

Saint Francis of Assisi
edited by Mirabai Starr

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Praise to you, Saint Francis of Assisi, brother to the sun and the moon, to birds and worms, fire and wind. Your unconditional love of creation excludes no one. When you embraced the leper anything left between you and your God melted away.

In our habitual grasping, we have lost the joy of letting go. Whisper in our ear, Francis. Let us live your simple wisdom, and seek not so much to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.

Thank you.

Amen.

Devotion, Prayers, and Living Wisdom

Saint Francis of Assisi

Contemplation in Action

History likes to portray Francis of Assisi as a perfect being, unmoved by the trials that bring the rest of us to our knees. A placid sage who held out his holy hands to the gentle forest creatures while they scurried and swooped and glided to greet him. An innocent child-man who easily slips into the kingdom of heaven while the rest of grapple outside the gates with our thousand grown-up concerns and responsibilities, failing again and again to meet our lives gracefully.

It is comforting to discover that Francis of Assisi suffered and lamented, lost his temper and forfeited his dignity, rebelled against the rebels and lashed out at the meek. That, like us, he fell again and again. And that he continued to stand up, brush himself off, and recommit his life to God. It is precisely in his humanness that his true sanctity lies; it is in that same essential humanity that we can find a role model for a deeply spiritual life.

Like most great prophets, Francis of Assisi became a saint in spite of himself. The more he tried to disappear into the unifying light of the divine, the more the Holy One seemed to raise him up as a shining example of what is meant by the phrase "Love one another."

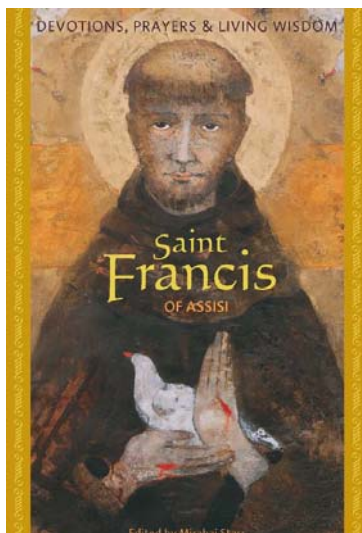
Eight centuries after his death, this humble Italian sage is the most popular saint in the world. Saint Francis dissolves the boundaries between believers and doubters, leaps over the fence that divides religious traditions to penetrate the heart and inflame the imagination in every culture and across the centuries. Who doesn't love this gentle, joyful saint, a being who preaches to the birds with one hand and blesses lepers with the other?

Francis of Assisi was born in 1182 and died in 1226. In his 44 years on the planet, he managed to reform the entire Roman Catholic Church – not through revolution and dissent, but through gracious persuasion and his own living example of an authentic gospel life. Francis committed every breath to making the **Beatitudes of Jesus Christ** a daily reality:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Francis dedicated himself to uplifting the wretched conditions of the poor. He gave up his inherited wealth and privilege to live among the outcasts, the marginalized, the struggling, identifying with them as Jesus identified with them. If Francis received a half a loaf of bread in his begging bowl, he divided it among all who were hungry. He refused all possessions beyond the patched robe he wore to cover "Brother Body."

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Francis understood that great sorrow shatters our hearts and that only in that shattering can the light of the divine come streaming in. Into the vessel hollowed out by grief and loss, the Holy One pours his love and fills us to overflowing. Francis tended to that emptying with boundless lovingkindness. Wherever he perceived suffering, he offered comfort, both in the form of physical relief and spiritual illumination.



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*When I Returned From
Rome*

*A bird took flight.
And a flower in a field
whistled at me as I
passed.*

*I drank from a stream of
clear water. And at night
the sky untied her hair and
I fell asleep clutching a
tress
of God's.*

*When I returned from
Rome, all said, "Tell us the
great news," and with
great excitement I did:
"A flower in a field
whistled, and at night the
sky untied her hair and
I fell asleep clutching a
sacred tress..."*

In the spirit of Francis of
Assisi, from Love Poems
From God by Daniel
Ladinsky

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Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Francis quietly suggested that the lavish materialism of the Church was an impediment to spiritual growth. It is the gentle and not the powerful who will drink from the divine cup. It is the humble who will uncover the divine treasure that lifts the burden of debt for themselves and for all humanity.

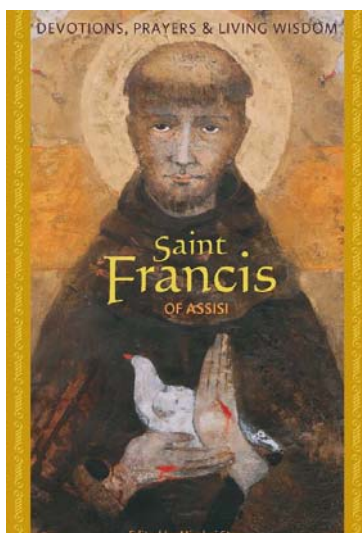
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Francis inspired his followers to desire the liberation of their brothers and sisters as passionately as they themselves longed to be free. He modeled a spiritual path that combined private, contemplative prayer with active service in the world.

While Francis could easily have become the respected leader of a successful monastic community, removed from the distractions of society, he chose instead to immerse himself in the messy human condition, where he was often reviled as an embarrassment to the high society from which he came. Rather than accept a traditional endowment, Francis and his followers begged in the streets for bread, bricks and firewood. He tended lepers and cared for orphans. He stood up against oppression wherever he encountered it, but he did so in such a loving way that he posed no obvious threat to the authorities and so managed to convert them to his cause.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Francis insisted that in choosing a life of voluntary poverty and radical simplicity, his followers not criticize those who were not ready for such extreme practices. In an age where communities of bold heretics were hurling accusations of hypocrisy at the Roman Church, Francis embraced and forgave the transgressions of Christendom with the same humility and tenderness with which he treated every individual soul that crossed his path. He invited all who had been rejected by society to take refuge among the Little Brothers and rebuild their inherent dignity in a climate of authentic compassion.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Francis saw the face of the Creator throughout his creation. In the unselfconscious symphony of birdsong, Francis learned how to joyously praise the Holy One. Watching a toddler teeter into his mother's arms, Francis recognized the simple pleasures of house-holding. As he had given these up to follow the most radical teachings of Christ, he sculpted a family of snow-people to symbolize his sacrifice and make fun of his own longings for human connection. Francis refused to take himself seriously. His child-like wonder in the beauty of the natural world lifted the veils that separated him from a direct encounter with the divine.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Children of God. Francis was born into a cult of knighthood, in which young men of noble birth were expected to charge off and vanquish their neighbors in an ongoing culture of civil strife. After spending a year as a prisoner of war following one



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In 1980, Pope John Paul II declared Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology. Francis took the biblical teaching about man being given dominion over creation and turned it in his gentle hand. Francis taught that God had created human beings as stewards for the rest of his creatures, and for the earth and the elements that sustain us all. Rather than viewing himself as the master of the animals or nature as an indifferent collection of forces, Francis embraced all created things as his family. He delighted in the smallest details of the Creator's humblest children.

such pointless battle, Francis experienced the futility of violence in every fiber of his being. He exchanged his suit of armor for a trowel to lay mortar and bricks in the restoration of ruined churches. And in place of the classical songs of chivalry he used to perform as a troubadour, Francis picked up two sticks and pantomimed a violin, singing love songs to God in French while his brothers danced in holy intoxication.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Francis began and ended his religious vocation the victim of condemnation and rejection. When he first gave up his life of comfort and ease and took to the streets to live among the poor and beg for his most basic needs, the people of Assisi slammed their doors in his face and called him crazy. When he began to rebuild churches and preach a gospel of radical simplicity and unconditional love, they laughed at him. Gradually yet inexorably, Francis' gentleness and passion attracted followers until the small brotherhood founded on voluntary poverty had flowered into a complex organization, rife with internal conflict and misunderstanding, one that barely resembled Francis' original vision. This betrayal broke his heart, yet it also opened him to receive the ultimate gift from Christ: participation in his Passion through the stigmata.

The full spectrum of Francis' life – from joyful exaltation of the Lord to crushing self-doubt – reflected his living commitment to Christ's teachings of love.

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