

The Life Story of St. Francis

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) is the founder of the Franciscan Order. He was born at Assisi in Umbria. Although baptised with the name John, his father's love of France led him to re-name his son Francis. His father was Piero Bernardone, a prosperous cloth merchant. His mother's name was Pica and she was probably from the South of France. Francis learned his father's business and planned to follow him in this trade. Francis was very popular as a young man, often being the leader of the youth in Assisi. He was described as a proud and vain, though kind and affable, willing to give to the poor. Worldly in his early years, he entertained dreams of being a knight.

At that time, Italy was not a single country as we know it today. There were many smaller states which frequently made war on each other. In 1201 Francis took part in such an attack between Assisi and the neighbouring town of Perugia.

Unfortunately, Francis' skills as a knight did not hold him in good stead. He was taken hostage and remained in prison for several months. This was followed by a period of illness, during which his mind began to turn towards God. Around 1205 he enlisted in another military expedition, to Apulia. However, God spoke to him in a dream and asked him who could do more, the servant or master. It was clear to Francis that he had been serving the servant, so he abandoned plans for life as a knight and returned to Assisi where he began to care for the sick.

There were lepers at that time in Assisi. They lived outside the city but Francis recalled how the sight of them made him feel sick. By accident he met a leper and, remembering his resolve to serve and love others, he embraced the leper and kissed his hands. On leaving the area the leper could not be seen which Francis understood as God again entering his life.

In 1206, while praying alone in a dilapidated chapel dedicated to San Damiano, Francis heard the cross speaking to him. The voice called him to repair the Church which was falling into ruin. Francis interpreted this as a command to repair the physical church. He took some of his father's cloth and sold it, giving the money to the priest at San Damiano.

The priest would not use the money but instead gave shelter to Francis. His father, angry and embarrassed by Francis' behaviour, first imprisoned him in a cellar and finally brought him before the bishop. Francis Bernardone publicly renounced his own father so as to belong only to God. He abandoned the parties of his companions in order to help lepers, derelicts and society's rejects. He abandoned his rights and possessions, even his clothes. It was then he was given the dress of a poor farmhand, the tunic which has become the trademark of the Franciscans. Francis spent the next two years as a mendicant, hermit and restorer of dilapidated churches in the area of Assisi.

Francis soon attracted followers. He preached the necessity of a poor, simple life-style based on the ideals of the Gospels. In the beginning Francis gave some rules of life which were approved by Pope Innocent III. Eventually he wrote the Rule of the Order of Friars Minor which was confirmed by a Pope Honorius III in 1223.

The example of Francis and the early followers was contagious and a young noble woman, Clare (1194-1253), on Palm Sunday, 1212, fled her father's house. Francis cut her hair as a sign of her consecration to God in the little chapel of the Portiuncula. Many other women followed Clare. Six years later the Sisters received approval to live in cloistered poverty. Thus was born the Second Order of Saint Francis, which he called the Poor Ladies or "Poor Clares".

Between 1210 and 1221 St. Francis sent his companions throughout the world in order to preach the poor, humble and crucified Christ and to bring reconciliation and peace to everyone. He insisted that his followers were not monks. Theirs was a new way of life, so he called them "Friars Minor or Lesser Brothers", from the Latin word 'frater' or 'brother'.

In 1221, a Florentine merchant, Lucchesio, and his wife Buonadonna, were attracted by the example of Francis and asked to be able to live the life of the Minors while remaining in their married state. The Secular Franciscan Order was born.

In 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, Francis made his famous but fruitless attempt to convert the Sultan al-Kamil. When he returned to Assisi Francis retired from the government of the order for a life of prayer, contemplation and fasting. It was during this time in his life that he prayed in La Verna, a mountain retreat just north of Assisi. Here in 1224 he received the Stigmata, the imprint of the wounds of Christ in his own body. A year later, in the garden of San Damiano, he composed the first part of his famous poem, the Canticle of Brother Sun. He died on October 3, 1226 and was canonized in 1228. Francis's feast day is October 4.

The friars travelled all over Europe, arriving at Dover in England in 1224, just two years before Francis died.

The First Franciscan Order has had many changes. From the time of the first Friars, the Franciscans today have grown into three distinct groups. The branches have their own governments and structures and are called the Friars Minor, Friars Minor Conventuals, and Friars Minor Capuchin.

These families have developed with many works and ministries. At present we, the Friars Minors, number 17,224, of which 104 are bishops and more than 586 are novices. The Capuchins number 11,343, of which 68 are bishops; the Conventuals number 4,514, of which 11 are bishops.