

FRANCIS OF ASSISI

(~1181 - 1226)

By S. Bracefield



A. His Life¹

His Early Life

Francis was born at Assisi in Umbria (Italy) in 1181 or 1182. He was one of several children born to Pietro Bernadone (a wealthy cloth merchant) and Pica (probably from a noble family in Provence). He was called *Giovani* at his baptism but his Father altered his name to *Francesco* due to his fondness for France, where he had been on business at the time of his son's birth.

He received some elementary education from the priests of St George's at Assisi but was not very studious. He is described as carefree, a lover of pleasure and fine clothes, courteous, popular and a lavish spender of money. He initially helped his father in his trade but showed little liking for a merchant's career.

He became very skilled in the use of arms and at 20 went out to fight the Perugians with the townsmen and was captured and held captive for a year. In an illness during this time his mind was turned to eternity and the emptiness of his life, although these thoughts passed on his freedom and returning to health. He embarked on a military career but another illness and some dreams appeared to change him.

An encounter with a leper (who after controlling his natural repulsion he embraced and gave all his money), a pilgrimage to Rome (where he was pained at the miserly offerings at St Peter's so he gave all his money and swapped clothes with a beggar) and a vision of God commanding him "Go... and repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin" while praying in a "forsaken wayside chapel" called St Damien's just out of Assisi, started him on a different course of life.

Rebuilding churches

Francis took the vision to mean rebuild the church he was in so went home and took a lot of his fathers merchandise and sold it and his horse at a market. He had to hide from his

¹ This section, including quotations unless otherwise indicated has been sourced from an article titled "*St Francis of Assisi*" in the online edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia

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father but was eventually caught, beaten and locked up. After escaping to St Damien's where the priest had refused to use the money, he was called to a civil court and willingly renounced his inheritance and cut ties with his family. At this time he contemplated surrendering his worldly goods, honours and privileges, and wandered the hills making up hymns, working for a while as a scullion in a monastery.

He then returned to Assisi and begged for stones, which he carried to St Damien's and used to rebuild the church. Afterwards he restored two other nearby deserted chapels (St Peter's and St Mary of the Angels), at the same time continuing his works of charity particularly to lepers.

Renouncing All

He built himself a hut to live in near St Mary of the Angels and there, in 1208, probably 24th February he heard preached the text on Christ's sending out of the disciples: they were to possess neither gold nor silver, nor scrip for their journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor a staff, and that they were to exhort sinners to repentance and announce the Kingdom of God. "Francis took these words as if spoken directly to himself, and so soon as Mass was over threw away the poor fragment left him of the world's goods, his shoes, cloak, pilgrim staff, and empty wallet. At last he had found his vocation. Having obtained a coarse woollen tunic of "beast colour", the dress then worn by the poorest Umbrian peasants, and tied it round him with a knotted rope, Francis went forth at once exhorting the people of the country-side to penance, brotherly love, and peace²."



Here St Francis in a 14th century miniature cuts out the coarse garment that became the standard Franciscan habit

*from *The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, Joan Evans (ed) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 31*

The Friars Minor- A Following and Official Approval

Several men joined him, likewise giving away all their worldly possessions and living in small huts near the one Francis had built. "Francis prepared a simple Rule for his little brotherhood. It consisted chiefly of Christ's appeal to take up the cross, his advice to the rich young ruler and his directions on sending out the apostles."³ "The Franciscans might possess neither money nor goods, not even books. Their habits were coarse and simple, and sandals were forbidden them."⁴

² (main quote from Catholic Encyclopedia) Peace: it appears he sought to heal civil strife between the nobility and townsfolk Kenneth Scott Latourette *A History of Christianity Vol 1: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1975),431

³ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas: Word, 1995),212,3

⁴ Maurice Keen, *A Penguin History of Medieval Europe* (London: Penguin, 1968),157

When there were 11 of them they went to seek recognition from the pope. Although it seems they were not received favourably at first, the pope had a dream of Francis upholding the tottering Lateran (the headquarters of the papacy since the days of Constantine), so gave them sanction.

Francis called his group the *Friars minor* and on being given by the Benedictines the chapel of St Mary of the Angels (or Porziuncola) they lived by it in little mud, straw and wattle huts. From there they "went forth two by two exhorting the people of the surrounding country. Like children "careless of the day", they wandered from place to place singing in their joy, and calling themselves the Lord's minstrels. The wide world was their cloister; sleeping in haylofts, grottos, or church porches, they toiled with the labourers in the fields, and when none gave them work they would beg."

A Second Order: The Order of Poor Ladies or Poor Clares⁵

During Lent in 1212, Clare, an 18 year-old from a wealthy home was moved by the preaching of Francis at St George's and sought him out against her parents' wishes, desiring the same manner of life. Francis temporarily placed her in a Benedictine convent but eventually established her, her sister and other followers in a building at St Damien's, which the Benedictine monks gave to him for that purpose.

The daily life of the Poor Clares was similar to the Friars Minor including work, prayer, penance and contemplation. They wore a loose fitting garment of grey frieze with a linen rope, and cloth sandals.

Below. Poor Clares in choir- they were not expected to be as learned as men so were allowed missals (books) for reference
Right. Poor Clares at table. The nun reading (as prescribed by their rule) is shown haloed

from *The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, Joan Evans (ed)
(London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 51



⁵ Article titled "*Poor Clares*" in the Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XII Copyright © 1911 by Robert Appleton Company Online Edition Copyright © 1999 by Kevin Knight Nihil Obstat, June 1, 1911. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York

Ideals

Francis had a great love for nature. Stories of him caring for and speaking to animals abound. He preached to the birds, encouraging them to praise God who had made them and even spoke to a wolf who had been eating people and on finding that it was doing so because of hunger, persuaded the townspeople to feed it- from then on it became like a town pet! In 1223 he conceived of celebrating Christmas in a new manner by reproducing in a church the stable scene in Bethlehem- inaugurating popular devotion to the crib.

Francis was against his friars becoming scholars. He “desiderated for his friars only such theological knowledge as was conformable to the mission of the order, which was before all else a mission of example. Hence he regarded the accumulation of books as being at variance with the poverty his friars professed, and he resisted the eager desire for mere book-learning, so prevalent in his time, in so far as it struck at the roots of that simplicity which entered so largely into the essence of his life and ideal and threatened to stifle the spirit of prayer, which he accounted preferable to all the rest.”

Francis never separated the contemplative from the active life and from time to time retreated to one of several “hermitages”. In 1213 Count Orlando gave Francis the mountain of La Verna as a retreat “especially favourable for contemplation”. It was here in 1224 during a 40 day fast that he is said to have had visions of an angel and received the stigmata⁶ -“the saint's right side is described as bearing an open wound which looked as if made by a lance, while through his hands and feet were black nails of flesh, the points of which were bent backward.”

Missionary Endeavour

In 1212 Francis tried to go to Syria but was forced to return and instead devoted himself to evangelising central Italy. In 1214 he unsuccessfully tried to go to Morocco falling ill in Spain. In 1217 the first general chapter of the Friars Minor was held and several parts of Europe were allotted for his followers to evangelise. Francis did much preaching in Italy including before the pope in Rome. He gained a big following among the people, so much so that at Camara, a small village near Assisi, the whole crowd begged to be admitted to his order. It was instances such as these that caused him to start a third order.



⁶ **Stigmata:** “history tells us that many ecstasies bear on hands, feet, side, or brow the marks of the Passion of Christ with corresponding and intense sufferings. These are called visible stigmata. Others only have the sufferings, without any outward marks, and these phenomena are called invisible stigmata...None are known prior to the thirteenth century. The first mentioned is [St. Francis of Assisi](#), in whom the stigmata were of a character never seen subsequently; in the wounds of feet and hands were excrescences of flesh representing nails, those on one side having round back heads, those on the other having rather long points, which bent back and grasped the skin. The saint's humility could not prevent a great many of his brethren beholding with their own eyes the existence of these wonderful wounds during his lifetime as well as after his death. The fact is attested by a number of contemporary historians, and the feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis is kept on 17 September...Dr. Imbert counts 321 stigmatics... In this list there are 41 men.”

The above explanation is from the article titled “*stigmata*” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume XIV Copyright © 1912 by Robert Appleton Company. Online Edition Copyright © 1999 by Kevin Knight Nihi Obstat, July 1, 1912. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York

At the second general chapter meeting in 1219 Francis assigned a separate mission to each of his foremost disciples, choosing himself the war between the crusaders and the Saracens (5th Crusade). Here he preached to the sultan of Egypt (with little result) then visited Palestine prior to returning to Italy.

A Third Order: The Brothers and Sisters of Penance (Tertiaries)

This group, probably started in 1221 was for those unable to leave their homes or vocations and was “a sort of a middle state between the world and the cloister”. Their original rule no longer exists but it included similar ideals including poverty (although they were permitted to own property), and they were not to carry arms, take oaths or engage in lawsuits.

Passing the Reigns to Others

On his return to Italy Francis found many, varied problems amongst his orders and at the Chapter of Mats in 1220 or 1221 with about 5000 friars and 500 applicants for admission present he passed over the leadership to others, living by example the way he wanted them to be.

In the last few years of his life he developed serious health problems but also composed the “Canticle of the Sun” and dictated his testament urging his followers to poverty, obedience and manual labour.

He died at the Porziuncola, Assisi aged ~44 on 3 October, 1226 after having given up even his robe and covering himself with borrowed cloth, and listening to the reading of the passion in St John’s gospel and reciting Psalm 141.

He was made a saint two years after his death.

B. His Contribution

His Orders

His major contribution lies in the establishing of the 3 orders, which have had significant influence in Catholicism to this day. The most influential has been the Friars Minor, commonly called the Franciscans.

Contribution of the Franciscans

The number of Friars Minor increased rapidly. Unlike older monastic orders, they lived in towns and cities, which were at that time beginning to develop again. They were missionaries to nominal Christians in Western Europe, and non-Christians further away.

Francis, grieved by worldliness in the church and its lack of touch with the people had sought to both uphold it and reform it by example. Cardinal Ugolino, a great admirer of Francis who became Pope Gregory IX saw the potential of Franciscans in the area of reform but in a different way to that intended by Francis. “He would reform the church by giving the Franciscans authority; Francis wanted to reform the church by preaching Christ like humility.”⁷ Francis, near the end of his life saw his movement moving in a direction contrary to that he would have wished. To the intense indignation of Francis Brothers Minor were beginning to establish themselves in universities... And were becoming advisors in the papal curia.”⁸ He also saw the Franciscans become divided over the practicality of his rule when applied to an ever-increasing group of friars, particularly in the command to own no property. They split

⁷ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas: Word, 1995),213

⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity Vol 1: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1975),433

into two factions, the Spirituals and the Conventuals or Moderates, the conflict between these two parties continued throughout the Middle Ages. The Moderates eventually won out, and in 1322 the pope put their property in their own name instead of under direct papal control. The Spirituals got caught up in heretical doctrines and many were imprisoned.

To this day Franciscans and Dominicans (another mendicant order) have had a leading part in the worldwide extension of the Roman Catholic faith. Franciscans are only rivalled by the Jesuits in providing the Roman Catholic Church with the largest number of missionaries.⁹ "God's Poor Little Man of Assisi became the means of renewing the youth of the Church and of imitating the most potent and popular religious movement since the beginnings of Christianity."¹⁰

Poor Clares & Tertiaries

Both these groups are still continuing today. There are several groups of Poor Clares in North America and undoubtedly elsewhere as well. There are also two groups of Tertiaries: the *Secular Franciscan Order* with membership of 435,000 in 1996 and the *Third Order Regular*, with 379 congregations and 116,000 members. All three Franciscan Orders also have an Anglican Church branch and there is a further group for those of other denominations called the *Order of Ecumenical Franciscans*.¹¹

The Tertiaries have been a means of influencing a multitude of people who would never have joined a stricter monastic order: "a new spirit of greater humanity and gentleness even in the secular world was the result of the life of St Francis."¹² "That the Third Order of St. Francis went far towards re-Christianising medieval society is a matter of history."¹³



St Clare of Assisi
(1193-1253)

His life

Love and Compassion

People were attracted to Francis because he was always courteous and thoughtful towards others and especially notable was his care for even the most despised in society: "the whole world found refuge, the poor, the sick and the fallen being the objects of his solicitude in a more special manner."¹⁴ It is particularly in his dealings with the erring that he shines out, as he was willing to show mercy with a view to restoring the fallen- differing with the medieval view of justice and evildoers. Even the animals found him a friend and protector.

Poverty

In Francis' day many churches and monasteries (despite their vows of poverty) were unashamedly wealthy. The monastic ideal of a holier way of living through poverty (following

⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity Vol 1: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1975) 428

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¹¹ <http://www.wtu.edu/franciscan/pages/intro/index.html>

¹² George Zarnecki *The Contribution of the Orders in The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, Joan Evans (ed) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966),78

¹³ The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume VI Copyright © 1909 by Robert Appleton Company
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¹⁴ *ibid*

the example of Jesus) still persisted although it was little practised. Francis was convicted by the sermon on the rich young ruler that the best way of living for God is a life of voluntary poverty. It certainly made a deep impact on the people, the majority of whom were poor.

“The gospel of voluntary poverty drew its strength from a deep and widespread resentment of a corrupt and neglectful priesthood... at its heart was the spiritual hunger of people... Every zealous preacher knew if “apostolic poverty” is the Christian ideal then bishops in their embellished palaces and monks in their wealthy cloisters were not living the Christian life.”¹⁵ By contrast the Franciscans “dwelt among them (the people) and grappled with the evils of the system under which the people groaned. They worked in return for their fare, doing the lowest and most menial labour, and speaking to the poorest the words of hope... in this wise Francis bridged the chasm between an aristocratic clergy and the common people.”¹⁶

Cheerfulness

“He insisted that all of his order should bear a cheerful face to the world, rejoicing in the Lord in all seasons and places”¹⁷

“Francis’ habitual cheerfulness was not that of a careless nature or of one untouched by sorrow... nor were temptations or other weakening maladies of the soul wanting to the saint at any time... it drew its strength from his intimate union with Jesus.”¹⁸

Humility

“Humility was, no doubt the saint’s ruling virtue. The idol of an enthusiastic popular devotion, he ever truly believed himself less than the least.”¹⁹

Obedience

“The principle of obedience to the Church’s hierarchy was deep and strong in Francis, and this explains why he visited pope and Curia as soon as his community began to form, and why he looked constantly in later years to Pope and Cardinal Protector, not to grant him privileges or special protection, but to help him sustain the ideal of his Order within the established hierarchy of the Church.”²⁰

His motivation

His motivation was his “ardent devotion to Christ”.²¹ “The love of Christ and Him Crucified permeated the whole life and character of Francis.”²²

¹⁵ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas: Word, 1995),205

¹⁶ The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume VI Copyright © 1909 by Robert Appleton Company

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¹⁷ Maurice Keen, *A Penguin History of Medieval Europe* (London: Penguin, 1968),156

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¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Christopher Brook, *The Structure of Medieval Society in The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, Joan Evans (ed) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 40

²¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity Vol 1: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1975) 432

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His preaching

Simplicity and Optimism

Francis was very effective in communicating even to the lowliest of people.

“The impact of Francis’ message came largely from its optimism and its sheer simplicity. Uncomplicated by theology, his appeal was direct to the soul of the individual to reach out towards its maker in hope and gratitude.”²³

Francis “had a brilliant gift for direct teaching through the senses of smell and hearing and above all sight: he acted many little parables before his friars.”²⁴

Orthodoxy

“Though he taught no new doctrine, he so far re-popularised the old one given on the Mount that the Gospel took on a new life and called forth a new love.” While Francis’ sermons were on the moral rather than doctrinal, “a very cursory inquiry into Francis’ religious belief suffices to show that it embraced the entire Catholic dogma”.²⁵

Peace

Francis and his followers sought to “quell the storms of passion and restore tranquillity to hearts torn asunder by civil strife... After money Francis most detested discord and divisions. Peace, therefore, became his watchword.”²⁶

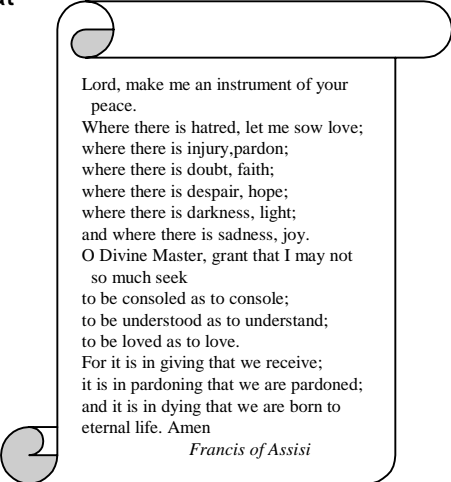
Relation to the world

Even today Francis’ name is associated with a love of nature. “He found in all created things, however trivial, some reflection of the Divine perfection, and he loved to admire in them the beauty, power, wisdom and goodness of their Creator.”²⁷

“When he instructed the birds to sing God’s praises he was not indulging in sentimental fantasy, but forcing on his hearers his conviction that the world was God’s world, a part of the wonder of His creation. This was in tune with the beginning of a new tendency to look straight at nature and a new capacity to reproduce it with precision, which reaches its first perfection in the middle of the 13th century... The notion that the world was good needed emphasis in an age and a land accustomed to the preaching of the Cathars, who taught that the world was irremediably evil.”²⁸

His Writings

They are described as short, simple and informal. He didn’t set forth his ideas systematically. They tend to be “a few leading thoughts taken from the words of the Lord”.



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

Francis of Assisi

²³ Maurice Keen, *A Penguin History of Medieval Europe* (London: Penguin, 1968), 156

²⁴ Christopher Brook, *The Structure of Medieval Society in The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, Joan Evans (ed) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 40

²⁵ The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume VI Copyright © 1909 by Robert Appleton Company
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²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Christopher Brook, *The Structure of Medieval Society in The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, Joan Evans (ed) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 40

“Francis’ writings breathe the unstudied love of the Gospel and enforce the same practical morality, while they abound in allegories and personification and reveal an intimate interweaving of Biblical phraseology.”²⁹ The most well known are his peace prayer (see p8) and the Canticle of the Sun.

Other Contributions

Hymnology

Francis is considered to have started a trend of popular hymn writing. “What the saint did was to teach a people accustomed to the artificial versification of courtly Latin and Provençal poets, the use of their native tongue in simple spontaneous hymns.”³⁰

The Arts

Francis’ Bethlehem stable play is “the first mystery play we hear of in Italy. He is said to have borne in part the revival of drama.”³¹

His unique and interesting life became the subject of much art: “the early Franciscan legend afford the most popular material for painters since the life of Christ.”³²

He has also been the subject of many biographies.

Conclusion

Francis of Assisi was a man whose influence is felt even in our day.

He is a man in whom there is much to admire: devotion to God, love to fellow men and a desire to “lift up the hearts of men and move them to spiritual gladness”³³.

While we perhaps would not agree with the superiority of voluntary poverty nor many of the tenets of the church of that era, in the framework of his times he lived the kind of life seen as the most holy, and sought to uphold the institutional church- the visible expression of the body of God’s people.

His care for the world God made was also revolutionary at that time, but he is remembered and admired for it today.

He set in motion a mighty reforming force calling people back to the simplicity of the gospel, which has reached beyond the borders of the Catholic Church.

His life stood as a shining example of the Christian life, especially amidst the hypocrisy and corruption of his day.



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³⁰ ibid

³¹ ibid

³² ibid

³³ ibid