The Life And Faith Of Saint Francis

Posted on October 31, 2018

Saint Francis of Assisi remains one of the most influential Christian figures of the Middle Ages because his religious life joined radical poverty, care for the marginalized, preaching, fraternity, peace, and reverence for creation. He was born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone in Assisi around 1181 or 1182, the son of a prosperous cloth merchant. His family expected him to participate in commerce and civic life, and as a young man he enjoyed fashionable clothing, celebrations, and the ideals of chivalry. His transformation into the founder of the Order of Friars Minor was gradual rather than instantaneous. Military defeat, imprisonment, illness, prayer, encounters with lepers, conflict with his father, and experiences in ruined churches contributed to his conversion. The original essay correctly identifies his movement from wealth toward poverty and service, but several details require clarification. Francis was not born in Rome, he did not find a monastery at San Damiano in the ordinary monastic sense, and the famous encounter with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil occurred during the Fifth Crusade in 1219 rather than during Francis's imprisonment. His life is best understood through his own writings, early biographies, and the religious conditions of thirteenth-century Italy (Armstrong et al., 1999–2001; Thompson, 2012).

Early Life in Assisi

Francis grew up in a commercial family at a time when Assisi was experiencing economic growth, conflict among social classes, and warfare with nearby cities. His father, Pietro di Bernardone, traded cloth and expected his son to continue the family business. Francis received enough education to participate in commerce and learned elements of French culture associated with courtly poetry and chivalry. His early ambitions were not directed toward monastic withdrawal. He wanted status, companionship, and the honor associated with military life.

Later biographies portray the young Francis as generous but attracted to expensive clothing and social display. These accounts were written after his sanctity had become known and often organize his youth as a contrast with his later poverty. Historians therefore distinguish between details supported by early sources and moralized stories designed to illustrate conversion. Even so, the contrast between merchant wealth and chosen poverty is central to understanding his religious identity.

War, Captivity, and Illness

In 1202, Francis participated in the conflict between Assisi and Perugia and was captured after the battle of Collestrada. Because his family possessed money, he could be held for ransom rather than treated as an ordinary prisoner. His captivity lasted roughly a year and was followed by illness. This

period did not immediately make him a friar, but later accounts connect it with growing dissatisfaction toward his former ambitions.

Francis attempted military service again around 1205 but abandoned the journey and returned to Assisi. His change of direction developed through reflection rather than through one simple rejection of war. The chivalric language of service remained part of his imagination; he increasingly redirected the idea of serving a lord toward service of Christ.

The Encounter with the Leper

One of the most important events described by Francis himself involved people with leprosy. In his *Testament*, written near the end of his life, he says that when he lived in sin, the sight of lepers seemed bitter to him, but the Lord led him among them and he showed them mercy. What had seemed bitter became sweetness. Because this testimony comes directly from Francis, it provides unusually strong evidence for how he interpreted his own conversion (Francis of Assisi, 1999).

The significance is broader than one charitable act. Medieval lepers could experience fear, exclusion, poverty, and social distance. By approaching and serving them, Francis crossed a boundary that had structured his emotional and social life. Conversion meant learning to see value where he had previously felt disgust. His later fraternity would continue this emphasis on serving people who were poor, ill, or excluded.

San Damiano and the Call to Repair the Church

Tradition recounts that Francis prayed before a crucifix in the neglected church of San Damiano and heard Christ tell him to repair the church. Francis first interpreted this literally and began rebuilding damaged churches, including San Damiano, San Pietro, and the Porziuncola. He obtained resources partly through the family business, which contributed to a severe conflict with his father.

Later Franciscan interpretation understood the command more broadly as a call to renew Christian life. Francis himself did not begin as a theologian announcing a program of institutional reform. He repaired buildings, prayed, served lepers, and experimented with a life of poverty. The larger movement grew from these practices.

Conflict with His Father

Francis’s use of family resources and rejection of the merchant career brought him into conflict with Pietro. Before the bishop of Assisi, Francis renounced his claim to his father’s property and returned even his clothing. The episode became an enduring symbol of his break with inherited wealth and status.

The dramatic story should not obscure its human cost. From the father's perspective, the son was abandoning family responsibilities and disposing of commercial property. From Francis's perspective, economic dependence interfered with a new religious commitment. Medieval hagiography presents the scene as a decisive victory of spiritual over worldly fatherhood, but it also demonstrates how radical religious choices disrupt ordinary relationships.

Gospel Poverty

Francis's poverty was not simply admiration for having few possessions. He wanted to imitate the life of Christ and the apostles through dependence, work, begging when necessary, and refusal to accumulate property. The friars were to live among people rather than possess large monastic estates.

This ideal was difficult to maintain as the movement expanded. Books, houses, education, travel, care for sick friars, and administration required resources. Franciscan history therefore developed continuing debates about what poverty meant for an institution. Francis's charisma could sustain practices that became harder for thousands of friars dispersed across Europe and beyond.

The First Companions

Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter Catani were among the early men who joined Francis. According to Franciscan sources, the companions sought guidance from Gospel passages concerning the sale of possessions, carrying little for the journey, and following Christ. Their community did not initially possess a complex legal constitution.

The brothers called themselves lesser brothers, or Friars Minor. "Lesser" expressed humility and a refusal of superior status. They worked, prayed, preached repentance, and traveled. Their identity differed from monks bound primarily to one enclosed monastery. Mobility allowed them to respond to rapidly growing towns and changing social conditions.

Papal Approval

As the group expanded, it needed recognition from Church authorities. Francis and companions traveled to Rome around 1209 or 1210, where Pope Innocent III gave oral approval to their form of life according to early tradition. The exact details are difficult to reconstruct because later accounts contain symbolic narratives.

Formal papal approval developed further under Honorius III, who approved the Later Rule in 1223. The movement therefore remained within the Roman Catholic Church rather than becoming an independent sect. This relationship mattered because the period contained several poverty

movements viewed with suspicion or condemned as heretical.

The Order of Friars Minor

The Friars Minor expanded rapidly. Members traveled through Italy and into other regions, preaching and establishing fraternities. Growth created opportunities and problems. Francis preferred simplicity and personal example, while a large order required organization, education, leadership, and stable relationships with bishops and universities.

Francis eventually resigned direct administration of the order. This was not necessarily a complete defeat. It reflected illness, changing institutional needs, and tension between charismatic origins and organizational development. His authority remained spiritual even when others managed daily governance.

Clare of Assisi

Clare, a young woman from a prominent Assisi family, was inspired by Francis's preaching and left her household around 1212 to pursue religious poverty. Francis helped establish her and other women at San Damiano. The community later became known as the Poor Ladies and eventually the Poor Clares.

Clare should not be treated merely as Francis's female follower. She became a significant religious leader and defended her own community's commitment to poverty against pressure to accept property and income. Their relationship demonstrates how Franciscan ideals were interpreted through different institutional and gender constraints.

Preaching and Mission

Francis wanted the brothers to preach repentance through words and behavior. The often-repeated modern quotation "Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words" is not found in his authenticated writings. His Rule does, however, emphasize peaceful conduct and appropriate preaching.

Francis attempted journeys toward Muslim territories and eventually traveled to Egypt during the Fifth Crusade. His missionary desire existed within medieval Christian assumptions about conversion, but his encounter with a Muslim ruler became especially significant because it occurred amid war.

Francis and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil

In 1219, Francis crossed military lines near Damietta and met the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil.

The exact content of their conversation is uncertain. Christian sources agree that Francis was received and returned safely, but later accounts embellish the event with stories such as proposed ordeals by fire.

The encounter should not be romanticized as a modern interfaith conference or reduced to aggressive mission. Francis came as a Christian preacher who desired conversion, yet he entered peacefully and encountered hospitality from a Muslim ruler during a brutal crusading conflict. The event offers evidence that direct human encounter remained possible even where institutions were at war.

The Rule of 1221

The Earlier Rule, associated with 1221, contains extensive Gospel language and instructions about poverty, work, preaching, relationships, mission, and community life. It reflects a movement still close to its charismatic origins.

The text includes guidance for brothers who go among Muslims and other non-Christians. One approach is to avoid disputes and be subject to every human creature for God's sake while confessing Christian identity; another is to proclaim the Christian faith when they judge that this pleases God. This passage is important for interpreting Francis's mission because it combines witness with noncontentious presence.

The Later Rule of 1223

The Later Rule is shorter and more juridically organized. Pope Honorius III approved it in 1223. It established a durable constitutional foundation for the Friars Minor and remains central to Franciscan life.

The Rule emphasizes obedience, absence of personal property, work, prayer, fasting, preaching, and fraternity. Francis did not intend poverty to mean idleness. Brothers who could work were expected to work faithfully while avoiding possession of money in ways restricted by the Rule.

Greccio and the Nativity

At Greccio in 1223, Francis organized a Christmas celebration involving a manger, hay, and animals so that participants could contemplate the poverty of Christ's birth. The event is often described as the first Christmas nativity scene, though representations of the Nativity existed long before Francis.

Its importance lies in the physical and emotional style of Franciscan devotion. Francis wanted people to see and feel the humility of the Incarnation. His spirituality often joined theological belief with concrete material experience: a leper's body, a ruined church, bread, animals, landscape, and the

wounds of Christ.

The Canticle of the Creatures

The *Canticle of the Creatures*, composed in Francis's final years, praises God through Brother Sun, Sister Moon, wind, water, fire, and Mother Earth. It is among the earliest important literary texts in an Italian vernacular (Francis of Assisi, 1999).

The poem does not worship nature. Created things are relatives in a shared order that gives praise to the Creator. The language has become influential in contemporary Christian environmental thought because it resists treating the nonhuman world merely as property or raw material.

Francis and Animals

Stories about Francis preaching to birds, negotiating with the wolf of Gubbio, or calling creatures brothers and sisters have shaped his popular image as a patron of animals. Some episodes come from sources written after his lifetime and should be treated with historical caution.

The deeper pattern is well supported: Francis saw creation as revealing God's generosity and responded with affection and wonder. This does not map perfectly onto modern animal-rights theory. He remained a medieval Christian ascetic with beliefs and practices different from contemporary environmental ethics.

Illness

Francis's later years were marked by serious illness, including eye disease and other physical suffering. Travel, fasting, harsh living conditions, and disease may have contributed. He sought treatment but sometimes resisted comfort because of his ascetic ideals.

Modern admiration for asceticism should not turn illness into a spiritual requirement. Francis's willingness to suffer belonged to a specific medieval religious worldview. Contemporary followers may honor his simplicity without neglecting appropriate healthcare.

The Stigmata

In 1224, while on retreat at La Verna, Francis reportedly received wounds corresponding to the crucifixion of Christ. Early sources describe marks in his hands, feet, and side. The event became central to Franciscan devotion and contributed to his image as a person physically conformed to Christ (Bonaventure, 2000).

Historical method can establish that companions and early biographers reported the wounds and that the belief arose close to Francis's death. Whether the stigmata resulted from a miracle is a theological judgment beyond what historical evidence alone can prove. A respectful academic discussion can distinguish documentary history from faith interpretation.

Death at the Porziuncola

Francis died on October 3, 1226, near the Porziuncola at Assisi. Accounts describe him asking to be placed on the ground, emphasizing poverty even at death. He was approximately forty-four years old.

Pope Gregory IX canonized him in 1228, only two years later. Construction of the Basilica of Saint Francis began at Assisi, and his remains were transferred there. Rapid canonization reflected both popular devotion and the Church's recognition of the movement.

The Testament

Francis's *Testament* is important because it provides his own retrospective interpretation of vocation. He emphasizes the encounter with lepers, faith in churches and priests, the brothers given by God, the Gospel form of life, manual work, and commitment to poverty.

The text also reveals concern that the order might move away from its origins. Francis insists that the brothers should not reinterpret the Rule through explanatory glosses. After his death, debates emerged over whether and how the Testament legally bound the order.

Peace

Francis greeted people with a blessing of peace and instructed brothers to avoid quarrels and conflict. His peace was rooted in Christian discipleship rather than modern diplomatic theory.

He lived during communal wars, crusades, and violent political competition. His movement did not end these conflicts, and Francis did not become a political pacifist in every modern sense. Nevertheless, his personal movement across enemy lines and preference for humility created a strong legacy of peacemaking.

Poverty and Social Justice

Francis did not develop a modern economic program. His response to wealth was personal and communal renunciation rather than a policy for redistribution through the state. Yet his choice challenged the social prestige attached to money and class.

By calling himself and his companions lesser brothers, he attempted to live without domination. Service to lepers and identification with poor people challenged ordinary status boundaries. Modern social-justice movements can draw inspiration from this practice while recognizing that contemporary poverty also requires structural analysis Francis did not provide.

Francis and Ecology

Francis has become an important symbol for ecological spirituality. Pope John Paul II named him patron of ecology, and Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'* draws explicitly on the Canticle and Franciscan relationships with creation.

His relevance lies less in providing technical environmental policy than in reshaping moral imagination. Sun, water, land, animals, and humans are not isolated commodities but members of a shared created world. This perspective can support ecological responsibility when combined with modern science and environmental justice.

My Reflection on Francis

What I find most powerful in Francis's life is the movement from distance to relationship. He moved from fear of lepers to serving them, from the pursuit of status to calling himself lesser, from inherited wealth to dependence, and from crusading boundaries to direct encounter with a Muslim ruler.

His life is difficult to imitate literally. A modern person may have children, debt, medical needs, or responsibilities that make radical dispossession irresponsible. The value of Francis is therefore not a command that everyone abandon property. It is the question he places before ordinary choices: how much money, prestige, comfort, and control are enough, and whose suffering becomes invisible when these goals dominate?

Conclusion

Saint Francis of Assisi was a merchant's son from Assisi whose conversion developed through war, illness, prayer, service to lepers, and rejection of inherited wealth. He founded the Friars Minor, supported Clare and her community, preached a Gospel life of poverty and peace, met Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil during the Fifth Crusade, helped establish the Christmas celebration at Greccio, composed the *Canticle of the Creatures*, and was associated with the stigmata during his final illness. He died in 1226 and was canonized in 1228.

His legacy is powerful because it cannot be reduced to sentimental love of animals. Francis challenged status, property, fear of the marginalized, and religious complacency through embodied practice. His historical world was different from the present, and some popular stories are later

traditions rather than certain facts. Yet his insistence on fraternity, humility, peace, and gratitude toward creation continues to raise demanding questions about how faith should shape relationships with people and the natural world.

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