and

sisters, such as: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and Brother Wolf. Francis called his own body Brother Ass. Even death was a friend—Sister Bodily Death.

Francis taught his followers to always be cheerful despite adversity, and to bless those who treated them with abuse or contempt. The Franciscans preached and lived such virtues as humility, generosity, self-control, and forgiveness. Although many priests were suspicious of Francis and his strange teachings, he advocated complete obedience to the Church. He also urged his followers to remain full of hope and joy, and to mourn their sins only in private. This last message was unique for the time, for the Church advocated public penance for sins.

Francis imposed another requirement upon his followers which was unusual for the time: “Whoever should come to the brothers, be he friend or enemy, thief or robber, let him be kindly received.” This eventually became part of the “rule”⁸ for the Franciscans. For Francis, to live meant to be kind and charitable. He often gave away his staff or his garments to those who were poorer than he.

In 1210, with the Brothers growing rapidly, Francis and 11 of the Brothers traveled to Rome in an effort to win the Pope’s recognition and blessing for the Brothers Minor. Francis was carefully examined by Cardinal Ugolino⁹ and then by Pope Innocent III.¹⁰ These Church leaders appreciated Francis’ faith and obvious sincerity, but they told Francis he would be better off in one of the established monastic orders.¹¹ Francis held firm. Every established order had possessions, and Francis insisted that his followers must have none. He was convinced he had received his commission from Jesus Christ Himself, and would not consider altering it. In the end, Francis won Papal approval for the Brothers Minor. However, the Pope imposed two requirements upon them: (1) before preaching in any area, they must first obtain the permission of the area’s local bishop, and (2) they must elect a leader for their order. Of course, they elected Francis.

In 1211, Francis sent missionaries from the Brothers all over northern Italy. In many places they encountered derision and persecution, but their message, and the sincerity and cheerfulness with which it was delivered, brought more followers to Porziuncola. By the year 1212, the movement had spread throughout northern Italy. People attributed many miraculous healings to Francis’ ministry, but Francis insisted that they were merely “the work of the Lord.”

Clare. On Palm Sunday, 1212, an 18-year-old woman approached the Brothers, seeking to follow the Franciscan rule. The oldest of three daughters from a wealthy family of Assisi, she was said to be very beautiful. She would become one of Francis’ closest friends. Her name was Clare.¹² She became the leader of the *Clarissi*, or “Poor Clares,”¹³ the Franciscan order for women, centered at San Damiano. Pope Innocent III gave the Poor Clares official papal recognition in 1216. Besides prayer and meditation, the Poor Clares spent their time gardening, nursing the

sick, and spinning and weaving for the Brothers. Like the Brothers, the Poor Clares lived lives of simple poverty. And like the Brothers, the Poor Clares grew rapidly and established new groups far outside of San Damiano. One of Clare's younger sisters, Agnes, headed one such group at Monticelli, near Florence.

A third branch of the Brothers, the Franciscan Tertiaries,¹⁴ began in about 1210. These were men and women who wished to serve God and others in accordance with the Franciscan ideal, but who needed to remain in the world in order to fulfill family responsibilities. The Tertiaries were not required to give up all possessions, but they were expected to live frugal, moral, and Godly lives, and to spend time serving others. The Tertiaries received official Papal recognition in December 1221.

Francis himself continued to travel and preach, mostly in Italy. One of his most famous preaching tours occurred in 1218. He exhorted his Italian listeners to a life of sacrifice and service, and was hailed everywhere as a prophet. In the small village of Camara, not far from Assisi, the people were so moved by Francis' words and example that the entire congregation asked to join the Tertiaries.

Dissension and Changes. By 1215, dissension arose among the Brothers. Francis' way was too simple-minded for some, too austere for others. Some of the Brothers wanted Papal protection against persecution; others advocated loosening the absolute prohibition against possessions; and many sought freedom to study, learn, and achieve. In addition to these spiritual troubles, Francis experienced physical ailments such as pain and exhaustion. He began to doubt his mission, wondering if he should not become a hermit, and turned to Clare for advice. After devoting herself to prayer for a time, Clare came back with her answer: Francis' doubts were not from God, but from Satan, for God had called Francis to serve the world, not himself. In about 1217 or 1218, Francis made a journey to Rome and met Dominic,¹⁵ founder of the Dominicans, another monastic order. Cardinal Ugolino again urged Francis to relax the rule for the Brothers and join forces with one of the established monastic orders, but Francis still refused.

Francis would gradually lose his battle for spiritual purity among the Franciscans. Mistreatment of the Brothers in Germany, Hungary, and Spain forced him to accept Papal protection for the order in 1216. Then during his absence on a trip to Egypt and the Holy Land, 1219 - 1220, the Church and a large group of discontented Franciscans held sway. They modified the prohibition against possessions, and eased other requirements as well. A novitiate of one year was prescribed, but after that the vows were made irrevocable.

Clare remained loyal to Francis, as did many others, but Francis felt betrayed. By the time he returned in 1220, he was no longer physically or mentally able to resist the tide of change. He agreed to the preparation of a new rule for the order, and later

that year he relinquished the leadership of the Brothers, kneeling at the feet of the new leader, Peter of Cattaneo.¹⁶

The new rule for the Franciscans permitted possessions, and called upon new members to give all of their possessions to the Brothers rather than to the poor. Missionaries could carry money and provisions for their needs. The scholarly Brothers were encouraged in their studies, and were even helped in this by the order. The Pope approved the new rule in 1221, and then modified it in 1223, but not all of the Brothers accepted it. Those who did were called Conventuals; those who adhered to Francis' original rule were called Strict Observants, Zealots, or Spirituals. Francis remained in the latter category.

The Stigmata. Physically, Brother Ass was failing Francis. He suffered from headaches, weakness in his limbs, and a growing pain behind his eyes—apparently the result of malaria contracted in Italy and an eye infection he picked up in Egypt. In August 1224, he realized he needed a rest, so he went on a retreat to Monte Verna, high in the mountains of central Italy. He was accompanied by three Brothers, but he often withdrew from them in order to devote himself to prayer, meditation, and a study of Christ's passion in Gethsemane. Then on September 13, 1224, Francis had a vision of a six-winged seraph nailed to a cross. As the vision approached, Francis felt excruciating pain in his palms, feet, and side, and discovered that he had received the Stigmata: Christ's nail wounds in his feet and hands, and the spear wound in his side. With the pain came joy and serenity Francis had never known before. His three friends nursed him during his convalescence. But from that time forward, Francis always kept his hands hidden in the sleeves of his tunic and rode a donkey because walking had become too difficult.

Francis' final two years were marked by failing health and deep sadness because of the widening divisions among the Franciscans. Francis lost his eyesight, but he never lost the serenity he had gained at Monte Verna. He spent the summer of 1225 with the Poor Clares at San Damiano and dictated poetry and prose. Later he underwent two excruciatingly painful operations, which failed to restore his eyesight and left him severely weakened. In the spring of 1226, Francis returned to Assisi, where he dictated his Testament—a theological and autobiographical work, describing his experiences and his beliefs about service to God. He repudiated the rule of 1223 and reiterated his belief in absolute poverty for the Brothers. The Conventuals ignored, and later suppressed, Francis' Testament, while the Church disavowed it.

Francis met death with joy. He sang and encouraged his Brothers until he was too weak to sing or speak. He died in Porziuncola on October 3, 1226, and was canonized two years later¹⁷ by his friend, Ugolino—by then, Pope Gregory IX. At the time of Francis' death, about 5,000 Franciscan monks lived in Italy, Hungary,

Germany, England, France, and Spain. Fifty years later, in 1280 A.D., the Franciscans had grown to 200,000 monks and 8,000 monasteries. Although the vast majority did not observe the strict asceticism and poverty Francis advocated, they did preach and travel on missionary journeys, helping to reinvigorate Christianity throughout Europe.

Sources:

- (1) *Reader's Digest Family Treasury of Great Biographies (Volume VIII): "St. Francis of Assisi,"* by E. M. Almedingen ("St. Francis," 1967; *Biographies Volume VIII*, 1971)
- (2) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know*, by Margaret & Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, 1994).
- (3) *The Story of Civilization, Volume IV: The Age of Faith*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950).
- (4) *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 (Beginnings to 1500)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (5) *Great Saints, Great Friends*, by Mary Neill and Rhonda Chervin (Alba House, New York, 1990).
- (6) *Microsoft Encarta Virtual Globe* (1998 ed.).
- (7) "St. Francis of Assisi," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>.
- (8) "Francis of Assisi," in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Francis_of_Assisi.

Endnotes for “St. Francis of Assisi”:

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* Bible translation.

² Assisi is located in the middle of the Italian boot, about 130 kilometers (81 miles) north of Rome.

³ The first Crusade was in 1096 - 1099, and resulted in the capture and sacking of Jerusalem in 1099. The second Crusade, in 1147 - 1148, resulted in the decimation of two European armies and ultimate defeat near Damascus. Jerusalem again fell to the Muslims, led by Saladin, in 1187, prompting the third Crusade, 1189 - 1192. One of the leaders in this third Crusade was King Richard “the Lion-Hearted” of England. The Europeans won many battles, but failed to recapture Jerusalem. Five more legitimate Crusades would follow: the 4th, 1202-1204; 5th, 1217-1218; 6th, 1228-1229; 7th, 1248-1254; and 8th, 1267-1270. There was also the tragic “Children’s Crusades” in 1212. All but the 6th were dismal failures. The 6th, led by the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II (reigned 1215-1250), regained Jerusalem for about 15 years, until 1244 when the Muslims wrested it back. They would not lose the city again until the 20th Century.

⁴ Perugia is located less than 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) west of Assisi.

⁵ This was the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels.

⁶ Matthew 10:7-10 says [Jesus speaking]: “ ‘And as you go, preach, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Heal *the* sick, raise *the* dead, cleanse *the* lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for *your* journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support.’ ”

⁷ These first three followers were: Bernard of Quintavalle, Peter of Cattaneo, and a man named Giles.

⁸ The “rule” contains the rules and regulations which govern a monastic order, similar to a constitution.

⁹ Cardinal Ugolino was the Pope’s nephew, and later became Pope Gregory IX.

¹⁰ Pope Innocent III, who was Pope from 1198 to 1216, is regarded by many as the most powerful Pope in the history of the Church. His given name was Lotario de’ Conti di Segni; he was born in Anagni, near Rome, in 1161, to wealthy, aristocratic parents. He received his education in Paris and Bologna, and became a Cardinal in the Church at age 29. He was 38 when he was elected Pope.

Innocent was at heart a good man. He built a hospital in Rome and inspired the building of others throughout Europe. He vigorously promoted morality within the clergy and the laity. He was far-sighted enough to encourage St. Francis, St. Clare, St. Dominic, and others who were

invigorating the Church with their fresh ideas and fervent faith. Although Pope Innocent apparently enjoyed the pomp and honors of the Papacy, he was honest and could not be corrupted—except perhaps by power.

Innocent believed strongly in the independence and supremacy of the Church over all secular authorities—at least in matters of religion. He refused to permit the taxing of Church property by the State. He insisted that the clergy could not be tried by any secular authority—a belief which had cost St. Thomas Becket his life 30 years earlier. (See the article on St. Thomas Becket, on this web site.) Under Innocent’s firm direction, the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, outlawed trial by ordeal and upgraded educational requirements for priests. The Council also demanded that clergymen remain celibate, imposed the obligation of annual confession to a priest on all believers, and made transubstantiation (the belief that the Communion bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ) official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church.

Innocent’s greatest talent was his political acumen. He extended Papal control over much of Italy, and played a key role in determining the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire (i.e., Germany). He humbled King John of England and forced him to accept the supremacy of Papal authority in Church affairs, such as the election of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Kings in France and Spain were forced to obey Innocent on religious issues, and his influence was felt as far as Norway, Portugal, Poland, much of eastern Europe, and even distant Armenia. One visitor said Innocent was “the successor not of Peter but of Constantine.”

Despite his accomplishments, Innocent III was never canonized as a saint, perhaps because his impressive administrative and diplomatic skills were stained by much innocent blood. Innocent advocated the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), which—against his wishes—sacked Constantinople and probably hastened the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Muslims. Learning nothing from this experience, Innocent promoted a Fifth Crusade (1217), which was also a dismal failure. Viewing heretics as traitors to the faith, to be dealt with harshly, Innocent declared, and aggressively pursued, a “holy war” against the Cathari (or Albigensians) of southern France in 1208. The result was a bloody, destructive, and often savage 20-year war, the end of which Innocent did not live to see.

¹¹ By the time Francis was born, monasticism had been practiced in some form for more than 800 years. One of the oldest existing orders, the Benedictine monks, founded by Benedict of Nursia (480 - 542), had been in existence for more than 600 years. (For more on Benedict, see the article, “St. Benedict of Nursia,” on this web site.) Some of the other prominent monastic orders in Francis’ day were:

1. the Augustinians, founded shortly after 1059 A.D. based upon the example of St. Augustine (354 - 430 A.D.);
2. the Carthusians, founded in 1084 A.D. by St. Bruno of Cologne;
3. the Cistercians, founded in 1098 A.D. by Robert of Molesmes, but made famous by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153 A.D.); and
4. the Carmelites, which originated in Palestine in about 1210 A.D.

¹² Clare lived from 1193 to 1253. She was canonized as a saint in 1255, two years after her death.

¹³ The initial name of the Poor Clares was the Second Franciscan Order of Poor Ladies.

¹⁴ The Tertiaries were also known as the Third Order, or the Order of Penitents. They were the “Third Order,” because the Franciscan monks were the First Order, and the Poor Clares were the Second Order.

¹⁵ St. Dominic (1170-1221) was an older contemporary of St. Francis. Originally christened as Domingo de Guzman, Dominic was born in Calaruega, in the Castile area of Spain. His uncle raised him, but the Church educated him, and once grown he joined the Augustinian order of monks. Early on, he was known for his strict asceticism, his devotion to prayer, and his gentle, joyful spirit. In 1201, Dominic’s bishop took him to southern France, where he battled heresy for 15 years through the humility and sincerity of his faith (in sharp contrast to the ignorance and corruption of much of the Roman Catholic clergy of that area and time). In 1216, at Dominic’s request, Pope Honorius III recognized the Dominicans as a new monastic order, and Dominic shifted his labors to Rome. From there, Dominic recruited and trained missionary monks.

Like Francis, Dominic and his followers surrendered their possessions and adopted an ascetic lifestyle; also like the Franciscans, the Dominicans preached throughout Europe. Indeed, the initial name of the Dominican order was the Friars (brothers) Preachers. But Dominic did not share Francis’ distrust of education, so the Dominicans became involved in schools and universities much earlier than did the Franciscans. Dominic died in Bologna, in northern Italy, at the age of 51.

¹⁶ Recall that Peter was one of Francis’ earliest followers. See footnote #7. Peter died the following year, on March 10, 1221, and was succeeded by Elias.

¹⁷ Francis was canonized as a saint on July 16, 1228.