

# FRANCIS OF ASSISI

*Elissa Cuttjohn, SRC*



*Giovanni Bellini, Saint Francis in the Desert, ca. 1480.*

Francesco di Bernardone was born in the ancient hill town of Assisi, in central Italy, in 1181. His father, Pietro, was a successful cloth merchant who frequently traveled to France. His mother was from a wealthy and possibly noble family.

Francis was described as a charming, fun-loving teenager who freely used his family's resources to fund his active social life with his friends. He sometimes traveled with his father to France and was especially fond of the musical tradition of the troubadours of Provence.

In 1202, when he was twenty-one years old, Francis enthusiastically went to war for Assisi with dreams of chivalric glory. During Assisi's devastating defeat, Francis was captured and held for ransom under harsh conditions for nearly a year. His less

privileged comrades, who hadn't died in battle, had been hunted down and killed. Upon his release, Francis fell seriously ill.

The Francis who returned to Assisi was a different man. Instead of the happy-go-lucky youth he had been, Francis was now moody and haunted by nightmares and war-related flashbacks. He gave away his clothes, begged from passersby, and practiced self-mortification. He wandered the nearby forests.

Eighteen months later, an old friend convinced Francis to join another military campaign. However, on the way he had a dream that caused him to return to Assisi. Abandoning his dreams of knighthood, he sold his horse, his equipment, and his clothes.

## Francis's Conversion

Following a pilgrimage to Rome, in 1205, Francis stopped to pray before an icon of the crucified Christ in a side chapel of San Damiano, a century-old, run down church outside of Assisi, begging the Divine to guide him. Later he wrote down the words to his prayer and reported his experience:

Most High,  
Most glorious God (Divinity),  
Enlighten the darkness of my heart.  
Give me true Faith,  
Certain Hope, and  
Perfect Charity;  
Give me perception and knowledge,  
of you Lord,  
That I might carry out  
Your holy and just commands.  
Amen.

Francis had a mystical vision in which the crucified Christ on the cross came to life and said to him three times, "Francis, go and repair My house, which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." It seems that Francis interpreted this to mean that he should repair San Damiano Church, which he did. He also built a small hut next to it and lived there.

Francis spent more and more time in this church and eventually became a penitent attached to the church. Still, he was not well. He became so abnormally thin and unkempt that townspeople yelled curses and threw mud at him. Francis's father, Pietro, intervened and locked him in his house. Francis escaped.

In 1206, Pietro decided to take Francis to court, with the claim that he was disregarding his responsibilities. Francis claimed that he was an ecclesiastical person and refused to recognize the authority of the court, so the case was sent to the local bishop. The bishop encouraged Francis to give up all claims to his family's resources (Francis had a 50 percent stake in his mother's rich dowry). Francis willingly

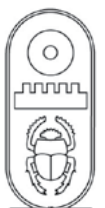
complied. Then he went into a nearby room, took off the clothes his father had given him, and placed them at his father's feet. Standing nearly naked before his father, Francis stated that from then on "Our Father who art in heaven" was his father, not Pietro di Bernardone.

Shortly after this, Francis found himself near some people affected by leprosy. He later wrote, "The Lord granted me, brother Francis, to begin doing penance this way: When I was in my sins, just to see lepers was very bitter for me. And the Lord himself took me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And on leaving them, what seemed bitter to me had turned for me into sweetness of body and soul. And afterwards I waited a little and left the world."

This was Francis's conversion. With zeal, he dedicated his life to helping those whom no one else wanted to help.



*A mosaic depicting Francis and a leper, in the General Curia of the Order of Friars Minor in Rome, Italy.*





*Caravaggio, Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, ca. 1595.*

### ***Sortes Sacrae***

Francis's life was simple – he cared for people affected by leprosy and prayed in and repaired San Damiano Church. Two years later, two men asked to join Francis in his life of prayer and penance. Francis didn't know how to proceed so he asked a nearby parish priest to perform a *Sortes Sacrae*, which was a common practice of lay people at this time, although considered superstitious by most educated people. The *Sortes Sacrae* involved a priest opening a bible, lectionary, or missal three times, revealing three verses that would guide the questioner.

In this case, the following three verses were revealed:

Mark 10:17-21—“Go, and sell all you own and give to the poor and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.”

Luke 9:1-6—“Take nothing for the road, No staff, no bag, no bread, no silver. Not even two tunics. Whatever house you go into, stay there, and leave from there.”

Matthew 16:24-28—“If anyone wishes to be my follower, deny yourself and take up the cross and follow me.”

Francis and the two brothers memorized these verses. These words guided Francis for the rest of his life.

After meditating on these verses for a year, Francis decided to ask the pope for approval of his way of life. Although there are conflicting reports of how he was able to achieve this, Francis was allowed to meet with Pope Innocent III, who permitted Francis to recruit brothers and instructed him to preach. (While at the same time, this pope, who named himself Innocent, was fanatically exterminating other Christian groups that he considered heretical, an example being the Cathars.) Francis had originally desired to spend time in nature and pray in solitude to the Divine; now he was responsible for a group of eleven men and was expected to recruit others.

### **Clare**

In 1212, after hearing Francis preach, eighteen-year-old Chiara (Clare) Offreduccio (ca. 1194-1253), who was

from an extremely wealthy noble family, asked Francis to help her live according to the Gospel. She became the first woman to join Francis in his work. She and Francis created the Order of Poor Ladies of San Damiano (today called the Order of Saint Clare). The sisters chose to live in poverty and seclusion. Like the brothers, the Poor Ladies sought to imitate the life of Yeshua. They spent their days in manual labor and prayer in a church near San Damiano. In 1216, Clare became the abbess of the order.

### The Rule

Eventually the group of brothers grew so large that Francis needed help with governance. On several occasions, other people led the group, however Francis was usually nearby to advise the leader and to keep the brothers true to his original vision. At times, usually in his absence, changes were made, which he generally reversed on his return.

Francis stayed true to his interpretations of the three Bible verses. This manifested in the Rule, a code of conduct that he wrote

as guidance for the brothers. In support of the Luke verse “Whatever house you go into, stay there, and leave from there,” the early Franciscans were prohibited from owning property. They rented their churches and housing. In support of the verse from Mark “Go, sell what you have,” those who joined Francis were required to give away all of their belongings.

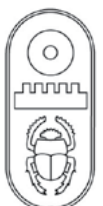
The brothers could not accept money, although later concessions were made to accept alms for people affected by leprosy. Francis wrote:

Our Lord teaches in the Gospel: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. . . .” We should not consider money or coin to have any more use than stones. . . . So let us be careful not to lose the kingdom of heaven for such a trifle.

Francis instructed the brothers that they should: “Apply themselves diligently in doing good works, as it is said, ‘Always be busy in some sort of good work so



*The Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi in Assisi, Italy, which was completed in 1253 and contains its namesake’s remains.*



that the devil will find you busy,' and 'Idleness is the soul's enemy.'" During the day, the brothers performed manual labor and preached. At night they devoted themselves to prayer.

Francis began calling the brothers Lesser Brothers. Many had been wealthy; others had been destitute. Francis accepted them all, with no waiting period, although this was later changed. In support of the Matthew verse "deny yourself . . .," Francis instructed the Lesser Brothers to consider themselves subservient to everyone (with just a few exceptions), even if they believed the other person was wrong. He instructed them to "Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again."

Priests were accepted into the Order and were allowed to study the Bible, however Francis forbade illiterate brothers to learn how to read, so that they would not be tempted by arrogance (for example, in order to know more than the other brothers) or by ambition (for example, in order to become a priest). Francis referred to himself as an *illiteratus*. He believed that the best way to preach was through example.

People who knew Francis reported that he had a deep affinity with animals. He would lovingly speak with them and, like many people, they were attracted to Francis. He praised animals for living day to day, without thinking about whether or not they would have food the next day, serving as examples for Francis and his followers to trust the Creator to supply their needs. In support of the verse from Luke "Take nothing for your journey . . . no bread . . .," Francis prohibited the brothers from carrying food over from one day to the next. He once told a brother that he could not soak beans overnight in order to cook them the next day.



*A fresco depicting Francis preaching to the birds in his namesake church in Assisi, ca. 1260.*

### **Francis and the Sultan**

Francis encouraged the brothers to travel as missionaries in order to convert "unbelievers," which he did as well. In 1219, he traveled to Egypt to try to convert the Muslim leader there in order to end the Fifth Crusade, a brutal war in which Christians were trying to regain the Holy Land from the Muslims. At this time, Muslims were generally portrayed as "beasts" and pagans by European Christians.

The leader of Egypt, the Kurdish Sultan Malik al-Kamil, a nephew of Salah ad-Din (Saladin), was a cultured man known in Egypt for his wisdom and fairness. When he was eleven years old, the English king Richard the Lion-Hearted had granted him knighthood. The war wasn't going well for al-Kamil so he made several offers to the Crusaders to give them Jerusalem in exchange for peace, however the Roman Catholic Church directed this Crusade and the papal legate, Cardinal Pelagius, repeatedly refused these offers. He wanted to crush the Muslims.

While al-Kamil was waiting for a response to one of his offers of peace, Francis and a companion, knowing that they might be killed, walked across enemy

lines into the Sultan's camp and asked to meet with al-Kamil. They were eventually allowed to do so. The Sultan asked Francis if he was there as an emissary of the Crusaders. Francis informed him that he was an ambassador of the Lord Yeshua and was there to save the Sultan's soul.

Al-Kamil generously welcomed Francis and his companion and eventually arranged for an exchange of ideas between his teachers of Islam and Francis. Al-Kamil later safely returned Francis to the Crusader camp. Francis then returned to Assisi.

Later, after defeating the Crusaders, al-Kamil arranged to have food sent to the starving Crusader troops and their animals. Although Francis did not convert al-Kamil, his example inspired many Franciscan missionaries to come and his calls for peace became more fervent after this. Al-Kamil's generous reception of Francis and his compassion to the defeated Crusaders have become legendary.

### “Canticle to Brother Sun”

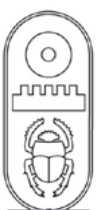
Francis became a passionate preacher and sometimes when addressing a group he would become so inspired during his praise of the Divine that he would begin dancing or singing. In 1224, he wrote the “Canticle to Brother Sun,” a prayer of thanksgiving to and for the Divine, that he and other brothers sang.

Most High, all-powerful good Lord,  
 Yours be the praises, the glory, and  
 the honor,  
 And all blessing.  
 To you alone, Most High, do they  
 belong  
 And no one is worthy to mention  
 your Name.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, with all  
 your creatures, especially Sir  
 Brother Sun,  
 Who is the day, and through whom  
 you give us light.

And he is beautiful and radiant with  
 great splendor,  
 And bears a likeness of you, Most  
 High one.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through  
 Sister Moon and the stars,  
 In heaven you formed them clear,  
 and precious and wonderful.  
 Praised be you, my Lord,  
 Through Brother Wind, and  
 through the air,  
 Cloudy and serene, and every kind  
 of weather,  
 Through whom you give sustenance  
 to all your creatures.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through  
 Sister Water,  
 Who is very useful, and humble,  
 and precious, and chaste.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through  
 Brother Fire,  
 Through whom you light the night.  
 And he is beautiful, and playful, and  
 robust and strong.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through  
 our Sister, Mother Earth,  
 Who sustains and governs us,  
 And produces fruit with colored  
 flowers and herbs.



*Sassetta, Saint Francis Renounces his Earthly Father, ca. 1444.*





*Francis's tomb in Assisi.*

Praise and bless my Lord and give  
him thanks  
And serve him with great humility.

**Pardon One Another  
for the Divine's Sake**

Towards the end of Francis's life, he suffered horrible pain from various illnesses. While in retreat, trying to recuperate, he was informed about a feud between the chief magistrate of Assisi, Don Oportulo, and Bishop Guido of Assisi. This eventually escalated to the point that Don Oportulo made it a crime to make any agreements with the bishop and the bishop ex-communicated Don Oportulo.

Francis was deeply saddened that no one had intervened to try to make peace. He had already written the "Canticle to Brother Sun" and added the following stanza to the end of that song to be sung to the parties involved in this feud. He sent a brother who instructed, on Francis's behalf, Don Oportulo and the bishop to meet outside the bishop's palace and sent two brothers to sing the revised "Canticle," ending with these words:

Praised be you, O my Lord, for all  
who show Forgiveness and

Pardon one another for Your sake,  
And who endure weakness and  
tribulation.  
Blessed are they who peaceably  
endure,  
For you, Most High, shall give them  
a crown.

Don Oportulo was so moved that he fell to the bishop's feet begging for forgiveness and withdrew all of his orders. The bishop had no choice but to ask for forgiveness in return, thus ending this altercation.

**Returning Home**

At the age of forty-four, Francis was very ill. He was nearly blind, unable to walk, and could barely eat or speak. He was moved to San Damiano, where Clare and her sisters took care of him. Later he went to the bishop's palace in Assisi for medical treatment. There, the brothers often sang songs of joy to him. In the last days of his life, Francis asked to be taken to the little hut that he had built next to San Damiano Church, where the Christ on the crucifix had directed him to rebuild his church. There, Francis went through transition on October 3, 1226.

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