

The One-of-a-kind St. Francis of Assisi  
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 The Feast of St. Francis ~ October 2, 2022

St. Francis was born in the twelfth century—an unappreciated but magical time when humanity in the West began walking out of the dark, middle ages back into the warm sunlight of creativity. Symbolic of the spiritual freedom spreading across Europe, Gothic cathedrals soared into the sky for the first time, replacing the heavy, dark earthbound Romanesque churches of earlier years. Christian men and women, began to realize that they had some control over their lives, and in their relationship with God. They did not have to do and think and feel only what the Church told them was acceptable.

This unnamed revolution of the twelfth century would lead eventually to the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, but in the twelfth century, this new burst of creative energy was just beginning to unfold. Francis of Assisi, sainted and celebrated by other Christians in his own lifetime and down to the present, was born into that amazing century. This man whose feast day we celebrate today was both a rebel and a gentle man of peace, he was a charismatic but totally disorganized leader, and he was a man who challenged the institutional Church even while he embraced the Body of Christ as few had before him—or since.

Born Giovanni di Bernardone in the year 1181, he preferred the nickname Francesco and so he was called all his life. He would eventually become the founder of the Order of Friars Minor—the Franciscans—but he was never ordained a priest, nor was he well educated. He was to become one of the most admired and beloved saints in Christian history, but probably one of the least imitated.

In the garden of St. James, Danbury, where I was received as an Episcopalian and sponsored for ordination, there is a bronze statue of Francis feeding his beloved birds with children playing around his feet. It is a slightly less than life-size depiction of the saint, and gently abstract. Its body language is clearly joyful, but the face of Francis is more elfish than human. Some people are fascinated by the statue—my son once spent hours sketching it—while others are discomforted and slightly repelled by its ambiguity. They blame the artist. After all, Francis was supposed to make people feel good. But the truth is that the real Francis often left people uncomfortable and perplexed, exactly as his beloved Jesus had 11 centuries before.

Born into a wealthy merchant family, a rogue and a soldier in his youth, Francis left behind his life of adventure and riches to lead a simple life begging and preaching to the poor. The Church wanted little to do with him, despite his passionate faith. He openly rejected their rich vestments and the luxurious living of the clergy and monks of the High Middle Ages. Instead he gathered about him men who were willing to beg for their food, care for lepers, work where they were needed and preach about Christ. And above all, men who chose to live simply, close to God and God's Creation.

In the Franco Zeffarelli film about Francis, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon," there is a scene in which Francis and his followers kneel before Pope Innocent III to ask for the pope's blessing and official recognition of the Order of Friars Minor. Against the advice of his cardinals, the pope grants them recognition and defends his decision with these words: "In our obsession with original sin, we too often forget original innocence." Francis reminds us of the essential and inherent goodness in ourselves, reminds us that we are creatures created in the image of the Creator.

Call it childlike, but I believe we all need to remember the self we were before responsibility and obligation became the organizing elements of our lives, before schedules and agendas and finances and sinfulness and loneliness. We need to remember back to original innocence. Our animal companions, beloved by Francis as they are by us, help us to do that.

Many churches, including the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine and St. James, Danbury where the statue of St. Francis watches over the garden, will celebrate this feast of St. Francis by blessing animals today, not

as much for the sake of the animals, I think, as for the animal owners who, for one brief moment, will, like Francis, approach God through God's humblest and most innocent creatures. All these centuries after his life, in a world that has no trouble at all believing that humanity is inherently sinful, Francis reminds us that we are also inherently innocent. It takes work to be sinful.

Francis became the founder of the great Order of Friars Minor that still today, helps to sustain the Church throughout the world. But even in his lifetime, much to his dismay, the Order grew too big to remain simple in its communal life. It developed a complex government, acquired books and buildings, and to a great extent, blended in with the established Church. Yet the ideal of Francis—his intimacy with the created order, his passionate love of God, his total identification with the poverty and suffering of Christ— remains a beacon not only for Franciscans, but for devout and struggling Christians everywhere.

The hymns we sing today all praise God for the creation in all its splendor. Francis himself, as he was dying and to the great embarrassment of his friars, insisted on lying naked on the bare earth so that his last earthly sensations would be in touch with that creation. May we, in his blessed memory today not only remember our beloved animals, but the entire created world that God gifted to us. This planet, “our island home” as the Eucharistic Prayer says, is suffering mightily these days. May we in all our actions: with every bit of plastic we use, every puff of pollution we add to the air, every animal we hunt for our own need to feel powerful—may we remember that ALL of creation is a GIFT. May we be as mindful of the health and welfare of the earth as we are the health and welfare of our loved ones, because one depends on the other. In the story of creation from Genesis, God pronounced every new day and its wonders to be “good.” Let us NOT abuse the good.

In our prayers today we will say together the beautiful and familiar prayer of St. Francis, but there is another, lesser-known prayer of devotion that Francis also wrote. can almost imagine him standing in a field, waist-deep in wildflowers, his arms flung wide to embrace the world and his face turned toward heaven as he prays:

You are holy, Lord, the only God  
and your deeds are wonderful.

You are strong.  
You are great.  
You are the Most High,  
You are almighty.  
You, holy Father, are  
King of heaven and earth.

You are Three and One,  
Lord God, all good.  
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good.  
Lord God, living and true.

You are love,  
You are wisdom.  
You are humility,  
You are endurance.  
You are rest.  
You are peace.  
You are joy and gladness.  
You are justice and moderation.  
You are all our riches.  
And you suffice for us.

You are beauty.  
You are gentleness.  
You are our protector,  
You are our guardian and defender.

You are courage.  
You are our haven and our hope.  
You are our faith,  
Our great consolation.  
You are our eternal life,  
Great and wonderful Lord,  
God almighty,  
Merciful Saviour. *AMEN.*

Readings: Genesis 1-2:3; Psalm 150; Luke 12:22-28, 32.