

### *Francis of Assisi, the Little Poor Man*

Most thought him a madman. Truth be told, he did have a certain Mad Hatter quality about him. He prayed to God, but he also prayed with animals. He loved people and nature alike. He fashioned himself a Troubadour, that eclectic class of poets and musicians, which hailed from south of France. He was known for dancing and laughing through the streets and villages he visited; in fits of spontaneity, he would break out in a public prayer, recite a poem or sing a song. He was a visionary, a radical, a conservative, a liberal; a man of God and a man about town. He was committed to the Church and her doctrines yet he was also committed to the affairs of the world. Seeing how he held these extremes in a delicate balance within his very person, it is hard to describe Francis. He was an enigma. He was strange. And because he cannot be summed up in a word or even a sentence, he has captivated inquiring minds for generations, becoming one of the truly fascinating characters of history.

Francis was born in 1181AD in the town of Assisi, which is located in central Italy. His family were successful merchants, and if life had proceeded along normal lines, Francis would have inherited the family business and lived a very profitable yet totally forgotten life. But God had a different plan for Francis. When he was 20 years old, he was called to arms by the senate of Assisi to fight against the rival city, Perugia. In the course of battle, he was captured and imprisoned for more than a year in a Perugian dungeon. This unfortunate event would prove to be a turning point for young Francis for when he was finally released, his life followed an altogether different course. It is said that during his time as a prisoner, Francis found his faith and took solace in God. Upon leaving the prison, he seemed different to his friends and family for he no longer took pleasure in worldly comfort. To the chagrin of his father, Francis began more and more to turn inwards. His process of conversion was slow, but over time his mind became completely preoccupied with matters of faith. Then one day, he snapped or was awakened from a slumber depending on how you look at it. His new found enthusiasm for the spiritual life led him to sell some of the more expensive items from the family store in order to renovate a local church, which had fallen into disrepair. His father was outraged and thought his son had broken with reality. He dragged Francis before the local church tribunal in hopes that the good bishop might talk some sense into his wayward child. But alas, he could not. While standing before the bishop, Francis renounced his father and forsook his earthly inheritance in order to answer a higher calling. Even the clothes on his back proved too much of a

connection to his former way of life, so Francis stripped naked and strolled out of the church to embark on a heavenly mission. He had been reborn, and he entered his new life the same way he had entered his old life—with absolutely nothing. Out of pity, a lowly servant brought him some clothes to wear: an old smock which had belonged to a farmer. Francis so approved of this beggar's garment that he adopted it as the only fitting attire for a simple man of God. And so was born that day the traditional brown habit of the Franciscans, which Francis himself can be seen wearing in the picture on the bulletin.

Over the next 20 years, Francis would go on to found a monastic order of traveling preachers. He was known far and wide for his small stature (he was only 5 feet tall!), his large heart, his gentle spirit, and his total commitment to poverty. He himself had no earthly possessions, and those who followed him were not allowed to own anything, either. Today we call this a Mendicant Order. *Mendicant* comes from the Latin word meaning, “to beg”. Once someone asked him why he did not accept payment for his services and he responded, “If we had any possessions, we should need weapons and laws to defend them.” Unlike other monastic orders, Francis was adamant about his disciples being in the world. He did not advocate seclusion, but rather inclusion. He wanted his preachers and teachers to be up close and personal with humanity; whether that be in the marketplaces rubbing shoulders with wealthy merchants or at the bedside of lepers or sitting in the dirt with outcasts or entering the fray of war to reach other nations and religions, Francis wanted the compassion of the church to be visible. He wanted the Gospel to be taught from shore to shore. He, himself, was a skilled teacher often using common items as object lessons to further the Gospel. One of his many claims to fame was his novel idea for a live nativity. Francis was the first to celebrate Christmas by reenacting the nativity scene using real cattle and sheep and people.

Let us end this evening by considering what sometimes makes Francis a bit of a controversial figure. First, there was his love of nature. He has been claimed by the liberal left in support of secular ecology, praising nature to the point of pantheism. It is certainly trendy today to be environmentally minded. But Francis cannot be hijacked so easily. It is true, he composed canticles in which he anthropomorphized nature. He sang of brother sun and sister moon, preached to the birds, tamed wild animals, and removed worms from walking paths to keep them from being crushed. But his love for nature was far from being nature worship; it sprung from a deep reverence for God's creation. He praised God as Creator first and foremost. Francis shared a solidarity with all

creatures, and his life was lived in harmony with God's created order. Long before there was an Earth Day or it was fashionable to be ecologically friendly, Francis sought to preserve creation because He himself had been preserved by God and saved by grace.

Finally, I will mention Francis' experience of stigmata. For those of you not familiar with this phenomenon, it is based on a passage from Galatians in which Paul says, "I carry the marks (stigma) of Jesus in my own body" (Galatians 6:17). Towards the end of Francis's life, it is said that he too experienced this. Francis had prayed to God for two graces before he died; to experience the pains of Christ's cruel passion AND to experience the same love that caused Christ to sacrifice Himself for the world. After wrestling with God in prayer, he emerged from his solitude with nail marks on his hands and feet and gash-like wound on his right side. Francis stigmata was the first of its kind in the Christian west. It is the subject of many paintings and is represented in tonight's icon by the bandages around his hands. Did this really happen to him? I don't know. Is this just a made-up story, which adds to his legend? Maybe. I leave it to you to decide. I, for one, am inclined to believe the account if for no other reason than my own humble admission that there is so much in this world I don't understand and God will always be a mystery to me. If Francis teaches us anything it is this: It takes all kinds and God uses all kinds. What might appear weird or quirky or downright ridiculous to us might be just the very thing God employs to shame the proud, humble the arrogant, and impart wisdom through foolishness. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills