



St. Francis

Biography Timeline: **1181**, born in Assisi, in the Umbria region of central, Italy, one of seven children to Pietro di Bernardone, a rich cloth merchant, and Pica Bourlemont; baptized “Giovanni di Pietro Bernardone” (after John the Baptist, the name and figure favored by his mother), renamed “Francesco” by his father, in recognition of his affection for the country of France; **1190**, attends the parish school at San Giorgio; being the son of a rich cloth merchant, he lives the high-life of a young man of means; becomes known as “King of Feasts;” **1193**, Chiara di Favarone di Offreduccio (Clare) is born to a renowned family of nobility; **November 1202**, in war between Perugia and Assisi, Assisi is defeated, and Francis spends a year in captivity, during which time he falls ill; ransomed by his father; **1204**, experiences a long period of illness and convalescence; **1205**, sets out to join the army of Walter de Brienne; returns after a vision and message in Spoleto; begins gradual stage of conversion; receives message from the icon of Christ Crucified in the chapel at San Damiano, just outside Assisi to “repair my house;” experiences conflict with his father over his decision to sell cloth to repair the San Damiano church; in a trial before the bishop, he renounces all worldly possessions and his patrimonial inheritance; nurses the lepers at Gubbio; fulfillment of conversion process; repairs San Damiano, San Pietro della Spina and St. Mary of the Angels at Portiuncula; **February 24, 1208**, on the Feast of St. Matthias, hears a sermon preached on Matthew 10:9, and thereafter dons a cheap, plain shepherd’s garb with a rope tied around his waist; **April 16, 1208**, Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter Cattani, a priest, joins him; others follow; **1208-1209**, assured of the pardon of his sins and the growth of his fraternity; brothers go out two by two, preaching penance; ;**1209**, brothers return to Portiuncula and Francis writes a brief Rule for himself and eleven friars; **April 16, 2010**, Francis receives official approval of Pope Innocent III to establish fraternal order; friars return to Rivotorto and eventually to the Portiuncula; **Palm Sunday, March 28, 1212**, Clare receives her religious habit at Portiuncula from the hands of Francis and joins the Order of the Poor Ladies (which will eventually become the Order of the Poor Clares); **1215**, Francis goes to Rome for the IV Lateran Council; **May 5, 1217**, on Pentecost, General Chapter of all the friars gathers at Portiuncula; first mission outside Italy; **May 26, 1219**, first friar missionaries leave for Morocco; **June 24, 1219**, goes on the road, to Egypt, site of the Fifth Crusade’s encampment, in order to meet with and convert al-Malik al-Kamil, the Sultan of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine to the Christian faith; **1220**, first Franciscan bothers become martyrs in Morocco; Cardinal Hugolino appointed Protector of the Order; Francis resigns as General Minister and friar Peter Cattani appointed; **1221**, Peter Cattani dies and Bro. Elias becomes Vicar; **1221-1222**, Francis goes on a preaching tour throughout Italy; **1223**, Francis goes to Fontecolombo to write the definitive Rule for the Order of Friars Minor; The Chapter discusses it and further changes are made until its approval by Pope Honorius III; **December 1223**, first living Christmas nativity scene is dramatized, midnight Mass at Greccio; **September 14, 1224**, while on long retreat on the mountain at La Verna, receives stigmata (five marks of Christ’s crucifixion); **1225**, his eye problems turn worse; stays for a while at San Damiano with Clare and the sisters; while almost blind writes “Canticle of the Creatures;” **1225 - 1226**, goes to Fontecolombo where doctors cauterize his temple in an unsuccessful treatment; at Sienna takes a turn for the worse and dictates a short will; **September 1226**, while staying at Bishop’s house in Assisi and aware that he is dying, writes the Testament and asks to be brought down to the Portiuncula; **October 3, 1226**, dies at Portiuncula in the evening, listening to a reading of Psalm 141; **October 4, 1226**, is buried in the church of San Giorgio; **July 16, 1228**, in Assisi, friend Cardinal Hugolino, now Pope Gregory IX, canonizes Francis; **May 25, 1230**, remains are transferred to his tomb in new papal basilica of San Francesco; **March 16, 2013**, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, after being elected Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, announces he is taking the name “Francis” to emulate St. Francis’ care for the well-being of the poor.

Since his death nearly eight centuries ago, St. Francis has become one of the most venerated religious figures in human history and one of the most admired monks, missionaries, and mystics in the traditions of Christianity.(1)

Schools, colleges, and churches bear his name. Retreat centers have sprouted up all over the world in his honor. Yards and gardens of Catholics, as well as Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and nonreligious folks alike, are the proud custodians of one St. Francis statue after another. Three religious orders – the Order of the Friars Minor, the Order of the Poor St. Clares, and the Third Order of St. Francis – proudly (and rightly) point to him as their founder. On or near October 4th, Francis' feast day according to certain traditions, countless "Blessing of the Animals" services are conducted all over the world.

But "Why?" we can ask. "Why Saint Francis?" Why and how did he become so esteemed?

Surely he became a great soul by his abiding obedience to what he believed was an undeniable, unequivocal call on his life. When confronted with the option of following Jesus' example of love and compassion – of allowing nothing to come between him and God – Francis did the exact opposite of the rich ruler depicted in the New Testament gospels.(2) At the age of 24, before the witness of a bishop and in front of his father, without hesitation and with an expression of radical freedom, he renounced his patrimonial inheritance and committed himself to a life of humility and service, especially joyful care for the poor. "...he was a holy man in an unholy time living a total commitment to the second commandment: Love thy neighbor."(3)

To the poor Francis was a friend. To lepers he was an embracing comforter. To each and every person, stranger and friend alike, he was a brother, and they were a brother or sister to him.

Francis abides as a great soul because of his love of nature. Consistently and without wavering throughout the twenty years of his ministerial journey, he regarded all of creation as his sacred siblings, as “brothers” and “sisters.” Francis’ great poem “*The Canticle of the Sun*” – originally entitled *Laudes Creaturarum* (Praise of the Creatures) – bears the imprint of his poetic vision of creation. The grand hymn “*All Creatures of Our God and King*,” set to a tune by German composer Peter von Brachel, is William Draper’s paraphrase of St. Francis’ canticle and is sung in countless churches, both Catholic and Protestant. It possesses deep affinity for Francis’ mystical expression of affection for the earth and all of its creatures.(4) For Francis, the gospel was to be preached as a stimulus for the redemption of *all* of God’s creation. Before Shakespeare intoned his lyrical credo, Francis believed that there are “... tongues in trees, books in running brooks,/ Sermons in stones,/ and good in every thing.”(5)

Francis is a great soul, of course, because of the enduringly famous prayer attributed to him:

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace
where there is hatred let me sow love
where there is injury – pardon
where there is doubt – faith
where there is despair – hope
where there is darkness – light
and where there is sadness – joy*

*O Divine Master
grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console
to be understood as to understand
to be loved as to love*

*For it is in giving that we receive
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Over the centuries there have been questions about the authorship of the prayer, but it is now universally known as “St. Francis’ Prayer.”(6) Regardless of the exact origination of the prayer, it has a ring of resonance with St. Francis’ spirit and harmonizes with the overall arc of his life and ministry. In the powerful movement of the prayer’s poetic parallelism, the possibility of becoming “an instrument” of God’s peace begins to take on a greater and greater likelihood of realization. The prayer’s idealistic hope is matched by its powerful persuasion, and one who prays it knows a satisfying recognition: “This is the way life is supposed to be.”

Many have followed Francis and have found life’s fulfillment in humble service accompanied by unfettered joy. One of the more famous contemporary Franciscans was Fr. Mychal Judge, the chaplain priest of the New York Fire Department, who, during the attacks of September 11, 2001, rushed into the World Trade Center North Tower to offer help and hope and became one of the first martyrs among the heroic rescuers.(7)

Another notable Franciscan, Cardinal Sean O’Malley has lived out love of neighbor with wisdom and extraordinary compassion.(8) Fast on the heels of cleaning up a diocese in Palm Beach, Florida, he was assigned to the Boston diocese to forge a new and clarified future for one of the most scandal-plagued ecclesial entities in the U.S. Both Judge and O’Malley have embodied what Francis taught his friars, namely that all those who would follow Jesus “should preach with their deeds.”(9)

And when Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose the name of Francis when he became Pope of the Catholic Church in 2013, he declared he did so to emulate St. Francis’ care for the well-being of the poor.

Perhaps G. K. Chesterton put it best: "What gave [St. Francis] his extraordinary personal power was this; that from the Pope to the beggar, from the sultan of Syria in his pavilion to the ragged robbers crawling out of the wood, there was never a man who looked into those brown burning eyes without being certain that Francis Bernardone was really interested in him; in his own inner individual life from the cradle to the grave; that he himself was being valued and taken seriously, and not merely added to the spoils of some social policy or the names in some clerical document."(10)

Praying with St. Francis – Suggestions for Use

- Day 1 **Praying the Prayer of St. Francis - Step #1** – Becoming peaceable means allowing yourself to be used as an instrument : (a) for the *healing* of your world and the world at large; (b) for the *harmonizing* of your world and the world at large; and (c) for the *wholeness* of your world and the world at large. Pray today – for five minutes in the morning, for five minutes at midday, and for five minutes at the close of the day – with a focus on peace.
- Day 2 **Praying the Prayer of St. Francis - Step #2** – The first three of the “sowing” propositions in the prayer are a matter of “Interior Decorating.” We cannot move out into the world as instruments of peace until we have made peace with ourselves. While self-reflection and self-revelation may seem to be daunting tasks, we are never so clear as when we "come clean." Pray today by recalling those times when your life was touched by the wounds of hatred, injury, and doubt – or when you were the wounding one. Then pause and begin to let old wounds be healed.
- Day 3 **Praying the Prayer of St. Francis - Step #3** – Hope, Light, and Joy are the elements of an ultimately fruitful, meaningful life. One might even say they are the premier components of an ideal existence. Such was the foundation of the Garden of Eden as portrayed in the book of Genesis. This part of the “sowing” portion of the St. Francis prayer provides a moment for “returning to the garden” and renewing those basic ingredients of a truly worthwhile life. Pray today by pondering the pairings of despair–hope, darkness–light, sadness–joy in your personal life and in local and worldwide events.
- Day 4 **Praying the Prayer of St. Francis - Step #4** – The next step in St. Francis’ Prayer may be called the “Gospel Medicine” portion. Recall those times when you have been a source of consolation for another person. Now imagine an opportunity

that might arise this day in which you might be of consolation for another person. Seek God's guidance as to listen authentically to someone and, thereby, offer them an understanding ear today. Pray also for a moment in which you can convey love – the central component of all “gospel medicine” – to another in need today.

- Day 5 **Praying the Prayer of St. Francis - Step #5** – The closing portion of St. Francis' prayer refers to his understanding of a “Spiritual Economy.” Consider today those to whom you will give a humble gift that will enrich their lives. Ask for God's guidance in how you will implement a plan for forgiving others for the injuries you have experienced from their hands. Finally consider what may be called the “Easter” portion of St. Francis' prayer. What portion of your life should be put to rest this week? Is there a part of your daily existence that you would be better off without? Begin to imagine those dimensions of eternal life which can be enacted in your life today.
- Day 6 **Praying for the Earth** – Pray today by repeating the third verse of “*All Creatures of Our God and King*” three times, morning, noon and night: *Dear mother earth, who day by day/unfoldest blessings on our way,/ O praise him, Alleluia!/ The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,/let them his glory also show.* Pray by singing, if you like.
- Day 7 **Praying for St. Francis to Be Known** – What Albert Einstein said about Gandhi may also be said about St. Francis: “*Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.*” Pray today that the generation in which you live, as well as future generations to come, will know all about St. Francis. Pray that they will believe.

NOTES

- (1) Anne Gordon, *A Book of Saints: True Stories of How They Touch Our Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), pp. 116ff; see also Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), pp. 404-407; Elizabeth Hallam, general editor, *Saints: Who They Are and How They Help You* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 81-83; www.franciscan-archive.org; Joan Acocella, “*Rich Man, Poor Man: The Radical Visions of St. Francis,*” *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2013.
- (2) Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30; see also Andre Vauchez's *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2012) (translated by Michael F. Cusato) and Paul Sabatier's *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Cosimo, 2007) (originally published in 1894).
- (3) Gordon, *A Book of Saints*, p. 119.
- (4) See *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1995), #22; for a recollection of how St. Francis believed the gospel was “for the birds,” see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>.
- (5) William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 2.
- (6) For the background and growth in popularity of St. Francis' prayer see Leonardo Boff, *The Prayer of St. Francis: A Message of Peace for the World Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001); the first English translation of “The Prayer of St. Francis” appeared in *Living Courageously*, (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936), a book by Kirby Page, a Disciple of Christ minister, pacifist,

social evangelist, writer and editor of *The World Tomorrow*. Page clearly attributes the text to St. Francis of Assisi.

- (7) One of the most iconic images related to the attacks of September 11, 2001, was provided by Shannon Stapleton's photograph (Reuters, Sept 11, 2001) of Fr. Judge being carried out of the rubble in New York City by members of the New York Fire Department and medical personnel.
- (8) Joe Feuerherd and John L. Allen, Jr., "Another fixer-upper for O'Malley: Franciscan bishop's appointment to Boston is seen as a welcome surprise," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 18, 2003.
- (9) Rule of 1221, Chapter XII, www.franciscanarchive.org.
- (10) G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Garden City: Doubleday Image Books, 1957), p. 80.

FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

Joan Acocella, "Rich Man, Poor Man: The Radical Visions of St. Francis," *The New Yorker*, Jan.14, 2013.

Leonardo Boff, *The Prayer of St. Francis: A Message of Peace for the World Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001)

G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Garden City: Doubleday Image Books, 1957), p. 80.

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Andre Vauchez, transl. by Michael F. Cusato, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2012)