

Contemplations & Living Wisdom

Saint
Francis
of Assisi

Brother of
Creation

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Foreword by Richard Rohr



SOUNDS TRUE
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Saint Francis Unfolding

Francesco

HIS BIRTH NAME was John—Giovanni, in Italian. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone. His father, Pietro di Bernadone, was a wealthy Umbrian cloth merchant, and his mother, Pica, was French. After a family trip to France, where the young Giovanni was captivated by the markets and the music, the women and the poetry, his father started to call him Francesco, “the Frenchman.” Francis of Assisi.

Francis was groomed for the family business. As a teenager, he was far more interested in romance than in commerce, but his antics fell well within the boundaries of acceptable behavior. He was famous among the youth of Assisi for throwing wild parties, providing a bountiful flow of wine, disappearing with beautiful women into darkened rooms, strolling the city streets till dawn,

singing the love songs of the troubadour. It was the beginning of the thirteenth century, and Francis was reared on the medieval myths of gallant knights and noble ladies. His primary ambition was to be adored as a hero.

Until he was captured in a battle with Perugia, and his goals radically shifted. Francis spent a year as a prisoner of war, during which he had ample opportunity to contemplate the superficiality of his privileged life. Into the abyss that opened out of the depths of uncompromising self-inquiry, Francis began to feel the presence of a loving God, a God who called his beloveds into a direct and personal relationship. He began to listen for the divine voice in the silence of his captivity.

When Francis was ransomed by his father, he returned home and fell seriously ill. His parents patiently tended him, but Francis was drawing further and further away from them. His congenial nature was replaced by a deep stillness that neither friends nor family could penetrate. He was courteous, but distracted, slipping in and out of a fever that began to look increasingly like prayer. Francis was undergoing a spiritual crisis, one that would permanently transfigure the wild youth into a holy sage. He still showed no signs of interest in following in his businessman father's footsteps.

One day, after Francis had begun to recover at last, he went out riding alone in the Umbrian countryside.

As he broke through a clearing in the forest, he simultaneously heard the warning sound of a leper's bell and saw the ravaged man appear from behind a tree. It was a cold day, and the leper wore nothing but rags. Francis, who had always been horrified by leprosy, leapt off his horse, crossed the clearing, and wrapped his cloak tenderly around the man's bony shoulders. Stunned by his own impulse, Francis looked into the leper's grateful eyes and, his own eyes welling with tears, kissed the man's face.

This was a turning point on Francis's path. What had once been bitter was suddenly sweet. What he had run from now had unspeakable allure. He did not care about being comfortable; he wanted only to give comfort. He was not interested in a full belly when, all around him, people were suffering from starvation. But what exactly could he do to alleviate the suffering of humanity?

He could join with it.

This mission did not begin overnight. First Francis would make a half-hearted effort to please his parents and join his father's trade. But wherever he went and whatever he did, Francis heard the whisper of the Holy One guiding him to a life of loving service.

As he was taking shelter from the summer sun one day in an ancient church outside the city gates, Francis heard the voice of Christ address him from the crucifix

on the wall. Christ pointed out that his house was falling into ruin, and he called upon Francis to rebuild it.

This was another turning point. Francis raced home, grabbed handfuls of expensive fabric from his father's storeroom, and sold it far below market price in a neighboring village. Then he donated the money to the bewildered priest at the dilapidated church to finance a full restoration. Pietro, who had tried to practice patience up to this point, broke. He hauled his wayward son before the bishop of Assisi and demanded recompense for what Francis had "stolen" from him.

As Francis stood before the bishop, who was dressed more like a prince than a follower of the barefoot Jesus Christ, and his seething father, and the jeering crowd of citizens, suddenly everything became clear. Francis did not own anything. Neither his father nor the bishop nor the men and women of Assisi really owned a thing. Everything on earth belonged to the Holy One. How could we do anything but praise the Creator and serve all of creation?

In a burst of wild joy, Francis stripped off his fine clothes and laid them at his father's feet. He renounced his inheritance and embraced a life of radical poverty in solidarity with the people. Naked, he walked away from the only life he had ever known, and he never returned. Ironically, Francis of Assisi was designated the patron saint of merchants by the Catholic Church.



The Little Brothers

It did not take long for the young men and women of Assisi to start investigating their old friend's new life. Once they encountered the sweet contentment and transformational inspiration of Francis's message and practices, they began to join him. Word spread far beyond the Umbrian region, and Francis attracted spiritual seekers in droves. Clare of Assisi, a beautiful young woman from a powerful family, dramatically divested herself of wealth and privilege and became one of Francis's most devoted companions.

Unlike other reformers of his time, Francis was not looking for followers. He simply wanted to align his life with what he considered to be the essence of Christ's teachings of love, charity, and poverty. He welcomed everyone who wished to join him in this endeavor, but he did not presume to be their leader. This did not stop people from looking to him as their spiritual master and guide.

As the brotherhood grew, the brothers began to demand that Francis draft some kind of monastic rule. They craved a structure to support them on this wild path they had embarked upon: a name, a code of

conduct, a set of practices. Francis jotted down a stark list of guidelines, and in 1210, a small group of companions followed Francis to Rome to ask Pope Innocent III for his approval of the new order, which Francis simply called the Friars Minor, or the Little Brothers. Struck by the purity of Francis's intention and the apparent lack of heretical elements in his vision, the Pope granted their request, but his blessing was verbal and never documented in writing.

Over the centuries, the Franciscan order burgeoned from a band of barefoot visionaries into one of the most powerful branches of the Roman Catholic Church. Even in Francis's own lifetime, the following that flowered around him took on a life of its own, ultimately drifting far from his original ideals, causing its founder deep grief and alienation. Eventually, Francis would feel compelled to step down as official head of the Friars Minor, resulting in a dramatic relaxation of the commitment to poverty.

But the early days of the new order were infused with optimism. The brothers lived joyfully, sleeping beneath the stars or in simple wattle and daub hermitages, wandering the Umbrian landscape, preaching a gospel of unconditional love. In 1212, in response to the influx of women, Francis founded the second order, the Poor Ladies (later called the Poor Clares) and appointed

his lifetime companion, Clare (Chiara, in Italian), as its head. Unlike the Little Brothers, who were wandering preachers and healers, the Poor Clares lived in an enclosed convent, where their primary practice was contemplative prayer.

Sickened by the increasing violence surrounding the latest wave of the Crusades, Francis set out on a journey to North Africa in 1219, with the intention of converting the Muslims to Christianity through the sheer power of Christ's teachings. The Egyptian sultan, intrigued by the holy reputation of the Christian mystic, allowed Francis to preach to him and his people. Although their encounter did not turn the sultan into a Christian, Malik al-Kamil listened politely to the bare-foot friar and affirmed the beauty of his faith before guiding him safely back to the Christian side of the line. Some believe that Francis met a Sufi master there and encountered the mystical wisdom of Islam, which so deeply resonated with him that he incorporated these jewels into his own teachings.

Not all of Francis's followers took monastic vows. Many laypeople, both single and married, were moved to build their lives on the foundation of Francis's teachings by living simply and caring for the poor. As Francis preached to these householders, one of the friars wrote down his sermon, and this became the basis for a rule

of life for laypeople. This document gave rise to the third Franciscan order, joining the team of the Friars Minor and the Poor Clares. The Third Order, then, was composed of those who wanted to follow the way Saint Francis showed, but were not able or willing to leave the world and join a monastic community.

As the years unfolded, Francis focused more on preaching and prayer and less on the administrative details of his sprawling brotherhood. He was not suited for politics. Yet the politics were heating up. A combination of internal discord and interference from the new pope finally convinced Francis to resign as Minister General of the order. He chose his replacement and retired to his hermitage to draft a formal rule as his final executive act.

In 1224, ravaged by penance and disease, and nearly blind, the forty-two-year-old friar climbed Mount La Verna to spend St. Michael's Lent in solitude and contemplative prayer. He was broken: broken-hearted, broken-bodied. The brotherhood that once consisted of a few companions passionately dedicated to giving everything away and trusting in God now included over five thousand members throughout Europe and the Holy Land. Many of these new brothers had never laid eyes on their founder, yet took it upon themselves to reform the order, entitling members to receive and use wealth

as long as they didn't "own" it. This distinction alienated Francis from his own spiritual family.

On the Feast of the Flowering Cross in 1224, alone in his mountaintop hermitage, Francis received the stigmata, the marks of Christ's wounds on his hands, feet, and sides. He had pleaded with Christ to allow him to directly participate in his suffering and the love that had prompted him to endure it. His beloved Brother Jesus answered his prayer. Francis tried to hide the evidence of his imitation of the divine sacrifice, but rumors of the miracle quickly spread among the people and filled their hearts with awe.

At the end of his life, feeling the presence of Sister Death waiting to receive him, Francis, who had always experienced a sacred intimacy with plants and animals, earth and sky, composed "The Canticle of the Creatures," a hymn in praise of our connectedness to all life. He returned to the Porziuncola to die, the place where the order had first been born. Two years later, Francis of Assisi was canonized as a saint of the Catholic Church. Eight hundred years later, he is known as a saint throughout the world, igniting the imaginations of Christians and atheists, romantics and pragmatists, lovers of nature and advocates for human rights. Francis transcends all limitations with his joyful, humble, incendiary love of God.



Joy

In 1980, Pope John Paul II declared Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology. Francis had taken the biblical teaching about man being given dominion over creation and turned it in his gentle hand. Francis taught that God had created human beings as stewards for the rest of his creatures, and for the earth and the elements that sustain us all. Rather than viewing himself as the master of the animals, or nature as an indifferent collection of forces, Francis embraced all created things as his family. He delighted in the smallest details of the Creator's humblest children.

And creation responded in kind. Especially the animals. When Francis preached in the open air, chattering birds became suddenly silent and then resumed their cacophony as soon as he said, "Amen." Crickets came tracking through the snow to the window of his cell when Francis recited the midnight prayers in deep winter, shaming the friars who could not bring themselves to rise from their beds. It is said that the animals of the forest surrounding the hermitage where Francis died crowded around his room, singing and barking and howling their lamentations.