



Follow Francis: Be Jesus !

Francis (1181/2 – 1226) was born in Assisi, the son of Peter Di Bernardone (a rich businessman of Assisi) and Monna Pica (originally from Provence.) When Francis was born, his father was buying cloth for his store in France. In his father's absence, Francis' mother went ahead and had him baptized John. The name Francis (literally "the French one" or even "Frenchy") was given him by his father upon his return because of his father's admiration for France.

Peter Di Bernardone was a cloth merchant, and Francis, following the wishes of his father, was involved in the cloth selling business himself. In the year 1205, wanting to become a knight, Francis went away to do battle in Puglia. But in Spoleto, a short distance away from Assisi, he had a dream which totally changed his plans. He returned to Assisi and began questioning the meaning and value of his life. Two moments of his conversion experience are well-known: meeting and embracing the leper, and, hearing the crucifix of San Damiano which spoke to him, saying: "Francis, go, repair my house which, as you see, is falling down." Wanting to do the will of God, Francis immediately started to materially repair churches. He discovered later, however, that his mission was to repair the Church spiritually (Francis was born at a time of great upheaval in civil society and the Church was in upheaval due to the rise of various heresies). By his example as a man of peace, Francis was able to bring about a renewal in society and in the Church.

In 1208, in a church in Assisi, he heard the Gospel verses: "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give it to the poor..." and: "Do not take anything for your journey, neither staff or knapsack, nor bread, nor money..." Listening to this word, he was overwhelmed with joy. Once Francis understood his vocation more clearly, he gave away all his possessions in order to live the Gospels radically and in poverty. His lifestyle profoundly impressed other young people of Assisi and inspired the first group of followers who gathered in Rivotorto: Bernard, Peter, Giles and Maseo. He told them to "Go and put into practice the teaching that you have heard from the Lord."

The desire to preach the Gospel was so strong in Francis that he undertook an itinerant ministry throughout various parts of Italy. He even went to Egypt to preach to the Sultan, impressing him with his courage and simplicity. Through his strong desire for union with God in prayer he gained the strength to announce the Gospel of Jesus. He said: "No one makes progress in the service of God without prayer."

Francis, in love with Christ, chose to live just like him. Poverty detached Francis from the things of the world in order to fix his gaze on heavenly things...on God. By choosing chastity, Francis renounced having his own family in order to love the Lord alone. He found himself looking after an even bigger family---his brother friars and those who followed after him. Through chastity, he gave up having a particular person to love in order to love all. Obedience for Francis meant recognizing God as the Lord who manifested his will through others. Francis called the superiors of his Order *ministers*, that is, servants---those who helped their brother friars to discover the will of God.

Francis also saw creation as a house which God had given to humanity, where God's wisdom, power and goodness can be contemplated. For this reason, Francis called all creatures his brothers and sisters, and considered them gifts and the means through which one encountered God the Creator. Creation was made for humanity and for its use; creation needs, therefore, to be used well and not abused.

Francis has a great devotion to the humanity of Christ. In 1223 at Greccio, in the Rieti Vally, Francis organized the first living manger....from which comes our tradition of creating a Nativity scene at Christmas. "So deeply was the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion of Christ impressed on his memory, that it was only with great difficulty that he succeeded in thinking of anything else." He was also deeply devoted to the Eucharist.

Francis gave three religious Orders to the Church. The First Order is the male branch and is made up of friars. In 1212, the Second Order of Franciscans was founded by St. Clare through the inspiration of St. Francis; this is the female branch: the Poor Clares. In 1221, Francis received from the pope approval for the Rule of the Third Order made up of laymen and women who, by living in marriage and in families, give witness to the Franciscan ideal in society.

On the morning of September 14, 1224, the sky opened and Christ crucified, appearing as a seraph angel, descended on the mountain of La Verna. Christ impressed on Francis the stigmata (the marks of the crucifixion of Jesus---wounds in his hands, feet and side---he became like Jesus both through his Gospel lifestyle and through the stigmata) which he would carry in his body until his meeting with Sister Death on the evening of October 3, 1226, at St. Mary of the Angels. Francis was declared a saint by Pope Gregory IX on July 16, 1228 – just two years after his death.

+ + + *"Follow Francis!" --- What His Living the Gospel Means for Us* + + +

- **"Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words"** –Bringing light to today's darkness!
- **The Gospel way of life: prayer, penance and charity** –The Cross: Christ's self-giving love!
- **Love of God and God's poor** – Keep Sabbath and the love of those who are poor in any way! Advocating Catholic social principles and practices!
- **Love of Poverty in imitation of Jesus** – Live simply that others may simply live! Stewardship of time, talent and treasure!
- **Love of the Earth, our home, and all its creatures** – ecology and the path of beauty, idols of profit and consumption, and the culture of waste!
- **Love of peace among all peoples and religions** – Lord, make me an instrument of your peace!