

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## The Canticle of Brother Sun

Francis Of Assisi

**M**ost High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.  
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,  
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

**P**raised 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.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather  
through which You give sustenance to Your creatures.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night  
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us,  
and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love  
and bear infirmity and tribulation.  
Blessed are those who endure in peace  
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.

**P**raised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,  
from whom no living man can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,  
for the second death shall do them no harm.

**P**raise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks  
and serve Him with great humility.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Francis of Assisi: Did You Know?

Little-known or remarkable facts about Francis of Assisi

Mark Galli is managing editor of Christian History.

Francis was originally named Giovanni, or John, after John the Baptist. His father was in France on business when his son was born, and upon his return he renamed him Francesco—"the little Frenchman."

When he was young, Francis tried to become a knight, and he fought in a battle against Assisi's rival city, Perugia. (Francis was captured and imprisoned for a year.) Later he set out to join another army, but he received a dream that instructed him to return home and seek a different calling.

Francis severely disciplined himself against temptations of the flesh. In winter, he would sometimes hurl himself into a ditch full of ice and remain there until every vestige of sinful temptation had departed. To avoid lust, he avoided talking with women. When he was required to speak with one, he fixed his gaze on the ground or sky.

Francis observed literally Jesus' command to "take no thought for the morrow." He would not allow the cook of his Order even to soak vegetables overnight for cooking the next day.

In his preaching, Francis spoke bluntly about sin and the need to repent. "He denounced evil whenever he found it," wrote one early biographer, "and made no effort to palliate it; from him a life of sin met with outspoken rebuke, not support. He spoke with equal candor to great and small."

Francis may have been the first person to create a "living nativity" scene. On Christmas Eve 1223, in order to "set before our bodily eyes how he [Jesus] lay in a manger," Francis and companions worshiped in a cave, surrounded by the traditional oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

Although Francis was known for his infectious joy, he abhorred laughing and idle words. His companion Brother Leo wrote, "Not only did he wish that he should not laugh, but that he should not even afford to others the slightest occasion for laughing."

Even though Francis preached against the sins of the church hierarchy, he had deep respect for clergy. "Those who sin against them," he once said, "commit a greater sin than [if they sinned] against all other people of this world."

Francis's ministry to lepers and his severe lifestyle led to his premature death. For example, he often slept sitting up, usually outdoors on the ground; he customarily fasted the forty days of Lent, as well as many other times. At the end, he was blind, diseased, and emaciated. He probably died from tubercloid leprosy—in his mid-forties.

Since Communion so powerfully demonstrated Christ's sacrificial love, Francis implored his friars to show all possible reverence for it. As for his own experience, one early biographer wrote, "The presence of the Immaculate Lamb used to take him out of himself, so that he was often lost in ecstasy."

Francis was the first person in history to receive the *stigmata*, Christ-like wounds, in his feet, hands, and side.

Francis instructed his friars to avoid learning and scholarship because such activities tempt one to substitute knowledge about God for knowing God. Within fifty years of his death, however, his order had within it some of the world's most learned men, including theologian Bonaventure and philosopher-scientist Roger Bacon.

The Franciscan Order, counting all its branches, is the largest religious order in the Roman Catholic Church today.

It was often reported that wild animals—rabbits, birds, even a wolf—became tame before Francis. He especially cared for animals that were associated with Christ. If he saw a lamb being led off to slaughter, he would try to rescue it by pleading or trading for it.

"Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace," sometimes called "The Prayer of Saint Francis," was not written by Francis—though it does embody his spirit. It was probably composed at a Catholic congress in Chicago, in 1925.

Though Francis revered all creatures, he was not a vegetarian.

After Francis died, the head of his order feared people would steal his body. So he buried Francis's coffin beneath the main altar in the Basilica of Saint Francis—under a slab of granite, gravel, ten welded bands of iron, a 190-pound grill, and finally a 200-pound rock. The plan worked: the coffin wasn't discovered until last century.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Francis of Assisi: From the Editor - Discomforting Francis

Mark Galli

When I hear Jesus' words, especially hard words like the Beatitudes, I sometimes dismiss them: "Impossible! Maybe Jesus could live them—after all, he was both God and man. But not mere mortals!" This baneful theology I readily reject with my mind but all too readily accept with my heart, and thus my moral resolve slackens.

Then I read about Francis of Assisi and discover something discomforting: Francis apparently lived the Beatitudes. He was poor as well as poor in spirit. He was meek and in a perpetual state of self-denial. He mourned his sins as few have ever mourned sins. He was ravenous for righteousness. He practiced mercy, even bathing lepers. He had a pure heart, and when he didn't, he immediately purified it by public confession. He made peace between quarreling factions. He suffered mocking and beating—with joy.

He wasn't perfect, and Protestants may not embrace all of his beliefs. But he shows me—and here I squirm—that Jesus' commands are not wild fantasies of a dreamy idealist but hard-headed guides to a life of freedom and joy. And for mere mortals, no less. Because of Francis, instead of ignoring Jesus, I repent and listen anew to the one who has, as Simon Peter put it, "the words of eternal life."

Such is my experience with "the little, poor man of Assisi." Whether you see Francis as an eccentric or the closest imitation of Christ, he still, eight centuries after his passing, continues to intrigue, and sometimes discomfort.

After reading this issue, let me know how Francis strikes you.

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## Snapshots of a Saint

Stories that reveal Francis's intense, complex personality.

*Like all great people, Francis cannot be sufficiently "explained." Writing about Francis can take us only so far in comprehending him. It is better sometimes to sit back and simply watch him in action. The following stories have been culled from the hundreds of events recorded in Francis's early biographies.*

### To Kiss a Leper

One day while Francis was praying fervently to God, he received an answer: "O Francis, if you want to know my will, you must hate and despise all that which hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess. Once you begin to do this, all that formerly seemed sweet and pleasant to you will become bitter and unbearable, and instead, the things that formerly made you shudder will bring you great sweetness and content." Francis was divinely comforted and greatly encouraged by these words.

Then one day, as he was riding near Assisi, he met a leper. He had always felt an overpowering horror of these sufferers, but making a great effort, he conquered his aversion, dismounted, and, in giving the leper a coin, kissed his hand. The leper then gave him the kiss of peace, after which Francis remounted his horse and rode on his way.

Some days later he took a large sum of money to the leper hospital, and gathering all the inmates together, he gave them alms, kissing each of their hands. Formerly he could neither touch or even look at lepers, but when he left them on that day, what had been so repugnant to him had really and truly been turned into something pleasant.

Indeed, his previous aversion to lepers had been so strong, that, besides being incapable of looking at them, he would not even approach the places where they lived. And if by chance he happened to pass anywhere near their dwellings or to see one of the lepers, even though he was moved to give them an alms through some intermediate person, he would nevertheless turn his face away and hold his nose. But, strengthened by God's grace, he was enabled to obey the command and to love what he had hated and to abhor what he had hitherto wrongfully loved.

### —Legend of the Three Companions

#### A Stone for a Pillow

Francis would not allow his resting place to be laid over with covers or garments when he received hospitality, but the bare ground received his bare limbs, with only a tunic between. When at times he refreshed his small body with sleep, he very often slept sitting up, and in no other position, using a piece of wood or a stone as a pillow.

When his appetite for something particular was aroused, as often happens, he seldom ate that thing afterward. Once, when in an infirmity he had eaten a little chicken, after he regained his strength of body he entered the city of Assisi, and when he had come to the gate of the city, he commanded a certain brother who was with him to tie a rope about his neck and to drag him in this way like a robber through the entire city and to shout in the voice of a herald, saying, "Behold the glutton who has grown

fat on the meat of chickens, which he ate without you knowing about it.”

Many therefore ran to see so great a spectacle, and weeping together with great sighs, they said, “Woe to us miserable ones, whose whole life is spent in blood and who nourish our hearts and bodies with uncleanness and drunkenness.” And thus, pierced to the heart, they were moved to a better way of life by so great an example.

Often, when he was honored by all, he suffered the deepest sorrow, and rejecting the favor of men, he would see to it that he would be rebuked by someone. He would call some brother to him, saying to him, “In obedience, I say to you, revile me harshly and speak the truth against the lies of these others.” And when that brother, though unwilling, would say he was a boor, a hired servant, a worthless being, Francis, smiling and applauding very much, would reply, “May the Lord bless you, for you have spoken most truly; it is becoming that the son of Peter of Bernardone should hear such things.”

—Celano, *First Life*

### **Preaching to the Birds**

When he was near Bevagna, he came to a spot where there was a huge flock of birds of various kinds. The moment he saw them, he ran to them and greeted them as if they understood, and they all turned towards him and waited for him. Those that had perched on the bushes bent their heads, when he came near, and looked at him in an extraordinary way.

He went straight up to them and appealed to them all to hear the word of God, saying, “My brothers, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator. He clothed you with feathers and gave you wings to fly, appointing the clear air as your home, and he looks after you without any effort on your part.” As he continued speaking to them like this, the birds showed their pleasure in a wonderful fashion; they stretched out their necks and flapped their wings, gazing at him with their beaks open.

In his spiritual enthusiasm, Francis walked among them, brushing them with his habit, and not one of them moved until he made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to go. Then they all flew away together with his blessing. His companions who were waiting on the road saw everything and when the saint rejoined them, in the purity and simplicity of his heart, he began to reproach himself for his negligence in never preaching to the birds before.

—Bonaventure, *Major Life*

### **Money and Dung**

Francis, the true friend and imitator of Christ, utterly despised all things belonging to this world and hated money above all else. He always urged his brethren both by word and example to avoid it as they would the Devil. And he told the friars to have as little love and use for money as for dung.

One day, a layman happened to enter Saint Mary of the Portiuncula to pray and laid some money near the cross as an offering. When he had left, one of the friars unthinkingly picked it up and placed it on a window ledge. But when this was reported to blessed Francis, this friar, realizing himself detected, at once hastened to ask forgiveness, and falling to the ground, offered himself for punishment.

The holy Father reproved him and took him severely to task for touching the money. And he ordered him to take the money from the window in his mouth, carry it outside the friary, and lay it on a heap of ass’s dung.

When this friar readily obeyed this order, all who saw or heard were filled with the greatest fear, and thenceforward despised money as ass's dung.

### ***—Mirror of Perfection***

#### **Demolishing a Building**

At this period, the friars had only a single poor cell thatched with straw, with walls of wattle and daub. So when the time drew near for the general chapter [meeting of friars], which was held each year at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, the people of Assisi, realizing that the friars were increasing in number daily, and that all of them assembled there each year, held a meeting. And within a few days, with great haste and zeal, they erected a large building of stone and mortar while blessed Francis was absent and knew nothing of it.

When he returned from one of the provinces and arrived for the chapter, he was astonished at the house built there. And he was afraid that the sight of the house might make other friars build similar large houses in the places where they lived or were to live, and he desired this place to remain the example and pattern for all other houses of the Order. So before the chapter ended he climbed onto the roof of the house and told other friars to climb up with him. And with their help, he began to throw to the ground the tiles with which the house was roofed, intending to destroy it to the very foundations.

But some men-at-arms of Assisi were present to protect the place from the great crowd of sightseers who had gathered to watch the chapter of the friars. And when they saw that blessed Francis and other friars intended to destroy the house, they went up to him at once and said, "Brother, this house belongs to the Commune [district] of Assisi, and we are here to represent the Commune. We forbid you to destroy our house."

When he heard this, blessed Francis said to them, "If the house is yours, I will not touch it." And forthwith he and the other friars came down.

### ***—Mirror of Perfection***

#### **Perfect Joy**

One day at Saint Mary, Saint Francis called Brother Leo and said, "Brother Leo, write this down."

He answered, "I'm ready."

"Write what true joy is," he said. "A messenger comes and says that all the masters of theology in Paris have joined the Order—write: that is not true joy. Or all the prelates beyond the mountains—archbishops and bishops, or the King of France and the King of England—write: that is not true joy. Or that my friars have gone to the unbelievers and have converted all of them to the faith; or that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and I perform many miracles. I tell you that true joy is not in all those things."

"But what is true joy?"

"I am returning from Perugia, and I am coming here at night, in the dark. It is winter time and wet and muddy and so cold that icicles form at the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs, and blood flows from such wounds. And I come to the gate, all covered with mud and cold and ice, and after I have knocked and called for a long time, a friar comes and asks, 'Who are you?' I answer, 'Brother Francis.' And he says, 'Go away. This is not a decent time to be going about. You can't come in.'

"And when I insist again, he replies, 'Go away. You are a simple and uneducated fellow. From now on don't stay with us anymore. We are so many and so important that we don't need you.'

"But I still stand at the gate and say, 'For the love of God, let me come in tonight.' And he answers, 'I won't. Go to the Crosiers' Place [another monastery] and ask there.'

"I tell you that if I kept patience and was not upset—that is true joy and true virtue and salvation of the soul."

—14th century Latin manuscript

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## Francis of Assisi: A Gallery of Five Who Knew a Saint

Not everyone who loved Francis followed his way.

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### **Pietro Di Bernardone (1155?–1220?) Bewildered father**

Pietro di Bernardone was a successful cloth merchant and considerable landowner, having orchards and farms in the plain below Assisi and on the slopes of nearby Mount Subiaso.

He was also a great enthusiast for things French; he was away in France on business, in fact, when his son Giovanni was born. Upon his return, he renamed the boy Francesco, “the little Frenchman,” and made sure his son learned to speak French.

As the boy grew, Pietro taught him the family business, and he was no doubt proud when his robust 21-year-old marched off to war with fellow Assisians to battle rival city Perugia. He was also no doubt alarmed when he heard that his son had been captured and imprisoned. He paid a handsome ransom to get him back. But his son was never the same after that. Francis went off once more to war, but his heart wasn’t in it; he returned saying he was seeking a different calling.

This new calling began to alarm Pietro when one day his son impulsively took fine fabric from the shop, rode to market, and sold it— along with the family horse he had been riding!

A month later, Pietro was informed that Francis was walking the streets of Assisi, begging for food and becoming a laughingstock. An enraged Pietro found his son and beat him. He dragged him home and locked him in a dark cellar, limiting him to bread and water, until his son came to his senses.

These then customary and legal means of enforcing parental authority did not bear fruit. As soon as Pietro was called away on business, Francis’s mother let her son go.

That’s when Pietro called in the authorities. He told the bishop that his son, divine calling or not, had no business stealing from the family. The bishop summoned Francis and instructed him to return what he had taken. Pietro and the bishop waited as an obviously shaken Francis stepped into an adjoining room. When the door opened again, Pietro saw his son walk out naked, carrying his clothes in a neat pile. He placed them at Pietro’s feet and said to all present, “Up to now, I have called Pietro di Bernardone father. Hereafter I shall not say, Father Pietro di Bernardone, but Our Father Who Art in Heaven!”

It is a scene full of wonder. Was Francis’s acceptance of his divine mission primarily a rejection of his father? If so, what personal issues divided father and son? Or did a life of poverty require forsaking his father, who would always represent the lure of Mammon, the life of ease and comfort?

We simply don’t know, for the historical sources remain silent. We can only watch as transfixed son and astonished father walk out of the cathedral, one on the narrow path of pilgrimage, the other on the wide path to his fabric shop—never, as far as we know, to have anything to do with each other again.

**Giles of Assisi**  
**(c.1190–1262)**  
**Laborer, lover, and knight**

Like many young men, Giles was no doubt filled with dreams of glory, daring, and great deeds. He observed the eccentric yet enchanting behavior of his fellow Assisian, Francis. Then, after two prominent citizens of the town forsook wealth and status to join Francis, 18-year-old Giles did the same. On Saint George's Day, when churches across Europe honored the great knight's dragon slaying, Giles presented himself to the "little poor man."

Giles became a sort of spiritual knight, traveling to Rome, to Saint James of Compostela in Spain, to the Holy Land. His quest? To know his Lord as he visited holy places, and to make him known as he lived and preached the way of Francis.

As a boy, Giles knew well the sweat of the farm, and on his travels, he earned his room and board by chopping firewood, sweeping rooms, washing dishes, moving haystacks, cutting cane, fetching water. For Giles labor was never "common" but instead an uncommon opportunity for joy and moral purification.

Once he overheard a worker scold idle peasants, "Don't talk, but do, do!" Giles, thrilled at this crisp summary, ran toward some friars he was with and, while still some distance away, shouted, "Just listen a bit to what this man is saying: 'Don't talk, but do, do!'"

Knight and laborer Giles was also a lover. The most extraordinary moments of his life came during prayer, in moments of ecstasy with God. From 1234 to his death, he forsook traveling and pursued a life of contemplation.

To that secluded spot near Perugia came people as poor as Giles and as great as Pope Gregory IX and as brilliant as philosopher Bonaventure, all to seek his advice or venerate him.

His sayings were colored with talk of life in the country: "Sins are like burrs that stick to clothes and are hard to pluck off." Sometimes chivalry supplied the analogy: Whoever gives up prayer because of difficulties "is like a man who runs away from battle." The good knight does not immediately leave the battlefield when he is wounded or struck by the enemy; rather he continues to battle vigorously to win.

Many of his sayings, collected in *The Sayings of Brother Giles*, are paradoxical charges: "If you want to see well, pluck out your eyes and be blind. If you want to hear well, be deaf. If you want to walk well, cut off your feet."

This quest, begun at age 18 at the foot of Francis, absorbed Giles until his death at age 72. As he put it, "If a man were to live a thousand years and not have anything to do outside himself, he would have enough to do within, in his own heart."

**Anthony of Padua**  
**(1195–1231)**  
**Scholar and "wonder worker"**

Today Saint Anthony is widely invoked for the return of lost property, for protection of travelers, and for the health of the pregnant. In paintings, we see him with a Bible or lily in hand, representing his knowledge of Scripture, or with a donkey, which supposedly knelt before the sacrament he once held aloft.

In history, though, we see another, more rugged side of Anthony.

Born in Lisbon to a noble family, he spent the passions of youth on Augustine: he joined and began studying with members of the Augustinian order at age 15. Ten years later, his life of quiet devotion was disrupted.

One day some relics passed through town: the remains of Franciscan friars recently martyred in Morocco. Anthony was electrified. Like many spiritual athletes of the times, nothing excited his blood more than the thought of dying for Christ. He sought immediate release from his order and joined the Franciscans. Appointed a missionary at his request, he boarded a ship headed for Morocco.

He never made it. Illness forced his return, and a storm forced the returning ship to Sicily. So he made his way to Assisi, where his life again became one of quiet prayer and work aimed at spiritual perfection.

Almost immediately, though, his quiet was interrupted. When he preached at his ordination, it was discovered that studious and passionate Anthony was learned and eloquent. Francis then appointed him to teach theology for the burgeoning Franciscan Order.

Some Franciscans were startled at this: Hadn't Francis taught that study was to be avoided because it fostered pride? Perhaps this is why Francis wrote Anthony a now famous letter: "Brother Francis [sends his] wishes of health to Brother Anthony, my 'bishop.' It pleases me that you teach sacred theology to the brothers, as long as—in the words of the Rule—you 'do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion' with study of this kind."

For the few next years, Anthony held various administrative posts—and he preached. He was phenomenally popular, sometimes attracting crowds of up to 30,000. He fearlessly denounced powerful men for their unjust treatment of the poor, and moneylenders for their profiteering. So successful was he at converting heretics in Southern France and Northern Italy, hotbeds for the infamous Cathari, he was called "The Hammer of the Heretics."

He also became known as a "wonder worker" for the miracles he wrought, sometimes during his preaching. One story has it that, as he spoke at a gathering of Franciscans, Francis was "raised up into the air" and blessed the brothers. In another, as Anthony preached to an international gathering of clergy, all understood him as if he spoke in their own tongues—a new Pentecost.

From 1230 on, he spent the remainder of his life near Padua. His furious pace, though, brought about premature death at age 36. Within only six months, he was canonized.

He is considered to be the founder of all later Franciscan scholarship and is now called the "Evangelical Doctor"; for in 1946 he was named a Doctor of the Church for "the great advantage the church has derived" from his learning and holy life.

### **Gregory IX (1170–1241) Machiavellian friend**

Pope Gregory IX doesn't seem like the type of person who would be a friend of "the little poor man" of Assisi. Take, for instance, his handling of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II.

When in 1227, Frederick balked about going on a crusade, the newly installed Gregory excommunicated him. When Frederick relented and left for Palestine, Gregory lifted the excommunication but had Frederick's holdings in Italy attacked. He also told Frederick's Italian subjects that they no longer owed Frederick allegiance.

When Frederick hurriedly concluded a treaty (giving the Muslims possession of Palestine) and returned to Italy to recover lost territory, Gregory excommunicated him again.

Years later, when Frederick called Gregory "wickedness ... seated on the throne of the Lord," Gregory didn't quite turn the cheek: he called Frederick the "monster of slander."

Take another instance: Gregory has the dubious distinction of founding the Inquisition. It was his way of combating heretic Waldensians and Cathari in France, Italy, and Spain. Though he gave the Dominicans responsibility for prosecuting heretics, he personally took on special cases. Punishments were not limited to excommunication but also included civil punishments: whippings, stocks, torture, and in extreme cases, hanging or burning.

Still, this Gregory was a man "afire with love" for Francis. While still Bishop Ugolino of Ostia, he had met Francis: "When he saw that Francis despised all earthly things more than the rest," wrote an early biographer, "and that he was alight with the fire that Jesus had sent upon the earth, his soul was from that moment knit with the soul of Francis and he devoutly asked his prayers and most graciously offered his protection to him in all things."

Ugolino soon became Cardinal Protector of the Franciscan Order, and as cardinal and as Pope Gregory IX, he fostered growth of the Franciscans and the Poor Clares. He encouraged the mission work of the Franciscans (and Dominicans), and he canonized men like Francis and Anthony of Padua in record time.

Some of this attention was no doubt politically motivated: it was to his advantage to increase an order that was directly subject to his authority. But in this fierce and wily politician there also seems to have been a humble reverence for the man whose life and teachings pointed to a better way.

### **Elias of Cortona (c. 1180–1253) Prodigal Franciscan**

Elias was a man of remarkable gifts, possessing a character that, as one historian put it, "was a strange combination of piety and pride."

He was a notary in the town of Bologna when he joined Francis, and he quickly became a trusted friend. Francis placed great confidence in him, perhaps because, as one historian wrote, "he admired gifts in this organizing genius which he himself did not possess." Elias was appointed provincial of the friars in Syria, and in 1221, minister general of the entire Franciscan order.

Elias was close to Francis in his last years. According to one early biographer, he received Francis's dying blessing: "You, my son, I bless above all and throughout all." At Francis's death, the grieving Elias gathered witnesses to verify Francis's stigmata and wrote the letter informing friars of their founder's passing.

Though no longer minister general, he was entrusted with building a church in Francis's honor. To that basilica Francis's relics were transferred in 1230, and, to prevent theft, Elias had them buried under gravel, bands of iron, and heavy stone.

Two years later, Elias was again proclaimed minister general of the order. To honor Francis, whom he loved dearly, he wanted the Order to be great and powerful. He failed to realize how paradoxical his efforts would be.

He completed the ornate lower church of the great basilica that today dominates Assisi, pressuring

ministers and brothers to contribute. He also promoted missionary work in Syria and throughout Europe, and he enlarged study houses. Under his leadership, the Order grew in numbers and influence.

In appointing, transferring, and dismissing ministers, however, he relied on the almost unlimited powers granted him by the Rule of the Order. He also showed favoritism in his appointments.

His personal lifestyle scandalized some: on the grounds of health, Elias insisted on a personal cook, and he preferred to have his meals served by properly attired servants.

Conservatives finally orchestrated a coup in 1239, and Elias was deposed. When Elias joined up with Frederick II, the pope's perpetual antagonist, Elias was excommunicated. A small body of friars followed him, and for them he erected a monastery at Cortona.

Fourteen years after being deposed, though, as he lay on his deathbed, Elias did penance, and he died absolved.

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Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Francis of Assisi 1181-1220: Christian History Timeline

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### Francis of Assisi

**1181/2** Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone is born and baptized in Assisi, Italy; later named Francesco

**1190** Francis attends the parish school at San Giorgio

**1193** Chiara di Favarone (Clare) is born to a renowned family of nobility

**1199-1200** Civil war rages in Assisi, a city intent on independence from both papal and imperial power; nobility flee to the city of Perugia, Assisi's arch-rival

**1202** Francis fights in a battle between Assisi and Perugia, is captured and imprisoned in Perugia

**1203** Francis's father ransoms him; Francis endures a long illness

**1204** Late: Sets out to participate in a crusade; en route, a vision directs him to return home to seek God's will

**1205** Spring: Francis's gradual conversion begins: he gives generously to the poor and embraces a leper; he is mocked by fellow Assisians; he seeks solitude with God in caves and abandoned churches  
Fall: In the church of San Damiano, Francis hears, "Go, repair my house which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin"; he sells cloth from his father's shop and gives money to repair the church building

**1206** Jan./Feb. His enraged father takes Francis before the bishop of Assisi, demanding repayment for his cloth; Francis strips, returning his clothes and renouncing his inheritance  
Spring: Nurses lepers and begs for stones to repair churches

**1208** Desires to imitate Jesus perfectly; begins to preach repentance and peace; several young men leave their families and possessions to join Francis

**1209** Writes a rule [guiding charter] for his new order; goes to Rome to gain papal approval for the order; settles with his "brothers" in a small church in Assisi called "The Portiuncula"

**1211** Tries to reach Muslim territory to convert Muslims; heavy winds detour his ship and force his return

**1212** Clare is received as a follower of Francis; she begins the Second Order of St. Francis, known as the Poor Clares

**1213** Francis receives as a gift La Verna, a mountain in the Tuscan Valley; he often seeks solitude there

**1215** Francis begins his "Eucharistic Crusade," exhorting people to show reverence for Communion

**1217** Some 5,000 brothers convene; Francis seeks volunteers to preach in Germany, Tunis, and Syria; eventually, brothers reach Spain and England

**1219** Franciscan missionaries to Morocco killed, the order's first martyrs; Francis sails to the Holy Land and in Egypt tries to convert the Muslim sultan

**1220** Pope Honorius III requires Francis to establish more discipline in his order; recognizing his poor administrative skills, Francis appoints Peter of Catanii as minister general

**1221** Francis writes a letter that becomes the basic rule of the Third Order, a Franciscan order for lay men and women; at the request of church authorities, Francis begins to create a more formal rule for the First Order

**1223** Fall: After much debate in the brotherhood, Francis revises his Rule; final revision of the Rule approved by Pope Honorius III

Dec. 24/25: Exhausted and ill, Francis travels to Greccio; he re-enacts the Christmas story, popularizing the nativity scene

**1224** Francis returns to La Verna to pray and fast; he receives the stigmata, marks of Christ's wounds

**1225** Spring: Nearly blind and suffering possibly from tuberculoid leprosy, Francis returns to San Damiano, where Clare and her sisters care for him; he writes ***The Canticle of Brother Sun***.

Late summer: Submits to cauterization treatment for his eye maladies

**1226** Sept. Asks to be taken back to the Portiuncula; composes a final verse about "Sister Death" for his ***Canticle***

Oct. 3: Dies; buried at the Church of San Giorgio in Assisi

**1227** Francis's friend and protector, Cardinal Ugolino, becomes Pope Gregory IX

**1228** Canonized

**1230** Remains are transferred to the Basilica of Saint Francis, built in his honor

### **Francis's World**

**1180** University of Paris founded; glass windows first in English homes

**1187-1191** Third Crusade

**1191** Second era of Maya civilization begins; tea comes to Japan from China

**1196-1198** Famine decimates Western Europe

**1198** Innocent III elected Pope; Fourth Crusade announced

**1200** Engagement rings come into fashion; Cambridge University founded

**1202** First court jesters in Europe

**1204** Constantinople sacked in Fourth Crusade [Fourth Crusade ] ; city of Amsterdam founded

**1210-1221** North transept of Chartres Cathedral in France built

**1212** Children's Crusade; Rheims Cathedral begun (completed in 1311)

**1214** Roger Bacon, greatest scientist of his time, born

**1215** Fourth Lateran Council affirms transubstantiation of elements at Communion; Magna Carta confirmed

**1217** Thomas Aquinas born; University of Salamanca founded

**1218** Genghis Kahn conquers Persia

**1220** Dominic founds his Dominican order; giraffes first shown in Europe

**1221** Vienna becomes a city

**1230** Founding of Berlin

**1233** Coal first mined in Newcastle, England

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Francis's Troubled World

In that day, it took extreme measures to live for peace: a photo-essay.

The Editors

Thirteenth-century Europe was full of war and rumors of war. Take the "Commune" of Assisi, as it was called.

A commune was essentially an independent city-state that included surrounding country and towns. Self-governing Assisi could wage war, which it had been doing on rival Perugia on and off for over a century. In 1200, war began again, first with sporadic raids and the destruction of crops and border towers.

In November 1202, Assisi's army amassed in the city and likely passed through the gate leading to Perugia. In that army rode Francis, a member of the *Compagnia dei Cavalieri*, the city's armed elite, knights and merchants who could afford a horse and armor. On the plain between the cities, a furious battle ensued, and the men of Assisi were slaughtered: "The hand is not to be found with the foot, or the entrails with the chest," wrote one chronicler of the carnage; "on the forehead horrible windows open out instead of eyes."

Francis, fortunately, was taken prisoner and would be ransomed within a year. The experience, though dreadfully common for the times, marked him in an uncommon way.

## Starting over Again

In that age, there were few refuges of peace. Even the church fought wars, mostly with Frederick II, who, as Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily, surrounded the vulnerable Papal States.

The church's moral condition was also deeply troubled. Added to the plentiful reports of clergy promiscuity, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) noted in disgust, "Many priests have lived luxuriously. They have passed the time in drunken revels, neglecting religious rites. When they have been at Mass, they have chatted about commercial affairs. They have left churches and tabernacles in an indecent state, sold posts and sacraments."

One little church that physically symbolized this abysmal moral condition was located just outside of Assisi. San Damiano was at least 200 years old, crumbling, deserted, seemingly beyond repair. It was here that Francis received his revelation to rebuild the church.

With trowel and stone and mortar, he did just that, and then moved on to another church, and another still. The third was called Saint Mary of the Angels, or more usually, the Portiuncula, "the little portion." Francis made the abandoned, sagging chapel home for his new order, telling his brothers "to make poor dwellings, of wood, not of stone, and to erect small places according to a humble plan"—a little plan with large consequences.

## Living Symbols of Peace

In later years, Francis would often retreat to a hermitage in Greccio for prayer. Greccio was a *castello*,

a fortified town. After dark, a typical castello would shut its gates and impose a curfew to curtail robberies, rapes, and murders. In such a setting, where fear and violence tread darkly, Francis re-enacted the birth of the Prince of Peace.

La Verna was another retreat of Francis. Donated to Francis by Count Orlando dei Catani, a man of considerable military and economic might, it became the place where Francis received the crucified marks of his "weak and poor" Lord.

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## The Case for Downward Mobility

Why did Francis insist that his followers live in absolute poverty?

Dr. William S. Stafford is professor of church history at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. He is author of *Domesticating the Clergy: The Inception of the Reformation in Strasburg, 1522–1524* (Scholar's Press, 1994).

Francis was the son of a cloth merchant, yet after his conversion he wore a miserable, threadbare patched tunic.

When his father begged Assisi's bishop to stop his crazy son from giving away family property, Francis stood in front of the bishop and stripped himself naked to proclaim that he had no father but God.

In the surging profit economy of northern Italy, Francis told a Franciscan brother who had accepted a coin to shove it into a dunghill with his lips.

Crucial events in Francis's relationship with Jesus Christ turned on poverty. He was enamored with the poverty modeled by Christ and the disciples, and he insisted his followers live in radical poverty. Why?

### Poor Jesus

Francis was not a systematic theologian articulating an explicit, developed doctrine of poverty. He preferred acting out the truth to stating it in bald words. Still, his *Admonitions* (a collection of directives to his friars), and the *Earlier* and *Later Rules* (guides for his Order), offer material for an outline of his "gospel of Jesus' poverty."

To Francis the Gospels made it utterly clear that the only way to know God was through Jesus. And the Jesus Francis knew was humble:

"Why do you not recognize the truth and believe in the Son of God? See, daily he humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; daily he comes to us in a humble form; daily he comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest" (*Admonitions* I:15–18).

Jesus was the one who emptied himself of status and glory and came as one who was humble and poor. Francis saw Jesus as coming in humility whether as a poor preacher or through a piece of bread (in Communion). Status and glory went with wealth; the high and the mighty were always the rich. But the crucified Jesus was lowly, weak, and therefore *poor*.

Those whom Jesus called to repent of the world's way and to follow his "footprints" to eternal life had to be humble like him, renouncing the pride of station and power. That meant renouncing possessions above all. When Francis stood in front of the bishop of Assisi and stripped off his father's clothing, it was a symbolic renunciation of his birth family's whole life, a round of godless getting and spending.

### Relinquishing the Will

Ever since the Fall, humans had claimed to possess things for themselves alone. Francis was particularly harsh about any form of "appropriation": arrogating to oneself what is God's:

"The Lord said to Adam: Eat of every tree; do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was able to eat of every tree of paradise, since he did not sin, as long as he did not go against obedience. For the person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good **who appropriates to himself his own will** and thus exalts himself over the good things which the Lord says and does in him; and thus ... what he eats becomes for him the fruit of the knowledge of evil" (**Admonitions** II:14; emphasis added).

Glorying in your thoughts and deeds or lording it over brothers and sisters or owning property—all alike were acts of appropriation. They blocked out God and neighbor in favor of self. They did precisely what Jesus had not done. They flew in the face of the reality that God alone was Lord.

That reality, Francis constantly reminded his hearers, God would enforce at the Last Judgment. Thus Jesus' call to repentance was a call to turn from appropriation to poverty:

"The Lord says in the Gospel: 'He who does not renounce everything he possesses cannot be my disciple,' and 'He who wishes to save his life must lose it' " (Luke 14:33, 9:24; **Admonitions** III:1).

### Concrete Acts

Anyone who decided to join Francis had to give away all possessions to the poor and live as the poorest of the poor.

Francis knew that some people who sincerely wanted to follow Jesus on the way of poverty could not lawfully do so. Bishops had no right to renounce the incomes and prerogatives of their sees; married people could not break up their households and vow poverty and celibacy without a spouse's permission. For such people, Francis said, the spiritual desire to do so was enough. He supported the Franciscan "Third Order," which permitted people to follow a rule of simplicity and devotion to Jesus while remaining in callings they were not free to abandon.

Yet all through his life, he insisted on literal poverty whenever possible. Concrete, life-changing acts were more pungent for Francis than feelings or abstract principles:

"Woe to that religious [friar] who does not keep in his heart the good things the Lord reveals to him and who does not manifest them to others **by his actions**, but rather seeks to make such good things known by his words. He thereby receives his reward, while those who listen to him carry away but little fruit" (**Admonitions** XXI:23; emphasis added).

### Joyful Poverty

Following Jesus' poverty inevitably brought suffering, which Francis accepted as self-mortification. His last years were suffused with darkness and pain, culminating in his receiving the stigmata of the Crucified (wounds in his hands, feet, and side). Yet these years also brought blessing and joy:

"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God. The truly pure of heart are those who despise the things of earth and seek the things of heaven, and who never cease to adore and behold the Lord God living and true with a pure heart and soul" (**Admonitions** XVI:12).

Those who were truly poor, and who thus did not appropriate honor or glory to themselves, were the only ones who could freely give honor and glory to God. Francis's praise of God erupted at all times, even at the times of greatest darkness, as the **Canticle of Brother Sun** makes plain. The **Earlier Rule**, a list of demanding exhortations to the freedom of holy poverty, appropriately concludes with an ecstatic hymn:

Let all of us  
wherever we are  
in every place  
at every hour  
at every time of day  
everyday and continually  
believe truly and humbly  
and keep in [our] heart  
and love, honor, adore, serve  
praise and bless  
glorify and exalt  
magnify and give thanks to  
the most high and supreme eternal God  
Trinity and Unity  
the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit  
Creator of all  
Savior of all who believe in Him  
and hope in Him  
and love Him  
Who is  
without beginning and without end unchangeable, invisible,  
indescribable, ineffable  
incomprehensible, unfathomable,  
blessed, worthy of praise,  
glorious, exalted on high, sublime most high, gentle, lovable,  
delectable and totally desirable  
above all else  
forever.  
Amen.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

## A Time to Be Poor

In Francis's day, abandoning possessions was seen as a key to holiness

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Although Francis and his Order of Friars Minor celebrated poverty with a new intensity, voluntary poverty was hardly new in Christian tradition. Luke's Gospel emphasized Jesus' call to renunciation, and his Acts of the Apostles idealized the Jerusalem community in which "none claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32).

In the third century, hermits like Antony began selling all their possessions and regarded money as a demonic snare. The monastic Christianity that soon followed was likewise founded on vowed poverty.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, new tides of devotion led Christians to yearn for the "perfect life"—a life that would mirror Christ's and not compromise God's perfect will. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, considered possessions an intolerable distraction from the love of God.

## The Gross Gap

As Duane V. Lapsanski, in *Evangelical Perfection*, has shown, the century before Francis, monastic writers and wandering preachers increasingly focused on "evangelical poverty," the life of poverty modeled by Christ and the apostles.

In the newly burgeoning towns, the townsfolk who prospered did so mostly by trade or usury, both of which were, at best, morally ambiguous. In the view of moralist preachers, the wealth of the towns was the result of greed and exploitation, the gap between rich and poor was gross, and there was no way the judgment of God could be evaded. It was no accident that Francis was the son of an urban merchant or that money caused him spiritual nausea. Evangelical poverty explicitly presented itself as an act of penitence and as the divine verdict against the neglect of Christ's poor.

Radical preachers' vigorous support of evangelical poverty did not go unchallenged. Not all tradition-minded (and comfortable) bishops and abbots were pleased with claims that they were inadequately Christ-like. As members of mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) began to attend universities, their theologians came to debate the claims of apostolic poverty with great acuity and considerable heat. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, argued that love, not poverty, was the measure of perfection. The Franciscans responded by forbidding members of their order to read Thomas's works!

It was in such a time, a time passionate about poverty, that Francis formulated his views.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Francis's Tenacious Lady

Gentle Clare of Assisi had to defy family and church to follow in Francis's way.

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While praying before a cross in 1193, a woman named Ortulana of Assisi received a prophecy about the child growing within her womb: "Do not be afraid, woman, for you will give birth in safety to a light which will give light more clearly than light itself." When the child was born, Ortulana named her **Chiara**, or Clare, "the clear one."

In many ways, the light of Saint Clare, disciple of Saint Francis, has been hidden under Francis's bushel—until now. Last year's celebration of the 800th anniversary of her birth has sparked what a Minnesota newspaper described as "Clare mania." And for good reason: Clare carved out her own unique, attractive way of being Franciscan.

### Noble Family

Clare of Assisi was born into the noble Offreduccio family, which boasted seven great and wealthy knights. Her father, Favarone, was a count, who probably fought and died in a crusade. Clare's mother made pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the tombs of Peter and Paul in Rome, and the shrine of Saint James of Compostela in Spain.

As a beautiful noble woman, Clare had many suitors, but she refused all marriage proposals because she had made a private vow of virginity. In addition, she divested herself of her inheritance and gave the money to the poor. In fact, her sister Beatrice tells us that Clare sold part of Beatrice's inheritance, too!

During her early teen years, Clare prayed regularly with other women, including other noble women. Like her mother, Clare slowly earned a reputation for good works and virtue.

### Following Francis

By this time, Francis had publicly rejected his father's wealth and was enlisting help to rebuild the walls of the Church of San Damiano. Before Francis ever mentioned having a community of brothers, he prophesied at San Damiano that "ladies will dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout his holy church."

Perhaps he was searching for women to fulfill this prophecy when he first visited Clare in her home. (Beatrice, though, later said Francis came because he heard about Clare's holiness.)

Francis continued to visit Clare, and she "more frequently" visited him (both accompanied by their companions). Though Clare was already living a holy life in a community, Francis wanted her to start a new way of life. Then again, maybe Clare, having heard him preach, needed little persuasion.

In any case, on the evening of Palm Sunday 1212, Clare slipped through the door of her family home and made her way down the winding streets of Assisi, outside the city walls, through the dark olive groves, to the small chapel called the Portiuncula, where Francis and his brothers waited. She put on the drab garb

of the Poor Brothers, and her hair was cut. Francis's brothers then accompanied her to the Benedictine monastery in Bastia.

"After the news reached her relatives," *The Legend of Saint Clare* notes, "they condemned with a broken heart the deed ... and, banding together as one, they ran to the place, attempting to obtain what they could not [that is, Clare]. They employed violent force, poisonous advice, and flattering promises, trying to persuade her to give up such a worthless deed that was unbecoming to her class and without precedence in her family. But taking hold of the altar clothes, she bared her tonsured head, maintaining she would in no way be torn away from the service of Christ."

After another relocation, and another attempt by her family to bring her home, Clare and her sister Agnes, who had joined her, moved to San Damiano, dedicating their lives to Francis's way, as poor virgins in imitation of the poor Jesus.

### **Poor Ladies**

Soon other noble women came to live and pray with Clare, including her mother and her sister Beatrice. They called themselves the Poor Ladies. (Today members of her order are known as Poor Clares.)

Their life together was austere: they ate food the brothers begged for them, wore simple clothing, lived from the work of their hands, and fasted often. Clare's health, in fact, broke down as a result of her fasting. Nonetheless, she continued making cloth, providing altar linens to more than fifty churches around Assisi.

Clare called the Poor Ladies her *sisters*, rather than *nuns*, for she believed they equally shared in the humanity of Jesus. When she was 21, she reluctantly agreed to accept the role of abbess, though she never used the title during her forty years of service.

Nor did she ever ask her sisters to do anything she would not do herself, including, as one sister later wrote, "giving them water by hand, washing the mattresses of the sick sisters with her own hand, and even washing the feet of the serving sisters." One account of her life adds that Clare washed the mattresses of the sick, "not running away from their filth nor shrinking from their stench."

Clare's reputation spread, and many sought her healing touch for themselves or others. *The Legend of Saint Clare* tells how Francis sent Brother Stephen to her because he was afflicted with madness. Clare made the sign of the cross over him and then permitted him to sleep in the place where she usually prayed. Shortly he arose, healed; he returned to Francis freed of his insanity.

Clare always made the sign of the cross over the person who needed healing, indicating from where she drew her miraculous power.

Clare and her Poor Ladies remained devoted to Francis and cherished his visits and teachings. When he died in 1226, they felt the loss deeply. Thomas of Celano described Francis's funeral procession as it passed by Clare's Monastery of San Damiano:

"Redoubling their sighs and looking upon him with great sorrow of heart and many tears, they began to proclaim in a restrained voice: 'Father, father, what shall we do? Why do you abandon us in our misery? Or to whom do you leave us, who are so desolate? Why did you not send us rejoicing ahead of you to the place where you are going—us whom you leave in prison, us whom you will never visit as you used to?'"

### **Hunger Strike**

In 1216, after much pleading, Clare had received from Pope Innocent III the right to live without communal property. But two years later, Cardinal Ugolino issued a new rule for her monastery, and it did not include this Privilege of Poverty. Clare objected, but without effect.

Then, after Francis's death in 1226, a papal bull prohibited Francis's brothers from serving as preachers to the Poor Ladies; there was concern about the possibility of sexual indiscretion.

At this point, Clare protested vigorously, refusing the food that the friars supplied her monastery. Her biography says, "The pious mother, sorrowing that her sisters would more rarely have the food of sacred teaching, sighed, 'Let him now take away from us all the brothers, since he has taken away those who provide us with the food that is vital.'" In short, she went on a hunger strike.

When Pope Gregory heard of it, he rescinded this aspect of his rule. In 1247, another rule was imposed upon her order by Innocent IV. Clare, unhappy with this rule, wrote her own Form of Life, which was eventually approved.

### **Clare's Way**

Clare's spirituality was profoundly influenced by two central mysteries of the Christian faith, the Incarnation and the Redemption.

Clare was impressed at how the Virgin mother carried Jesus in her womb. She concluded that she and her sisters had a similar mission: "As the glorious Virgin of virgins carried him materially, so you, too, by following her footprints, especially those of poverty and humility, can without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, holding him by whom all things are held together."

The impoverished state of Jesus' birth, life, and death became the basis of Clare's poverty. In her **Testament**, Clare urged her sisters to always observe poverty "out of love of the God who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross." In addition to physical poverty, though, Clare sought spiritual poverty, emptying herself to make room for God.

For Clare, the Passion of Christ showed that temporal suffering is transformed into eternal glory. Urging Agnes of Prague, who had established a sister foundation, to persevere in poverty, Clare wrote, "If you suffer with him, you will reign with him. [If you] weep [with him], you shall rejoice with him; [If you] die with him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints, and in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among [all]."

### **Death of a Saint**

In August 1253, as Clare lay on her deathbed, her Form of Life was finally given papal approval, the first rule written by a woman to be so approved. Two days later, on August 11, she died and was buried in the church of San Giorgio, where her body remains today.

During her forty-year ministry, in spite of the many obstacles she had faced, Clare's order had grown rapidly. It began as a single house in Assisi; by the time of her death, there were 147 houses of "Damianites" throughout Europe.

Like Francis, Clare was canonized rapidly, two years after her death, by Pope Alexander IV, a close friend of the Poor Ladies.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## The Strange Stigmata

Did Francis really receive the wounds of Jesus?

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***The Italian poet Dante, in his Divine Comedy, said of Francis, "He received from Christ the last seal, which his members bore for two years." By "the last seal," Dante meant the Christ-like wounds that appeared on Francis, which Dante interpreted as a confirmation of Francis's life of Christ-like suffering.***

***Francis was the first to claim to have received such "stigmata." But did he actually receive such wounds? What kinds of wounds were these? What caused them? What did they mean? Christian History put these questions to Dr. Lawrence S. Cunningham, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. He is author of St. Francis of Assisi (Harper & Row, 1981).***

The basic facts about which the early sources on the life of Saint Francis agree are these: Two years before he died, Francis went on retreat with three of his long-time companions, to a mountain called La Verna. He was tired, sick, nearly blind, a person who no longer headed the movement of little brothers he had founded.

On or about the Feast of the Holy Cross (September 14), he had an ecstatic experience. He saw a vision of a six-winged seraph (compare Isa. 6:2) embracing a crucified man, and the crucified man seemingly pierced Francis's body.

Afterward, until his death in 1226, Francis carried on his body what appeared to be wounds on his hands, feet, and side. An early account described the wounds as dark scars that would periodically bleed.

In announcing Francis's death, the head of his order, Brother Elias of Cortona, wrote a circular letter to all the friars. Elias said that those who were with Francis at his death inspected the wounds, which Elias called, for the first time, ***stigmata***.

The Greek word ***stigma*** means "brand mark" or "scar." The word occurs in Paul's letter to the Galatians: "I carry the brand marks (***ta stigmata***) of Jesus on my body" (6:17). The same word was carried over by Jerome in his Latin Vulgate version; Elias was simply using Paul's vocabulary to describe the bodily marks of Francis.

### Real Wounds?

This strange phenomenon, which Elias said was "unheard of in our time," seems not to have been a fiction. It is well attested in the earliest sources.

The early Franciscans collected notarized statements from those who saw the marks on Francis, both during his life and after his death. In less than a decade after Francis's death, a painting (the Berlingheri altarpiece at Pescia) depicts the wounds on the hands and feet of Francis.

Francis had the stigmata: that seems defensible given the historical evidence, even though, in his own

day, there were doubters.

### **What Caused Them?**

Scholars of the stigmata, even Catholic believers like the late Herbert Thurston, S.J., almost unanimously agree that such phenomena are best explained as bodily reactions to intense ecstatic and psychological experiences.

In Francis's case, the early biographers of Francis clearly connect the stigmata to his intense devotion to the crucified Christ. All of Francis's preaching about poverty and self-denying love were intimately linked to his understanding of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

Of course, whether a profound experience has ultimately been brought on by God is not in the purview of science to decide. Yet Francis's demeanor after the experience suggests to some that his was a genuine miracle. He bore his stigmata without becoming obsessed by them or allowing them to become an object of curiosity. After the events on La Verna, and for two years until his death, he still went on preaching tours, despite his ill health.

In addition, during that same period he composed his lyrical poem ***The Canticle of Brother Sun***. If one can judge from that brilliant composition, he did not dwell morbidly on what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the gnarl of the nails ... the niche of the lance."

### **Enduring Significance?**

Though Francis is the first person in history to have had the stigmata, subsequent Christian history records any number of persons who claimed them.

Take the most famous stigmatic of this century. Capuchin Franciscan friar Padre Pio, who died in 1968, bore bodily wounds for nearly fifty years. He was the object of much interest during his lifetime, and visits to his monastery in Southern Italy had all the air of a medieval pilgrimage.

Other alleged cases of stigmata in our century have proven to be frauds of self-mutilation or cases of psychic pathology.

In any event, it may come as a surprise to some that the Catholic church is very slow to highlight the miraculous significance of phenomena like the stigmata.

In this century, the church kept Padre Pio out of public view for nearly a quarter of a century, for fear that a cult would quickly build up around him.

As far as Francis's stigmata, even the papal document of canonization (two years after the death of Francis in 1228) makes no mention of it.

Yet the stigmata have had a significant influence on the broader church. Before Francis there had been a tradition, going back at least to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), that emphasized an emotional piety dwelling on the suffering humanity of Jesus.

Francis's teaching and experience brought that form of devotion to a new pitch. He added impetus to a mystical tradition that later would break out in various forms: from devotion to the blood of Jesus to modern mystical treatises like ***The Autobiography of Saint Theresa of Lisieux***. One could argue, in fact, that the increasingly realistic depiction of Christ's wounds in art (especially in crucifixes) can be linked to the widespread acceptance of the story of the stigmata of Francis.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Fractures in Francis's Order

How should his followers obey his instructions?

"Make me an instrument of your peace" may typify the Franciscan spirit, but Francis's followers have sometimes been anything but peaceful. Fights broke out over how strictly and carefully to obey Francis's commands. Controversies over the **Later Rule** and the **Testament of Francis** led to clashes, imprisonments, and even killings. The chart below captures the most important controversies and reform movements.

In spite of their volatile past, today the Franciscan orders accent what they hold in common.

FRANCIS FOUNDS HIS ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR IN 1209.

- **Later Rule** approved in 1223.
- Francis writes his **Testament** before he dies in 1226. Already, many Franciscans, who live throughout Europe, have had no contact with Francis or his Rule.
- In 1230, Pope Gregory IX decrees that Francis's **Testament** has no binding force on the Order. He also approves the right for the Order to use, though not own, property.
- After decades of ferment in the Order, in 1310, Ubertino da Casale calls for a return to the fundamentals of Francis's Rule, especially strict poverty.

In 1317, his followers, the "Spirituals," are excommunicated as heretics and arrested; some are burned.

Order of Friars Minor

### CONVENTUALS

(O.F.M. Conv.)

In 1430, friars residing in study centers and urban "convents" (hence their name) are permitted to own property and receive revenues.

In 1517, they are separated from the Observants. They live out a more settled expression of Francis's ideals.

Order of Friars Minor

### OBSERVANTS

(O.F.M.)

In the 1330s, friars in south Assisi begin following a "stricter observance" of the Rule.

In 1415, they gain ecclesiastical recognition, and in 1443 are given their own Vicar General.

In 1517, they are separated from the Conventuals and tend to practice an itinerant ministry.

Order of Friars Minor

**CAPUCHINS**

(O.F.M. Cap.)

In 1525, Observant Matteo da Basci seeks to live literally by Francis's Rule.

Other Observants try to thwart the movement, so in 1529, da Basci's followers, known as Capuchins, receive papal permission to become an independent order. They emphasize a contemplative way of life.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Controversial Passages

**From the Later Rule:  
Official Charter of a New Order**

***This document was approved in 1223 as the official rule, or charter, of Francis's followers, the Order of Friars Minor. Three of its passages soon led to bitter controversy.***

How literally were these injunctions to be obeyed? Did they apply in all times and places? What if a superior ordered a brother to obey something seemingly contrary to the Rule, such as to receive money or to buy property to build a hospital?

I firmly command all the brothers that they in no way receive coins of money, either personally or through an intermediary.

The brothers shall not acquire anything as their own, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all. Instead, as pilgrims and strangers in this world who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go begging for alms with full trust. Dedicate yourselves totally to this, my most beloved brothers, do not wish to have anything else forever under heaven for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The brothers who are the ministers and servants of the other brothers should visit and admonish their brothers and humbly and charitably correct them, not commanding them anything which might be against their conscience and our Rule. On the other hand, the brothers who are subject to them should remember that they have given up their own wills for God. Therefore I strictly command them to obey their ministers in all those things which they have promised to observe and which are not against conscience and our Rule.

**From the Testament:  
Francis's Final Charge to His Followers**

***In this document, dictated just before his death, Francis encouraged his brothers to observe his Rule. Though formally it is only an "admonition," a few sentences seem like commands. Brothers who observed them literally brought both controversy and reform to the order.***

Let the brothers beware that they by no means receive churches or poor dwellings or anything which is built for them, unless it is in harmony with [that] holy poverty which we have promised in the Rule, [and] let them always be guests there as pilgrims and strangers (1 Pet. 2:11).

And the minister general and all other ministers and custodians [leaders in the order] are bound through obedience not to add or subtract from these words. And let them always have this writing with them along with the Rule. And in all the chapters which they hold, when they read the Rule, let them also read these words.

And I through obedience strictly command all my brothers, cleric and lay, not to place glosses on the Rule or on these words, saying: They are to be understood in this way. But as the Lord granted me to speak and to write the Rule and these words simply and purely, so shall you understand them simply

and without gloss, and observe them.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Francis of Assisi: Christian History Interview - Modern Medieval Man

Eight hundred years later, Francis's life and message seem remarkably up to date.

interview with Conrad Harkins

***Francis of Assisi is one of those rare figures who still appeals to Christians of many denominational and theological stripes. Christian History asked Conrad Harkins, O.S.F., a scholar at the Franciscan Institute at Saint Bonaventure University in New York, to talk about Francis's continuing attraction. Harkins is one of America's leading scholars of Francis and editor of Franciscan Studies.***

**Christian History:** There were many traveling preachers in Francis's day. Why is Francis remembered when others have been long forgotten?

**Conrad Harkins:** First, because Francis was utterly committed to God. Everyone says the great problem in Western society today is our collapse of values. For Francis the supreme value, the value that gave value to everything else, was God.

Francis was so committed to Christ, he took the Gospels as a manual of Christian life. When he heard that the Gospel said not to possess money, wear shoes, or own more than one tunic, Francis obeyed.

In addition, and just as important, he obeyed *joyfully*. There was a tremendous optimism and enthusiasm about Francis. For him a life of Gospel poverty was never depressing or sorrowful.

As Francis was being converted to God, he went with some young friends singing, dancing, and cavorting through the streets of Assisi. At one point, he fell behind the group. They turned back to find him and saw a dreamy look in his eyes. They teased him: "Oh, Francis, you're in love!"

Francis replied, "You're right. And I shall take a bride more beautiful and more lovely than any you can even begin to imagine."

He was talking about God. That's what transformed him. His joy in God, his love for God, was and is infectious.

**What did Francis preach about? How was his theme different from preaching then and now?**

Francis considered John the Baptist his patron saint, and like John he dedicated himself to penitential preaching. But even though Francis spoke about punishment for sin, he mainly exhorted people to see the goodness and love of God.

Sometimes while preaching to crowds, he would turn and look at some birds and address them: "Look how God feeds you! How good God is to you, because he gives you wings to get from place to place. He gives you the sky to fly around in. And you praise God by singing!"

Then he would turn to the people and say, "How do you people praise God for all the good gifts he gives to you?"

Instead of hearing about a vengeful deity, people heard about a loving God, and they would respond, "Yes, Francis! We want to make God the center of our lives. What do we do?"

**What counsel did Francis give?**

His earliest advice included six items:

- Love God with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
- Control your body lest it lead you into vice and sin.
- Receive the Eucharist.
- Confess your sins.
- Bring forth fruit—good works—in penance.

Vast numbers of people began dedicating themselves to this God-centered, God-fearing life. In one town, after hearing Francis preach, an entire group of men suddenly renounced their property and joined him as friars. Of course, most hearers didn't go so far, and without abandoning their property and family, they started living simple, frugal lives of good works.

### **Didn't Francis expect everyone to live in poverty?**

Francis never said that the world at large should live without property. Many itinerant preachers in Francis's day condemned anyone who did not live exactly as they lived. Francis, on the other hand, strictly forbade his friars to condemn those who did not live in voluntary poverty. By no means did he expect married people to give up their property and money. Otherwise, the whole world would starve to death!

Francis believed that he and the friars were a prophetic witness to the world. People would see their dedication and say, "These friars give themselves completely to God; they manage to live on so little! Maybe I don't need so many things in order to survive."

### **Why was Francis so committed to poverty and the poor?**

To Francis the disadvantaged were his brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same Father. It wasn't just social service he was performing; he revered the poor as people given to him by God.

For Francis, the poor were a gift. Serving them wasn't a dutiful sacrifice; it was something a good God called him to do, something that brought him great joy.

Francis was in love with God, and God was the good behind all that is good, and the highest good. If you value God above everything else, then possessions, fine clothes, and money just don't matter.

### **How did Francis, the spiritual radical, feel about the institutional church?**

Surprisingly, Francis held deep respect for it. Other radicals of his day were critical of the church. Though Francis called everyone, including priests and bishops, to repentance, he respected the church's authority.

One time Francis preached in a town where a priest was living with a woman. One man asked Francis whether the townspeople should continue to receive the sacraments from this immoral priest.

Francis took those listening to him to the priest's house and knocked on the door. When the priest came to the door, Francis said, "I do not know whether these hands are stained as the man ... claims. In any case ... these hands remain the channel whereby God's graces and blessings stream down on the people" [in the Eucharist]. Then he prostrated himself before the priest and kissed his hands.

### **Francis often seems too good to be true. What faults did he have?**

In his biographies, there are stories after his conversion of his repenting of pride and hypocrisy (though in some cases, his guilt seems to be the result of a very tender conscience).

In addition, he definitely was a poor administrator. For example, when he first sent the friars to foreign lands, they went completely unprepared. One contemporary describes the friars who went to Germany. When some Germans asked them, in German, if they

were hungry, the friars responded with the only word they knew: "Ja." So they were given something to eat.

Then the friars were asked if they were thirsty; they said, "Ja," and they were given something to drink.

Then they were asked if they were heretics. They said, "Ja," and they were beaten!

In addition, Francis once sent friars to various regions without getting permission for them to preach in other church jurisdictions. He eventually recognized his administrative shortcomings and resigned as minister general of his own order.

### **Where do we see the effects of Francis's ministry today?**

In one allegorical story about Francis, he is courting Lady Poverty. She says that she must first examine his cloister, or monastery, before she agrees to wed him. Francis takes her to a hill overlooking Assisi and the whole Umbrian Valley and says, "There, Lady Poverty, is our cloister," extending his hands out to the whole world.

In other words, his followers were to live God-centered lives *in the world*. That was revolutionary. Most preachers before Francis founded settled religious houses, where people tried to live out the ideal Christian life in work, prayer, and contemplation. Francis instructed his friars to practice prayer and contemplation, but he also told them to live out a Gospel life in the world.

After Francis, many cloistered communities began moving out into the world. Today we take it for granted that if you are deeply committed to the Gospel, you will go into the world to serve. That assumption is due in large measure to Francis's ministry.

***Francis says if we're going to make peace, we're going to suffer.***

Conrad Harkins

### **Sometimes Francis is portrayed as the environmental saint. Is that fair?**

Francis saw that *everything*—dogs, cats, birds, flowers, sun, rivers, mountains—is a creature of God. So Francis had tremendous reverence for all creation. Like Paul, he sees all creation groaning, waiting to be brought into perfection (Rom. 8:22). That's why he preaches to the birds, picks up worms who are in harm's way, and writes a song extolling "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon." Francis anticipated our rightful concern for the environment by hundreds of years.

### **What else does Francis teach us today?**

I could list dozens of things, but let me mention this one: his way of practicing peace.

In one early account of Francis's life, it says that Francis grieved that no one "intervened to make peace." It's a beautiful phrase. Christians often pray for peace as if it's something that drops out of the sky. Instead, Francis believed peace is something that is made. So he insisted that his followers become *peacemakers*, as he was. For example, Francis once helped a magistrate and a bishop of Assisi resolve their quarrels.

Francis also teaches us that if we're going to make peace, we're going to suffer, and we're going to have to give up something. Most people want peace by simply imposing their wills upon others, giving up nothing. Peace can be had only if we see the other person's needs and grievances and willingly relinquish some of our own.

Making peace, then, is hard work. That's why in *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, Francis adds that line, "Blessed are those who *endure* in peace."

### **What does Francis mean to you personally?**

Though it sounds blasphemous, Francis is sometimes called a second Christ. Why? Because he lived Christ's teachings more purely than did anyone else in his age, and in any age since. I read about Christian values in the Gospels, but in Francis I see someone living them out.

That example both supports and inspires me. I want my life to be like his: totally centered on Christ.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 42: St. Francis of Assisi

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## Francis of Assisi: Recommended Resources

Conrad Harkins, O.F.M., is a scholar at the Franciscan Institute at Bonaventure University in New York, and author of numerous articles on Francis of Assisi.

The best collection of early documents about Francis is *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Marion A. Habig, editor, (Franciscan Herald Press, 1983). In one, thick volume, it contains all the early material; the *Omnibus* is indispensable.

Of the many accounts in that volume, *The Legend of the Three Companions* and *The Legend of Perugia* probably capture the real Francis better than other early biographies. (By the way, the word legend doesn't mean "fable." It refers to something that was required reading when friars gathered.)

A shorter collection of writings is *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translation and introductions by Regis Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Paulist, 1982).

### Modern Works

I don't find convincing many of the conclusions in Paul Sabatier's *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (Scribner's, 1905), but this book set modern Franciscan studies into motion. Johannes Jurgensen's *St. Francis of Assisi: A Biography* (translated by T. O'Connor Sloane; Longmans, 1912) is the standard Catholic biography and reply to Protestant Sabatier.

Arnaldo Fortini, two-time mayor of Assisi, in his *Francis of Assisi*, (translated by Helen Moak, Crossroad, 1981), was the first to use the civil records of Assisi to cast light upon the life of Francis.

I recommend the works of an English scholar, John Moorman: *St. Francis of Assisi* (SPCK, 1963) and *The Spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1977).

Erik Doyle's *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood* (Seabury, 1981) contains excellent material on Francis and ecology. Raoul Manselli's *St. Francis of Assisi* (translated by Paul Duggan; Franciscan, 1988) is a fine recent biography.

For popular reading, three books come to mind. G. K. Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi* is an extended essay with keen insights. Dennis Stock has created a beautiful picture book in *St. Francis of Assisi*, text by Lawrence Cunningham (Harper & Row, 1981). Finally, *The Francis Book: 800 Years with the Saint* (Macmillan, 1980), compiled and edited by Roy Gasnick, contains engaging short essays (with comments from people as diverse as Lenin and Wordsworth) and some unusual art.

### The Franciscan Order

The name John Moorman comes up again, this time in *A History of the Franciscan Order from Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Clarendon, 1968). His chapter on the life of Francis is very good.

Cajetan Esser's *Origins of the Franciscan Order* (Franciscan Herald Press, 1970) was one of several books that helped pave the way for renewal of Franciscan life.

A popular introduction is William Short, *The Franciscans* (Liturgical Press, 1989).

### **Films and Videos**

The most famous film on Francis, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, is helpful only if you take it as poetry. The movie distorts many facts in order to capture, though sometimes with great beauty, one aspect of Francis's early life.

For a powerful and historically accurate production, see *Francis: Troubadour of God's Peace* (available for rental from some religious bookstores and libraries). It is a moving, one-man play based directly upon the early account *The Legend of the Three Companions*.

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