

A SHORT LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Throughout history St. Francis has remained one of the most beloved figures of the Christian tradition. Whether it is his reverence for creation, his radical solidarity with the poor and simple dependence on God, or his capacity to see all around him as brother and sister, Francis has inspired generations to more passionately embrace the Gospel life. While he is often reimagined today as a gentle figure preaching to birds or a quiet statue in a garden, Francis was a man of fierce conviction, transformed by a profound encounter with divine love, such that he sought but one thing—to walk perfectly in the footprints of Jesus Christ.



EARLY LIFE OF FRANCIS

Born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone in 1181/2, Francis received his nickname from his father, a successful cloth merchant with a deep affinity for French culture. Raised in the hilltop town of Assisi, Francis's early life in that picturesque setting stood in stark contrast to the era's turbulence. His world was one of conflict in both ecclesial and social structures. Corruption, laxity and abuses in the Church led to division and calls for reform. Major shifts in economic power led to class conflict between established nobility and the rising merchant class. And during Francis' life, three crusades were attempted to retake the Holy Land.

The son of a merchant, Francis worked the family business and was well provided for. A romantic with a charismatic personality, he was the life of the party, singing like a troubadour and famously footing the bill for his friends. From youth, Francis had grand dreams of one day earning fame and renown as a knight on the battlefield.



This dream met harsh reality around the age of twenty when Francis first went to war and was captured and imprisoned for a year. Francis was ransomed and returned home, broken and plagued by illness. About a year later he again sought glory in battle in the south of Italy but was stopped short with a vision that sent him home to seek God's will. While his peers continued toward the battlefield, he returned to Assisi in disgrace to face the ridicule of his neighbors.

FRANCIS' CONVERSION

During this time of questioning and confusion, Francis underwent a gradual but profound conversion. This interior transformation was anchored by two definitive encounters: seeing the face of Christ in the suffering of a leper and hearing the voice of Christ while in prayer before the crucifix at San Damiano.

The early biographers emphasize that the young Francis had a great dread of leprosy. A terrible disease of the flesh, those with leprosy were outcast from society, living in communities on the fringes of cities. However, overcoming this revulsion became the catalyst for his conversion, as he relates in his own words:

“In this way did the Lord give me, Brother Francis, the grace to begin doing penance: when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world” (The Testament).



St. Bonaventure's *Life of Saint Francis* recounts this story in more intimate detail. Francis, in the early fervor of conversion, reframed his original desire to become a knight by resolving to become a knight of Christ. One day, while out riding in the valley below Assisi, Francis met a leper. He dismounted his horse and ran to kiss the leper and give him money. When Francis returned to mount his horse he turned and could no longer see the leper. Francis was filled with joy and resolved “to embark always on the greater” (LM I.5).



It was shortly after this encounter that Francis began to seek out solitary places of prayer. One day, while St. Francis was out walking, he passed by the church of San Damiano, which had fallen into ruin and was about to collapse. Led by the Holy Spirit, he entered and began praying before the Crucifix there. As St. Francis was laying prostrate before the image of the Crucified praying, his heart was stirred, and he heard the voice of Christ say “Francis, go rebuild My house as you see, it is all being destroyed” (LM II.1).



Taking this call at face value, Francis sold bolts of his father’s expensive cloth, and tried to give the proceeds to the priest for the chapel’s repair. Unfortunately, this brought tensions between Francis and his father to a head. His father, who had been increasingly resistant to the changes in Francis, brought Francis before the bishop, demanding recompense for the sold fabric. Before his father and the bishop, Francis famously stripped naked, offering his father even the clothes on his back saying, “until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, ‘Our Father who art in heaven,’ since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him” (LM II.4).

FIRST FOLLOWERS & THE RULE

This moment was decisive for Francis. He set about repairing small chapels around Assisi, namely San Damiano and the Portiuncula—churches that became central to the Franciscan movement. Early on, many thought Francis had lost his mind. He often begged stones and building materials to the jeers of the townsfolk. However, as he became recognized for his holiness, a small group of followers started to gather around him. These men spent their time in prayer, preaching, service among lepers, and in simple manual labor in exchange for food.





In 1209 the group counted twelve members and they traveled to Rome to seek approval for a new form of life from the pope. St. Bonaventure writes that in a dream, Pope Innocent III saw a “little and poor man, small and scorned” supporting the Lateran Basilica so that it would not fall (LM III.10). This vision convinced the pope that in some way Francis and his companions would play a pivotal role in renewing the Church. Pope Innocent approved Francis’ simple rule, instructing them to preach penance and the word of God.

Francis and his followers returned to Assisi and took the name Friars Minor, or lesser/little brothers. This name highlights the vision Francis had for his community—no longer seeking worldly prestige, but identifying with the poor and lowly. They settled at the Portiuncula (Our Lady of the Angels), one of the small chapels that Francis rebuilt. Not wanting to own anything, the friars rented the chapel from the Benedictines in exchange for a basket of fish. Francis so loved the Portiuncula that he often told his brothers: “See to it, my sons, that you never abandon this place. If you are driven out from one side, go back in from the other, for this is truly a holy place and the dwelling place of God” (1C 7). This small chapel became home for the early Franciscan movement.



Francis' influence extended beyond his band of brothers. In 1211 Clare, a young noblewoman, left her family and station behind to make vows at the Portiuncula. Setting aside societal expectations and worldly comforts, she followed Francis in embracing a life of poverty and prayer. Clare settled at San Damiano and founded a cloistered community of women, the Poor Ladies (known today as the Poor Clares or the 2nd Order of Saint Francis). Clare and Francis shared a profound, lifelong spiritual intimacy. Francis sought Clare's counsel for pivotal decisions, and near the end of his life, Clare cared for Francis for a time at San Damiano.



Francis' zeal also caught fire among the laity. Recognizing that not everyone was called to a life of itinerant preaching or the cloister, Francis established a third order for those living in the world. The Brothers and Sisters of Penance, now referred to as the Secular Franciscans, sought to radically live out the tenets of the Gospel in their daily lives— at home, at work and in social interactions.

ROME, MISSION & GROWTH OF THE ORDER



In 1215, Francis returned to Rome amidst the Fourth Lateran Council. At the beginning of the council, Pope Innocent III preached on Ezekiel 9, in which the faithful were marked with the sign of the Greek letter Tau. Francis was so inspired by this homily, that he adopted this symbol for his personal signature, a constant reminder of the cross. According to tradition, on this trip Francis also met Dominic, the head of another itinerant group of friars called the Order of Preachers. These founders held each other in deep regard, both playing crucial roles in reforming the Church of the 13th century.



A major focus of Lateran IV was Eucharistic reform, formally defining the doctrine of transubstantiation and establishing new standards of reverence and solemnity for the Sacrament. This love for the Eucharist resonated with Francis who embraced the message and frequently reiterated it to his followers. For Francis, the Eucharist in a particular

way exemplified the humble love of God who continues to make Himself present to us. It was this littleness of God that was the model for Francis' own littleness. In a letter to the entire order Francis writes:

“Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble, and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him! Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!” (LetORD 26-30).



In 1219, amid the violence of the Fifth Crusade, Francis returned to the battlefield—not as the glory-seeking soldier of his youth, but as a missionary of peace. Crossing enemy lines in Egypt, he secured an audience with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. Francis preached the Gospel and, according to legend, even challenged the Sultan's religious leaders to a "trial by fire" as a proof of the Faith. Though the Sultan declined the offer, he was so moved by the friar's courage and sincerity that the two men parted with deep mutual respect, and Francis was granted safe passage home.

Francis returned to Italy to a rapidly growing order facing new challenges and complexities that required greater institutional clarity than the simple rule of 1209 could provide. Though an inspiring and charismatic leader, Francis lacked legal precision in formulating a rule to govern a large religious community. In 1221, Francis completed a new rule that was spiritually beautiful but practically difficult to enforce. Recognizing the need for stability, Cardinal Hugolino, the Order's protector, helped refine the text into a more structured legislative document. This collaboration resulted in the Regula Bullata (the "Later Rule"), which received official papal approval from Honorius III in 1223, providing the formal framework that has guided the Franciscans for centuries.





THE CRIB & THE CROSS

At the end of 1223, Francis, was in the town of Greccio, and had the desire to experience tangibly what it would have been like for Jesus at his birth in a manger. Francis wanted to see with his own eyes the humble and poor conditions that the Son of God was born into. With the help of a young nobleman, Francis set up a stable with an ox and an ass and placed a figure of Jesus in a manger filled with hay. Villagers came from all around as the brothers sang and Francis joyfully proclaimed the Gospel, filled with love by the image of the humble Christ child. This first reenactment of a living nativity moved the hearts of many to conversion.

For Francis, the Incarnation, or God entering into our human reality was a defining characteristic of his spirituality. Just as God continues to come to us in the Eucharist, Jesus' coming, not as a king but as a vulnerable child, illustrated the intimacy of God's love for us. As we hear in Philippians, Christ, "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (1 Phil. 2:6-8). This self-emptying love of God was the model that Francis strove to imitate in his own embrace of Lady Poverty. He sought to give up everything in loving response to the God who first loved him.



Francis was a man of deep prayer who frequently sought places of solitude for extended periods. In 1224, two years before his death, Francis was praying on Mount LaVerna. While meditating upon Christ's Passion he received a vision of Christ crucified, born on a six-winged seraph. The significance of seraph wings lies in Scripture—it is seraph angels that stand in constant adoration of God. In this encounter, the early biographers recount that Francis received the wounds of Christ in his own hands and feet. From Bonaventure we hear that Francis was being drawn into God and transformed into "Him Who chose to be crucified out of the excess of His love" (LMj 13.2). These



wounds in St. Francis' body, referred to as stigmata, are the first recorded in history. The early biographers reflect that Francis strove to follow Christ so closely, and desired to share in His passion so ardently, that not only his soul transformed, but even his body. Francis was so moved by the depth of God's humble love, that this love was mirrored in his own body.

ILLNESS, CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES, AND THE TRANSITUS

Francis' health continued to decline dramatically. It was not long after his experience at LaVerna that, while recovering in a hut at San Damiano, Francis composed his Canticle of the Creatures. In this poem, widely considered the first great work of Italian literature, St. Francis blesses God for all of creation, for it all gives glory to God. He praises Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Water and Brother Fire for all the ways that they point us towards God, and how they are God's gifts to us. The profound irony is that as Francis wrote this, he suffered from an affliction of the eyes that made it unbearably painful to look directly at light.

Today, St. Francis is widely known for his love of creation—he preached to birds; he tamed a wolf. This deep kinship with nature cannot be reduced to a simple affection for the outdoors. He loved *creation* precisely because of its connection to the *Creator*. Creation expresses the goodness of God, and Francis could call the sun and moon brother and sister because of the Incarnation, when God entered the physical world. The sun, the moon, stars and fire all bear the fingerprints of a God who loves us and is with us.



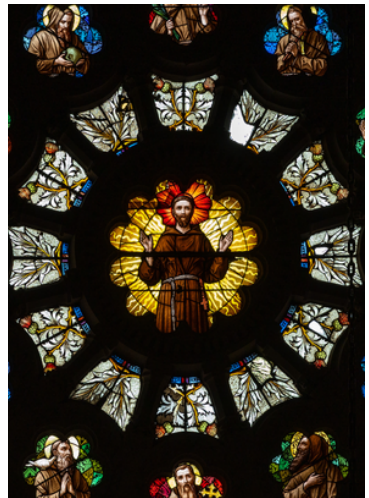


Francis was taken to the Portiuncula as he approached his death. It was here that Francis added a final stanza to the *Canticle of the Creatures*, a verse praising God even through Sister Bodily Death. Francis recognized that those who go to God seeking his will, will share eternal life. He also dictated a final testament for the brothers, speaking of how God first called him and led him to start the order, and to urge the brothers to remain faithful to this life.

On his deathbed, Francis asked to be laid naked on the bare earth. He desired to own nothing of his own as he went to God, until his superior asked him to put on a habit that would be lent to him. Francis was surrounded by friars praying and visited by a dear friend, Lady Jacoba, whom he affectionately referred to as Brother Jacoba so that she could enter the cloister to see him (and bring his favorite cookies). The passing of Francis is referred to as his *transitus*, his passing from this life into the next. To this day, the *transitus* is celebrated on October 3 by the Franciscan family throughout the world. It is a celebration of Francis' life and the spirit with which he looked on death, not with fear, but as the entrance to eternal life.

ST. FRANCIS' LEGACY

Just two years after his death, Francis was declared a saint by Pope Gregory IX, formerly Cardinal Hugolino. As miracles multiplied and his fame spanned Europe, the small spark that God began with Francis became a major force of renewal in the Church. Through the centuries, thousands upon thousands have followed in his footsteps as Friars Minor, Poor Clares and Secular Franciscans, giving the Church hundreds of saints and blessed. Francis has continued to capture the imagination of generations—kings and leaders, artists and academics, religious and lay people alike. We pray that during this Jubilee year of St. Francis, you too might be inspired by his witness, and respond to the call to more radically follow Jesus Christ.



ATTRIBUTIONS

Text and photography by Br. Ross Henley, OFM Capuchin.

Quotes from Franciscan sources available at www.franciscantradition.org.

3. Cimabue. *Madonna Enthroned with Saint Francis*.
4. P. Subercaseaux Errazuriz. *Setting out for the Wars*.
5. St. Augustine Church. *The Call of St. Francis*.
P. Subercaseaux Errazuriz. *The Bishop's Judgement*.
P. Subercaseaux Errazuriz. *Repairing San Damiano*.
6. Josep Benlliure y Gil. *Francisco and His Brothers Plan their New Life*.
Benozzo Gozzoli. *Dream of Innocent III and the Confirmation of the Rule*.
Raquel Kueffner. *The Portiuncula*.
7. St. Augustine Church. *The Vows of St. Clare*.
St. Augustine Church. *The Founding of the Third Order*.
St. Francis' Handwritten Tau.
Fra Angelico. *Meeting of St. Francis and St. Dominic*.
8. Domenico Ghirlandaio. *Trial by Fire before the Sultan*.
Rule of the Order of Friars Minor (1223)
9. Antoni Viladomat. *Apparition of the Holy Family to St. Francis in the Crib at Greccio*.
Benozzo Gozzoli. *Nativity in Greccio*.
Caravaggio. *St. Francis in Prayer*
10. St. Augustine Church. *St. Francis receiving the Stigmata*.
El Greco. *St. Francis receiving the Stigmata*.
Benozzo Gozzoli. *Stigmatization of St. Francis*.
Giotto. *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds*.
Josep Benlliure y Gil. *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*.
11. St. Augustine Church. *Sister Clare's Farewell*.
Josep Benlliure y Gil. *Francis Blesses His Disciples*.
St. Augustine Church. *St. Francis and Capuchin Franciscan Saints and Blesseds*
12. Raquel Kueffner. *Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi*

