

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 42

St. Francis of Assisi

St. Francis – this name is known in both Catholic and Protestant circles. What about this Italian fellow who lived over 800 years ago for about 45 years has secured his place in church history for the ages? We seek to understand the answer to that question by reviewing highlights of his life, understanding what was important to him, and how he lived his calling before God.

As we look at the life of St. Francis, there are a lot of resources available. In 1999, the Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University published through New City Press a three volume series on St. Francis in English. The series has the first 150 years of writings on Francis, including those by Francis himself. Many of these writings are available for the first time in English in this series.¹

THE LIFE OF ST. FRANCIS

A number of people wrote what we might term “biographies”² of St. Francis. These accounts give good basic information on certain events that we will discuss here.

Francis was born in Assisi, an Italian town in Umbria, north of Rome around 1181 or 1182. Francis was one of several children born to Pietro (“Peter”) and Pica Bernadone. Peter, his father, was a wealthy cloth merchant. Francis was born while Peter was away in France on business. Pica named her son Giovanni (“John”) after John the Baptist, but Peter would have none of that! Once Peter got home, he changed his son’s name to Francis. This seems to foreshadow the conflict Peter would have with Francis over the way Francis chose to follow God’s calling later in life.

¹ Our quotes throughout this paper will come from that series and will be cited simply as “Francis” with the appropriate volume and page number. These books are available in paperback on Amazon.com for anyone who wishes to read Francis in more depth. One may also wish to view the Oscar nominated movie, “Brother Sun Sister Moon” which chronicles the life of St. Francis.

² The actual writings were not technically “biographies” as we would use the term today. They were not written as historical accounts of the life events that shaped Francis and constituted his life. Instead, they are accounts of events that were put into writing for other purposes. For example, *The Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano was written two years after Francis died as an official account of Francis’s life, virtue, and miracles in preparation for Pope Gregory IX’s canonization of Francis. Other accounts were written to explain the movement of Franciscan’s or to put into historical context their practices and beliefs.

In his growing years, Francis received some formal education, but was not a serious student.³ Instead, Francis was more intent on running with his friends and being, what we might call, the life of the party. Francis was funny, quick witted, constantly singing, handsome, and well dressed (he had quite an affinity for stylish and expensive clothes!). Francis treated his friends kindly and was always generous with his money. Francis would regularly buy meals and merriment for his companions. The writers of the Catholic Encyclopedia register Francis in his early years as “the very king of frolic.”

As we discussed last week in the lesson on the crusades, one of society’s problems in that age was the incessant fighting of local towns and rival cities. Around age 20, Francis was caught up in such a skirmish when Assisi went to fight against the neighboring town of Perugia. Perugia won. Francis was captured and spent about a year imprisoned in Perugia. The experience was not too revolting for Francis because he later decided to embark on a military career. The night before leaving, Francis dreamed of a great palace, “its walls covered everywhere with shining shields emblazoned with crosses.” A voice told Francis that, “All these things...belong to you and your knights.”⁴ At the time, Francis took the dream literally. Later, he would see his calling as a spiritual battle with his brothers as his soldiers. A short time later, Francis had a second dream instructing him to return to Assisi, which Francis quickly did.

At this time (1205), Francis was in his mid-twenties and began to grow very sensitive to spiritual matters. He was especially thoughtful about all the poor and sick people he would see. As Francis contemplated these things, his friends noticed him somewhat absent minded. They would tease him about whether he was thinking about taking a wife. Francis would answer, “You are right! I was thinking about taking a wife more noble, wealthier, and more beautiful than you have ever seen.”⁵ The friends took Francis literally, but Francis was referring to what he would later term, “Lady Poverty.”

Up to that point, Francis had a particular revulsion to lepers. But, Francis believed that God was going to take the things that repulsed him and turn them into loves. So, when Francis unexpectedly came upon a leper, Francis initially retreated but then acted out of conviction that God would grow love and drew near the leper.

³ Commentators note that Francis’s writings show “the limits of his education and the simplicity of his vocabulary” (Francis, vol 1, p. 13).

⁴ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 35.

⁵ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 72.

Francis gave the leper some money, kissed the leper's hand, and gave him a hug. Francis would soon go on to minister to a number of lepers with joy in his heart as he saw God indeed turn this revulsion into joy.⁶

After a pilgrimage to Rome (where Francis exchanged clothes with a beggar outside the Vatican), Francis was in a worn down chapel outside Assisi praying. Francis heard a voice telling him, "Francis, don't you see that my house is being destroyed? Go, then, and rebuild it for me."⁷ Because the chapel itself was in disrepair, Francis thought he was to rebuild that particular chapel. It would be later that Francis would see his calling to rebuild part of the church at large (the body of Christ, not physical buildings!).

Francis went home, gathered up a good bit of his father's cloth, and rode his horse to market in a nearby town. There, Francis sold all the cloth as well as the horse and took the money to the priest at the broken down chapel. Peter, Francis's father, was not a happy man. In fact, he was furious! After hiding out in a cave for a month, Francis ultimately resurfaced in town. The townspeople believed Francis had become crazy, and they were quite abusive to him. Francis's father caught him, physically beat him, dragged him home, and locked Francis up in a dark closet.

When Peter went back out of town on business, Pica (Francis's mother) let Francis out. Francis went to a nearby priest who told Francis that giving money to the poor and the church was a good thing, but Francis had no right to give his father's money. So, Francis went out and tried to restore to his father the money that he had given away for the chapel. Peter took back the money, but was not fully satisfied. Peter actually chose to disinherit Francis.

Francis declared himself God's child ("Until now I have called Pietro Bernardone my father...[but I say] from now on: 'Our Father who are in heaven,' and not, 'My father Pietro Bernardone.'" ⁸), and even took off the clothes he was wearing and gave them back to his father.

Francis chose to embrace Lady Poverty. While most beggars would solicit money or food, Francis took a bit different path. Francis would go around and beg for stones to use in rebuilding the churches. Francis was living in a little hut/lean to he had built near a chapel when he heard the gospel reading at church in 1208 that

⁶ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 74-75.

⁷ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 74-75.

⁸ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 80.

Christ sent his disciples without multiple cloaks (“Go...do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep” (Mt. 10:9)). Francis felt that was the life he wanted, and he gave away the very last things he had and kept only a brown woolen tunic tied around the waist with a knotted rope.

At this point, Francis lived a consistent life of service and love with his Lady Poverty for several years. The townspeople generally quit mocking him and started holding him in a measure of respect. Several well-known townspeople (people of position as well as wealth) decided that they wanted to join Francis in his life of dedication to God through poverty and service. Together, Francis and his companions sought advice from the gospels on what to do with their many possessions. They quickly found three passages that indicated to them they should sell everything and give it to the poor.⁹

Within a fairly short time, these companions grew in number such that Francis thought it important to have a “written rule” (a set of instructions for those who are to commit to the order) for them. They called themselves the “penitents of Assisi,” and they set out to Rome to have their rule approved by Pope Innocent III. The accounts differ somewhat on what exactly transpired, but ultimately, the Pope gave verbal sanction to the rule and gave authority to Francis and his companions to preach repentance.

The group returned to Assisi with Francis’s new name for them, the “Friars Minor.”¹⁰ After living in a hut and out in the open, the Friars Minors received a little chapel as a gift from the Benedictines of Monte Subasio (see Church History Literacy lesson 37). The Friars settled in and built a few small huts that later became the first Franciscan settlement.

Over the next few years, the Friars went out by two’s, singing and serving those they found. They would take jobs working fields (or would ask for food if they could not get a job). Their numbers grew significantly, and not just among men. During Lent in 1212, a young heiress of Assisi named Claire came to Francis, after being moved by his teaching. Claire wanted to join Francis’s way of life. She was 18 at the time, but did not have her father’s permission. Several nights later,

⁹ The first passage was Matthew 19:21, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” The second was Mark 6:8, “Take nothing for your journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts.” The third passage was Mark 8:34, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” See *Francis*, Vol. 2, p. 86.

¹⁰ Some believe the name references the lower classes (Latin “*minores*”) as a reminder and mark of humility; others believe the name recalls Mt. 25:40-45.

Claire and several companions went out at night and met with Francis and several of his brothers. They cut Claire's hair, gave her a Minority habit and placed her with some Benedictine nuns nearby until a place for the women could be built. These women ultimately formed the Second Franciscan Order of Poor Ladies, known today as "Poor Claires."

Over the next several years, Francis started several journeys to the Muslim lands of Syria and Morocco from a desire to convert the people to faith. His trips were interrupted each time (shipwreck, illness, etc.), but more followers joined him after each journey.

As the Friars Minor grew, they started holding "chapters" or meetings of the order. The first chapter (in 1217) divided the order into provinces and also divided the world into Franciscan missions. Poverty, for Francis, was never an end to itself. It was the lifestyle that went with Francis's calling to convert as many as possible. Francis had a missionary's heart, and from the beginning, his order sought to establish itself in ways to bring the gospel to the world.

Francis would preach to large and small crowds. The people adored him at this point in his life. They sought his attention, and were happy if they could kiss the ground he walked on (or cut a piece of his tunic!). While he was preaching (not really sermons in the sense we think of sermons, Francis gave short exhortations) at Camara (a village near Assisi), all the people who listened to him wanted to join his order. Because they contained people who were married and working, Francis started a Third Order (today called the "Brothers and Sisters of Penance"). These were never required to leave their homes or spouses, but Francis set a rule for them that included not taking up arms, not taking oaths, and not engaging in lawsuits, as well as other duties.

In 1219, the Franciscans held a second chapter. Francis again focused much of this chapter on evangelism. Francis assigned himself the area of the world that included crusade activity in Syria, and he left to go preach both to the Christian troops and the Saracen adversaries. Francis seemed to have no fear, leaving the Crusader's camp and walking into the "enemy's." Francis did not gain many converts among the Saracen Muslims (the ruling group of Muslims in the Syria/Arabia area), but succeeded at getting a promise of greater indulgence for Christian worship in Muslim controlled areas.

Francis had to return rather quickly to Italy, for there was a great deal going on with his order. There was a definite transition occurring because the simple poverty lifestyle Francis and his early companions embraced was a near impossibility with the size and number of adherents at that point. Through great

counsel received by Cardinal Ugolino,¹¹ changes were brought into the order. There were at this time around 5,000 friars in the order with at least another 500 seeking admission. At an assembly at Porziuncola, Francis stepped down as leader of the order and lived the rest of his days leading by example, but not from a position of authority.

We err if we fail to mention that in 1223, Francis thought to celebrate Christmas by building a nativity complete with a crib. Thus, when we see nativity scenes set up today, we have Francis to thank for it!

Over the next several years, Francis's body began to fall apart. He lost most of his eyesight and his body was constantly ill. In 1224, Francis was reported to have received in his body, the stigmata (the marks of Christ's wounds). One early writer notes that Francis had long before bore the marks of Christ in his heart, but at that point, came to bear the marks on his body. As the wounds became apparent, Francis made a final visit to Claire. In a reed hut prepared for him in a garden, Francis wrote his Cantic of the Creatures, one of his greatest works of poetry:

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To you, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

¹¹ Cardinal Ugolino would later become Pope Gregory IX who canonized Francis. The Cardinal was a principal counselor for Francis who gave great and important advice that helped the Franciscan through this transition time as well as through other difficulties.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy are those who endure in peace, for by you, Most High, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your most holy will. The second death can do no harm to them.

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

Francis improved briefly, but it was soon apparent he would die. So, Francis had his body taken to one of the chapels he first repaired, Porziuncola. This was also where the brothers first built their huts in their earliest community life. Francis gathered his friends nearby, and took off his only possession, his tunic. Francis gave that away and chose to lay on the bare ground, covered only with a borrowed cloth. He rejoiced in staying faithful to Lady Poverty to the very end, and remembering Christ, broke bread with his friends. Francis told them, "I have done my part, may Christ teach you to do yours." He then asked someone to read the passion account from John's gospel. Francis started singing Psalm 142. On Saturday night, October 3, 1226, as Francis sang the last verse, "Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me," he died.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Persecution as believers

People mocked Francis and his companions. People "nonchalantly and brazenly persecuted them as if they were criminals." But, Francis and his companions "suffered all things with constancy and patience." Rather than becoming dejected or distressed, they accepted the misfortunes and reckoned themselves fortunate to suffer for the sake of Christ. Interestingly, "When people saw them rejoicing in their tribulations and

enduring them patiently for the Lord, unceasing in every devout prayer...many of them...experienced a change of heart.”¹²

This is not surprising. Jesus taught us, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (Mt. 5:11-12). Jesus also said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:43). That is the Christian response. While some will not react by converting to faith, there is no doubt some will. Peter wrote about husbands who do not believe as being won over to faith “without words by the behavior of their wives” (1 Pet. 3:1). The Christian response to suffering is summed up by Peter, “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Pet. 4:19).

2. Interactions with our Christian Brothers and Sisters

St. Francis would often give his brothers “admonitions, corrections and precepts, as it seemed best to him, after consulting the Lord.” Notably, everything that Francis “said in word, he would first, with eagerness and affection, show them in deed.”¹³ In this way, Francis managed to follow the instructions of Hebrews 10:24 (“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”) while avoiding the hypocritical pitfalls Jesus warned against in Mat. 7:4 (“How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”). Companions of Francis reported that “he would make his admonition with kindness, his reprimand with reason, and his command with gentleness.”¹⁴

Another interesting aspect of Francis’s interactions with his brothers concerned his role as leader. Even though “he was more exalted than all other brothers,” Francis appointed one of his brothers as a guardian and even superior. Francis did this “to avoid any occasion of pride.”¹⁵ Francis was wise. Peter admonished us to live accordingly when he wrote, “All of you, clothe yourself with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves,

¹² Francis, Vol. 2, p. 45.

¹³ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 52.

¹⁴ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 53.

¹⁵ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 52.

therefore, under God's mighty hand, so he may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet. 5:5-6).

3. Interactions with Others

Francis treated all people with care and kindness. He was as careful with the poor as he was the wealthy, with the sick as with those who were well, and with the downtrodden as much as the famous and well-to-do. One of his companions reported that Francis would, "respect the elderly, and honored the noble and the wealthy." Yet, he also, "loved the poor intimately and showed compassion to them." Francis admonished his brothers "not to judge or look down on anyone, not even those who eat and drink and dress extravagantly." For Francis, he sought to be "subject to all."¹⁶

This should be the way we treat others. Kindness and compassion should be our hallmark. As John wrote, "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble."

4. God is the Owner of All We Have

Francis chose Lady Poverty as his companion. In doing so, he set aside every possession to preach the gospel to any (man or beast!¹⁷) who would listen. Francis lived consistently with John's admonition:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 Jn 2:15-17)

That does not mean that all are called to absolute poverty, but it does mean that anything man may possess belongs to God. Anytime man begins to possess something with any other frame of mind, the truth is that the

¹⁶ Francis, Vol. 2, p. 52.

¹⁷ In this lesson, we have not covered the fame that came to Francis because of his reported ability to speak with creatures in ways that calmed savage beasts and kept the attention (or at least kept them from fear) of birds and other more tame animals. There were many miracles attributed to Francis that can be read of in the various writings after his death.

possessions then possess the man, rather than the man possessing the possession.

Whatever we have, we are expected to handle it as stewards of God. To whom much is given, much is expected.

EPILOGUE

Still today, there are a great number of people who term themselves, “Franciscans.” These men and women seek to observe the Rule of St. Francis of Assisi in one of its several forms.

All three orders still thrive: the first order (the “Friars Minor”), the second order (the “Poor Ladies or Claires”) and the third order (the “Brothers and Sisters of Penance” or the “Secular Franciscan Order”). The first order actually has three separate groups that are now considered independent orders (The “Friars Minor,” the “Friars Minor Conventuals,” and the “Friars Minor Capuchins”). Each of these three groups observe the rule of St. Francis, but the Conventuals observe it with certain dispensations allowed while the other groups are a bit more strict in following the rule without deviation.

In the third order, there is a distinction between those who are “Secular” and those who are “Regular.” The “Regular” are men and women who choose to live by vows of poverty (a simple lifestyle seeking to make a better world through their talents and gifts), consecrated chastity, and obedience (to God, to community, to Church and to self). The “Secular” continue to live their secular lives, gathering regularly for fraternal activities.