

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND HIS FRIARS

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Francis of Assisi was born to Peter and Pica Bernardone in the year 1182. His true name, therefore, is Francis Bernardone: he is called Francis "of Assisi" after his home town in Italy. (It is about 90 miles directly north of Rome).

Francis died at Assisi in the year 1226 when he was forty-four. In this comparatively short life-span he lived so fully and so impressively as to leave a lasting influence on the Catholic religion, and indeed on the history of mankind. Catholics, Protestants, Moslems, Hindus, even people of atheistic opinions, honour this man. Lenin, the founder of Russian Communism, is said to have remarked when near to death: "Had we ten St. Francis of Assisi's, we would have changed the world far better."

So Francis was a mighty man. Yet, as we shall try to explain, he was in most ways a simple, straight-forward person, gifted above average surely, but without pretensions.

The one thing that lifted him above the normal measure of Christian men and endowed him with a rare quality was his decision, under God, to re-live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For this, he is called the most Christ-like man our history has seen, and he is loved by admirers with something of the esteem we have for Jesus Christ himself.

EARLY YEARS

Until his twenty-first year, he was the son of an Assisian cloth merchant - Peter Bernardone - and little more. He had a reasonable education, he was popular amongst the youth, he was often bored with being a shop assistant.

Then the spirit of adventure entered, and he thought to satisfy it by apprenticing himself to the knights - a cavalier class who were attached to the nobility and a step above the merchant class. Maybe the youthful Francis hoped to better himself and his family in the social scale.

In this desire he had his parents' approval. So, as a knight's apprentice, he joined a battle between Assisi and

Perugia, was taken prisoner and cooled his heels in Perugia's political gaol for most of a year. Then he was ransomed, and came home quite ill.

Recovered, he tried again and went with a few others to join Walter de Brienne, a knightly leader in the papal army. It was on this exploit that the great adventure which was to be his life-story came clearer to him. A very strange incident happened at Spoleto, not far from Assisi, where the party of would-be soldiers rested for the night.

God Calls

What happened was this. As Francis slept, he dreamt. And in a vivid dream that assumed reality on awakening, he heard a voice which distinctly said: "Francis! Which is better - to serve the master of the earth, or to serve the master in heaven?"

He knew he was receiving some mystical message - some God-given insight. Putting aside his military gear, he came home to Assisi crestfallen, and pondering in his mind where his future lay.

The Spoleto incident was not his first encounter with the "call" that vivid faith can evoke in a person. For one evening, not too long before this incident, as he caroused with youthful friends in the streets of Assisi, he was stopped in his tracks by some kind of a "visitation", and immediately grew reserved and remote. When one of his friends exclaimed laughingly, "What's wrong? Are you thinking of taking a bride"? Francis answered: "Yes I am, and her name is Lady Poverty."

A sudden vision of the poor, rejected Christ had assumed vivid reality before his eyes.

The Anguish of Decision

There was upset in his home when he came back from Spoleto as a dishonoured soldier, a coward. Unwilling to accept the lot of a merchant, and now turned aside from his attempts to rise in the chivalrous ranks of the knights - where was his restlessness to lead him?

Fuller accounts of his life will tell you of the anger and even the violence of his father, Peter Bernardone, at the indecision of his twenty-one year old.

For Francis himself there ensued a long period of two to three years - so long for a youth - when he entered into an agony of spirit searching for an authentic answer to the "call" of God. What **did** the Lord want him to do?

It is related that he and a companion would go away from the town into the nearby Subasio hills. There they prayed and talked and reflected. Often Francis would spend a few days fasting, reflecting on the gospels, attending Mass in the mornings.

And about this time he met a leper face to face. He, with his fashionable friends, had abhorred the hideous lepers of the lazaret near Assisi. In the last few days of his life, Francis recalled how his encounter with this leper worked deeply in him. In modern language his story would run like this:

"There was a creature in front of me, his body evil-smelling, his face eaten away. I was revolted and nauseated and my whole instinct was to flee. But this time I did not move. Something made me look into the poor creature's eyes in that hideous face, and my own eyes weeping I went to him. I clutched the stump of his hand, I kissed it, and we were in one another's arms!"

Some narrators of this story add: "And when Francis came back to his senses the leper was gone, for it was

Christ the Lord!"

Francis' own version of the incident is found in his **Testament**, written at the end of his days. He stated simply:

"After this experience **I left the world**, and what had seemed so revolting to me now became sweet to me". In short, he had in a flash of vivid insight re-evaluated things in the light of Christ's words: "Blessed are those who suffer . . ."

So, gradually the world and its prizes - a wealthy merchant's son, a knight of distinction, a happily married man, and who knows what else - these faded from his heart because he had become possessed with a **NEW LOVE** . . . a stirring, startling, bursting love for Jesus Christ who lives so near to us, and who is crucified and continues to be crucified.

Now his path was becoming clear - it was to follow, and to drink to the full, the life and the "Chalice" of the Lord.

Leaving the World

The most moving, and sometimes misunderstood, event soon followed. This was his public renunciation of his own father, Peter Bernardone, and his open-armed taking on of his one true father, God in heaven.

What happened was that Peter Bernardone continually pursued his son, quizzing and probing and bullying. And Francis, caught in the wondrous new spirit that was beginning to possess him, had no clear answers to give to his parent.

Finally came the breaking point, and Bernardone demanded of his son that he restore money he had taken to help poorer people. By this time Francis was firming in his decision to work for God and not for personal gain, so there was a confrontation before the court of Bishop Guido of Assisi. And as the father pushed his claim for material goods taken by the son, Francis, in a bold and final gesture, handed back what money he could find, and other goods he had, and then stripping from his body the clothes he wore, he handed even these to his father, and standing there almost in nudity, he cried out loudly: "Now I have no earthly father and I can truly look upwards and say 'My father who is in heaven' . . ."

Obviously one has to grasp in re-reading this story that Francis **meant** what he said, and at that moment he literally disinherited himself from any and every possession of this world, and vowed never to stake a claim again **against anyone**.

Here, as you might write poetically, stood the world's poorest man "in spirit", with utterly no claim; and what is marvellous to relate Francis of Assisi never withdrew those words.

Decisions Follow

So was his future set for a life with God, depending completely on God's providence: a celestial beggar-man. And quite soon, Jesus Christ - as Francis ardently believed - began to enter personally into the deeds of this wholehearted young man.

Francis was praying in the small church of San Damiano, outside the walled town, when the crucified figure of Christ answered his much repeated request, "What do you want me to do?" with words: "Francis, go and rebuild my church". So he began to restore three small derelict chapels near Assisi, beginning with that of San Damiano.

Then companions came to assist him - Bernard of Quintavalle, a wealthy man, Peter Catani, a priest, and Giles, a peasant. And it was necessary to make some corporate plan for their living.

What did Francis do? He took them to Mass at one of his project derelict Chapels, St Mary of the Angels, and when Mass was heard he asked the priest to open the large altar Missal three times at random (they did such things in the Middle Ages). Each time a similar text was revealed:

"Go and preach: The Kingdom of God is at hand. Take neither gold nor silver nor copper in your belts; no travelling bag, no change of shirt, no sandals, no walking staff . . ." (Mt. 10).

That is, they were to become simple, wandering apostles, in imitation of Our Lord's twelve. A final light had dawned.

The leper incident had led him . . .

The shedding of his clothing had led him . . .

The voice of Jesus at San Damiano chapel had led him . . .

And now, with the words of the Gospel, it all came together. The great adventure, in God's plan, was that he and his men **should renew on this earth the life of the twelve apostles**. So Francis, in considerable joy, turned to the others and said: "This is our, life".

In a very true way, the Franciscan Order began there and then. The year was 1209.

THE FRIARS MINOR

A fuller account of the Life of Francis will tell at this stage how other men came to join the first few, and how Francis taught them. He explained how he prayed, he gave them the Gospels to read, he lead them in simple daily good work amongst the lepers, in rebuilding chapels, and in working with the peasants. And then, as his stature grew, he was asked by the clergy to preach.

So it was that Francis said to himself, and to his group of twelve poor men: "We must go to Rome and see the Pope, and ask his approval of what we are doing". Some time in the year 1210 this odd-assorted little group actually stood before His Holiness Pope Innocent III in the Lateran Palace in Rome, and wondrous to tell, the Pope approved of them. It was said the Pope had a vision in sleep, and saw a ragged little man prop up with his hands the falling walls of the same Lateran basilica! When Francis stood before him, the Pope realized with some emotion that here was his ragged little man.

Innocent III also gave them permission to preach exhortatory sermons and officially tonsured them to show that they belonged to the jurisdiction of the church, rather than to the civil authority.

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Then came a wonderful burst of vocations to the new brotherhood: scholars, priests, knights, youths, peasants. It is said that the new religious made their first larger conquests amongst the country youth of the Italian Abruzzi region. Sometimes as many as twenty or thirty came from a single village area to join them.

And Francis was not a little bewildered by the inrush. He pored over the Gospels; he explained that they should live as simply as Christ's apostles: above all they should possess nothing as their own "neither a house nor place or anything at all"

(Rule of 1223, chap. 6).

And as the numbers greatly increased, Italy and soon France, Germany, Spain and even England witnessed with surprise the rising up of these new groups who now began to call themselves "Friars Minor" (Lesser brothers).

New Men

"They have been started by a person called Francis", the people were told, "a man from Assisi; not a bishop, nor an abbot, nor an influential priest, but a layman who claims an inspiration from God. Pope Innocent has approved of them, they've already done some wonderful things. Francis is held to be a saint".

That the "Friars" were new in inspiration the people could readily see, for they were not clerical in appearance, although a number were priests; they were not monks and had no monasteries, even though they wore a half-monkish attire.

They would lodge wherever a bishop, or a priest, or a person of substance would give them lodging, no matter how temporary, and they prayed the psalms and they worked - something new, something fresh, something inspirational was happening!

Church Situation

Europe at this time, 1200-1230 and afterwards, had a splendidly established church system: dioceses with their bishops, monasteries with their abbots and schools and craft works, clergy in their humbler parishes. In fact the thirteenth century is the great century of the building of the European cathedrals and the consolidation of some hundreds of famous monasteries.

Where, then, did this new brotherhood of Friars fit in? The answer is that a new social development was taking on in this same Europe. The cities were growing, a merchant class arising, and dispossessed peasants were ending up in the slums of the new cities; and no one was particularly interested in them. Alongside these new poor were the lepers, who were numerous, and the chronically sick, who were often neglected.

The new brethren, lodged precariously in the midst of the new poor, had ample people for their ministry, and fired with the spirit of the Gospel, and needing no regular pay, they found work of all kinds daily opening up before them.

It is rather breathtaking to re-read how quickly the small communities of Friars grew. In England, for example, they arrived from the continent about 1220 and had twenty or more small friaries within five to six years, and a Province of Friars in about forty years. And this was the pattern in Germany, France, Spain, not to mention Italy where they seemed to appear from nowhere in every province of the land.

It is a great story of high adventure for over a hundred years.

Highlights 1210-1219

To return to Francis himself and the quick early flourishing of the new brotherhood. Bewildered he may have been with it all, but very, very strong was he in personal character. Beyond that, and this was the telling point, lay the "experiences" of his spiritual growth - the voice and the word of Christ, and to these he must utterly be true. One may say that Francis saw his brotherhood as a re-creation of apostolic living, but for himself - what did he see? Only that he had heard the Lord; that he had seen a vision of Christ's dereliction and crucifixion, of his nakedness and poverty, of his rejection by so many . . . and the little Poor Man's heart was so deeply moved that all he could live for was to give back to Jesus Christ the whole love and complete dedication in earthly poverty of himself. No other way can we explain Francis, except that he was drawn into an enormous **love story** with his Saviour, and that the Holy Spirit of God was the enkindler of this loving

fire.

As the brethren increased so did Francis's determination to see that they kept to the God-shown path of Christ's Gospel. "Speak not to me", he would say, "of St. Benedict's Rule, or those of St. Augustine and St. Bernard - the Lord has made clear my path to me and to my brethren: it is to live his holy Gospel in simplicity."

St. Clare

When Clare, a young noblewoman of Assisi, eloped from her parent's stately home in 1212 and came by night to follow the same road as Francis, his heart was deeply moved. It was as though a heavenly seal had been stamped on his efforts up to this point, for Clare showed a determination like his own to love the poor Christ and to flee from any kind of security of house or property, and to entrust herself completely to Providence. He received her with unstinted pleasure, presided over her vows, and found her a lodging with other nuns for the time being. She was to remain the one who understood his vocation better than anyone else. And she and her Poor Clare sisters stood staunchly to him in fulfilling it.

For a religious founder like Francis the annual meeting, or Chapter, of the brethren is always a highlight. At these Francis was attentive to the needs of his new brothers in Christ; he guarded their health, forbidding excessive penances, he counselled them in spirit. 1215 was a special year: he took a group with him and went down to Rome to listen to the great Pope Innocent at the Fourth Lateran Council, and while there he won a final confirmation of his new way of life.

Returning home he set himself again to the day-to-day preaching of Christ's good news to the Italian villages. Sometimes on one day he preached in five different places. We are told that the little Poor Man (Il Poverello as the Italians say) exercised an irresistible attraction over an audience. He spoke quite simply and spontaneously with a strong musical voice; he strove for no eloquence, but the strength of inner conviction was always felt in his words. Learned professors at Bologna were as readily impressed by him as were labouring men and women in the fields.

He spoke mainly of God's love in Christ - he pictured the sufferings of our Saviour for men - called for penitence and peace. Allusions came easily to his tongue from the beauties of nature. And over and over he cried out to the Italian rulers, nobles, merchants, people: "We must honour and cherish one another and live in peace." Wherever he went he honoured the clergy and gave complete reverence to the Bishops, even those unworthy of their calling.

A man of irresistible love was how the people saw him, yet a man bowing most humbly and in great awe before the enormous Majesty of the Eternal God Our Father.

Brother Masseo, who often went with him on his preaching rounds, one day said to Brother Francis: "Why you? Why you? Why does the whole world come after you?" And Francis replied: "God the Almighty looked around the world to find the poorest, least talented, meanest looking person he could find - and he found me; it is his endowment in me that wins men."

Chapter of Mats

In 1219 there assembled in the beautiful Umbrian plain below Assisi a great general meeting, or Chapter, of all the friars who had come to follow the poor man Francis. They now numbered no less than 5,000 - Italians mainly, but with a fair sprinkling of men from other nations. The chapter was called the "Chapter of Mats", because the assembly lived in huts made of rushes.

It was apparent at this chapter that crises were appearing in the brotherhood. What about organization? What about systematic education? How could so many men wander the earth without fixed dwelling? Where was

the new order heading?

Above all, many of the brethren pressed Francis to give them a clear **Rule of Life** to stand alongside the inspirational texts of the Gospels by which they were living. "Men are men", they probably said to the founder, "and not all can live by the heat of fervent prayer and uplifting inspiration."

We are told that Francis was grieved to hear words like these. "My brothers, my brothers," he cried out, "the Lord called me by the way of simplicity and humility; he showed me that this was the true way for myself and for those who would trust me and imitate me . . . The Lord said he wished me to be a fool in this world . . . but you by your learning and wisdom he will confound".

It must have been clear to Francis that a real crisis was to come within the brotherhood.

ON CRUSADE

Very soon after this enthusiastic but critical chapter, Francis, with three companions, set off to go to the Crusaders' Army in Egypt. His brethren were hastening to many regions of the Christian world and also to countries occupied by Moslems, and he consciously sought to lead and inspire them. So he came to Damietta, Egypt, and met the Crusaders. He won not a few of the soldiers to the brotherhood; he was also appalled at the cruelty of some of the dedicated soldiery. And when the Crusaders were mauled in battle by the forces of Sultan El-Kamil, Francis desired to meet the Sultan and to preach to him about Christ the Envoy of the true God.

There is no doubt that David met Goliath - the unarmed Francis came before the powerful Sultan. An independent witness, James of Vitry, Bishop of Acre in Palestine, wrote these words in 1220: "The master (of this new order), when he had come to our army, fired by the zeal of faith, crossed over to the army of the Saracens, and they brought him before the Sultan, who for several days listened attentively to his preaching, and then, fearing lest any of his army should be won over to the faith of Christ, sent him back to us in all honour, saying, "Pray for me, that God may deign to reveal to me that faith which is most pleasing to him."

It is a famous encounter. One of its fruits was the peaceful entrance of Friars into the Sultan's realm as Guardians of the holy places of Palestine - a task that the Friars Minor still fulfil after 750 years and more.

The Order in Trouble

Going from Egypt to Acre and then to Jerusalem to kneel and kiss the places associated with Christ, Francis heard that troubles had erupted amongst the Friars back in Italy. He hastened to return home.

What he had heard was true. A number of his men demanded permanence of residence for the sake of advanced studies, and this he would not countenance. Others called again for a properly constructed Rule of Life in which a more orderly form of Noviciate would be prescribed. In short, the demand was to organize the brotherhood on generally accepted lines. No longer, said many, could the friars continue to exist in such large numbers as apostolic itinerants, with no money, no books, no houses.

Without labouring the point here, it is certain that Francis of Assisi, Christ's little poor man, entered on two or three years of great agony of spirit between 1221-1223. He did not, in any way, want to mitigate the simplicity and the stark poverty, and the gospel freedom, of the first years of the brotherhood. Yet, helped by very sober and very good men such as St. Anthony of Padua and Cardinal Ugolino (soon to be Pope Gregory IX), he gradually came out of his agony of spirit and saw that he must abandon the future of the order into the hands of Providence, and, in as much as he could, cease from worrying.

Fonte Colombo and Greccio

In a troubled frame of mind, but now free from headship of the order - he had first confined authority to a friar priest, Peter Catani, and then to the very able Brother Elias - he went from Assisi to the Rieti Valley, and there at the hermitage of Fonte Colombo in lovely hill country, he set himself to write out a more legalistic *Rule of Life*. With the help most likely of Brothers Caesar of Speyer and Leo, he succeeded in his task, and this Rule of 1223 became the standard of religious observance in the Order of Friars Minor: it is a combination of Gospel inspiring texts and of prescriptions for the orderly development of the brotherhood, a compromise that worked.

Coming out of the hermitage Francis regained the vigour of his preaching. On a Christmas night about this time, and not too far from Fonte Colombo, he arranged a beautiful liturgy around a vivid representation of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem: Mary, Joseph, the Christ child, shepherds, angels, all were included. And from this acted-out event it is said that the European custom of the Christmas crib derives its strongest inspiration.

La Verna

Then moving north through his home territory, he continued his apostolic journey for close to a hundred miles - always on foot - until he came to a mountain called Alverna that had been given to him as a refuge by a local count. With him were a coterie of his dearest brothers - Leo, Angelo, Masseo, Rufino, Silvestro, Illuminato, and Bonizzo.

There on Mount Alverna he settled down to pray for forty days and forty nights, taking the barest minimum of food. And here, most wondrously, he met again in person the Crucified Jesus who had beckoned him on at San Damiano some twenty years before.

The forty days were observed in preparation for the feast of the Archangel Michael, a powerful intercessory figure in Middle Age piety. And about the same time occurred the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14th, 1224.

As dawn broke on this feast day a blindingly beautiful vision came to him. It was that of a seraphic figure nailed to a cross, with wings covering the body and lapping around the cross. And as it came near he was seized with an extraordinary delight and became enraptured in an ecstasy of the love of God and of our lord Jesus Christ. When the vision receded and Francis regained his senses, he saw to his amazement that the wounds of our Crucified Lord were embedded in his own hands and feet, and opened in his side. He had been made into a living crucifix by the power and action of God. "The union of his mind and spirit with Christ was now apparent in his flesh". (St. Bonaventure).

The brethren were overwhelmed with the event, as was Francis himself. Most carefully he sought to hide God's wonder in him from the people, and for the next two years of his living, before he died in 1226, he had to be carried by donkey for he could not walk on his wounded feet. It was as though the wounded Christ himself was again walking our earth!

Francis of Assisi suffered a lot in the last two years of his life. "Brother Ass", as he called his body, rebelled because of the severities he had inflicted on himself in early days: blindness came to him and he submitted to shocking cauterization of his temples in the hope of recovering sight. So he was, in a way, a pathetic figure . . . "wounded and without beauty" (Isaiah, ch. 53). The strange wounds in his hands and feet and side brought acute pains.

But there was in him, in these later years, an extraordinary sense of joy. It is well related that he had an assurance from God of the certainty of his salvation, and a premonition that his large and ebullient order would settle down and survive in the Catholic Church and do much good.

The Poor Clares were also thriving, and the third order for the laity which he had begun in 1221 was spreading quickly. So there was much genuine consolation.

Lover of beautiful nature and of the animal creature that he always was, it was during a bout of truly wretched physical illness that he composed the well-known "Canticle of Brother Sun."

Even the Assisians tended to be scandalized when they would hear the Friars' chorus, led by Francis, rising from the place where the friars gathered.

And so, in tears and in joy, and with worry over their brethren, the great son of Assisi came towards his death.

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The bedside scene at St. Mary of the Angels, in the plain below Assisi, was very moving. Francis asked to be laid practically naked on the bare earth, as Our Lord had died naked on the hard cross. He had the brethren read to him Christ's passion. He broke bread and shared it with them. He laid his hands on each of their heads in blessing and showed special fondness towards Brother Bernard of Quintavalle, his first disciple. Then as the shadows fell, he freely joined them in the chanting of Psalm 142.

"With a loud voice I cry out to the Lord . . .
Lead me forth from this prison
that I may give thanks to your name."

On October 3rd, 1226, towards sunset in the evening, he died.

His tomb

You will find Francis' tomb beautifully enshrined in Assisi. Brother Elias, the Minister General, spared no expense in honouring his father and friend. Many of the Friars, mindful of Francis' Lady Poverty, were shocked and hurt by the extravagance. Succeeding generations have no doubt seen it differently. He who shunned all magnificence . . . isn't it somehow fitting that our earth should honour him in magnificent manner?

750 Years Ago

Seven hundred and fifty years and more have passed since St. Francis died. His memory does not grow dim. He is ranged close to Jesus Christ in our catholic thinking, and his inspiration is everywhere.

What of his Friars? Yes, they have survived despite problems and arguments and, at times, divisions. For they have loved this wondrous little Poor Man who set them on their way.

In 1977 he has some 45,000 of them following in his footsteps.

There are three branches of his first order - Franciscans, Capuchins and Conventuals. But in their living and praying and working, these friars are united in their common Father Francis.

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PEACE PRAYER

The legacy of Francis has taken many forms. There is, however, one prayer that seems to sum up the Franciscan spirit. It is the so-called "Peace Prayer" attributed to the little poor man:

*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.*

* * *