

## St. Francis' Story -- 100718

Around 1000 BC a wave of immigrants settled in the upper Tiber River valley in Italy. Their settlements reached as far as the Adriatic Sea. These were the Umbrians, living in small fortified settlements on high ground. From 450 BCE these settlements were gradually taken over by the Etruscans. Then the Romans took control of central Italy after the Battle of Sentinum in the year 295. Assisi is part of ancient Umbria. It was again subject to invasion during the middle ages, when, under Theodoric the Great (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries ME) waves of Ostrogoths migrated south and westward. In 493, Theodoric the Great established a kingdom in Italy. Ostrogoths were the branch of the fearsome Goths in the East. Their cousins in the West were the Visigoths.

The Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian declared war on the Ostrogoths in 535 in an effort to recover the former western provinces of the Roman Empire (including Umbria). Initially, the Romans were successful, but under the leadership of Totila, the Goths reconquered most of the lost territory. The war lasted for almost 21 years and caused enormous damage and depopulation of Italy. The remaining Ostrogoths were absorbed into the Lombards who established a kingdom in Italy in 568. Thus Assisi became part of the Lombard Duchy of Spoleto.

The Guelphs and Ghibellines (Italian: *i guelfi e i ghibellini*) were two factions, supporting the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor respectively, in the city-states of central and northern Italy. During the 12th and 13th centuries, rivalry between these two parties formed a particularly important aspect of the internal politics of medieval Italy. The division between the Guelphs and Ghibellines persisted until the 15th century. Thus Assisi (Ghibelline) and nearby Perugia (Guelph) were in constant conflict

Giovanni “Francesco” di Pietro di Bernardone was born into this milieu in 1181 or 1182. He went on to found the Order of Friars Minor, known as the Franciscans. The original Rule of Saint Francis approved by the pope disallowed ownership of property, requiring members of the order to beg for food while preaching. The austerity was meant to emulate the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Franciscans traveled and preached in the streets, while boarding in church properties.

Francis was born in 1182; his father was a wealthy cloth merchant. (The Schmatte Business). His early years were frivolous, but the experiences of sickness and military service were instrumental in leading him to reflect on the purpose of life. One day, in the church of San Damiano, he heard Christ saying to him, "Francis, repair my falling house." He took the words literally, and sold a bale of silk from his father's warehouse to pay for repairs to the church of San Damiano. But his father was outraged, and there was a public confrontation at which his father disinherited and disowned him, and he in turn renounced his father's wealth--one account says that he not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. He declared himself "wedded to Lady Poverty", renounced all material possessions, and devoted himself to serving the poor.

In his day the most dreaded of all diseases was something known as leprosy. The biblical perception that people with leprosy were unclean may be connected to a passage from [Leviticus](#) 13: 44-46, “He is a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall pronounce him utterly unclean; his plague is in his head. And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be,” among others. Judeo-Christian belief, for some,

held that leprosy was of moral consequence, and, as in many societies, early Christians believed that those affected by leprosy were being punished by God for sinful behavior. Moral associations have persisted throughout history. Pope Gregory the Great branded people with the disease as religious heretics. Based on the increased number of hospitals created to treat leprosy patients in the 12th and 13th centuries we know that there was a rise in leprosy in Europe in the Middle Ages. France alone built nearly 2,000 leprosariums during this period.

The social perception in medieval communities was generally one of fear; those people infected with the disease were thought to be unclean, untrustworthy, and morally corrupt. People with leprosy were also often required to wear clothing that identified them as such or carry a bell announcing their presence. Segregation from mainstream society was common. The third Lateran Council of 1179 and a king's edict expelled lepers from the city limits. Because of the moral stigma of the disease, methods of treatment were both physical and spiritual, and leprosariums were established under the purview of the church.

Lepers were kept at a distance and regarded with fear and disgust by most. But Francis cared for them, fed them, bathed their sores, and gave them the kiss of peace. After his father's refusal pay for repairs to the Church of San Damiano, Francis undertook to repair it by his own labors. He moved in with the priest, and begged stones lying useless in fields, shaping them for use in repairing the church. He got his meals, not by asking for money so that he might live at the expense of others, but by scrounging crusts and discarded vegetables from trash-bins, and by working as a day laborer, insisting on being paid in bread, milk, eggs, or vegetables rather than in money. Soon a few companions joined him. Dante in his *Paradiso* has Thomas Aquinas say of Francis:

“Let me tell you of a youth whose aristocratic father disowned him because of his love for a beautiful lady. She had been married before, to Christ, and was so faithful a spouse to Him that, while Mary only stood at the foot of the Cross, she leaped up to be with Him on the Cross. These two of whom I speak are Francis and the Lady Poverty. As they walked along together, the sight of their mutual love drew men's hearts after them. Bernard saw them and ran after them, kicking off his shoes to run faster to so great a peace. Giles and Sylvester saw them, kicked off their shoes and ran to join them....”

After three years, in 1210, the Pope authorized the forming of the Order of Friars Minor, commonly called the Franciscans. ("Friar" means "brother," as in "fraternity", and "minor" means "lesser" or "younger." A Franciscan, meeting another Christian is to think, "I am your brother in Christ, and your younger brother at that, bound to defer to you and to give you precedence over myself." This is the true meaning of humility; as we have heard it said, "God first, the other fellow second, and I'm third."

Francis and his companions took literally Jesus' words when he sent his disciples out to preach: "You have received the Gospel without payment, give it to others as freely. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, no spare garment, nor sandals, nor staff." They would have no money, and no property, individually or collectively. Their task was to preach, "using words if necessary," but declaring by action example the love of God in Christ. Francis was given to a touch of the dramatic (in parting from his father, for example), and it was probably he who set up the first Christmas crèche, to bring the Good News home to human hearts and imaginations as well as to their intellects.

In 1219, Francis went to the Holy Land to preach to the Muslims. He was given a pass through the enemy lines, and spoke to the Sultan, Melek-al-Kamil. Francis proclaimed the Gospel to the Sultan, who replied that he had his own beliefs, and that Muslims were as firmly

convinced of the truth of Islam as Francis was of the truth of Christianity. Francis proposed that a fire be built, and that he and a local volunteer would walk side by side into the fire to show whose faith was stronger. The Sultan said he was not sure that a volunteer could be found among his people to do such a thing. (As Yogi Berra would say, "Include me out.") Francis then offered to walk into the fire alone. The Sultan was deeply impressed but remained unconverted. Francis proposed an armistice between the two warring sides, and drew up the terms; the Sultan agreed, but Christian leaders would not.

Back in Italy and neighboring countries, the Order was suffering from its own success. Then, as now, many persons were deeply attracted by Francis and his air of joy, abandonment, and freedom. What is overlooked is that these were made possible only by his willingness to accept total poverty, not picturesque poverty but real dirt, rags, cold, and hunger, and lepers with their sores and the real danger of infection. Many idealistic young men were joining the Order in a burst of enthusiasm and then finding themselves not so sure that such extremes of poverty were really necessary. When there were only a few friars, they were all known to Francis personally, and the force of his personality kept the original ideals of the Order alive in them. Once the Order was larger, this was no longer possible.

In 1220 Francis resigned as minister-general of the Order. He died on 4 October 1226 and was canonized within two years. Along with Catherine of Siena, he was designated patron saint of Italy. As he later became associated with animals and the natural environment, and it became customary for Catholic and Anglican churches to hold ceremonies blessing animals in observance of his feast day, October 4. He is often remembered as the patron saint of animals. Francis is one of the most venerated religious figures in history. They even still have statues of him for sale at Home Depot.

The Franciscans split into two factions: the Conventuals, who held a limited amount of property in common, and the Spiritual Franciscans, who disavowed all property. The Spirituals taught that Christ and the twelve apostles had held no property, singly or jointly. But this view offended those who did hold property, and was declared by them to be heretical. In 1318, several Spiritual Franciscans were burned at the stake in Marseilles.

A story is told of the days when the friars first began to have permanent houses. A beggar came by when Brother Juniper was at the gate and asked for a little money. Brother Juniper said, "There is no money in the house. But wait a minute. Last week someone gave us an altar cloth with little silver bells attached. We don't need those. I will cut them off for you. They will be as good as money." And he did. When the sacristan learned what had happened, he complained to the prior, who said, "We are fortunate that he did not give away the cloth itself. But send him to me, and I will scold him." Brother Juniper came, and the prior scolded him until he was hoarse. Brother Juniper noticed that the prior was hoarse, and went to the kitchen and cooked him some mint sauce. He brought it to the prior, who had gone to bed. He said, "Father Prior, get up and eat this mint sauce. It will be good for your throat." The prior said, "I don't want any of your mint sauce. Go away and let me sleep." Brother Juniper said, "It's good sauce, and will be good for your throat." The prior said, "Get away from me; I don't want it." To which Brother Juniper responded, "Well, if you won't have any, how about holding the candle for me while I eat it?" This was too much for the prior. He got up and they both ate.

Here from the first known letter from Francis to all Christians: "O how happy and blessed are those who love the Lord and do as the Lord himself said in the gospel: 'Love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.' Therefore, let us love and adore God with pure heart and mind. For this is God's particular desire in saying: True worshipers

adore the Creator in spirit and truth. For all who adore God must do so in the spirit of truth.

Furthermore, let us produce worthy fruits of penance. Let us also love our neighbors as ourselves. Let us have charity and humility. Let us give alms because they cleanse our souls from the stains of the world. We lose all the material things we leave behind in this world, but we carry with us the reward of our charity and the alms we give. For these we will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense we deserve. We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh. Rather we must be simple, humble and pure. We should never desire to be over others. Instead, we ought to be servants who are submissive to every human being for God's sake. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on all who live in this way and persevere in it to the end. He will permanently dwell in them. They will be the Father's children who do his work. They are the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

St Francis believed that nature itself was the mirror of God. He called all creatures his “brothers” and “sisters”, and even preached to the birds and supposedly persuaded a wolf to stop attacking some locals if they agreed to feed the wolf. In his “Canticle of the Creatures,” he addresses “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon”, the wind and water, and also “Sister Death.” Francis’ courage, humility, compassionate charity and great faith have become a seminal model for how to act as if we believe we are part of the Body of Christ.

As the poet Wang Wei says, “No. It is not enough to despise the world. It is not enough to live one’s life as though riches and power were nothings. They are not, But to grasp the world, to grasp and feel it grow great in one’s grasp is likewise not enough. The secret is to grasp it, and let it go.”

## **St. Francis Day Blessing**

In the Scriptures, the act of blessing means 'the imparting of power or life.' The person performing the blessing is mediating that power from God or Christ to the person or the animal involved. To bless is more than an express goodwill and caring. To bless is impart God's power in person! *Shalom* is one Hebrew expression of blessing. Amongst the Wolof, it is *Jamm Rek*.

The blessing of each of these animals, by name, means that health, healing, and life are being mediated from God for the benefit of the animal in its relationship with its human partners, that's us.

Almighty and everlasting God, Creator of all things and giver of all life, let your blessing be upon all these animals. May our relationships with them mirror your love, and our care for them be an example of your bountiful mercy. Grant the animals health and peace. Strengthen us to love and care for them as we strive to imitate the love of Jesus Christ our Lord and God's servant Francis.