

ADVOCATES OF HUMAN SPIRITUAL RIGHTS: Francis of Assisi, Part 1



Detail of Francis from the fresco "St. Francis Preaches to the Birds" painted on the west side of the nave of the lower basilica in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,

*And first my lord Brother Sun,
Who brings the day; and light you give us through him.
How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor!
Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.*
– “The Canticle of the Sun,” Francis of Assisi

Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone (born 1181/1182, Assisi–died October 3, 1226, Assisi, Italy), known as Francis of Assisi, is the principal patron saint of Italy, the original founder of all Franciscan Orders, and the leader of Roman Catholic reform movements of the early 13th century. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant; his mother, a noble woman from Provence. He was born and grew into adolescence in warring times, when it was customary for nobles of neighboring towns to engage in military skirmishes and while the popes of Christendom called up the Third and Fourth Crusades against the Islamic forces in Palestine. In youth Francis was handsome, gallant, courteous, and witty, a humorous imp and king of frolic who would as soon empty his pockets for a beggar as for himself, popular with everyone in town and the romantic ringleader of the young nobles. He fancied himself a disciple of the Provençal “joyous science,” a troubadour. He early resolved on a military career, and in late 1205 he attempted to join the papal forces against Frederick II, the Holy Roman emperor; Francis’s biographers tells us that a series of dreams or visions urged him back to Assisi where, after a period of uncertainty, he began to seek an answer to his calling in solitary prayer. Not long after, as Dante sings, Francis solemnized his nuptials with Lady Poverty. In 1208, while Pope Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against the “Albigenses” that eradicated the language and culture of Provence, Francis exchanged the remnant of his fashionable clothes for a single tunic in the style of the poorest Umbrian peasant and wandered into the hills behind Assisi, improvising hymns of praise and identifying himself as “herald of the

Great King" and "God's troubadour." Whatever he did in the name of God he did with the same appearance of great import and seriousness and the same light humor and grace he had used in younger days, mischievous and merrily sly, to undermine the tyrannies that complicate human life.

He evolved into a profound mystic and teacher. He made his life into a drama, at times as an example, at other times as a lesson to be watched and not imitated, in order to awaken and return a half-dead Christendom to God. Thoroughly in touch with his age, he used his life to reflect and evoke what was in the heart of the people, and from him the people learned to live in the hope of immortality. He blended the natural and the supernatural so closely in his life that he clothed his asceticism in romantic charm and impregnated his language with the chivalry and poetry of the *chanson de geste*. In his concept, Courtesy was the younger sister of Charity and one of the qualities of God himself; the Divine was reflected in all things; there were sermons in stones; and all things were his brothers and sisters. The life he wished to communicate was the life of Christ, "The Mirror of Perfection," and he took on the *persona* of Christ as a role he played. He never intended to found an Order (he was ordained a deacon later in life under protest) but a brotherhood that expressed God's brotherhood, of which all created things were a part. He did not intend to be a reformer: He tried to correct abuses by holding up Images of God. To those who sought "better gifts," he opened his arms; the others he left alone. His mission was to rekindle the love of God in the world and to reanimate the life of the spirit in the hearts of all.

His example began to attract followers in 1209. When the number of his companions numbered eleven, Francis drew up a rule of life for them to follow, styled his group the Penitents of Assisi, and set out for Rome to seek the approval of the Holy See. Accounts of their reception differ, but it seems Pope Innocent III verbally approved the Rule, and so the

members received the ecclesiastical tonsure. (This "first Rule," as it is now called, has not come down to us in its original form.) After their return to Assisi, the brethren, now called by Francis the Friars Minor— that is, the Lesser Brothers—obtained a permanent foothold near Assisi about 1211 through the generosity of the Benedictines of Monte Subasio, who gave the brethren the little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, the now-famous Portiuncola. Adjoining this humble sanctuary, a few small huts of straw and mud enclosed by a hedge became their first convent and the central spot in the life of Francis. From here, Francis sent forth the Friars Minor two by two like children "careless of the day," singing in their joy and calling themselves the Lord's minstrels. During Lent 1212, Clare, a noble eighteen-year-old heiress of Assisi, sought out Francis to become his spiritual student. In her, Francis found the embodiment of the Lady Poverty whom he had served from afar. Francis gave her a religious habit similar to his own and eventually lodged her in the church of St. Damian with her sister Agnes and a few other female companions who followed her. Thus was founded the sisterhood of Poor Ladies (now known as the Poor Clares).

Francis convoked the first general chapter of the Friars Minor at the Portiuncola in May 1217. At this gathering, Francis apportioned the provinces of the Christian world into so many missions. Francis reserved France for himself, but he was dissuaded from going there by Cardinal Ugolino (soon after made protector of the Friars Minor by Pope Honorius III), who sent Francis to Rome to preach before the pope and cardinals in the pope's own cathedral of St. John Lateran in order to allay the prejudices that had been growing among the Roman Curia at the methods Francis was using. At the second general chapter of the Order in May 1219, Francis assigned a separate mission to each of his foremost disciples. For himself, he selected the seat of the newly pronounced Fifth Crusade against the Saracens. In June he set sail for Egypt with eleven of his companions. Francis was present at the siege and

the taking of the city of Damietta by the Christian crusaders. In the midst of the battle, Francis preached to the crusaders, then passed over to the enemy camp where he was arrested and led to the sultan. It is reported that the sultan received Francis with courtesy and gave him permission to visit the holy places in Palestine. It is also reported that the sultan, charmed by Francis, said: "I would convert to your religion, which is a beautiful one—but both you and I would be murdered."

< PART 2 >