

**FRANCIS OF ASSISI**  
Messenger for Today's World

by  
Robert Waldron

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## Bellini's Francis

Hurt hard by prayer, Francis  
staggers, sways. The very Love  
that draws him, stays him now,  
and shocks with sudden pain.  
His hands are holes. His quick feet,  
nailed to stone, hold him here.

Far off, a shepherd stares, his flock  
astir, his flock afraid. A heron,  
practiced in stillness, waits.  
With pity, a hare looks up  
at Francis from his little cell.

The donkey, used to burdens,  
recalls Francis' Friend,  
the Babe he warmed with breath,  
the Man who rode his back  
through waving palms,  
through songs and shouts,  
Who also came to this.

Francis gasps. He sees through tears  
what we can't see. What seems a bright  
dancing tree, what seem white cloths  
of sunlit cloud, is One he's come to love  
more truly now, in his pierced and grieving  
heart, in all his life and limb.<sup>1</sup>

James Littwin

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## Introduction

When pursuing spiritual renewal, there is no better companion for the journey than Francis of Assisi, the *Poverello*—the “little poor man”—the world’s most beloved and popular saint. Francis is famous for many reasons. He was a gentle man of the Middle Ages, a troublesome time when the gentle were crushed beneath the feet of the proud, the powerful, and the avaricious. He was a man in love with Christ, offering himself completely to the Man of Sorrows.

Growing up in a privileged and wealthy home, Francis (the name his father gave him, but his mother chose Giovanni, after St. John the Baptist) stripped himself of all worldly encumbrances to embrace Lady Poverty. Although he had a phobia of sick people, particularly lepers, he devoted his life to helping the poor, the ill, the hungry, the lowest of the low, the world’s pariahs (including lepers, though he kept his distance until the day he kissed one).

He had only three years of formal education, but possessed the soul of a poet, softening the hardest of heart with his songs and verses, words that praised the beauty of God’s creation. He once yearned for glory as a knight, but became a passionate knight for Christ, devoting himself not to warfare but to peace, without and within; he loved Christ so wholly and holily that Christ honored him by bestowing upon him the stigmata, open wounds like those that shed the divine blood that saves the world.

As we begin a new millennium, we want to reintroduce St. Francis to a new generation of Christians and non-Christians. Why? Because no other saint so completely embraced Jesus Christ. Francis’s life was not an *imitatio Christi*; it was far more profound than imitation. Francis disappeared into Christ to such an extent that he could say, “Not I, but Christ in me” (Gal:2:20). As much as a person can become Christ, Francis did.

In the past, almost every Catholic knew who St. Francis was. He was the son of Pietro Bernadone of Assisi, born in 1182 and died in 1226. He founded the Order of Friars Minor (O.F.M.), popularly known as “Franciscans.” In 1228, two years after his death, Pope Gregory IX canonized him. From then on his fame, his spiritual message, and his religious order have spread throughout the world.

Our modern culture has reduced Francis to a gentle man who preached to birds. But he was far from sentimental. Yes, he was gentle and charming, and indeed possessed a mystical rapport with animals, particularly birds. But more importantly, within the Catholic Church he initiated a spiritual rebirth long before Martin Luther. Francis indeed obeyed the command heard from Christ in the church of Damiano: “Rebuild my church.” And only a man who was committed, tough, and courageous, who did not fear poverty, disease, and abuse, could accomplish what Christ had asked of him.

Some people may ask how a twelfth-century figure can inspire us today. Francis is not only a man for the Middle Ages; he is also, to borrow playwright Robert Bolt’s description of St. Thomas More, “a man for all seasons.” Francis was a person of realism, one who today, because of the life he embraced, would be called a revolutionary. His life is far from over. Some say it has barely begun, because at its heart is the dilemma of universal poverty. Thus, to anyone who says “Another book about St. Francis?” we reply, “Thank God, for we cannot pigeonhole St. Francis according to time because he is timeless.”

In Francis, every generation finds the saint they need. We shall see, however, that Francis himself does not change. The more we know about him, the more we open ourselves to change within us: if we pay attention to Francis’s life and his spiritual message, in our time we will see with different, rinsed eyes, and we will find in him the message uniquely meant for us.



The ailments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries mirror those of today—war, poverty, hunger, homelessness, and disease. Things have not changed much. As in the Middle Ages, our world is still divided into the haves and the have-nots. Christ himself reminds us, “You always have the poor with you” (Jn 12:8). Francis did not ignore these troubles. He faced them, trying to allay if not solve them, a huge task for one person. But with God’s help he was able to assist many of God’s people. And because he could speak with those who had suffered during his time and connect with them, he can speak to us.

Our world still has millions of hungry, homeless, war-scarred, disease-ridden children, women, and men. Francis extends his stigmatized hands across the centuries to help us face life, to lift our spirits, to help us discover what is real in life; he also points his finger toward Christ, who said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

In his way of life, Francis shows us the way to Christ. He speaks to us now in our moment. He himself is the example par excellence of a person who not only emulates but becomes Christ. Thus, to listen to and follow Francis is to listen to and follow Christ, ultimately to become Christ-like.

We will always need role models to help us live Christian lives; for this very reason Holy Mother Church has created a pantheon of saints, for she knows that we need to identify with real people. The true purpose of sainthood is not to glorify any human being, but to present exemplars of holiness to help to bring each of us to Christ. For nine hundred years, Francis has done this.

There is, indeed, a Franciscan spirituality. To learn about it and so apply it to our lives we need to know Francis’s story. We need to know about his wild youth, about his conversion, about the vicissitudes of separating himself from his family, about the difficulties of establishing his religious order, about his struggles to become more Christ-

like, and about his inner battles to preserve the purity of his mind and soul. We will learn about his gentle disposition, his love of nature, his love of animals, his love of prayer, and above all, his love of Jesus Christ who bathes our souls.

We will do this by looking at images. Each of the five chapters will begin with a stanza from St. Francis's "The Canticle of the Creatures." This poem, composed late in his life, expresses the core of Franciscan spirituality. To touch Francis, like the woman who touched the hem of Christ's tunic, we need only read and meditate upon his Canticle; it will place us first in his presence, and then in the presence of God. The Canticle will touch us with Francis's message, and will transform our lives as Christians.

Another aid to understanding Francis and his spiritual way is Bellini's famous *St. Francis in the Desert* (also called *St. Francis in Ecstasy*), which many consider the world's greatest painting. The original is in the Frick Museum, New York City.

We can learn much about Francis and his spirituality by meditating upon Bellini's masterpiece, and so we will make frequent reference to it. It reveals what Francis considered important in life and provides an entrance into the mystery of his life and being, one like no other saint venerated in the Catholic Church.

Francis will always remain an enigma, but by employing study, prayer, and meditation on his life and on his modern and unique message, we will find in him the saving word meant individually for each of us on our once-only life journey.

Francis was a builder. As a young man, he learned masonry while tearing down Assisi's La Rocca Castle and re-using the stones to build a city wall. Thus, when from the Byzantine cross in the ruined church of San Damiano in Assisi Christ asked Francis to rebuild his church, he meant not only the small, decrepit structure, but also the troubled, chaotic universal Church. Francis rebuilt San Damiano as

well as two other churches, San Pietro della Spina and the “Porziuncola,” the little structure enclosed within Santa Maria degli Angeli. It became the cradle of the Franciscan movement. An expert at rebuilding churches made of stone as well as the earthly Church, Francis can also help to rebuild Christian lives.

Everything great begins small. A painting begins with a brushstroke, a sculpture with the stroke of a hammer on a chisel, a musical composition with a note, a poem with a word, a novel with a sentence, a dance with a step. Discovering the charming, joyful, holy St. Francis begins with turning one page to the next. Each small gesture has the power to change one’s life forever.

This book can be used on your own, or with a group. Either approach is beneficial. The book is designed to be read over the course of five weeks, one chapter a week. Each concludes with study guide questions meant to lead readers, individually or in a group, more deeply into Francis’s life and message, bringing you closer to the saint and so closer to Christ.

## The Canticle of the Creatures

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord!

All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing.

To You, alone, Most High, do they belong.

No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and You give light through him.

And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!

Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens You have made them bright, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which You give Your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom You brighten the night.

He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of You; through those who endure sickness and trial.

Happy those who endure in peace, for by You, Most  
High, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Bodily  
Death, from whose embrace no living person  
can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!

Happy those she finds doing Your most holy will.

The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and  
serve Him with great humility.<sup>2</sup>

WEEK ONE

Chapter One

**Francis's Youth and the Voice  
from the Cross of San Damiano**

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord!  
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all  
blessing.  
To You, alone, Most High, do they belong.  
No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.  
Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures,  
especially through my lord Brother Sun, who  
brings the day; and You give light through him.  
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!

“The Canticle of the Creatures”

1

The Canticle of the Creatures

We begin our journey with “The Canticle of the Creatures,” a poem that reflects many remarkable facts. Francis composed it at the end of his life. The zenith of his mystical journey, his reception of the stigmata at Mount La Verna, had left him quite ill. He was nearly blind; his disease made him sensitive to any illumination, from sunlight to the mere flame of a candle.

Thomas of Celano, his biographer, records how this poem of praise welled up within Francis after he had received the stigmata and returned to Assisi:

One night when Francis was exhausted more than usual because of his severe infirmities, he nevertheless kept the shield of patience unshaken by praying to Christ. Finally, as he prayed in agony, the Lord gave him this promise of eternal life. "If the whole bulk of the earth and the whole universe were made of precious gold without price, and it was given to you as a reward for these severe sufferings which you are now enduring, and instead you would be given a treasure of such great glory, in comparison with which that gold would be as nothing, not even worthy of mention, would you not be happy and would you not willingly bear what you are bearing?"

"I would indeed be happy," Francis replied, "and I would rejoice beyond all measure."

"Rejoice!" the Lord exclaimed, "for your sickness is a promise of my kingdom. Therefore await your inheritance of the kingdom, steadfast and assured, because of the merit of your patience."<sup>3</sup>

Soon after this declaration, Francis composed "The Canticle of the Creatures" at San Damiano, where St. Clare and her nuns maintained a convent and a hospital. In his final painful days they cared for him as he endured a number of serious ailments, including trachoma, an eye disease he likely contracted when he visited Egypt. Paradoxically, while almost blind Francis composed the Canticle, one of the first poems in vernacular Italian, in praise of the visible

glory of God's creation. It conveys such pure joy that one wonders how a man so ill could be so happy and articulate.

Francis could praise God because he himself had disappeared into God, a continuation of the unitive experience of Mount La Verna; whatever Francis uttered was inspired. In fact, one could say that he served as the mouthpiece of God, who looks at creation through Francis and, as in Genesis, finds it "very good" (Gn 1:31). Keep in mind, however, that when Francis "looks" with his inner eye he is seeing the beauty of the world imprinted upon his mind and soul, for his physical eyes could no longer tolerate light.

"The Canticle of the Creatures," a mystically charged poem from the medieval era, speaks eloquently and meaningfully to contemporary readers, who are far more attuned to ecology. Unlike the audience in Francis's time, we recognize how we have damaged God's earth.

The poem begins with distance—the Lord God is "most high." Francis is looking up at the sun's golden disc, far above human beings and all other earthly creatures. By so quickly rendering the distance Francis emphasizes his own lowliness. He then lists all of life's worthiest attributes—praise, glory, honor, and blessing—as belonging alone to the Most High. Nothing is greater than God.

Humbled by God's greatness, Francis announces that no mortal is worthy to pronounce God's name. Spatial distance is added to spiritual distance: human beings are far removed from God yet they live in the light of the sun, in the presence of God. Hence, in praising God and all creatures, Francis begins with Brother Sun. From a medieval perspective he renders the sun, who brings the light that produces all we need to live, as masculine. But he also describes the sun as "fair," that is, beautiful. The sun shines with "splendor," that is, with magnificence. So Francis is saying that every virtue attributed from time immemorial to the sun belongs first to God. And echoing St. Augustine's dictum that God is the source of all beauty, praise