

A History of Saint Francis

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), Italian mystic and preacher, founded the Franciscan Order in 1209. The order is devoted to preaching the Gospel and living in strict poverty.

Known as the Seraphic Saint, Francis was born in Assisi, Italy in 1182. His mother, Pica, had him baptized Giovanni di Bernadone, in honor of John the Baptist. But, his father, a wealthy cloth merchant, renamed him Francesco (French in Italian) because of his commercial success and interest in France.



Francis was a handsome and cheerful young man and enjoyed the pleasures of life. He also spent a short time in the military and following a battle between Assisi and Perugia, he was held captive in Perugia for over a year. While imprisoned, he suffered a severe illness during which he resolved to alter his way of life. He felt God was calling him to live as Jesus did, so he decided to give up his wealth and embrace a life of poverty and service to the poor and sick. "When people serve the poor," Francis said, "they are serving Christ himself."

After a pilgrimage to Rome, where he begged at the church doors for the poor, he claimed to have had a mystical experience in the Church of San Damiano just outside of Assisi. There the Icon of Christ Crucified came alive and said to him three times, "Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." He thought this to mean the ruined church in which he was presently praying, and so sold his horse and some cloth from his father's store, to assist the priest there for this purpose.

His father Pietro, highly indignant, attempted to change his mind, first with threats and then with corporal chastisement. After a final interview in the presence of the bishop, Francis renounced his father and his patrimony, laying aside even the garments he had received from him. For the next couple of months he lived as a beggar in the region of Assisi. Returning to the town, he restored several ruined churches, among them the *Porziuncola—little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels—*situated just outside of town, and which later became his favorite abode.

He performed charities among the lepers and began working on the restoration of other dilapidated churches. Francis then devoted the next three years to the care of outcasts and lepers in the woods of Mount Subasio. In 1208, one day during Mass, he heard a call telling him to go out into the world and, according to the text of Matthew 10:5-14, to possess nothing, but to do good everywhere.

Francis put on the clothes of a poor shepherd and began preaching to people about peace with God, with one's neighbor, and with one's self. He looked on all people and things as his brothers and sisters because they were created by the same God.



The Porziuncola chapel

In 1209, Francis gathered round him the 11 young men who became the original brothers of his order and took them to Rome where Pope Innocent

Ill gave him permission to start the religious order of Franciscans, later called the First Order; they elected Francis superior. In 1211 he received a young, well-born nun of Assisi, Clare, into Franciscan fellowship; through her was established the Order of the Poor Ladies (the Poor Clares), later the Second Order of Franciscans. It was probably later in 1212 that Francis set out for the Holy Land, but a shipwreck forced him to return.

In May of 1213 he received the mountain of La Verna (Alverna) as a gift from the count Orlando di Chiusi who described it as “eminently suitable for whoever wishes to do penance in a place remote from mankind.” The mountain would become one of his favorite retreats for prayer. In the same year, Francis sailed for Morocco, but this time an illness forced him to break off his journey in Spain. Back in Assisi, several noblemen (among them Tomasso da Celano, who would later write the biography of St. Francis) and some other well-educated men joined his order.



Saint Francis With Al Kamil, 15th Century

In 1219 he was in Egypt, where he succeeded in preaching to, but not in converting, the sultan. Francis then went on to the Holy Land, staying there until 1220.

Although nativity drawings and paintings existed earlier, St Francis of Assisi celebrated Christmas by setting up the first known three-dimensional *presepio* or *crèche* (Nativity scene) in the town of Greccio near Assisi, around 1220. He used real animals to create a living scene so that the worshipers could contemplate the birth of the child Jesus in a direct way, making use of the senses, especially sight. Thomas of Celano, a biographer of Francis and Saint Bonaventure both tell how he only used a straw-filled manger set between a real ox and donkey.

According to Thomas, it was beautiful in its simplicity with the manger acting as the altar for the Christmas Mass.

In September 1224, after 40 days of fasting, Francis was praying upon Monte Alverna when he felt pain mingled with joy, and the marks of the crucifixion of Christ, the stigmata, appeared on his body. Accounts of the appearance of these marks differ, but (according to Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, President Emeritus, University of Notre Dame) it seems probable that they were knobby protuberances of the flesh, resembling the heads of nails. Francis was carried back to Assisi, where his remaining years were marked by physical pain and almost total blindness. So deep was his desire to be like his Lord, the marks of Jesus' five wounds remained with Francis the rest of his life. He died at his beloved Porziuncola chapel on October 3, 1226 and was buried in Assisi. Pope Gregory IX canonized him 2 years later. In 1980, Pope John Paul II proclaimed him the patron saint of ecologists. In art, the emblems of St. Francis are the wolf, the lamb, the fish, birds, and the stigmata. His feast day is October 4.



St Francis receives the Stigmata

Fairfield Bay is nestled in a woodsy setting and the entire community has been designated a wildlife sanctuary. St. Francis loved the beauty of nature and wildlife so much, it seemed only natural for the founding members of this community to name their new parish in his honor.