

Introduction

Contemplation in Action

History likes to portray Francis of Assisi as a perfect being, unmoved by the trials that bring the rest of us to our knees. A placid sage who held out his holy hands to the gentle forest creatures while they scurried and swooped and glided to greet him. An innocent child-man who easily slips into the kingdom of heaven while the rest of us grapple outside the gates with our thousand grown-up concerns and responsibilities, failing again and again to meet our lives gracefully.

It is comforting to discover that Francis of Assisi suffered and lamented, lost his temper and forfeited his dignity, rebelled against the rebels and lashed out at the meek. That, like us, he fell again and again. And that he continued to stand up, brush himself off, and recommit his life to God. It is precisely in his humanness that his true sanctity lies; it is in that same essential humanity that we can find a role model for a deeply spiritual life.

Like most great prophets, Francis of Assisi became a saint in spite of himself. The more he tried to disappear into the unifying light of the Divine, the more the Holy One seemed to raise him up as a shining example of what is meant by the phrase “Love one another.”

Eight centuries after his death, this humble Italian sage is the most popular saint in the world. Saint Francis dissolves the boundaries between believers and doubters, leaps over the fence that divides religious traditions to penetrate the heart and inflame the imagination in every culture and across the centuries. Who doesn't love this gentle, joyful saint, a being who preaches to the birds with one hand and blesses lepers with the other?

Francis of Assisi was born in 1182 and died in 1226. In his 44 years on the planet, he managed to reform the entire Roman Catholic Church—not through revolution and dissent, but through gracious persuasion and his own living example of an authentic gospel life. Francis committed every breath to making the Beatitudes of Jesus Christ a daily reality.



***Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

Francis dedicated himself to uplifting the wretched conditions of the poor. He gave up his inherited wealth and privilege to live among the outcasts, the marginalized, the struggling, identifying with them as Jesus identified with them. If Francis received a half a loaf of bread in his begging bowl, he divided it among all who were hungry. He refused all possessions beyond the patched robe he wore to cover “Brother Body.”



***Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.***

Francis understood that great sorrow shatters our hearts and that only in that shattering can the light of the Divine come streaming in. Into the vessel hollowed out by grief and loss, the Holy One pours his love and fills us to overflowing.

Francis tended to that emptying with boundless lovingkindness. Wherever he perceived suffering, he offered comfort, both in the form of physical relief and spiritual illumination.



***Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.***

Francis quietly suggested that the lavish materialism of the Church was an impediment to spiritual growth. It is the gentle and not the powerful who will drink from the divine cup. It is the humble who will uncover the divine treasure that lifts the burden of debt for themselves and for all humanity.



***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst
for righteousness, for they shall be filled.***

Francis inspired his followers to desire the liberation of their brothers and sisters as passionately as they themselves longed to be free. He modeled a spiritual path that combined

private, contemplative prayer with active service in the world.

While Francis could easily have become the respected leader of a successful monastic community, removed from the distractions of society, he chose instead to immerse himself in the messy human condition, where he was often reviled as an embarrassment to the high society from which he came. Rather than accept a traditional endowment, Francis and his followers begged in the streets for bread, bricks, and firewood. He tended lepers and cared for orphans. He stood up against oppression wherever he encountered it, but he did so in such a loving way that he posed no obvious threat to the authorities and so managed to convert them to his cause.



*Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.*

Francis insisted that, in choosing a life of voluntary poverty and radical simplicity, his followers not criticize those who were not ready for such

extreme practices. In an age where communities of bold heretics were hurling accusations of hypocrisy at the Roman Church, Francis embraced and forgave the transgressions of Christendom with the same humility and tenderness with which he treated every individual soul that crossed his path. He invited all who had been rejected by society to take refuge among the Little Brothers and rebuild their inherent dignity in a climate of authentic compassion.



*Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.*

Francis saw the face of the Creator throughout his creation. In the unself-conscious symphony of birdsong, Francis learned how to joyously praise the Holy One. Watching a toddler teeter into his mother's arms, Francis recognized the simple pleasures of house-holding. As he had given these up to follow the most radical teachings of Christ, he sculpted a family of snowpeople to symbolize his sacrifice and make

fun of his own longings for human connection. Francis refused to take himself seriously. His childlike wonder in the beauty of the natural world lifted the veils that separated him from a direct encounter with the Divine.



***Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called the Children of God.***

Francis was born into a cult of knighthood, in which young men of noble birth were expected to charge off and vanquish their neighbors in an ongoing culture of civil strife. After spending a year as a prisoner of war following one such pointless battle, Francis experienced the futility of violence in every fiber of his being. He exchanged his suit of armor for a trowel to lay mortar and bricks in the restoration of ruined churches. And in place of the classical songs of chivalry he used to perform as a troubadour, Francis picked up two sticks and pantomimed a violin, singing love songs to God in French while his brothers danced in holy intoxication.



*Blessed are those who are
persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Francis began and ended his religious vocation the victim of condemnation and rejection. When he first gave up his life of comfort and ease and took to the streets to live among the poor and beg for his most basic needs, the people of Assisi slammed their doors in his face and called him crazy. When he began to rebuild churches and preach a gospel of radical simplicity and unconditional love, they laughed at him. Gradually yet inexorably, Francis' gentleness and passion attracted followers, until the small brotherhood founded on voluntary poverty had flowered into a complex organization, rife with internal conflict and misunderstanding, one that barely resembled Francis' original vision. This betrayal broke his heart, yet it also opened him to receive the ultimate gift from Christ: participation in his Passion through the stigmata.

The full spectrum of Francis' life—from joyful exaltation of the Lord to crushing self-doubt—reflected his living commitment to Christ's teachings of love.



❧ Francesco ❧

His birth name was John—Giovanni, in Italian. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone. His father, Pietro di Bernadone, was a wealthy Umbrian cloth merchant and his mother, Pica, was French. After a family trip to France, where the young Giovanni was captivated by the markets and the music, the women and the poetry, his father started to call him Francesco, “the Frenchman.” Francis of Assisi.

Francis was groomed for the family business. As a teenager, he was far more interested in romance than in commerce, but his antics fell well within the boundaries of acceptable behavior. He was famous among the youth of Assisi for throwing wild parties, providing a bountiful

flow of wine, disappearing with beautiful women into darkened rooms, strolling the city streets till dawn, singing the love songs of the troubadour. It was the beginning of the thirteenth century, and Francis was reared on the medieval myths of gallant knights and noble ladies. His primary ambition was to be adored as a hero.

Until he was captured in a battle with Perugia, and his goals radically shifted. Francis spent a year as a prisoner of war, during which he had ample opportunity to contemplate the superficiality of his privileged life. Into the abyss that opened out of the depths of uncompromising self-inquiry, Francis began to feel the presence of a loving God, a God who called his beloveds into a direct and personal relationship. He began to listen for the divine voice in the silence of his captivity.

When Francis was ransomed by his father, he returned home and fell seriously ill. His parents patiently tended him, but Francis was drawing further and further away from them. His congenial nature was replaced by a deep stillness that neither friends nor family could penetrate. He was courteous, but distracted, slipping in and

out of a fever that began to look increasingly like prayer. Francis was undergoing a spiritual crisis, one that would permanently transfigure the wild youth into a holy sage. He still showed no signs of interest in following in his businessman father's footsteps.

One day, after Francis had begun to recover at last, he went out riding alone in the Umbrian countryside. As he broke through a clearing in the forest, he simultaneously heard the warning sound of a leper's bell and saw the ravaged man appear from behind a tree. It was a cold day, and the leper wore nothing but rags. Francis, who had always been disgusted and frightened by leprosy, leapt off his horse, crossed the clearing, and wrapped his cloak tenderly around the man's bony shoulders. Stunned by his own impulse, Francis looked into the leper's grateful eyes and, his own eyes welling with tears, kissed the man's oozing face.

This was a turning point on Francis' path. What had always been bitter was suddenly sweet. What he had run from now had unspeakable allure. He did not care about being

comfortable; he wanted only to give comfort. He was not interested in a full belly when, all around him, people were suffering from starvation. But what exactly could he do to alleviate the suffering of humanity?

He could join with it.

This mission did not begin overnight. First Francis would make a half-hearted effort to please his parents and join his father's trade. But wherever he went and whatever he did, Francis heard the whisper of the Holy One guiding him to a life of loving service.

As he was taking shelter from the summer sun one day in an ancient church outside the city gates, Francis heard the voice of Christ address him from the crucifix on the wall. Christ pointed out that his house was falling into ruin, and he called upon Francis to rebuild it.

This was another turning point. Francis raced home, grabbed handfuls of expensive fabric from his father's storeroom, and sold it far below market price in a neighboring village. Then he donated the money to the bewildered priest at the dilapidated church to finance a full

restoration. Pietro, who had tried to practice patience up to this point, broke. He hauled his wayward son before the bishop of Assisi and demanded recompense for what Francis had “stolen” from him.

As Francis stood before the bishop, who was dressed more like a prince than a follower of the barefoot Jesus Christ, and his seething father, and the jeering crowd of citizens, suddenly everything became clear. He did not own anything. Neither his father nor the bishop nor the men and women of Assisi really owned a thing. Everything on earth belonged to the Holy One. How could we do anything but praise the Creator and serve all of creation?

In a burst of wild joy, Francis stripped off his fine clothes and laid them at his father’s feet. He renounced his inheritance and embraced a life of radical poverty in solidarity with the people. Naked, he walked away from the only life he had ever known, and he never returned. Ironically, Francis of Assisi was designated the patron saint of merchants by the Catholic Church.



❧ The Little Brothers ❧

It did not take long for the young men and women of Assisi to investigate their old friend's new life. Once they encountered the sweet contentment and transformational inspiration of Francis' message and practices, they soon began to join him. Word spread far beyond the Umbrian region, and Francis attracted spiritual seekers in droves. Clare of Assisi, a beautiful young woman from a powerful family, dramatically divested herself of wealth and privilege and became one of Francis' most devoted companions.

Unlike other reformers of his time, Francis was not looking for followers. He simply wanted to align his life with what he considered to be the essence of Christ's teachings of love, charity, and poverty. He welcomed everyone who wished to join him in this endeavor, but he did not presume to be their leader. This did not stop

people from looking to him as their spiritual master and guide.

As the brotherhood grew, the brothers began to demand that Francis draft some kind of monastic rule. They craved a structure to support them on this wild path they had embarked upon: a name, a code of conduct, a set of practices. Francis jotted down a stark list of guidelines, and in 1210, a small group of companions followed Francis to Rome to ask Pope Innocent III for his approval of the new order, which Francis simply called the Friars Minor, or the Little Brothers. Struck by the purity of Francis' intention and the apparent lack of heretical elements in his vision, the Pope granted their request, but his blessing was verbal and never documented in writing.

Over the centuries, the Franciscan order burgeoned from a band of barefoot visionaries into one of the most powerful branches of the Roman Catholic Church. Even in Francis' own lifetime, the following that flowered around him took on a life of its own, ultimately drifting far from his original ideals, causing its founder deep grief and alienation. Eventually, Francis would

feel compelled to step down as official head of the Friars Minor, resulting in a dramatic relaxation of the commitment to poverty.

But the early days of the new order were infused with optimism. The brothers lived joyfully, sleeping beneath the stars or in simple wattle and daub hermitages, wandering the Umbrian landscape, preaching a gospel of unconditional love. In 1212, in response to the influx of women, Francis founded the second order, the Poor Ladies (later to be called the Poor Clares) and appointed his lifetime companion, Clare (Chiara, in Italian), as its head. Unlike the Little Brothers, who were wandering preachers and healers, the Poor Clares lived in an enclosed convent, where their primary practice was contemplative prayer.

Sickened by the increasing violence surrounding the latest wave of the Crusades, Francis set out on a journey to North Africa in 1219, with the intention of converting the Muslims to Christianity through the sheer power of Christ's teachings. The Egyptian sultan, intrigued by the holy reputation of the Christian

mystic, allowed Francis to preach to him and his people. Although their encounter did not turn the sultan into a Christian, Malik al-Kamil listened politely to the barefoot friar and affirmed the beauty of his faith before guiding him safely back to the Christian side of the line.

Not all of Francis' followers took monastic vows. Many laypeople, both single and married, were moved to build their lives on the foundation of Francis' teachings by living simply and caring for the poor. As Francis preached to these householders, one of the friars wrote down his sermon, and this became the basis for a rule of life for laypeople. This document gave rise to the third Franciscan order, joining the team of the Friars Minor and the Poor Clares. The Third Order, then, was composed of those who wanted to follow the way St. Francis showed, but were not able or willing to leave the world and join a monastic community.

As the years unfolded, Francis focused more on preaching and prayer and less on the administrative details of his sprawling brotherhood. He was not suited for politics. Yet the politics were

heating up. A combination of internal discord and interference from the new pope finally convinced Francis to resign as Minister General of the order. He chose his replacement and retired to his hermitage to draft a formal rule as his final executive act.

In 1224, ravaged by penance and disease, and nearly blind, the forty-two-year-old friar climbed Mount La Verna to spend St. Michael's Lent in solitude and contemplative prayer. He was broken: broken-hearted, broken-bodied. The brotherhood that once consisted of a few companions passionately dedicated to giving everything away and trusting in God now included over 5,000 members throughout Europe and the Holy Land. Many of these new brothers had never laid eyes on their founder, yet took it upon themselves to reform the order, entitling members to receive and use wealth as long as they didn't "own" it. This distinction alienated Francis from his own spiritual family.

On the Feast of the Flowering Cross in 1224, alone in his mountaintop hermitage, Francis received the stigmata, the marks of Christ's

wounds on his hands, feet, and sides. He had pleaded with Christ to allow him to directly participate in his suffering and the love that had prompted him to endure it. His beloved Brother Jesus answered his prayer. Francis tried to hide the evidence of his imitation of the divine sacrifice, but rumors of the miracle quickly spread among the people and filled their hearts with awe.

At the end of his life, feeling the presence of Sister Death waiting to receive him, Francis, who had always experienced a sacred intimacy with plants and animals, earth and sky, composed "The Canticle of the Creatures." This most famous of his writings is a hymn in praise of our connectedness to all life. He returned to the Porziuncola to die, the place where the order had first been born. Two years later, Francis of Assisi was canonized as a saint of the Catholic Church. Eight hundred years later, he is known as a saint throughout the world, igniting the imaginations of Christians and atheists, romantics and pragmatists, lovers of nature and advocates for human rights. Francis transcends all limitations with his joyful, humble, incendiary love of God.



Joy

Jn 1980, Pope John Paul II declared Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology. Francis took the biblical teaching about man being given dominion over creation and turned it in his gentle hand. Francis taught that God had created human beings as stewards for the rest of his creatures, and for the earth and the elements that sustain us all. Rather than viewing himself as the master of the animals, or nature as an indifferent collection of forces, Francis embraced all created things as his family. He delighted in the smallest details of the Creator's humblest children.

And creation responded in kind. Especially the animals. When Francis preached in the open air, chattering birds became suddenly silent and then resumed their cacophony as soon as he said "Amen." Crickets came tracking through the snow to the window of his cell when Francis recited

the midnight prayers in deep winter, shaming the friars who could not bring themselves to rise from their beds. It is said that the animals of the forest surrounding the hermitage where Francis died crowded around his room, singing and barking and howling their lamentations.

One of the most famous accounts about Francis' bond with animals is the story of the Wolf of Gubbio. It happened that a large and ferocious wolf was terrorizing the inhabitants of this mountain town. The creature was starving. At first it slaughtered farm animals, but then it began attacking human beings. No one dared to wander beyond the city gates for fear of being devoured.

When Francis was visiting Gubbio and saw how the people were suffering, he took it upon himself to confront the wolf. That night, the people of the town climbed the city wall to watch as Friar Francis ventured to the edge of the woods. He had hardly advanced ten steps when the wolf leapt out of the forest and ran toward Francis, its teeth bared. Francis held up his hand and made the sign of the cross in the air between them. The wolf stopped in its tracks and closed its mouth.

“Come to me, Brother Wolf,” Francis said. And the wolf approached the saint and lay down at his feet like a lamb.

Francis explained that he understood the wolf was suffering from hunger but that it had no right to cause this kind of anguish among the humble citizens of Gubbio. He offered to help make peace between the people and the wolf by convincing the townspeople to feed the wolf every day, in exchange for the wolf’s promise to never to hurt anyone again. When Francis asked the wolf for a sign of assent, the animal bowed its head and wagged its tail. Then he turned to the crowd and obtained their vow to uphold their end of the peace pact. He offered himself as bondsman for “Brother Wolf.”

From that day onward, the wolf appeared in the town every afternoon, stopping at a different house to be fed. The wolf was gentle and the humans courteous. When the wolf finally died of old age, the people of Gubbio grieved. Its sweetness and patience had been a daily reminder of the holiness of Saint Francis.

For Francis, all things were reflections of the Creator and served as reminders to praise him. The beauty of creation provided constant opportunities for rejoicing. Francis' love of God was so vast that it spilled over and flooded everything he saw and touched. He treated bishops and earthworms with equal courtesy. A fire in the hearth was as likely to send him into rapture as a hymn in the cathedral. More so! He was less kind to himself than he was to the grasshoppers that ravaged his herb garden. He called his body "Brother Ass," and put up with its stubbornness with long-suffering patience rather than true respect.

In the relationship between Brother Francis and Sister Clare, we witness the more vulnerable side of the saint. With Clare, Francis could allow himself to let down, to be nurtured and comforted, to play. A boyish joyousness radiated from his eyes whenever he saw her. Chiara, sister of light, lit up Francesco's heart and made all things right.

He also bore a special love for the infant Jesus. A favorite Francis story unfolds one winter solstice, the deepest, darkest time of the year. The Umbrian landscape was draped

in a thick blanket of snow. In a few days, the brothers would celebrate Christmas at Greccio. Francis, exhausted and ill, expressed his longing to honor the Christ child in some special way.

So the brothers constructed a replica of Christ's crib, spread straw on the platform, and fabricated the barnyard animals, the blessed mother, and her holy husband. They painted stars on the backdrop to shine above the humble scene and placed torches everywhere to light the way for the Word of God to fill the flesh of a baby boy.

When Francis was brought in to see the manger, he was overcome by awe at the mystery of the incarnation. He fell to his knees, murmuring private praises. The village people came from their houses to witness the miracle of the incarnation. Christmas hymns rose into the night sky and penetrated the winter air like leaping flames. The rocks and trees bore witness to their simple joy.



❧ Sorrow ❧

But as his vision of a brotherhood based on the radical values of poverty and humility began to crumble, Francis slipped deeper into a dark night of the soul. He knew nothing anymore. All familiar spiritual sensations dried up, and every religious concept evaporated. But Francis did not abandon his faith. He turned his radical values inward. He surrendered to the poverty of feeling nothing. He embraced the ineffable knowledge that comes only with unknowing.

His Beloved was stripping Francis of everything that stood between them. Self-mortification was a flame that ignited the garment of his ego, annihilating his small self so that his true self could fall into the arms of divine union. Francis did his part: emptying the cup of his soul. The Holy One responded by filling Francis' cup with love.

The last six years of Francis' life were marked by physical illness and emotional turmoil. Men he had never met had managed to take control of the brotherhood and betray his most cherished ideals. His eyes filled with pus until he could no longer see anything but shadowy shapes. When Francis recalled Christ's trials, he found consolation in sharing a tiny taste of the divine anguish.

It is Francis of Assisi who introduced the practice of meditating on the Passion of Christ as a means for breaking through to God's unconditional love. But for Francis, this was not simply a religious exercise. His compassion for the suffering of Jesus was so intense that he spent hours weeping bitterly. Some of his companions reported that, long before he went blind, Francis sometimes cried so hard he shed tears of blood.

One day, while Francis was kneeling in the woods, sobbing over the suffering of the crucified Christ, he encountered a man out walking. When the man asked the friar why he was crying, Francis countered by asking how anyone could hold back his tears in the face of such a sacrifice

as Jesus made for us. And the man, overcome by the saint's devotion, cried with him.

Francis did not always suffer his challenges cheerfully. Sometimes the frail ascetic raged against the circumstances and the people who defied him. "Who are they," he bellowed, "to snatch my order and my brethren from my hand?" When he visited the Porziuncola one day and found strangers building a stone church on the sacred ground where the brotherhood had first made their home, Francis climbed the roof and began hurling down the tiles with his own hands.

Other times, Francis allowed himself to be thoroughly humiliated without uttering a word of protest. Arriving cold and exhausted at the house of some friars he did not know, he was turned away with curses and blows. Instead of giving in to the temptation of self-righteousness, Francis huddled in the rain and thanked God for the opportunity to share in the divine sorrow. "This," he said, "is perfect joy."

When he stood up before an assembly of thousands of friars, imploring them to be faithful to his beloved Lady Poverty, they mocked him and

dismissed him. Francis ended up revising his strict rule of life to make a dozen concessions he never would have dreamed of making at the outset, such as relaxed adherence to Jesus' injunctions against owning property of any kind. But even these did not please his detractors. They replaced the primitive rule with a set of standards that did not even resemble the founding inspiration. It was this severely compromised structure for spiritual formation that finally received papal approval.

Toward the end of his life, as his many illnesses coalesced into a single lethal mass, Francis' closest companions begged him to move to a place where conditions would be more comfortable and conducive to healing. The bishop insisted that Francis come live with him. But the only place Francis was willing to relocate to was a rough hut outside the convent of San Damiano. He wanted to be near Clare, who tended him with loving care and yet honored his commitment to simplicity.

Troubled by his blindness, Francis finally agreed to allow a physician to cauterize his eyes in hopes of restoring his sight. As the

doctor plunged a poker into the glowing embers, Francis addressed the flame: “Brother Fire, I have always loved and honored you. Please do not burn me more than I can bear.” And the saint did not flinch as the healer scalded the tender flesh around his eyes. The remedy did nothing to improve Francis’ vision, but the saint praised God for the miracle of feeling not a trace of pain.

This was St. Francis. He did not intentionally place sorrow over gladness, but when pain filled his cup, he gratefully accepted the opportunity to share a tiny sip of the sacrifice he felt his Lord had made on his behalf. And yet, when the joy bubbled up and overflowed his heart, Francis would not hesitate to leap to his feet, grab two sticks, and play a love song to God on his imaginary violin.

