

## **What is so special about St. Francis?**

"Why do they all come running to you? You're not tall and handsome, you're not cultured, you're not even an aristocrat. What's so special about you?" asked Brother Masseo. St. Francis' reply was "Do you want to know why? God looked around all the earth and could find no viler or more worthless creature, so he chose me to confound the beauty, culture and nobility of this world. In that way people will see that all good things come from him and praise his name above all others."

I often wonder why St. Francis is so universally admired. He attracts admirers among atheists and believers of other faiths (Lenin is supposed to have said "If I had 10 Francis of Assisi I could convert Russia"). He is venerated in Eastern Churches as well as in the West, by Protestants and Anglicans as well as Catholics. What makes him so special?

Francis had a profound faith, a deep prayer life and an abiding love of God and creation, but many saints share those characteristics. For me, what makes Francis special and gives him his universal appeal is his genius for living out in his actions the essence of his Christian convictions.

The basis of Francis' spiritual life was a profound understanding of what it meant to call God "Father". When his natural father tried to divert him from following God's call, Francis returned everything his father had given him, even his clothes, and standing naked before the Bishop of Assisi declared "Up to now I have called Pietro Bernadone my father, but from now on I say Our Father, who art in heaven...".

Now if God is Father, then all human beings are sisters and brothers. In the early days of the Franciscan order the friars were called many things (some unprintable!).

Some called them the Order of Apostles, some the Order of Penitents, and some even called them the Order of Preachers (a name which came to be given exclusively to the Dominicans), but Francis called his order the "Order of Friars Minor"- the order of lesser brothers. They were live as brothers of all, to reveal by their love that all human beings are sisters and brothers under the fatherhood of God. In his own life Francis came to this understanding in his encounter with a leper. Like most people of his time Francis had a fear and loathing of lepers until one day, meeting a leper on the road, he realised that this man was his brother. Not only was he his brother but he was the image of Christ who was himself poor, rejected and despised. Francis, impulsive as ever, hugged and kissed the astonished leper and from that day onwards he found that the sight of lepers filled him with compassion and joy.

Francis' understanding of brotherhood was not just confined to humanity. God was Father of all creation and therefore all creation was united in bonds of brotherhood. In the Canticle of Creatures Francis praised God for Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Mother Earth, Brother Fire, Sister Water and all God's creatures.

This family relationship is expressed wonderfully in the story of the wolf of Gubbio. There was once a wolf who, out of hunger, took to attacking the people of Gubbio as they worked in their fields. The people were so frightened of the wolf they didn't dare go out into the fields without armed protection. Francis said to them: "Let me go out to talk with the wolf." So he left the people cowering behind the ramparts of Gubbio's walls and went out to meet the wolf. Francis spoke with the wolf, who became docile at his approach and returned with him to the people of Gubbio, who in their turn became docile at his approach. Francis then brokered a peace pact between the people and the wolf: The people would feed the wolf and in return the wolf would live peacefully with them. For two years the wolf roamed the streets of Gubbio, fed and loved by the people until he died of old age and you can even visit Brother Wolf's

bones if you go to Gubbio today. What a wonderful living out of Isaiah's prophecy of harmony in creation where it is said "the wolf will lie down with the lamb." (Isa. 65:25)

For Francis it was God's creative transcendence, the fact that God is Father and Creator, that guaranteed that all creatures are our sisters and brothers. But if God is defined on the one hand by transcendence, on the other hand it is his overwhelming love for creation and for each one of us that struck Francis. This love was expressed most fully in the humility of Jesus Christ who surrendered the glory of the Godhead in order to become human, so that we might become children of God. It was this humility, this poverty of Jesus which affected Francis so much. If this is how God-made-man lived, he reasoned, then how much more are his followers called to poverty, renouncing all that makes people important in the eyes of the world and becoming lesser brothers of all. It was because of Christ's self-giving that Francis felt called to be poor.

The extent of Christ's self-giving was seen most perfectly in the poverty and abandonment of the Cross, so Francis had an abiding devotion to the Cross and would spend hours in prayer before it. So much did he want to identify himself with Christ on the Cross that a couple of years before his death Francis prayed "Lord, grant me the grace to feel both the love and the pain that you felt upon the Cross". His prayer was granted in the vision of the Crucified One and the gift of the wounds of Christ which stayed with Francis until his death.

The love of Christ led naturally for Francis to a love of the Church and the Pope, Christ's Vicar on Earth, for it is through the Church that the Holy Spirit continues Christ's saving work. It was not that Francis did not see the Church's weaknesses or infidelities, but for Francis the way to combat these was not aggressive criticism but

constructive example. When the people of a certain town asked him to reprimand their priest who led a notorious life, Francis knelt before the priest and asked for his blessing; example converts much more powerfully than criticism.

Such single-mindedness and determination could so easily have turned Francis into a fanatic. What prevented that? What kept Francis safe from fanaticism were the twin virtues of humility and charity. When people started calling him a saint in his lifetime, Francis said: "Don't call me a saint, I could still go off and father a child." He recognised his own weakness in the face of temptation and that gave him a compassion for other sinners that is incompatible with fanaticism. His charity was illustrated when one of the brothers cried out with hunger one night because of over-strict fasting. Francis picked some grapes and ate them with the brother, preferring to break his own fast rather than see his brother ashamed and humiliated eating alone.

All this answers the question at the beginning of this piece – “Why do they come running after you?” It is Francis' integrity, his genius for living out his Christian convictions in all aspects of his life, which makes him so special. Characteristically, Francis' answer to the question was much simpler; he was showered by God with his blessings, blessings which are available to us all if we have the humility to accept them.

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