

Francis of Assisi, Peacemaker

1182 - October 1226

"Remember that when you leave this earth you can take nothing of what you have received, but only what you have given: a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice, and courage."

The Italian religious leader St. Francis of Assisi founded the religious order known as the Franciscans. He became renowned for his love, simplicity, and practice of poverty.

Francis was born Giovanni di Bernardone, but because his father called him Francis, so did everyone else. He was baptized in the town of Assisi in central Italy in 1182. His father, Pietro di Bernardone, was a successful cloth merchant, and Francis grew up with a love of fine clothes and good times. He led the other young men of the town in enjoying good food and drink, singing, and dancing.

He was educated in math, poetry, and music and learned to read and write while attending a school that was part of the Church of Saint Giorgio of Assisi. Francis joined the forces from Assisi in their fight against Perugia, another town in Italy.

When he was twenty, he was taken prisoner. A year later, sobered by jail and sickness, he underwent several religious experiences. In one of these, while he was praying in the run-down chapel of Saint Damiano outside Assisi, he heard a voice from the crucifix telling him, "Francis, go repair my house, which is falling in ruins." Francis went quickly back to the city, sold his horse and some cloth from his father's shop, and came back to give the money to the priest at Saint Damiano.

Francis's father, furious that his son wasted his money on churches and beggars, took him before the bishop to bring him to his senses. When the hearing began, Francis calmly took off all of his clothes, gave them to his father (the astonished bishop quickly covered Francis with a cloak), and said that he was now recognizing only his Father in heaven, not his father on earth. He lived his life from this time on without money and without family ties.

While Francis never took the vows of priesthood, he began a life dedicated to his Christian faith. He expressed his faith in words and actions. Francis wrote "Canticle of Creatures," also called "Canticle of the Sun" (a canticle is a religious song), he wrote about Brother Sun and Sister Moon. Francis referred to his way of life as his marriage to Lady Poverty. The thirteenth century was a time of troubadours, or poet-musicians, and Francis had the best of their talents. He was happy, he sang, he loved nature; he spoke to the birds and the animals as though they were his friends.

"If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who deal likewise with their fellow men."

A New Order in Catholicism

Francis felt he should live in the original spirit of the teachings and actions of Jesus. This meant living without property or luxury, and it also meant loving other people. A number of the young men of Assisi, attracted by Francis's example, joined him in his new way of life. Unlike monks in monasteries, the new order of Franciscans lived in cities and travelled. The community of brothers lived among the people, tended the sick, fed the poor and preached. In time, Franciscan brothers would teach, translate



texts and create Christian missions in distant lands such as California.

In 1209 Francis and his followers went to Rome, Italy, where they presented their ideas to Pope Innocent III (c. 1160–c. 1216; the pope is the head of the Catholic Church) and received his approval. They found themselves influencing more people, including a lady named Clare, whom Francis helped to create a new order of nuns.

A Brother Crusader

In 1212 Francis left for Palestine (today's Israel and Jerusalem). His ship ran into bad weather, and he had to return to Italy. Two years later his adventurous spirit and missionary zeal drove him to seek Muslims in Spain, but sickness prevented him from completing the trip. He tried once more, in 1219, going to Egypt with the Crusaders. At the siege of the city of Damietta in Egypt, Francis boldly walked through the battle lines into the enemy camp and met the sultan of Egypt, who, apparently impressed with Francis's ideas about brotherly love, gave him permission to continue on to the Holy Land.

The Franciscan Order

When Francis heard that trouble had started in Italy among some of his Franciscans, now numbering in the thousands, he returned home. The force of his personality had held the group together, but now Francis saw the need for a practical guide to his kind of Christian life. He insisted that the new rule stress the poverty he felt was so important: the order could not possess money; all its houses must be simply furnished; and each Franciscan could have only a tunic, a pair of pants, and, if really necessary, a pair of shoes. Francis went to Rome in 1223 to present the new rule to Pope Honorius III, who approved it wholeheartedly.

Francis lived until October 3, 1226. He died during the evening hours of October 3, 1226, while listening to a reading he had requested of Psalm 141. On July 16, 1228, he was pronounced a saint by Pope Gregory IX. He is known as the patron saint of animals, the environment, and is one of the two patron saints of Italy.

Francis of Assisi Biography. Encyclopedia of World Biography, n.d. Web. 26 Jan. 2013.

Read more: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Fi-Gi/Francis-of-Assisi.html#b#ixzz2J8CoeOGm>

Questions: Based on your understanding, answer the following with complete sentences with specific details to support your ideas.

1. What brought Francis to a religious life?

2. How did Francis write about his faith?

3. How were the Franciscan brothers different than traditional monasteries?

4. What indicates Francis' interest in expanding Christianity through military conquest?

5. What rule did Francis insist his followers follow? What was its importance to Francis?

6. Based on the quotes from this article, why might Francis be a supporter of animals and the environment?