

St Francis Today

1. FROM HIS LIFE AND EXAMPLE

A whole new life was sweeping through Italy in 1182
when Francis of Assisi was born.

The new city states were becoming prosperous
with new-rich merchants such as Francis' father,
Peter Bernardonne who gave him a good education
and all that came from it.

The young man full of verve for life,
popular and venturesome, he was inspired by
the valours and ethics of chivalry of the Knight-errants
and sang their songs with the troubadours
carrying them with him throughout his life.

An inevitable disillusionment with the 'Crusades'
brought him to the common crisis of youth.

He no longer thrilled at the sight of the shimmering amour, the Perugian valleys of vineyards,
and the finery that his father manufactured.

The inevitable questions arose in his mind
"What am I doing here ? – where am I going ?".

Then for the first time he became aware of the *poverty*
amid the splendour when a beggar
asked for alms in the name of Jesus Christ.

A while later he encountered a leper
But accustomed to their traditional shunning of these hapless creatures, in an impetuous moment
and a personal victory, he went to him and kissed him.
His whole attitude changed from doubt and despair to that of joy in finding a direction in which to go.
His friends and family assumed that he was in love - "Who is she ?" they asked. "Lady Poverty" he
replied, to which was prepared to sacrifice his life.

In visiting St Peters in Rome, he was both inspired
and dejected at the great accumulation of wealth
that encrusted the church of God.

Returning to Assisi, he came upon the ruined little church of San Damiano.
Gazing at the Byzantine crucifix, the eyes of Christ
were seemingly fixed upon him.

Francis unspoken questioning
was greeted by the words from the Lord
"Do you not see how my house is going to ruin ? – then go and build it up again."

Enthusiastically he took this to mean this little church, but was later to realise that his mission
was to entire Christendom.

But not having the funds,
he sold some of his father's merchandise,
who was furious and even brought a legal suit
against him to have it returned.

In a dramatic moment, Francis responded
by stripping himself of all his clothes,
disowned his father and left to begin
his mission of identifying with and dignifying poverty,
taking as his authority the words of Christ :

"If anyone wishes to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross" –
in the knowledge and promise that all one's needs would be met on the road. [Matthew 16:24]

This message was picked up some of his friends, including Peter Cattani a former knight Angelo Tancredi, notable a priest named Sylvester. Pacifco a troubadour, Masseo, a tall eloquent man

with whom Francis enjoyed friendly banter.

Giles was a ploughboy and a jack-of-all-trades with a trenchant wit. Then there was Leo, who became the scribe of all the best that Francis spoke.

As symbolic of their cause they chose a simple brown tunic tied around the waist with a stout cord.

This brotherly group was approached by a young teenager Claire, a cousin of Rufino, who both came from a high society family.

After hearing Francis give a sermon at the little chapel of Portiuncula on the needs of the poor, Claire asked to follow him.

So was born a parallel mission of the 'Poor Claires', at the convent of San Damiano, drawing many from the ranks of nobility to this Sisterhood.

Because of the growth and influence of this strange group of missionaries of poverty, he was advised by Bishop Guido,

a kindly man and spiritual confidant of the necessity of seeking the approval of Pope Innocent III in Rome.

This however, required following a certain protocol for obtaining an audience.

The brothers debated intensely on what they wanted to ask of the Pope.

A speech was composed, such that it would not offend or lead to religious objections or attacks on the rich.

At the Papal audience,

Francis and this motley group were confronted by an elegant, courtly man or 37, having a sound legal as well as a theological background.

Francis froze. His speech deserted him and he just launched into a spirit-filled but simple statement of enthusiasm for serving the poor as "Friars minor"

The cardinals present asked what they wanted

- a building ? or support of any kind ?.

Francis said they needed nothing

but to have their blessing to put into practice what Christ did and commanded

- that is to throw themselves completely - on the promises of God.

The Pope and cardinals had no answer - and had to agree.

Thus was born this Order of St Francis, as the first religious order for people living in the secular world.

Since it was impossible to bring all into a church with its life and influence,

His task was to bring Christ into the world, their homes, in business and government regardless of any person's status

but with a special concern for the poor.

This resulted in the first 'Peace Treaty' in 1210,

which gave the lesser classes of Assissi, peasants, low wage-earners and outcasts with certain social recognition and rights.

A Servant of God to People

The legacy of St Francis is just how a simple life

can have a profound meaning, purpose
with results that come from example
rather than from theological knowledge.
For he was not a passive believer, as one who could
merely accept what scripture was handed to him.
It had to be lived as a test of faith in true humility.

God was to him more believable than the world
had thought and Jesus Christ the model for all
human behaviour and the norm for every decision,
whether individual or social.

Those to whom he communicated in turn rediscovered the Lord as their closest and most faithful
friend.

**"You are my friends' he said
" if you do what I command." [John 15 :14]**

Obedience

In a religious attitude of loving obedience,
Francis opened his life generously to the word of God,
to his superiors in the church, the Order itself
and to the brothers that the Lord gave him.

He called them all to the same vocation
o which he had been called – indeed to *all* people
– including those that were not Christian
– and to all animals and nature.

He chose to be poor, even in relation to God,
and so constantly sought to purify his intentions
and to those around him.

Social sensitivity

Knowing as he did from concrete personal experience
the social and political ills of society,

Francis was able to arouse in the church a renewed
sensitivity to human beings and their problems.

He sought wherever possible to alleviate the conditions that made it so difficult for people to live in
harmony

- conditions of suffering that were ever-increasing
He knew only too well that only the person who is
free of the prison of debilitating riches and egoism
can understand the needs of those who have less,
and to effectively espouse their cause.

God's Creation

St Francis gave spiritual renewal
to those wonderful passages of Genesis
which depict the creation of the world as *Good*, but
which have been desecrated in the scramble for riches

He was in essence the first 'environmentalist'.
To him all creatures of the earth are brothers
and sisters for three fundamental reasons that .

1. They share with us a common origin.
2. They share with us the same destiny.
3. All are symbols and bearers of Christ.

St Francis' sainthood and miracles
should not be an obstacle to following his example.
Anyone can make miracles happen – if they believe
– and trust in God to guide them
to their personal purpose in life.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the harmony
Francis enjoyed was his submissiveness, knowing
that God can express his will through any of his works.
He even avoided prayers of petition lest he should attempt to 'appropriate' the favours of Most High
Instead, he confined his prayers
to praise, thanksgiving and joy.

Francis himself was a reminder
of how generously God bestows the gift of joy
on those who faithfully follow Christ.
Pleasure is always fleeting, but joy is that
which can endure and overcome the sufferings,
evils, insults humiliations and blows of this world.

We learn from the biographies of Francis
that the friars and brothers joked
and affectionately scoffed at each other's foibles.
He kept the description of himself as 'Brother donkey'.

A true scientist in the spirit he listened to mysterious
voices, pried into the mute language of things.
To him, no animal could be reduced to a status
of a mere object to be used and consumed.
In this, there are many legends attached to Francis,
such his 'Sermon to the birds' that responded
in a physical and understanding manner to his words.

The 'Canticle of the Sun' is still the finest exposition
of nature's wholeness and relationships.

The potent example of his taming a wild wolf
in the village of Gubbio bringing a reconciliation between seemingly irreconcilable parties.

The legend of St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

“Where there is discord- let me sow unity

A seemingly unlikely but significant example of peace-making was when the Italian town of Gubbio lived in terror because an exceptionally large and fierce wolf which terrorized the countryside, killing animals and even people.

When St Francis came to visit the town he took compassion on the people in their plight and resolved to confront the beast.

With a companion he set out into the lair of the wolf. On hearing its howl he went towards it and cried out *“Brother wolf, come here. In the name of Christ I command you not to harm anyone any more.”*

The wolf stopped in its tracks as St Francis gravely lectured him on the fear he had created.

He finished by telling the beast that he wished to make peace between him and the people of Gubbio. The wolf wagged its tail, bowed its head in agreement and followed him back to the town to meet the people. They were told of the pact made with the wolf.

Acknowledging that all God’s creatures require food, their part in the contract was to promise to feed it.

It then became more of a pet and a mascot, until its death two years later, when it was greatly mourned and buried in a chapel dedicated to St Francis.

This story delivers a powerful message of reconciling wild energy to human welfare.

St Francis lectured equally and partially excused the life styles and actions on both sides.

The wolf was not evil – only hungry.

The people of Gubbio had lulled themselves into a comfortable life-style that had forgotten their responsibilities of stewardship of God’s creatures. What they had demonized, he called Brother.

This metaphor is associated with the modern city with all its violence, and the ‘urban jungle’ that has to be ‘tamed’.

However, If we see nature as coming from God’s hand, not simply as a challenge to our competitive and possessive spirit, but more as intimately related to us, to be respected and enjoyed, then the idea that a wolf can be our brother is not all that odd.’

The story has less to do with St Francis and his relationship with the wolf and more to do with their mutual conversion.

Any real peace, coming from recognition and repentance, has to come from a change of heart or ‘mindset’ such that St Francis was able to make, and which has to be a touchstone of all future “Peace-Makers”

Brotherhood

Human brotherhood meant
having all things in common.

Francis and his followers discovered
in their fraternal existence, the courage to suffer
daily inconveniences and even misunderstandings.
Enjoying the freedom that being children of God
and dependence upon him, gave them the freedom
to call upon the church to live the Gospel to the fullest
without ever being tempted to turn against it
– because they lived it.

As the brothers traveled, they greeted all they met
with a cheerful '*Buona Giorno, Buona Gente*'
[Good morning Good people"]
They were essentially Apostles of Peace and goodwill.
Love was his greatest gift to everyone,
which overflowed so much
that he was unaware of his own circumstances.
The three Orders he founded –
the Order of the Friars Minor,
the Poor Clares and the Third Secular Order
are just parts of that one Order of Friendship
and a universal brotherhood.

He wanted everyone to retain serenity
in the face of difficulties, as he penned
in the now famous blessing to Brother Leo :

*"My the Lord bless you and keep you
May he show his face to you and have mercy on you
May he turn his countenance upon you
and give you peace."*