

The Biography of St. Francis

So what is Franciscan Evangelical Life?

It is Life engendered by the Word of God and lived
in the spirit of Saints Francis and Clare.

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI⁵

FRANCIS OF ASSISI WAS BORN IN 1181 OR 1182 to Pietro Bernardone, a wealthy cloth merchant, and his French wife Lady Pica. Pietro was away trading in France when his son was born, and the child was christened Giovanni, but his father changed it to "Francesco" (the little Frenchman) on his return. Pietro had an affection for all things French, which Francis himself came to share: at his most joyful, he liked to improvise love songs in French and sing them to God. Francis was not much of a student, however, nor did he have any great enthusiasm for taking up his father's business.

In his youth Francis had a reputation as a playboy and a *bon vivant*, treating his friends to good times at his father's expense though he was equally generous with the poor. He dreamed of distinguishing himself in battle, but at about age twenty he was taken prisoner in Perugia, and languished there ill for a year before being ransomed by his father. His convalescence back in Assisi was marked by uncertainty about his future, but eventually he made another attempt at a military career. This one ended when a dream turned him back to Assisi, and he withdrew from his former pleasures, embracing beggars and lepers and spending much of his time wandering the countryside in search of direction. He finally found it at a little half-ruined church called San Damiano. Francis was kneeling before its Byzantine cross one day when suddenly the Lord spoke to him from it: "Francis, go and repair my house, which as you can see, is falling into ruins." Francis took this command literally at first, and restored several derelict churches in the area before coming to understand that it was not churches he was meant to rebuild, but the Church itself.

The changes in Francis' life made him appear increasingly eccentric in the eyes of the citizens of Assisi. Relations with his father became more and more strained until eventually, humiliated and fed up, Pietro

⁵ Pitchford, Susan. *Following Francis* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006).

hauled his son before the Bishop of Assisi and demanded that he renounce his inheritance. Francis, in a gesture that has resonated through the centuries, took off his clothes before the bishop and assembled people. Handing what remained of his possessions to Pietro, Francis said, "Until now I have called you my father on earth, but from now on I desire to say only, 'Our Father who art in Heaven.'" The bishop took Francis under his care, and soon Francis was himself receiving followers, who joined him in renouncing worldly goods and nursing lepers, restoring churches and performing works of charity. Dressed in the clothing of beggars, Francis and his companions set out without money or supplies to preach repentance and the kingdom of God. The brothers took shelter where they could, and offered manual labor in exchange for food, but when work could not be found they accepted alms. The hunger, cold, sickness and the general physical misery they experienced were forgotten under the spell of Francis' charm. Their radical attempt to live the gospel initially made them objects of derision, but in time the scorn turned to respect and even veneration.

The movement grew rapidly: within ten years of having their Rule accepted by the pope, they were able to draw some 5,000 friars and a further 500 aspirants to a Chapter held outside Assisi. The movement was widening as well. In 1212 Francis had received the vows of the eighteen-year-old Clare, who went on to found the Second Franciscan Order of Poor Ladies, known after her death as the Poor Clares. In 1221, the Rule of the Order of Penance or "Third Order" was accepted by the pope, opening the way for still greater growth by making room for people from all walks of life. Francis continued to travel around Italy exhorting the people, and ultimately traveled as far as Egypt where he preached the Christian faith to Sultan Malek Kernel. But by the time he returned to Italy, already infected with the trachoma that would leave him nearly blind, his Order was in disarray. Growth was making it increasingly difficult to remain true to the original vision of gospel simplicity, and the attempt to inject a bit of realism and prudence into the organization looked to Francis like compromise and betrayal. He resigned his headship of the Order and spent the remainder of his life trying to lead by example alone.

Like Christ himself, Francis alternated periods of preaching with times of seclusion and intense prayer. Two years before his death, he retired to Mount Alverna for forty days of prayer and fasting. Passing his time in solitude and meditation on the Passion of Christ, he asked two favors of the Lord: that he would know both the pain Jesus had experienced in his Passion, and the love that had compelled him to go through with it. This prayer was dramatically answered when Francis received the Stigmata: the five wounds of Christ's crucifixion impressed in his own flesh. His body already frail from poverty and self-denial, his eyes burning from trachoma, the Stigmata added to Francis' suffering. Yet he returned to Assisi and paid a visit to St. Clare at San Damiano where, in anguish and virtually blind, he dictated his magnificent hymn of praise, the *Canticle of the Creatures*. Less than a year later, Francis lay dying at the bishop's palace in Assisi. When the end was close, he asked to be taken back to the Porziuncula, the little chapel and settlement that was the cradle of his Order. There, faithful to Lady Poverty to the end, he lay naked on the ground surrounded by his brothers, and gave them his final exhortation: "I have done what was my duty to do-may Christ show you

what is yours." He was taken at last by "Sister Death," whose praise he had sung in a verse added to the *Canticle of the Creatures* just before his death on October 3, 1226, at age forty-five. Francis was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in 1228, and his feast day is celebrated October 4th.

SAINT CLARE OF ASSISI (1193-1253)

Favarone and Ortulana, Clare's parents, were of the noble class in Assisi. Their intergenerational residence in the upper part of the town was adjacent to the Cathedral of San Rufino. When Clare was a small child, the political situation in Assisi became so dangerous for the women and children of the noble class that they fled to nearby Perugia. The merchant class of Assisi was forcing its way into power, thus crippling the feudal system. New city-states began forming throughout Italy. During the first decade of the thirteenth century, the social order in Assisi stabilized enough for the young Clare to return to the city with her mother and her two sisters.

Clare had made a private vow of virginity. A local nobleman, Lord Ranieri, testified that many knights had wished to marry the beautiful Clare, but she was determined to dedicate herself to the service of God by remaining in her home, living a life of prayer, and helping those most in need. She also decided to divest herself of her entire inheritance to give the money to the poor. Francis had heard of Clare's holiness and she had heard Francis preach in the cathedral. Francis came to meet Clare and subsequently Clare, accompanied by a companion, met frequently with Francis.

Whatever happened between Francis and Clare, on Palm Sunday, 1212, Clare took a dramatic, irrevocable step on her spiritual journey. The noblewomen of Assisi, dressed in their finest clothing, paraded through the town to receive the blessed palms at the altar of the cathedral. Clare stood aside from this group. Nevertheless, Bishop Guido came to her and placed a palm in her hand. That night she slipped through the door of her family home and down the winding streets of Assisi to leave the town and to meet Francis at the Portiuncola. There he gave her the tonsure and a drab tunic as her religious garb. When the knights sought Clare the next day to carry her back home, she was found safe in the sanctuary of the Benedictine nuns at Bastia. After a week there, Francis and a few friars walked her to a residence of penitential women living at Panzo. After a few weeks, when all was in readiness for her life at San Damiano, she moved there with the women who chose to join her.

For forty years, Clare and the women lived a life of prayer and simplicity outside the city walls, close to leper colonies. These "Poor Ladies" strove to live the Gospels in a way that they had not been lived before. They did not "shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or shame and the contempt of the world." Clare, like Francis, considered all persons to be equal. During her lifetime, her reputation became well

known as a woman of prayer and one who possessed the gift of healing. A few of her writings remain that provide a glimpse of her rich spirituality. Clare modeled her life on the humanity of Jesus. By gazing upon the image of the crucified Christ, Clare came to identify with his poverty, and this became the foundation for her own practice of poverty. Because Jesus was born poor and naked in the crib and died poor and nailed on the cross, the only way Clare knew to imitate him was to also be poor.

Francis of Assisi died the evening of October 3, 1226. The mourners carried his body to San Damiano on their way up the hill to Assisi so that Clare and the women might see his remains and bid him their last farewell. Clare lived for twenty-seven more years offering support and guidance to Francis' earliest companions. During those years she experienced tension with the papacy over the form of life she desired to live. Three different popes gave her "new rules" to live by. When Pope Innocent IV made an effort to give her a Rule in 1247 that did not include the Privilege of Poverty, she began to write her own form of life which was closer in spirit to that of Francis. Clare's *form of life* was finally approved while Clare lay on her deathbed in 1253. The Poor Clares today follow this Rule of Saint Clare.