



Feast of St. Francis of Assisi—4 October

Saint Francis has long been revered as the Patron Saint of animals and the Environment. However, he achieved so much more in his short, but extraordinary, life. After renouncing his life of wealth, Saint Francis lived a simple life in poverty. He demonstrated a living faith by caring for the sick, the poor and the rejected. He was even accredited to establishing the tradition of the nativity creche.

EARLY YEARS

Saint Francis was one of several children born in late 1181 or early 1182, to Italian father and French mother. His father, Pietro di Bernardone dei Moriconi was a prosperous silk merchant and his mother, Pica de Bourlemont, was a noblewoman, originally from Provence.

Born whilst his father was abroad, his mother named him, Giovanni, after John the Baptist. However, upon returning home, his father renamed him Francesco (the Frenchman), possibly to honour his accomplishments and success in France.

Indulged by his parents as a youth, Francis had a very easy life. He lived a spirited life as a wealthy young man. He spent money lavishly and wore fine clothing. Francis had a happy demeanour. He was charming, handsome and was loved by all who met him. Although he had everything his heart desired, Francis displayed a sense of disillusionment to the world around him.

In around the year 1202, Francis enlisted into the military seeking glory, prestige and honour. He was captured by Perugia and spent a year in a dark, harsh dungeon. Once released in 1203, he returned to his carefree life.

In 1205, adorned in a magnificent armour decorated with gold, Francis once again left to enlist for battle. On his way, however, he had a strange vision which made him return to Assisi and re-evaluate his life. He returned home humiliated, ridiculed and labelled a coward. Francis no longer had the taste for a worldly life.

ON THE WAY TO CONVERSION

On a pilgrimage to Rome, he joined poor beggars. He spent time in solitude praying to God for spiritual enlightenment. However, conversion did not come so quickly. One day, Francis, the man who loved beauty, was confronted by a leper. Although he was repelled by his appearance and smell, Francis came off his horse and kissed the leper's hand. When the kiss of peace was returned, Francis was filled with joy. As he rode off, he stopped to look back but the leper was gone. He knew at that moment that God had tested him and that he had passed.

Francis' conversion led him to the ancient church at *San Damiano*, in which the icon of the crucified Christ said to him, "Francis, go repair my church which as you can see, is falling into ruins".



Assuming this meant to fix the crumbling building, Francis acted impetuously and took fabric from his father's shop. He then sold it to get money to fix the church.

Francis' father, Pietro, was furious. He dragged Francis before the bishop accusing him of theft and demanding the money be returned. At that moment, Francis renounced his father and his wealth. Reports say that he even stripped himself naked and the Bishop covered him with his own cloak.

During the months that followed, Francis wandered as a beggar, collecting stones to rebuild San Damiano. Over the course of two years, he embraced a penitent life, restoring several ruined chapels and nursing lepers in Assisi.

One morning at mass in February 1208, Francis heard Matthew's Gospel about the "Commissioning of the Twelve". The Gospel inspired Francis to devote himself to a life of poverty. He went forth preaching to people about penance, brotherly love and peace. His example drew others to him and within a year he had 11 followers from all walks of life. They lived simply and made deep impressions on their hearers.

In 1209, Francis composed a simple rule for his friars called, "**The Regula Primitiva**" or Primitive Rule. The rule was to follow the teachings of our Lord and to walk in his footsteps.

The Prayer before the Crucifix (1205-1206)

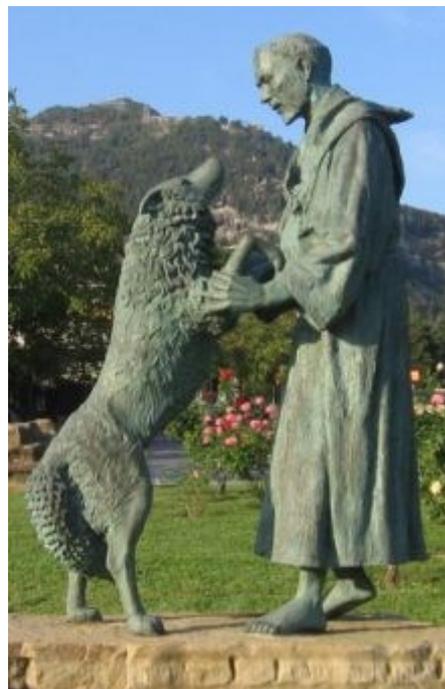
*Most High, glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart and
give me true faith,
certain hope, and perfect charity,
sense and knowledge, Lord,
that I may carry out
Your holy and true command.*

LOVE OF ALL OF GOD'S CREATION

Francis' deep affection for all of God's creation was displayed by showing equality, honour and respect to every person. His brotherhood also included all of God's creatures, great and small.

In one famous story, Francis was seen preaching to hundreds of birds about being thankful to God for their wonderful clothes, their independence and for God's care. The birds were attentive to Francis' words, only flying off when he finished.

In another account, Francis intervened when people of Gubbio wanted to kill a wolf who was terrorising their town. Legend says that Francis spoke to the wolf to never kill again. The wolf eventually became the town pet. He was fed by the town and was never hungry again. When the wolf died, a statue was created in his memory.



Further exemplifying his great love of all of God's creation, Francis wrote the "**Canticle of the Sun**", also known as **Laudes Creaturarum** (*Praise of the Creatures*), for the people of Umbria late in the year 1224. It is believed to be among the first works of literature written in the Italian language and is considered to be one of the most familiar songs of praise in the world. The Canticle of the Sun, in its praise of God, affirms Francis' personal theology as he often referred to animals as brothers and sisters to Mankind.

Canticle of the Sun

by Saint Francis of Assisi (1224)

*Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.*

*To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.*

*Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.*

*Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.*

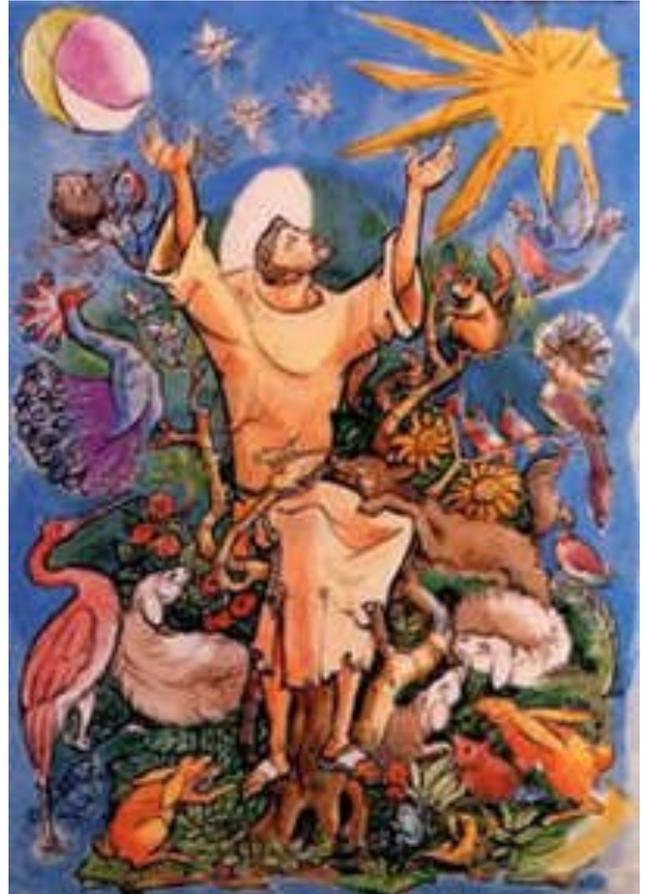
*Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night and
he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.*

*Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.
Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon
for love of You and bear sickness and trial.*

*Blessed are those who endure in peace,
By You Most High, they will be crowned.*

*Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.*

*No second death can do them harm.
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,
And serve Him with great humility.*



FOUNDER OF THE FRANCISCAN FRIARS

In the year 1209, Francis went to Rome seeking approval for his brotherhood from Pope Innocent III. Although, the Pope councillors did not approve of Francis' life of dire poverty and deemed it not safe or practical, on 16 April 1210, the Franciscan Order was founded. The group, called the **Order of Friars Minor** (Lesser Brothers) were then centred in Porziuncola and preaching in Umbria. Francis chose to never be ordained a priest, although he was later ordained a deacon.

The new order grew quickly with new vocations. In 1211, along with Clare of Assisi, Francis established a second Franciscan Order for Women, known as the “**Poor Clares**”.

For those who not leave their homes, Francis also formed the “**Third Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance**”. This fraternity was composed of laity or clergy who observed the principles of Franciscan life. Spreading beyond the shores of Italy, this order is now known as the **Secular Franciscan Order**.

SPREADING THE GOSPEL

Passionate about bringing the Gospel to all lands and converting the people, Francis travelled when he could. Famously, in 1219, he went to Egypt during the fifth crusade to convert the Sultan or win his martyrdom in the attempt. In the midst of battle, Francis was captured. Amazingly, he was not killed but was taken to the Sultan. Francis charmed the Sultan and later accounts state that he was given permission by the Sultan to visit holy places and preach there.

When Francis returned to Italy some ten years later he found that his brotherhood had grown to five thousand. Pressure came from outside to control the brotherhood and make them conform to the standards of others. Francis dream of radical poverty was seen as too harsh. He relinquished his authority.

CREATOR OF THE NATIVITY CRECHE

In 1223, Francis, now a deacon, was visiting the town of Greccio to celebrate Christmas. Greccio was a small town built on a mountainside overlooking a beautiful valley. Saint Francis realized that the chapel of the Franciscan hermitage would be too small to hold the congregation for Midnight Mass. So, he found a niche in the rock near the town square and set up the altar. Francis prepared a manger, brought hay, an ox and an ass to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people gathered there, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. Accounts state that Francis stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, and chanted the Holy Gospel. He then preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King and called the child the Babe of Bethlehem. Hence, at this extraordinary Midnight Mass, the tradition of the Nativity Creche was born.



FINAL YEARS

The last years of Francis' life were marked with much suffering and humiliation. Praying to share in Christ's passion, he received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ, in his own body in 1224. Suffering greatly from the stigmata and from a disease of the eyes, Francis' eventual death occurred on 3 October 1226 as he was singing Psalm 142(141) "Voce mea ad Dominum". He was about 45 years old.

Francis was pronounced a saint by Pope Gregory IX on 16 July 1228. His Feast day is celebrated on 4 October.

OTHER INTERESTING INFORMATION

Often attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, the Peace Prayer or **Prayer of St. Francis**, was never actually found in the writings of Saint Francis. The prayer only dates back to 1912 when it was first published in Paris by a Catholic Church Organisation (La Ligue de la Sainte– Messe) or "The League of the Holy Mass". Although no author was given, it is believed that it may have been written by the founder of the association, Father Esther Bouquerel. Used extensively during the two World Wars, this famous prayer has been frequently set to music and has found appeal with diverse faiths, encouraging service to others.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring love.

Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.

Where there is discord, let me bring union.

Where there is error, let me bring truth.

Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.

Where there is despair, let me bring hope.

Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.

Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

O Master, let me not seek as much to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love,

for it is in giving that one receives,

it is in self-forgetting that one finds,

it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,

it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

