

St. Francis of Assisi

BORN 1181 OR 1182; DIED 1226

DEACON AND FOUNDER

FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 4

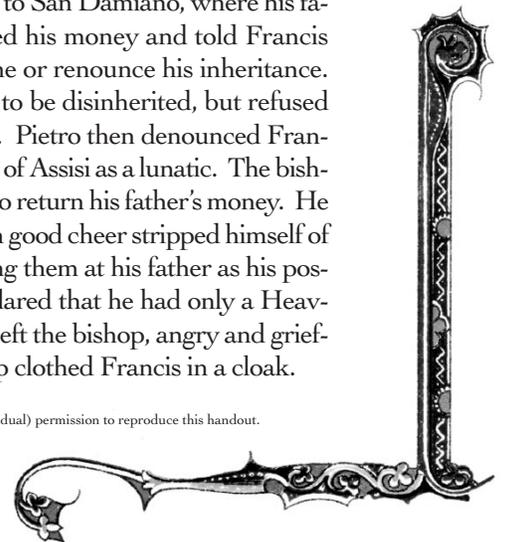
THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES of Europe was a time of knights, crusades, chivalry, troubadours; of pure, courtly love. Into this culture was born St. Francis of Assisi, who lived the Gospel counsel of poverty but spoke of it in the poetic language of romance, chivalry, and the courts of love.

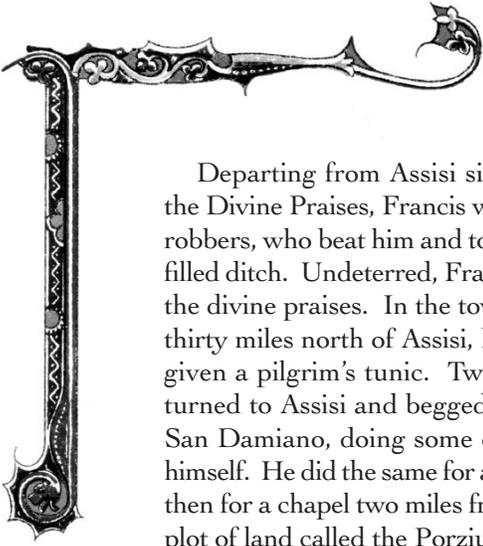
Francis was born in Assisi, a city in the central Italian province of Umbria. His father, Pietro di Bernadone, was a wealthy cloth merchant. His mother Pica may have been of a noble family of Provence (modern southern France), and he had at least one younger brother. Up to the age of twenty, Francis was truly worldly-minded. He spent lavishly, loved pleasure, was merry and witty, learned to play several musical instruments, and could sing well. Wherever he went he was the life of the party and a popular leader of his peers. Yet he did not seek carnal pleasure and was known to be generous to beggars. At twenty he became a soldier in Assisi's effort to free itself from Perugia, a city about ten miles distant. Assisi was defeated and Francis spent a year as a prisoner. He next determined to seek knighthood by joining an army in southern Italy to defend the Church's lands. In 1205, gorgeously well-equipped, he left Assisi but almost immediately met an impoverished gentleman. Mortified by his comparative wealth, Francis exchanged clothing with the man. The following day he set out anew, but fell ill less than fifty miles from home at Spoleto. There he heard a voice from Heaven instructing him to return home to serve God.

Francis began to devote much of his time to prayer, and developed a desire to sell all that he had in exchange for the call of the Gospel. Not sure how to do this, he soon realized that self-mastery and mortification were the foundation of spiritual



warfare. He also increased his almsgiving and began to care for the sick. Meeting a horribly disfigured leper while on pilgrimage to Rome, Francis gave him not only alms but also kissed him. One day while praying before a crucifix in the church of San Damiano in the valley below Assisi, Francis heard three times from the crucifix: "Go, repair my house, which you see is falling into ruin." Thinking the voice meant him to repair the small church, Francis went to his father's warehouse and sold bolts of fine cloth to raise money for the task. The priest of San Damiano, however, refused the money, and Francis' irate father demanded its return. Francis hid, fasting and in prayer, for a month, and when he reappeared he was so changed that people thought him mad and pelted him with trash. Pietro, even angrier, dragged his son home, beat him, chained his feet, and locked him up. Freed by his mother, Francis fled to San Damiano, where his father again demanded his money and told Francis to either return home or renounce his inheritance. Francis was willing to be disinherited, but refused to return the money. Pietro then denounced Francis before the bishop of Assisi as a lunatic. The bishop ordered Francis to return his father's money. He did so, and then with good cheer stripped himself of his clothing, thrusting them at his father as his possession too, and declared that he had only a Heavenly Father. Pietro left the bishop, angry and grief-stricken. The bishop clothed Francis in a cloak.



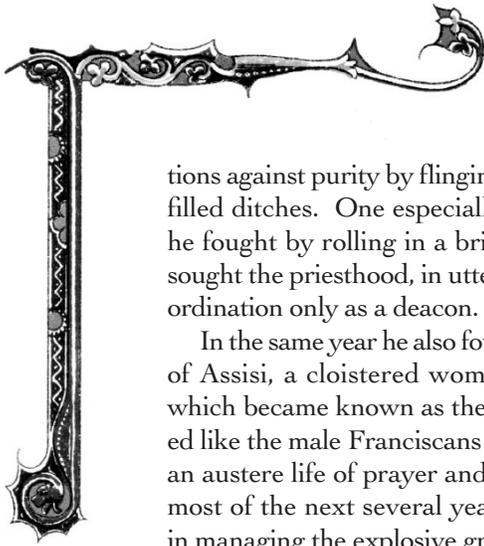


Departing from Assisi singing the Litany of the Divine Praises, Francis was soon set upon by robbers, who beat him and tossed him into snow-filled ditch. Undeterred, Francis went on singing the divine praises. In the town of Gubbio about thirty miles north of Assisi, he was taken in and given a pilgrim's tunic. Two years later, he returned to Assisi and begged for funds to repair San Damiano, doing some of the manual labor himself. He did the same for a second church, and then for a chapel two miles from Assisi on a small plot of land called the Porziuncola (Portiuncula) owned by the Assisi monastery of Monte Subasio. There he settled, and came to realize that the Lord was asking him not to repair the walls of churches, but to help renew the faith of the Church and to bring people to conversion. He felt called to follow as exactly as possible the commission of Jesus: *"And preach as you go, saying, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.' ... You received without paying, give without pay. Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food"* (Mt 10:7-10). Wearing a peasant's gray tunic and cord belt, Francis began a wandering life of preaching, filled with the desire to share God's love with everyone. An image of Christ through his life of poverty and humility, Francis was filled with joy, and this spilled over into a reverence for all of God's

creation. People soon noticed that around Francis there seemed to be a new Eden. Rabbits followed him; he could preach to birds and ask swallows to stop speaking so that he might preach; a wolf threatening the people of Gubbio obeyed his order to stop. He also received the mystical gifts of prophecy and the ability to work miracles. Within three years, he gathered around himself eleven followers, to whom he gave a rule embracing strict poverty. He took his proposed rule to the Pope, who was reluctant to approve it until in a dream he saw Francis propping up St. John Lateran, the cathedral church of the Bishop of Rome and therefore a symbol of the Church herself. He took this as confirmation that God indeed was calling Francis, and verbally approved his rule, the beginning of the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans). Returning to Assisi, Francis obtained permission to use the Porziuncola chapel and property, and his followers built crude huts in which to live. He taught them to gain knowledge and wisdom through prayer, not sterile study, and to love "Lady Poverty." They worked for food as field hands and at trades, begging for food (not money) when no work was available. They served everyone, especially lepers and others who suffered. Everywhere they were God's troubadours, singing of joy. Francis struggled for mastery over his own body ("Brother Ass"), and fought tempta-



St. Francis preaching to birds, late 19th century lithograph



tions against purity by flinging himself into snow-filled ditches. One especially severe temptation he fought by rolling in a briar-patch. He never sought the priesthood, in utter humility accepting ordination only as a deacon.

In the same year he also founded, with St. Clare of Assisi, a cloistered women's religious order which became known as the Poor Clares, devoted like the male Franciscans to strict poverty and an austere life of prayer and penance. He spent most of the next several years in preaching and in managing the explosive growth of the Franciscans throughout Italy and northward in Europe. They devoted themselves to prayer and to ministering to the poor and needy, opened churches and made the sacraments more available to people, and by their simple life and commitment to the Lord re-evangelized Europe. In less than ten years, there were five thousand Franciscans. The rapid growth brought challenges to the ideal of Franciscan poverty in the name of practicality, but Francis permitted no changes.

Three times he sought to extend his ministry to Muslims. In 1212, he was shipwrecked after having crossed to the Balkan Peninsula, and in 1214, he fell ill in Spain. In 1219 he sailed to the port of Damietta, in the Nile delta of Egypt, which was under siege by crusaders, hoping to evangelize the Sultan, Malik al-Kamil, or to be martyred by him. The Sultan saw Francis as a truly holy man and protected him, but he did not convert and sent him back through the lines some days later. From Egypt, Francis fulfilled his dream of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (just over a century later, the Pope gave Franciscans custody of holy sites in Palestine), and then returned to cope with a fresh challenge to the Franciscan rule. He was able to protect its original spirit, but three years later relinquished control. In the same year at Christmas, Francis created a living tableau of the stable at Bethlehem in a church in Greccio, a village in the province of Lazio south of Umbria, establishing the now popular Christmas custom of the creche that highlights the poverty, humility, and innocence of the Infant Jesus.

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By this time, Francis' mystical gifts included levitation during prayer. Not quite ten months later he received one final gift, the stigmata (the crucified Jesus' five wounds), the first known in history. During prayer at the Franciscan hermitage atop Mount La Verna in the Tuscan Apennines north of Arezzo, Francis saw a seraph (the highest rank of angel) with six radiant wings. The crucified Jesus appeared between its wings and Francis was filled with an intensely ardent love of his Lord. The wounds in Francis' hands and feet — which he hid — were scars that appeared to have nails embedded; the wound in his side often bled. In the final years of his life,

Francis was plagued by illness, blindness, and pain from the stigmata. His last work was the “Canticle of the Sun,” in which he sang praise

to God for “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon,” “Brothers Wind and Air” and “Sister Water,” “Brother Fire” and “our Sister, Mother Earth,” and even of “Sister Death.” In this poem are phrases that are echoed in the well-known prayer that begins “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,” which was not composed by Francis although it certainly breathes his spirit. He welcomed “Sister Death” soon afterward, covered only by a cloth on bare ground.

Franciscans today number more than thirty thousand friars under three principal variations of the original rule, the Order of Friars Minor (OFM), the OFM Capuchins, and the OFM Conventuals. In his own life and in founding the Friars Minor, Francis more than any other person in his time saved the Church from both decay and revolution. In touch with the spirit of his age, he was the man most responsible for reforming it. About him there was a simplicity, gentleness, and all-inclusiveness that embraced the poor, the sick, and the fallen; that inspired those who truly sought peace and joy in the daily service of God; and that revered the entire created order. He has an astounding influence on the life of the Church even today. Desiring God alone, he embraced poverty as one would embrace a lover, and Il Poverello — “The Little Poor Man” — remains the troubadour of immense joy.

