

All God's Creatures

Born in Italy circa 1181, Saint Francis of Assisi was renowned for drinking and partying in his youth. After fighting in a battle between Assisi and Perugia, Francis was captured and imprisoned for ransom. He spent nearly a year in prison — awaiting his father's payment — and, according to legend, began receiving visions from God. After his release from prison, Francis heard the voice of Christ, who told him to repair the Christian Church and live a life of poverty. Consequently, he abandoned his life of luxury and became a devotee of the faith, his reputation spreading all over the Christian world.

Later in life, Francis reportedly received a vision that left him with the stigmata of Christ — marks resembling the wounds Jesus Christ suffered when he was crucified — making Francis the first person to receive such holy wounds. He was canonized as a saint on July 16, 1228. During his life he also developed a deep love of nature and animals and is known as the patron saint of the environment and animals; his life and words have had a lasting resonance with millions of followers across the globe. Each October, many animals the world over are blessed on his feast day.

Born circa 1181, in Assisi, duchy of Spoleto, Italy, Saint Francis of Assisi, though revered today, began his life as a confirmed sinner. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant who owned farmland around Assisi, and his mother was a beautiful Frenchwoman. Francis was not in want during his youth; he was spoiled, indulging himself with fine food, wine, and wild celebrations. By age 14, he had left school and become known as a rebellious teenager who frequently drank, partied and broke the city curfew. He was also known for his charm and vanity.

In these privileged surroundings, Francis of Assisi learned the skills of archery, wrestling and horsemanship. He was expected to follow his father into the family textile business but was bored by the prospect of life in the cloth trade.

Instead of planning a future as a merchant, he began daydreaming of a future as a knight; knights were Medieval action heroes, and if Francis had any ambition, it was to be a war hero like them. It wouldn't be long before the opportunity for warfare beckoned.

In 1202 war broke between Assisi and Perugia, and Francis eagerly took his place with the cavalry. Little did he know at the time, his experience with war would change him forever. Francis and the men of Assisi came under heavy attack, and in the face of superior numbers, they took flight. The whole battlefield was soon covered with the bodies of butchered, mutilated men, screaming in agony. Most of the surviving Assisi troops were immediately put to death.

Unskilled and with no combat experience, Francis was quickly captured by enemy soldiers. Dressed like an aristocrat and wearing expensive new armor, he was considered worthy of a decent ransom, and the soldiers decided to spare his life. He and the other wealthy troops were taken as prisoners, led off to a dank underground cell. Francis would spend nearly a year in such miserable conditions — awaiting his father's payment — during which time he may well have contracted a serious disease. Also during this time, he would later report, he began to receive visions from God.

After a year of negotiations, Francis' ransom was accepted, and he was released from prison in 1203. When he came back to Assisi, however, Francis was a very different man. Upon his return, he was dangerously sick in both mind and body — a battle-fatigued casualty of war.

One day, as legend has it, while riding on a horse in the local countryside, Francis encountered a leper. Prior to the war, Francis would have run from the leper, but on this occasion, his behavior was very different. Viewing the leper as a symbol of moral conscience — or as Jesus incognito, according to some religious scholars — he embraced and kissed him, later describing the experience as a feeling of sweetness in his mouth. After this incident, Francis felt an indescribable freedom. His earlier lifestyle had lost all of its appeal.

Subsequently, Francis, now in his early 20s, began turning his focus toward God. Instead of working, he spent an ever-increasing amount of time at a remote mountain hideaway as well as in old, quiet churches around Assisi, praying, looking for answers, and helping nurse lepers. During this time, while praying before an old Byzantine crucifix at the church of San Damiano, Francis reportedly heard the voice of Christ, who told him to rebuild the Christian Church and to live a life of extreme poverty. Francis obeyed and devoted himself to Christianity.

He began preaching around Assisi and was soon joined by 12 loyal followers. Some regarded Francis as a madman or a fool, but others viewed him as one of the greatest examples of how to live the Christian ideal since Jesus Christ himself. Whether he was really touched by God, or simply a man misinterpreting hallucinations brought on by mental illness and/or poor health, Francis of Assisi quickly became well-known throughout the Christian world.

After his epiphany at the church of San Damiano, Francis experienced another defining moment in his life. In order to raise money to rebuild the Christian church, he sold a bolt of cloth from his father's shop, along with his horse. His father became furious upon learning of his son's actions and subsequently dragged Francis before the local bishop. The bishop told Francis to return his father's money, to which his reaction was extraordinary: He stripped off his clothes, and along with them, returned the money back to his father, declaring that God was now the only father he recognized. This event is credited as Francis' final conversion, and there is no indication that Francis and his father ever spoke again thereafter.

The bishop gave Francis a rough tunic, and dressed in these new humble clothes, Francis left Assisi. Unluckily for him, the first people he met on the road were a group of dangerous thieves, who beat him badly. Despite his wounds, Francis was elated. From now on, he would live according to the Gospel.

Francis' embrace of Christ-like poverty was a radical notion at the time. The Christian church was tremendously rich, much like the people heading it, which concerned Francis and many others, who felt that the long-held apostolic ideals had eroded. Francis set out on a mission to restore Jesus Christ's own, original values to the now-decadent church. With his incredible charisma, he drew thousands of followers to him. They listened to Francis' sermons and joined in his way of life; his followers became known as Franciscan friars.

Continuously pushing himself in the quest for spiritual perfection, Francis was soon preaching in up to five villages per day, teaching a new kind of emotional and personal Christian religion that everyday people could understand.

He even went so far as to preach to animals, which garnered criticism from some and earned him the nickname "God's fool." But Francis' message was spread far and wide, and thousands of people were captivated by what they heard.

In 1224 Francis reportedly received a vision that left him with the stigmata of Christ — marks resembling the wounds Jesus Christ suffered when he was crucified, through his hands and the gaping lance wound in his side. This made Francis the first person to receive the holy wounds of the stigmata. They would remain visible for the rest of his life. Because of his earlier work treating lepers, some believe that the wounds were actually symptoms of leprosy.

Francis of Assisi died on October 3, 1226, at the age of 44, in Assisi, Italy. Today, Francis has a lasting resonance with millions of followers across the globe. He was canonized as a saint just two years after his death, on July 16, 1228, by his former protector, Pope Gregory IX. Today, Saint Francis of Assisi is the patron saint for ecologists — a title honoring his boundless love for animals and nature. In 2013, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose to honor Saint Francis by taking his name, becoming Pope Francis.

Saint Francis of Assisi is the patron saint for ecologists — a title honoring his boundless love for animals and nature. It is believed that he thought of all creation as related. He referred to the moon as sister and the sun as brother. In 1972 Franco Zeffirelli directed a film "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" which was based on Francis' connection to all living creatures and everything in all creation.

Francis of Assisi loved all creatures, whether furry, finned or feathered. Whether he actually could talk to animals, or understand as they communicated with him is a matter of great speculation. Regardless of how you view these things, one thing is for certain.

He repented a life of leisure and wealth and devoted himself to living the Gospel, a practice we should all strive for today. A life of service, a life of joy and a life of love. In today's gospel we hear Jesus admonishing the highly educated and embracing an ascetic and simple way of life. He reminds us that to live our life in fullness we must set down the burdens we carry.

We are encouraged to lay down our burdens at the foot of the cross, because they are no longer ours to bear.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Francis, like Jesus before him, lived a simple life filled with grace, joy and love. His simple philosophy of life has drawn men and women to an ascetic life for 800 years. Today there are 667 communities; 4,289 members; 2,921 priests. Third Order Regular of Saint Francis (TOR): 176 communities; 870 members; 576 priests encompassing the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor Conventual.

Shortly, we will gather together our beloved beasts, be they in person, in a photograph or in our hearts. We will bless them and thank them for the blessing they have become to us, even when the barf on the rug or chew our favourite shoes.

They give us so much more than we would ever ask for, or dare I say, deserve, and so, today, we will give some of that love and blessing back to them.

Let all God's children say, Amen!

Sermon for the Blessing of the Animals

10 October 2021

Psalm 148.7-14

Matthew 11.25-30

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