

**ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI**

*An Example for Our Times*

BY

J.R. WOODWARD

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## **Introduction**

In a post-Christendom era, where people are skeptical of power and truth, we need to learn how to genuinely embody the good news, which is why we need to study the St. Francis way of life. With the gospels as his rule of life, he sought to follow in Jesus' footsteps as a peacemaker who traveled light, welcomed strangers, loved the outcasts, the environment and living in *communitas*. St. Francis has been heralded as the "hippie saint" and "in 1980 was named the patron saint of ecology by the Catholic church" (Talbot 1997:5). As we learn about his way of life, we will be encouraged and challenged to consider how to better embody the gospel in our day.

## **An Intriguing Life**

What happened in this man's life that, even eight hundreds years after his death, he is memorialized by the three religious orders he inspired, which include at least a million members today, both catholic and protestant? What was it about this man that causes four million people to visit his tomb each year? What was it about this man and has generated many gracious words, like these from Marina Warner, who says, "The Franciscan spirit continues to be considered by agnostics and atheists, as well as believers, as the most genuine expression of Christ's teaching ever approved by the Vatican" (House 2000:9).

## **A Simple Biography**

While St. Francis is remembered by such gracious words today, if we just looked at the first twenty-four years of his life, we wouldn't call him a Saint, because he acted more like a fraternity boy or a modern rock star. Francis was born in Assisi in 1181 on a

farm, with a silver spoon in his mouth. His dad Peter had built his wealth by obtaining and selling cloth. While Francis did not get a formal degree, he grew up learning both the sciences and the arts. He was very musical and his mother, Pica, among many other things, taught him to sing in Latin, Umbrian and French. Francis, or “Frenchy,” as some called him, because of his fondness for French songs and romance, was admired for his stylish clothes, his singing, his wit, his practical jokes and his ability to throw good parties. Francis and his friends, influenced by the troubadours, often danced through the streets, and probably did a bit more than just serenade the young ladies. “Frenchy” liked to test the law and social customs.

In time, Francis got bored with this way of life. It seemed futile, so he started going to a cave with a friend to seek God. He encountered God through dreams, hearing his voice, and by taking practical steps in following Christ. As he lived out his radical calling of obedience, poverty and chastity, a couple of others decided to join him. The group of three grew to twelve, and before long there were thousands. The disciples became more moderate and less radical the further they were from Francis. This was upsetting to him. Near the end of his life, Francis went with some companions to a lonely mountain in Tuscany, where he experienced a vision as well as wounds on his hands, feet and side. Only after these marks did Francis wear shoes, as he tried to hide these marks that would periodically bleed from even his closest followers. Francis was the first person in recorded history to receive the stigmata, but not the last.

### **The St. Francis Way of Life – His Influences**

Historical mentors richly influenced St. Francis’s life, for all the children in Assisi, including Francis, heard the accounts of the martyred saints like Felicianus, Victorinus

and Savinus, who brought the gospel to Assisi. The most prominent of the historical accounts was that of Rufino, who when threatened by the Roman proconsul Aspasio to stop preaching another sovereign in his district or face punishment, remained undaunted like Peter and Stephen before him.

As the story goes, Aspasio had him flogged, then stoned, but no torture would stop Rufino from proclaiming the message. Aspasio was so flaming mad now that he had Rufino thrown into the flames, which, with the help of an angel, Rufino escaped. While Rufino did not escape the last punishment, where he had a great rock tied around his neck and was thrown into the deep water, his witness of unwavering devotion to Christ greatly influenced the town of Assisi, and especially Francis in his time of self assessment.

These stories were rehearsed by word and pageant on annual days when the town remembered the saints. It was through stories like these that Francis began to have hope, not just for his own soul, but also for the renewal of the church, which at that time was in need of great repair; many priests lived luxuriously, and as Pope Innocent the III said, they had “extorted money from the faithful on every pretext” (Galli 2002:52-53).

While the martyrs of the faith provided encouraging historical mentors for Francis, by far the most influential historical mentor for St. Francis was Jesus himself. Thomas of Celano in summing up the meaning of Francis’ life in *The Life of St. Francis* says, “His highest aim, foremost desire and greatest intention, was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace his footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal, all the desire of his soul and all the fervour [sic] of his heart” (Galli 2002:142). St. Francis was in love with Jesus.

St. Francis not only looked to Jesus, but also the Father and the Spirit. He was shaped by the entire Godhead. When St. Francis, in his desire to follow Jesus, sold all he had, and even some of his father's possessions, his father became furious with him and took him before the bishop. He wanted Francis to return all of his family belongings. So Francis, without hesitation, took the clothes off his back. Realizing he still had a nice undershirt on, he stripped completely naked before all saying to his father, "Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, 'Our Father who art in heaven,' since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him" (Bonaventure 2005:17). God would on various occasions speak to St. Francis through dreams, visions and sometimes through his voice. These moments of divine connection shaped Francis deeply.

While Jesus was the key mentor in the life of St. Francis, there were other mentors in his life who acted as divine contacts, spiritual guides and sponsors. When Francis and his eleven companions went to Rome in hopes to get an audience with the Pope, they just happened to run into Bishop Guido of Assisi, a spiritual guide for Francis, who introduced them to the cardinal Lord John of St. Paul, who after a few days of questioning Francis, agreed to represent him to the Pope.

Another huge influence in Francis' life came in the form of his spiritual companions. They followed Jesus together. Francis understood the concepts of reciprocity and *communitas*, which is why he called his order "Little Brothers." In naming his order Little Brothers and never becoming a priest, he demonstrated his desired to have no Father superior such as was common in religious orders of his time. To Francis, God alone was Father, and all others were brothers and sisters. Francis

believed that the only privilege was in having no privilege. He felt that Jesus, being in the very nature God, became flesh and claimed no special privileges; therefore, if Jesus rejected the privileges of God, how much more should the Little Brothers live in kinship with all people. Francis would often put himself under the leadership of one of the other Little Brothers, thus he not only was influenced by his Little Brothers, but he influenced them by way of example.

### **The St. Francis Way of Life – Those He Influenced & How He Influenced**

For Francis, Jesus was his greatest influence, and in following his example, Francis' greatest influence on others was being an example. Which is why he said, "Preach always; if necessary, use words." Before he ever started to gain any followers, he practiced a way of life. One day at Mass, he heard how Jesus sent his disciples out to preach: "Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or staff" (Matthew 10:9,10 NIV). When he heard this, he joyfully committed it to memory. Bonaventure reports, "He immediately took off his shoes from his feet, put aside his staff, cast away his wallet and money as if accursed, was content with one tunic and exchanged his leather belt for a piece of rope" (Bonaventure 2005:24). Quick obedience characterized the life of St. Francis. As a person seeking to follow Christ, he first practiced then preached.

St. Francis was both a contemporary example and a teacher. He not only preached at local parishes, but he preached outdoors, in the country, in towns, wherever he could find an audience. He spoke with enthusiasm and with his hands like any good Italian. When St. Francis preached, he spoke in the common language of the people, not

in theological abstractions. He spoke with kindness and great challenge. As a result of his way of life and his preaching, he began to gather companions for his journey.

Francis's first disciple only stayed with him a short while before returning to his old way of life, but the second two would stay with him. Bernard and Peter came to him saying they wanted to be his companions. As his contemporary Bonaventure said,

In the morning they went to the church of St. Nicholas, where they said some preliminary prayers; then Francis, who was devoted to the Trinity, opened the book of the Gospel three times, asking God to confirm Bernard's plan with a threefold testimony. The book opened the first time to the text, "If you will be perfect, go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor" (Matt. 19:21). The second time to the text: "Take nothing on your journey" (Luke 9:3). And the third time to: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). "This is our life and our rule," the holy man said, "and the life and the rule of all who wish to join our company" (Bonaventure 2005:25).

Both Bernard and Peter sensed that this rule was so relevant to what was wrong with the church and the world that they sold their possessions, gave their money to the poor and began following the St. Francis way of life. This way of life not only included extreme poverty, but also Francis was an example in peacemaking, the environment, reciprocity, love for God and joyful living.

Francis was greatly concerned about the crusades, the wars occurring between Christians and Muslims. So during the fifth crusade, in contrast to the violence and aggression of the crusaders, Francis and a companion openly walked through enemy-held territory up to the tent of the Sultan Al-Kamil. He shared the true teachings of Jesus and the Sultan listened with great interest. Francis was a peacemaker and by his example influenced others to be peacemakers.

Galli reports that, "Over the next dozen years, Francis's order exploded in both numbers and geography. Twelve brothers living together outside of Assisi became an

order, commonly called the Franciscans, whose thousands of members could be found from England to Africa, from Portugal to Hungary.” (Galli 2002:84) This order in its earliest version had as its rule of life: obedience, poverty and chastity. Not only was this order flourishing around the world, but this order inspired two other orders. The first was began by Clare, who also came from a wealthy family. They called themselves the Poor Ladies. Clare insisted on this name, instead of nuns, because of her understanding of *communitas*. They equally shared in the work and worship of the order.

Since not everyone influenced by Francis could abandon their families and join his order, Francis outlined in a document *A Letter to the Faithful* how they might live. This became the basis for the rule of the third order, approved in 1221. Like each of the orders, these communities were organized around a rule of life. This rule of life centered on being generous to the poor, being peacemakers – they were forbidden to carry arms in a world of violence - and only making oaths to God and the pope. This helped them to remain peacemakers. This third order has flourished around the world and throughout history, down to today. As musician John Michael Talbot says, “Down through the ages, many people have sought to follow Francis’s example in their lives, including King Louis IX of France, the poet Dante, the artist Michelangelo, the musician Arlo Guthrie, the scientist Michael Faraday, the philosopher Roger Bacon, and numerous theologians” (Talbot 1997:3).

### **What We Can Learn From St. Francis**

There are many insights from St. Francis’s way of life that can benefit me, the ministry I serve, as well as any human being. I will focus on just three: Christo-centric living, developing a communal rule of life and falling freshly in love with our Maker.

We live in times similar to St. Francis, where people love Jesus, but hate the church. Many have the sentiment that Gandhi expressed, “I love your Christ, but I don’t like your Christians, because they are so unlike your Christ.” St. Francis’s life calls me to not just study the life of Christ, but to imitate him more fully. Living in a land of plenty and a consumeristic culture, St. Francis encourages me to consider how to live more simply and to be a better caretaker of my environment. Living in times where Christians are often fighting Muslims in the name of their nation-state, St. Francis encourages me to consider how to follow the Prince of Peace, realizing all are made in the image of God. Living in a time where over 30,000 kids die daily due to malnutrition or other preventable diseases, St. Francis encourages me to consider how Jesus blessed and befriended the poor and marginalized. St. Francis causes me to engage in more Christo-centric living.

Secondly, as I reflect on the St. Francis way of life, I am drawn to consider not just my personal rule of life, but also the importance of cultivating a communal rule of life in our congregation. I have been working on this concept over the last couple of years. By examining the different rules of life that St. Francis developed, I have been even more encouraged to proceed along this line of action. Developing a communal rule of life is a needed reminder that the faith of Jesus is a distinctive way of life rather than a complex theological system. St. Francis, through his life, reminds us that it is practice that transforms us, not simply knowledge. Paul would concur, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (I Cor. 8:1). I wonder what would happen in the life of the church if we paid more attention to how we live than what we say we believe. Orthopraxy must accompany orthodoxy in order to be orthodox.

Lastly, if anyone, including myself, is going to benefit from studying the life of St. Francis, we must realize the key to understanding the life of St. Francis. Many who look at the life of St. Francis have a hard time understanding him. As the publishers of C.K. Chesterton's book say, "He [Francis] was a man who loved women but vowed himself to chastity; an artist who loved the pleasures of the natural world as few have loved them, but vowed himself to the most austere poverty, stripping himself naked in the public square so all could see that he had renounced his worldly goods; a clown who stood on his head in order to see the world aright" (Chesterton 1989:Backcover) .

G.K. Chesterton suggest that there is only way to explain a person like this:

And for the modern reader the clue to asceticism and all the rest can best be found in the stories of lovers when they seemed to be rather like lunatics. Tell his life as a tale of one of the Troubadours, and the wild things he would do for his lady, and the whole modern puzzle disappears. In such a romance there would be no contradiction between the poet gathering flowers in the sun and enduring a freezing vigil in the snow, between his praising all earthly and bodily beauty and then refusing to eat, between his glorifying gold and purple and perversely going in rags, between his showing pathetically a hunger for a happy life and a thirst for a heroic death. All these riddles would easily be resolved in the simplicity of any noble love; only this was so noble a love that nine men out of ten have hardly ever heard of it... The reader cannot even begin to see the sense of a story that may well seem to him a very wild one, until he understands that to this great mystic his religion was not a thing like a theory but a thing like a love- affair" (Chesterton 1989: 15-16).

So I ask myself, those I serve, and all those who read this: How is your love life?

For the Apostle John said, "We love, because he first loved us" (I John 4:19).

When I think about people like St. Francis, I am encouraged to seek to live a life more devoted to God, which means that I will engage in Christo-centric living, develop a communal rule of life and learn to fall freshly in love with our Triune God. However, I realize that the starting point in all of this is not sacrifice or duty, but the delight in knowing how much God loves me. Sacred romance is the key to becoming fully human.

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