

# **Sermon for the Feast of St. Francis 10-4-09**

## **By the Rev. Steve Fuller**

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.  
Where there is **hatred** let me sow **love**,  
Where there is **injury** let me sow **pardon**,  
Where there is **doubt** let me sow **faith**,  
Where there is **despair** let me give **hope**,  
Where there is **darkness** let me give **light**,  
Where there is **sadness** let me give **joy**.

O Divine Master, grant that  
I may not try to be **comforted** but to **comfort**,  
Not try to be **understood** but to **understand**,  
Not try to be **loved** but to **love**.  
Because it is in **giving** that we **receive**,  
It is in **forgiving** that we are **forgiven**,  
And it is in **dying** that we are born to **eternal life**.

Just who was St. Francis of Assisi? I have heard about him for many years and just knew that the blessing of the animals was done in his name and that the small statue of him sits in the flower garden out in our front near the walk-way. But, who was he really?

When Mary asked me if I could preach in her absence today, I thought that should be easy, but then I found out just how little I really knew about St. Francis. So, I would like to share with you all today some of the important information about the peaceful man named St. Francis of Assisi.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was born into a wealthy family at Assisi, Italy, the son of a cloth merchant. Francis received little formal education and during his youth was mostly preoccupied with having fun. As a young man, he was popular, charming, enjoyed practical jokes and was usually the life of the party.

Because of his wealth, he generally picked up the tab and thus attracted a following of fun loving, rowdy young men and promiscuous women.

When armed conflict broke out between the men of Assisi and a neighboring city in 1202, Francis eagerly volunteered for the cavalry but wound up getting captured after the first big battle and spent a year in captivity.

Francis returned to Assisi hailed as a hero, but unknown to his friends he had undergone a transformation in his outlook during his captivity. Although he was once again the life of the party, he was now questioning his reason for existence.

One day, in the church of San Damiano, he seemed to hear 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. After much contemplation, including vivid dreams and mystic visions, he turned away from the pursuit of all worldly pleasures, sold all his property. 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. (It is probably not the same as either the modern or the Biblical disease of that name.) Lepers were kept at a distance and regarded with fear and disgust. Francis cared for them, fed them, bathed their sores, and kissed them. Since he could not pay for repairs to the Church of San Damiano, he 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 vegetable 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 Aquinas say of him:

*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." I take the meaning to be that 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.

Eventually, as the brotherhood grew, its members traveled to other parts of Europe to preach, including France, Germany, Spain and England. A separate order for women was formed, now known as the Franciscan Nuns or Poor Clares.

Francis had much love for animals with special fondness for the birds. He liked to refer to animals as his brothers and sisters. Legend has it that wild animals had no fear of Francis and even came to him seeking refuge from harm.

Francis and his companions took literally the words of Christ when he sent his disciples out to preach (M 10:7-10):

Preach as you go, saying, "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand." ... 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 word and action the love of God in Christ. Francis was partial to a touch of the dramatic (as in his parting from his father, for example), and it was probably he who set up the first Christmas manger scene, to bring home the Good News of God made man for our salvation, home to men's hearts and imaginations as well as to their intellects.

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: You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, let us love God and adore him with pure heart and mind. This is his particular desire when he says: True worshipers adore the Father in spirit and truth. For all who adore him must do so in the spirit of truth. Let us also direct to him our praises and prayers, saying: "Our Father, who are in heaven," since we must always pray and never grow slack.

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 these cleanse our souls from the stains of sin. Men lose all the material things they leave behind in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their charity and the alms they give. For these they will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense they 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.

By 1219, 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 real pus oozing from their sores and a 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. Now that the Order was larger, this was no longer enough. In 1220 Francis resigned as minister-general of the Order, and in 1221 he agreed to a new and modified rule, which he did not approve, but could not resist.

In 1224, Francis went up onto a mountain and began a 40-day fast. During that time he is said to have had a miraculous vision and received the marks of the nails and spear exactly as they appeared on the body of Jesus during his crucifixion.

He died on 4 October 1226. After his death in 1226, Francis was declared a saint by Pope Gregory IX.

The Franciscan split into the Conventual Franciscans, who held a limited amount of property in common, and the Spiritual Franciscans, who disavowed all property. They taught that Christ and the twelve apostles had held no property, singly or jointly.

This view offended those who held property, and was declared to be heretical (proof text, J 18:10; Jesus said to Peter, "Put up THY sword...."). In 1318, several Spiritual Franciscans were burned at the stake in Marseilles.

For several centuries now, his Franciscan order has experienced continuous growth and is still active today caring for the poor, educating youth, and performing many other good deeds.

Let me end today with a sermon attributed to St. Francis called his "Sermon to the Birds"

*My little sisters, the birds, much bounden are ye unto God, your Creator, and always in every place ought ye to praise Him, for that He hath given you liberty to fly about everywhere, and hath also given you double and triple raiment; moreover He preserved your seed in the ark of Noah, that your race might not perish out of the world; still more are ye beholden to Him for the element of the air which He hath appointed for you; beyond all this, ye sow not, neither do you reap; and God feedeth you, and giveth you the streams and fountains for your drink; the mountains and valleys for your refuge and the high trees whereon to make your nests; and because ye know not how to spin or sow, God clotheth you, you and your children; wherefore your Creator loveth you much, seeing that He hath bestowed on you so many benefits; and therefore, my little sisters, beware of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praises unto God.*

Saint Francis of Assisi - c 1220

Amen