



Francis Of Assisi: Spiritual Father And Guide *by Thérèse A. Ream, O.F.S.*

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Francis was born in the Umbrian valley in the city of Assisi, Italy. His parents were Pietro (Peter) and Pica Bernardone. The exact date of his birth is unknown; he was born either toward the close of 1181 or the beginning of 1182. Francis was born while his father was on a business trip to France. Pica had her son baptized with the name “John” in the church of San Rufino. When Pietro returned from his trip, he named his son Francesco (Francis). It is said that Francis celebrated the feast of his patron saint, Saint John the Baptist, with special devotion.

Francis grew through the years and then joined his father in the family cloth merchant business. He enjoyed spending his money and having fun with his friends. Francis would buy himself lavish clothing and treat his friends to wonderful feasts. It is said that he wasted his life until he reached his twenty-fifth birthday. (See Englebert, Omer. (1965/1979). *St. Francis of Assisi: A biography*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books).

During Francis’ late teens and early twenties, he was involved in many battles of the city to defend its freedom. In 1202, Francis was captured in a battle and taken prisoner to Perugia, a neighboring town and Assisi’s rival. He was held captive for approximately one year. Upon his return to his home, he experienced a change. Francis found that the glamour of the armor was not enough, that something was missing.

One of the first conversion stories recorded concerning Francis took place when he was about twenty-five years old. He was disgusted by leprosy and tried to stay away from people afflicted with this condition. Francis was riding one day and came upon a person with leprosy. His heart was moved with compassion and he dismounted and embraced the leper. He was filled with great joy and his bitterness turned into sweetness. Francis would later find out that conversion is not limited to a once only experience, but that everyone is called to daily conversion, the turning away from selfish desires and being open to doing God’s will. It means that people’s hearts are changed and they enter into a closer relationship with God.

In 1206, Francis entered the small chapel of San Damiano located outside the city walls of Assisi. He knelt before the Byzantine icon crucifix and began to pray. As he was deep in prayer, the figure of Christ on the crucifix spoke to him, “Francis, go repair my house, which is falling in ruins.” Francis took the words of Jesus literally and went to his home and gathered bales of cloth. He took the cloth to Foligno and sold it. He also sold his horse, so that he had to travel the ten miles back to Assisi on foot.

Francis went to the priest at San Damiano and tried to give him the money from the sales. The priest was leery of the change in Francis and did not want to be party to his practical joke, so he did not accept the money. However, the priest did allow Francis to stay with him.

Pietro learned of his son's spending spree and was furious. He went to find Francis at San Damiano, but Francis went into hiding. He stayed in hiding for about a month and then decided that he must face his father. Francis went into town and when Pietro heard his son, he grabbed him, drug him into the house where he chained him and threw him into a dungeon. Pica tried to sway her son into behaving as a cloth merchant's son, but Francis remained inflexible. When Pietro was gone from the house, Pica went to Francis, removed the chains and freed her son.

When Pietro returned home and found that his son was gone, he went to the Bishop of Assisi and demanded that his son return the proceeds of the sales to him. The Bishop summoned Francis to come before him and Francis complied. Francis gave the purse of money to his father and also the clothes which he wore. Francis declared that since he now served the Church, he would not say, "My father, Pietro Bernardone," but "Our Father who art in heaven ...". The Bishop covered the almost naked body of Francis with his own cloak. Being angry and unhappy, Pietro withdrew from his son. This seems to have been the end of Francis' relationship with his parents. Nothing is recorded to the contrary.

Francis took the next two or three years to rebuild and repair some of the churches around Assisi. One church in particular was extremely special to Francis, the *Portiuncula*, which means "The Little Portion." It was here on the 24th of February 1206 that Francis learned from the reading of the Gospel that he should "Go and preach the message" and to "live according to the Holy Gospel." This cradle of the Franciscan Family is the place where it first began!

The Little Poor Man (*IL Poverello*) began to understand that God wanted him to preach the Gospel. Francis set about his work joyfully and greeted everyone with a greeting Francis said was revealed to him by God: "The Lord give you peace!" This is a common greeting among Franciscans and one that reminds all of us that we have our roots in the Gospel as peacemakers and bearers of God's peace to everyone. Because of Francis' simple way and his love for his brothers and sisters, he started to have followers who wanted to live a life of prayer and penance. They saw how happy Francis was and how much he loved God and they wanted to be a part of this wonderful experience.

Francis and his followers were moved by such simple, but profound symbols of their and our Catholic faith. For example, when Francis prayed before the crucifix at San Damiano, he would meditate on Jesus and give him praise in these words:



**MOST HIGH AND GLORIOUS GOD, BRING
LIGHT TO THE DARKNESS
OF MY HEART!
GIVE ME RIGHT FAITH,
CERTAIN HOPE,
AND PERFECT CHARITY.
LORD, GIVE ME INSIGHT AND WISDOM
SO I MIGHT ALWAYS DISCERN
YOUR HOLY AND TRUE WILL. AMEN!**

Upon entering a church or passing any type of crucifix or cross or anything even remotely resembling a cross, Francis and his followers would recite the following words:



**WE ADORE YOU, O LORD JESUS,
HERE AND IN ALL THE CHURCHES
OF THE ENTIRE WORLD
AND WE BLESS YOU,
BECAUSE BY YOUR HOLY CROSS
YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD. AMEN!**

All Franciscans and those who have a devotion to Saint Francis should feel free to adopt these prayers and pray them frequently. Francis wrote wonderful prayers in many forms which should be reflected upon, studied, and prayed (see Armstrong, Regis J., & Brady, Ignatius C. (Trans.). (1996). *Praying with St. Francis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing).

Francis' deep devotion to the Scriptures and his love for Jesus in the crib and on the cross led him to be called as a deacon for the service of the Catholic Church. His life was one of service to his brothers and sisters and therefore he presents us with a wonderful example of being a "servant leader," a person called forth from the group to minister to others as Jesus ministered to his followers.

As a deacon, Francis taught by his example and used words when necessary. The statement that has been credited to him holds that we should "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." His belief was that all people must love God and be willing to change their hearts so that they can more faithfully do God's will. Francis spent a lot of time with his followers and told them stories about his own life experiences and how he grew into the understanding of knowing what God wanted of him. This could be equated with initial formation. Francis was always conscious of his responsibility to inform his followers of their obligations and responsibilities concerning the Order and was therefore a good steward of the gifts with which God had blessed him.

When at the beginning of formation, a person learns the basics about the Secular Franciscan Order and the wider Franciscan Family. The foundation of the Secular Franciscan Order is *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* based on the Gospel. The way of life proposed by *The Rule* is explained in more detail through the *General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order* and *National Statutes of the National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States of America*. All of these resources are tools that should be used to help you understand the way of life which the Secular Franciscan Order espouses. If you are a professed Secular Franciscan, they can help you deepen your living out of your vocation. If you are exploring the possibility of a vocation to the Franciscan life, they will help guide you and the sponsoring fraternity's discernment process concerning your pathway in life.

Ongoing formation was also a vital component of Francis' life. He challenged himself and his sisters and brothers to ask God for guidance and be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Each day was a new opportunity to grow in the knowledge of God and grow closer in our relationship with our heavenly Father. Secular Franciscans must take this commitment to ongoing formation as seriously as Francis did in his time. Francis loved God so much that he spent every day trying to find new ways to become closer and closer to his Father in heaven following the example of Jesus. In time, he was able to conform himself perfectly to the image of Jesus. This was why Francis was blessed to receive the Stigmata (the five wounds of Jesus) on or about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14th) in 1224, just two years before his death. Today, the Franciscan Order celebrates the feast of the Stigmata of our Holy Father Francis on September 17th. All people, especially Secular Franciscans, need to understand that as people called to daily conversion, we must open our hearts to the Word of God and be willing to study and pray so that Christ may be reflected more perfectly in our daily lives.

In this brief reflection, a little background has been provided concerning Francesco Bernardone and the early part of his life. Ask yourself what it was or is that draws you to Francis of Assisi. Look into your heart and remember the stories and the feelings that are present to you when you reflect upon the Little Poor Man of Assisi. Share some of those stories and feelings with members of your fraternity or others who are journeying with you during your time of discernment. Find out how your life parallels that of Francis. Ask God to open your heart so that you will know the will of the Father. It is also important to read and study a biography of St. Francis of Assisi, to come to understand and appreciate *IL Poverello* in his own time and in his own culture.

My prayer for you is that you will come to know in your heart and in your mind the path which God wants you to take. May you be faithful to the call of God! And everyday may you experience the joy and peace that Francis of Assisi felt as he followed his heavenly Father on the journey home. Francis died on October 3rd, 1226; the Franciscan Family and the whole Church celebrate the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi on October 4th.

The Lord give you peace!

