

Saint Francis of Assisi

**follower of Jesus
lover of God
friend to all
creation**



**Make Me
An Instrument
Of Your Peace.**

My personal reasons for this study of the life of Saint Francis:

My heart and my soul were deeply moved and inspired by the study of Saint Francis and his companions. I have written this essay for no other reason than to share the joy I have found in Christ through Brother Francis' example of simplicity of faith in action.

Just as Francis lived during a period of transition when the world was moving out of the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, so too our world and society are in transition from the Industrial Age into the Computer or Information Age.

As history seems to repeat itself, I hope to learn lessons from the past to help me cope with the upheaval of the future. I also hope to learn from Francis how to properly express my disappointment with the excessive materialism of the generation that I am a part of. Perhaps you may also share my yearning for release from this bondage to self indulgence.

You may ask why we study the lives of Saints. For this answer I will quote St. Bernard of Clairvaux, (1090 - 1153). "The Saints have no need of honor from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves us, not them, but I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by tremendous yearning." (To this I add Amen and Amen).

Blest to be a blessing,

Christopher R. Klein July 1996

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Introduction

Many historians recognize Francis of Assisi as one of the most influential figures of the Middle Ages. Though he lived a severely austere life and suffered numerous hardships both physical and financial, he had a great personal concern for the poor and oppressed. His simple, straightforward way of dealing with the Roman Catholic Church and with civil authorities appealed to many. Thousands followed his simple, honest teachings, and have carried his vision to the ends of the earth.

Francis, sometimes known as the Imitator of Christ, lived his life closely to what he believed the Gospels taught. His example inspires us to the possibility of lives totally centered in Christ's teachings. He was an enormously free and spontaneous person, yet he adhered faithfully to the Church, while living his life according to the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12.

Born into a relatively affluent family, as an adult Francis intentionally became poor financially as well as poor in spirit as a means of spiritual growth through experience. He mourned his sins as few have mourned their sins. He was meek and perpetually in a state of self denial. He had a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and was merciful, even bathing lepers. He kept his heart pure by public confession, and made peace between quarreling factions. He even suffered mocking and beatings with joy. Truly Francis was a most unusual person.

This is the story of "The Poor Little Man of God" as he liked to call himself.

CHAPTER ONE - The World of Francis of Assisi

The end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries were a time of awakening in Europe. The so-called Dark Ages had become the Middle Ages, and the next hundred years would see the beginning of the Renaissance, the rebirth of culture and the real beginning of the modern era. This was three hundred years before the Protestant Reformation began in Europe, and the Roman Catholic Church was at its height of power and influence, yet its moral base was deeply troubled. There were many reports of clergy promiscuity. The "Fourth Lateran Council" of 1215 even noted in disgust, "Many priests have lived luxuriously. They have passed the time in drunken revels, neglecting religious rites. When they have been at Mass, they have chatted about commercial affairs. They have left churches and tabernacles in an indecent state, sold posts and sacraments."

In the years preceding Francis birth, there had been several rebellious movements which brought persecution upon those participating for their verbal attacks on the Church and its leaders. These groups based their religious doctrine on the teaching of the Persian sage Manes of the third century. Manichaeism had been strongly opposed by Saint Augustine, who had been a Manichaean disciple for nine years before his conversion to Christianity in 387.

Manes taught that the universe is composed of two kingdoms engaged in eternal conflict, one of light and good, the other of darkness and evil. He preached that man's spirit is created by God and is therefore good, but his body is created by Satan and therefore the flesh is full of darkness and evil and must be purged by subjection of the body to the soul (forerunners of the Puritans).

During the twelfth century, one of these groups called the Cathari was in great strength in Bulgaria, Albania, and Slavonia. They divided into two branches, the more extreme sect being the Albigenses, whose teaching spread to Italy, Germany, and especially flourished in the area around Toulouse, France and were supported by the nobles there.

Peter Waldo and his followers, the Waldenses, encouraged further rebellion against the leadership of the Church. In 1180, one or two years before Francis birth, a group following Hugo Speroni broke away from the Waldenses and started a revolt against the Church which progressed from denunciation of the Church's wealth to condemnation of the clergy.

Pope Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against these break away groups in 1209. Christians from across Europe rallied to this crusade and on July 21, 1209 the town of Beziers, France was taken by storm with 7,000 of its inhabitants massacred.

Saint Dominic Guzman of Spain (1170-1221), a contemporary of Francis, labored for ten years to counteract the Albigenses heretics in the Languedoc province of France by preaching, teaching, and setting an example of austerity. In 1205 he founded an asylum in Toulouse, France for wayward daughters of the poor who were being enticed by the wealthy supporters of the Albigenses to stray from sound Christian teaching.

The Dominicans, an Order of Friars Preachers, adopted the rule of Saint Augustine and were recognized by Pope Honorius III in 1216. They differed from older Orders by their insistence on absolute poverty, rejecting the possession of even community property and becoming a mendicant Order dependent on charity for their daily subsistence.

Dominic (as Francis also) was careful to instruct his followers to treat the Church and its clergy with respect and not to condemn others who do not choose to live exactly as they did. This seems to be the key to their approval and acceptance by the leaders of the Church and would serve as a good example to us today.

CHAPTER TWO - Birth and Early Life of Francis of Assisi, Italy

Francis was the son of Pietro di Bernardone, who besides being a successful cloth merchant, also owned orchards and farms in the plain below Assisi and on nearby Mount Subiaso. Francis' mother was called "Pica", which may have been a nickname. Attempts have been made to find a noble origin for her by claiming that she was one of a noble family in northern France named "Picard". In fact, a son of Francis' brother Angelo was called "Piccardo". Angelo was referred to as "the son of the Lady Pica".

A story related by the Anonymous Chronicler of Brussels, which was current in Assisi only a few years after Francis' death, relates that Pietro Bernardone was in France on business when Pica realized she was about to give birth. She was all alone when she remembered the story of the Virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus in a stable, so she followed that example. Pica went down to the family stable with the cows and donkeys and gave birth to Francis there with very little pain. This story of Francis' birth may be totally untrue. But if it is true, or if Pica convinced herself that it was true and related it to Francis as truth, the story could explain why as an adult he considered himself an imitator of Christ.

Born in 1181 or 1182, Francis was baptized as Giovanni at the Episcopal Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in the upper town of Assisi, which was located within the central states of Italy. When Pietro returned from his business in France, he insisted on having his son's name formally changed to Francesco. Francis' limited education was provided by the priests of Saint George's in Assisi. He learned to read Latin with difficulty and writing was a struggle for him.

Tradition says that Saint George the Great (A.D. 303) was a Christian knight born in Cappadocia. While riding near a marsh in Sylene, Lybia, he rescued the king's daughter from a dragon. She had been chosen by lot as a human sacrifice to placate the beast, dressed in bridal finery and sent out to meet the dragon. Coming upon the scene, George attacked and killed the dragon, the remains of which were carried away on four ox-carts. Saint George accepted no reward for his service, but called the people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. He asked the king to build churches, honor priests, and to have compassion for the poor. (These were the three basic activities of Francis and his followers).

The legend of Saint George may only be an allegory for Christ (represented by Saint George), rescuing the damsel dressed in bridal white (the Church), and slaying the dragon (satan). Whether truth or fiction, the ideals of chivalry appear to have had a strong influence on the young Francis Bernardone. Francis was an eloquent person. His speech was tactful yet brilliant and to the point. His voice was strong but pleasing, with a clear musical tone. While rigid in self-discipline, he was understanding with others and discreet in all matters. He listened intently to both the visible and the invisible world. According to a March 1978 study of his skeletal remains, Francis was only about five feet tall. There was a lack of calcium in his bones, but no indication of malnutrition or tuberculosis as some earlier reports suggested.

His head was reported by eyewitnesses as being average size and round, his face a little long and prominent. His forehead smooth and narrow, his eyes were of average size, black, and glowing with sincerity, his hair was a dark chestnut color, his eyebrows straight, his nose thin and straight, his ears were small, a little pointed and upright, his temples smooth. His teeth were set close together, even and white, his lips were small and thin. He had a dark, rather thin beard. His neck was slender, his shoulders straight and square, his arms short, his hands slender with long tapering fingers and nails. His legs were thin and his feet small. His skin was delicate and he was thin.

Handwriting analysis of his surviving letters shows a person of superior, inventive intelligence, with ability in psychology. Francis would have been easily able to penetrate the souls of people and objectively analyze their motives. He was artistic, with an elevated ability for lyricism. Coupled with his strong organizational skills and a tendency to command with an equally strong leaning toward altruism (an unselfish interest in the welfare of others).

Although an example of his signature survives, Francis preferred to sign his name as a Greek cross, the letter "Tau". This cross was used by the Crusaders, and was inspired by a Biblical passage from Ezekiel 9:4.

One of Francis' early biographers, Thomas of Celano, relates that as a very young man Francis tried to out do others in display of worldly magnificence, in pranks, fashion, and in lewd, asinine talk, with songs, and in his flowing style of dress. Celano also records that Francis was a kindly man, thoughtful and amiable.

Celano writes that prior to his conversion, Francis' songs were better than anyone's, and he had the ability to sing in French. A popular French song of the time was "Litany of Love" by Piere Vidal of Toulouse, and may have influence Francis during his teen-age years. The song may have also inspired his thoughts about the natural world.

"Litany of Love" (Be m'agrada la Covinens Sazor) by Piere Vidal of Toulouse
"So pleases me the gentle season
And pleases me the gentle summer weather
And pleases me the birds singing so much
And pleases me the flowers in bud
So pleases me all that pleases the courtly
And most of all pleases me deeds of chivalry I undertake them joyfully
Bending all my heart and mind to them right willingly."

In November 1202, Assisi was at war with their rival city Perugia. The senate of Assisi called the sons of the merchant class to arms, and promoted those to the rank of Knight who could afford a horse and armor. This is similar to the modern-day custom of giving the title of "Gentleman by an act of Congress" to those who have the education to enter the military as an officer. Pietro Bernardone richly equipped the twenty-year old Francis, enabling him to become a member of the Compagnia dei Cavaliere, Assisi's armed elite.

On the plain between the two cities, near Saint John's Bridge over the Tiber River, Francis was unhorsed and taken prisoner. Because he was armed and mounted as a gentleman, Francis was lodged with the nobles, who were kept alive in expectation of a ransom paid by their families as part of a peace settlement.

Francis was kept in a common compound in the lower levels of a Perugian castle. Although it was probably a hard and miserable enough confinement, he would not have been put to slave labor as the poorer prisoners from Assisi.

Imprisoned from 1202 until 1204, Francis was released at least one year before most of the others captured with him. This indicates that his doting and prosperous father paid the ransom according to

the terms of redemption. This was probably arranged through Perugia's "Prisoners Aid Society", which had been in existence since 1154.

Francis returned to Assisi sick and with bitter memories. Even years afterward, his followers noted how his voice shook complainingly when he spoke of the wrong the men of Perugia did to those of Assisi. Francis depression in 1204 following his return to Assisi marked the first step in his definitive conversion from the world. God was dealing with Francis!

CHAPTER THREE - Conversion and Struggle to Find God's Will

When Francis returned from the Perugian prison, he appeared to the townspeople of Assisi to be suffering from an emotional breakdown. His father bore with him longer than most people, and encouraged his decision to re-enlist in the army for the Apulian War in southern Italy. Francis' father bought him new and costly equipment for his second military service.

In the spring of 1205, Francis rode out of Assisi toward Spoleto to join the military campaign of Walter of Brienne, a famous and dashing knight who was about to reclaim the beautiful kingdom of Sicily from Frederick II. Walter of Brienne died in June 1205.

On the first night of Francis' journey, he dreamed of a hall filled with military weapons and heard someone ask him, "Is it better to serve the Lord or the servant?" Francis replied, "The Lord." "Then why do you serve the servant?" the voice asked. The next day while riding toward Spoleto, he came across a penniless knight, one of the cities unpaid mercenaries, unable to equip himself. Francis gave most of his own equipment to the knight.

Returning to Assisi, his father was ultimately forced to conclude that his son was mentally disturbed when Francis took some cloth from the family business, sold it, and gave the money to the poor and needy of Assisi. Pietro Bernardone reacted with anger, blame and guilt, beating Francis and confining him. While his father was away, Francis' mother released him from his restraints.

Francis withdrew completely from "the business of the world", going to a cave and praying there alone day after day. After months of such behavior, perhaps as long as a year, he re-emerged into daylight as a different person. His friends noticed the change and as Francis was continuing to be converted to God, he went with some young friends singing through the streets of Assisi. At one point, he fell behind the group. They turned back to find him and saw a dreamy look in his eyes. They teased him, "Oh, Francis, you're in love!" Francis replied, "You're right. And I shall take a bride more beautiful and lovelier than any of you can even begin to imagine." Filled with great joy, he was speaking of Lady Poverty and his love for God.

It was at this time that he went on a pilgrimage to Rome, the classic remedy for spiritual unrest. Arriving at one of the city's shrines, he noticed only a small offering. Francis flung all his money through the open grating with such a clatter of coins that all looked up in surprise at such liberality. Then going outside where the beggars waited on the steps, he persuaded one of them to lend him his rags and stood all day, clad in the filthy torn garments, begging among the beggars.

In the mid-twelfth century, Pope Alexander III founded a religious Order known as the "Cross Bearers". Their job was to tend the lepers. By Francis' day, there were forty Lazar-Houses across Italy. Francis had previously had a strong aversion to lepers. He would not even approach the places where they lived. If by chance he happened to pass anywhere near their dwellings or see a leper, he would always turn his face away, to avoid seeing them, and hold his nose.

One day while praying fervently to know God's will for his life, Francis received the following answer: "Oh, Francis, if you want to know My will, you must hate and despise all that which hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess. Once you begin to do this, all that formerly seemed sweet and

pleasant to you will become bitter and unbearable. Instead the things that formerly made you shudder will bring you great sweetness and comfort."

While out riding on horseback one day, Francis met a leper along the way. He dismounted, gave the leper alms and conquering his former aversion, kissed the leper's hand. The leper then gave him the kiss of peace.

Some days later, Francis took a large sum of money to the leper hospital at San Salvatore della Pareti. He gathered all the patients together, and gave them alms, kissing each of their hands. When he left, what had been so repugnant to him had really and truly become something pleasant. From that time onward, he visited regularly the little leper houses outside Assisi and the lepers were to be a chief care of the Franciscans in their early days.

When Francis was twenty-four years old, he was praying before a crucifix in the church of San Damiano outside Assisi. San Damiano was at least 200 years old, crumbling, deserted, and seemingly beyond repair. It was here that Francis heard Christ say three times, "Francis, go repair my house which as you can see is falling completely to ruin."

Full of new-found enthusiasm, Francis left San Damiano, collected cloth from the family store, and ridden over to the town of Foligno to sell the cloth. Returning from his trip, he presented the astonished priest with the money he had obtained from the sale of the cloth. Knowing what kind of man Francis' father was, the priest refused to accept the money. Francis left the money on the window ledge of the little chapel.

When Pietro Bernardone learned what had happened, he was furious with his son. Pietro brought Francis before the bishop of the diocese. He wanted Francis to renounce all claims and return his goods. Because of his love for poverty, Francis readily agreed to come before Bishop Guy II. With no urging, hesitation, justification, or speech, Francis took off his clothes and gave them to his father. It was discovered that he had on a hair shirt under his costly robes, which he also removed. He then took off his pants, and stood completely naked before the bishop. To his father, he said "Up to today I called you father, but now I can say in all honesty, "Our Father who art in heaven". He is my patrimony, and I put my faith in Him."

On hearing this, the bishop was dumb-struck at his zeal. He jumped up to embrace Francis while covering him with his own cape. He instructed his servants to bring Francis some clothes. The servants brought an old smock which had belonged to a farmer. After drawing a cross on it with a piece of chalk Francis put the smock on judging it a worthy garment for a beggar and follower of the crucified Christ. This happened in January or February 1206.

Pietro Bernardone swore at Francis whenever they met, so Francis persuaded a beggar to walk around with him and bless him whenever his father cursed him. In the notarized title deeds of the Bernardone property of 1214, Francis' younger brother Angelo replaced his father Pietro as the property holder. It can be surmised from these records that Francis' father had passed away at this time. There is no record of Francis' reaction to this news.

At first Francis thought the call he heard to "rebuild My church" referred to the broken down chapels around Assisi. With his own two hands he spent the next three years of his life refurbishing San Damiano, Saint Peter della Spina, and Saint Mary of the Angels. Saint Mary of the Angels was the

abandoned, sagging chapel more commonly known as "The Portiuncula", the Little Portion, which would eventually become home for his new Order.

As others joined him, he began to realize that his was a deeper and more far reaching vocation than rebuilding chapels. God had chosen him to inspire a great movement of renewal in the Body of Christ. The rest of his life was lived following that ideal.

Francis taught his followers, "Let whoever may approach them, whether friend or foe, or thief or robber, be received kindly." "There will always be plenty of truth and virtue," he said, "but innocence? Its production is in decline, and who is making any more of it?" Francis is seen not as a preacher of truth or up-holder of virtue, but as a practitioner of innocence.

The following is Francis' "Prayer of Conversion".

"Most High, glorious God,
Enlighten the darkness of my heart,
And give me correct faith, certain hope,
And perfect love, sense and knowledge, Lord,
That I may carry out Your holy and true command."

CHAPTER FOUR - First Order and Co-Laborers in Christ

Monastic life in the Christian west was based on the lives of the apostles after Pentecost, where the Church of Jerusalem "held all things in common" (Acts 2:44). Francis chose a form of life patterned after the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus had nothing; neither staff nor purse, or extra tunic, or even a place to lay their head. They had to beg or earn their daily food and had no provision for the next day.

In Matthew 19:21, Francis read the words of Christ, "If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come follow Me." Francis determined to live his life in observance of the Gospel of Jesus through humility, a simple lifestyle, worldly poverty, and prayer. He was available and ready to help wherever needed. Francis also had a very real concern for the well being of others, to share with, suffer with, and rejoice with the poor. He wanted to overcome the most evil tendency in people - the desire to "lord it" over another. The Order he founded, later called the Friars Minor, is based on these principles.

Francis saw himself and his followers as prophetic witnesses to the world. He expected people to see the dedication of the Friars, their simplistic lifestyle, and their devotion to God, and then having examined their own lives, say: "These Friars give themselves so completely to God; they manage to live on so little! Maybe I don't need so many things in order to survive." The Friars were poor, helpless, defenseless, and to Francis they were people to which Christ referred when he said "they are blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

A conscious personal choice of the Friars was to willingly and joyfully embrace the hardships and suffering the poor of that time experienced. The wearing of coarse tunics and short pants tied with rope belts, living in inadequate shelters that hardly shielded them from the cold winter or summer heat, and working the fields for their own food only to experience the constant gnawing emptiness of hunger, was their way of living the Scripture of Matthew 8:20. "The foxes have their holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head."

Until Francis time, people wishing to dedicate their lives to God had only one choice: to leave the world and enter cloistered monasteries. This had been the practice for seven hundred years, with the "vowed" people trying to live ideal Christian lives by work, prayer, and meditation. Francis broke this mold by encouraging his followers to live a "Gospel" life while remaining "in" the world, rather than isolated from it. Francis did not envision his followers forming a community. Instead he wanted them to be traveling preachers much as the disciples of Jesus who were sent out two by two (see Luke 10:1). Despite the fact that they did not have a formal license to preach until Papal approval in 1209, Francis and his followers traveled the countryside greeting people with the words, "The Lord give you peace!", and exhorting them to repent of their sins and to love and fear God. The priests of the day usually spoke to their congregations in formal language, but Francis urged his followers to preach a simple, easily understood theology of love and compassion.

Saint Francis was an inspired speaker, who spoke only of love. He never threatened his listeners with words of hell and damnation, and even when he addressed large crowds, many listeners felt he was talking directly to them. Sometimes while preaching to crowds, he would turn and look at some birds and address them, saying, "Look how God feeds you! How good God is to you, because He gives you wings to get from place to place. He gives you the sky to fly around in. And you praise God by singing!"

Then he would turn to the people and ask, "How do you people praise God for all the good gifts He gives you?" After hearing one of Saint Francis' sermons, Stephan of Bourbon wrote that Francis brought "Wholesome shame and great edification to his listeners."

Though Francis preached and practiced austerity, he forbade moroseness. Influenced by Saint Augustine (354-430), he instructed the Friars to cultivate a joyful spirit, and reproved them for outward signs of grief, even if for their sins. "Keep such sadness between yourself and God", he advised.

Wishing to encourage his followers, Francis could be quite spontaneous and filled with joy, especially in public. He laughed, sprang into the air and danced, play two sticks as if they were a viol, or sing songs he had composed. When he was alone, however, Francis would cry, beat his chest, roll in thorns, and lift his hands to heaven in prayer. His cry was "All day long I search for Thee desperately, Lord; all night long while I am asleep Thou searchest for me. Oh Lord, when, when as night gives way to day, shall we meet?"

Francis saw God as "Father", but there was no place for the father figure in his order of Friars, and considered his followers as brothers and sisters. The Friars were forbidden to wield power or authority, especially over one another. In contrast, they were expected to be prepared to wash one another's feet. Francis was opposed to any authority that violated the rights of others, and therefore, the Franciscans were the first religious Order not to elect a "Father Abbot".

In the spring of 1209, while worshipping in the little Portiuncula chapel, Francis read the Gospel for the day which was from the tenth chapter of Saint Matthew, verses seven through thirteen. "And as ye go, preach, saying, The Kingdom of heaven is at hand...Provide neither gold, nor silver nor brass in your purses, nor script for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves; for the workman is worthy of his meat...And when ye come into a house, salute it. And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it."

After discussing the interpretation of this passage with the priest, Francis discarded his sandals and walked barefoot. Taking neither a staff nor a wallet, and having only one tunic with a rope belt, he set about his usual daily business. When Bishop Guy II of Assisi expressed horror at the hard life which the Friars lived, Francis replied with stunning shrewdness, "If we had any possessions, we should need weapons and laws to defend them."

CHAPTER FIVE - The First Twelve Companions of Saint Francis

Bernardo of Quintavalle, a wealthy citizen of Assisi whose home was on Cathedral Square, often helped Francis in his times of great poverty, even allowing Francis to stay in his own home. He and Francis had long discussions about the Christian faith and Bernardo had come to admire the "Poor Little Man of God". He decided to sell his belongings and distribute the proceeds to the poor, and to join Francis in his life of poverty. On April 16, 1208, Bernardo became the first person to join Francis in his life's work. Bernardo died circa 1241-1246

Peter of Catani, a doctor of law who had studied at the University of Bologna, was the second brother to join Francis shortly after Bernardo. He died March 16, 1221.

The third person to align himself with Francis was an eighteen-year old named Egidio or "Giles". Giles was a simple, illiterate, but shrewd peasant with a burning desire for prayer. On April 23, 1208, the day of Saint George's feast, Giles walked through the woods; he knelt by Francis, and said, "Brother, I would be with you." Francis recognized in him a kindred spirit, and brought him to Bernardo, and said, "The Lord has sent us a good Brother".

Giles had a ready tongue, with the ability to feel God through nature, and in coming to Francis on Saint George's day (the dragon slaying knight), Giles became a type of spiritual knight. As a Franciscan, he was the first to travel to Jerusalem. Giles worked at odd jobs to provide for himself along his way to Jerusalem. He chopped firewood, swept floors, moved haystacks, cut cane, made baskets of rushes, buried the dead, and supplied fresh water in coastal port cities. While staying with a cardinal in Rome, he would work in the kitchen for a loaf of bread as payment. He died on April 22, 1262.

Sylvester, a priest, had contributed stones for the Franciscan rebuilding projects. He was unhappy when Bernardo and Peter gave away their belongings in the Piazza of San Giorgio and distributed the money to the poor. Sylvester complained that he should have been paid for the stones before the money was given away. Francis took two handfuls of money from Bernardo, gave them to Sylvester and asked, "Have you now your payment in full?" These words and the glance from Francis made Sylvester search his own heart, and realized that his protest came from greed rather than zeal for justice. He soon became the fourth brother, and the first priest, to join the Order. He died in 1217.

The fifth Brother was Morico, a monk who belonged to the Order of the Cross Bearers, a religious group that tended to the needs of those suffering from leprosy.

John of Capella (also known as Giovanni de Campello), was the sixth to join the Order. He fell into exaggerations of piety and in 1219, when Francis was away in Egypt, tried to organize his own new order to replace the Franciscans. John's attempt failed and after contracting leprosy, he hanged himself. He is often thought of as the Judas Iscariot of the original twelve Brothers.

Philip, a Crosier Monk who tended to lepers, became the seventh person to unite himself with the Franciscans. Because of his height, he was nicknamed "Longo". Philip was a good speaker who brought fame to the Franciscans with his many missionary journeys. He died in 1259.

The eighth original Franciscan was Angelo Tancredi from Rieti. He was a man of knightly birth, whose arrival was greatly welcomed by Francis because of his courteous and knightly manners. He reminded Francis of his own youthful ideals of chivalry. He died in 1258.

A priest named Leo became the ninth to ally himself with Francis and his followers. He became the secretary of the Order, and put Francis teachings on paper. Francis called him "Pecorello di Dio", or "The Little Sheep of God." He died in 1271.

The tenth to join the Order was a nobleman named Rufino, who was a cousin of Saint Clare. He was a small, quiet man who spoke haltingly and preferred the quiet Carceri hermitage to missionary journeys. The poverty and hard life of the Order was difficult for Rufino, but he persisted. He was still living in 1278, the year of his death is unknown.

Masseo of Marignano was the eleventh to join the Brotherhood. He was tall, handsome, and the best preacher of the original twelve. Masseo used his common sense effectively, and Francis loved to travel with him. Once, Brother Masseo asked Francis, half jokingly, "Why after you? Why after you? Why after you?" Francis replied, "What do you mean, Brother Masseo?" "I mean, why does all the world seem to be running after you and everyone seems to want to see you and hear you and obey you? You are not a handsome man. You do not have great learning or wisdom. You are not a nobleman. So, why is all the world running after you?" In humility, Francis quoted I Corinthians 1:27: "God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise." Brother Masseo was the last survivor of the original companions. He died in 1280.

Juniper, a simpleton, became the twelfth Franciscan. He was the most literal of all the brothers, and while cheerful and generous, Juniper seemed to always be misunderstood. He was also the most pure in selfless humility of the Order, and Saint Clare called him "The Plaything of God". He died in 1258

One Friar in particular who had a great influence on the Franciscan movement after the death of Francis was Saint Bernardino of Sienna. As the Apostle Paul had been chosen by God to expand the movement of Christianity, Bernardino was appointed by God to reinvigorate the next generation of observant Franciscans.

Born in 1380, Saint Bernardino joined the Order when he was twenty-two years of age. He traveled throughout Italy preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. He was often called "The Peoples Preacher" because of his lively and realistic depictions of faith lived out in everyday life.

In 1430, he became minister general of the Friars of The Strict Observance when its members had dwindled to only three hundred. At the time of his death in 1444, there were over four thousand followers of the Observant Order and within ten years their numbers had increased to twenty thousand faithful.

CHAPTER SIX – Papal Approval

Sometime during April or May of 1209, Francis and his companions went to Rome to ask for Papal approval for the Franciscan Order, which was based on a literal interpretation of the Gospels and extreme poverty. With Papal approval, they would have protection of and from the Church and could live without fear of being accused of heresy, as were some of the other renewal groups of the day. According to Matthew of Paris, a biographer of Francis, the small band of Brothers presented themselves before Pope Innocent III for verbal approval of their Rule.

The Pope was approached daily with many self-appointed reformers in search of his blessing. Innocent III looked on Francis' ragged and unkempt appearance, and spoke rather belligerently to him. "Leave me alone with your Rule!" he shouted. "Go away, brother, and find a pig, for that is what you ought to be compared to rather than a human being. Stay with him where he wallows, and offer him your Rule. You can preach all the sermons you want to him."

When Francis heard this, he bowed his head, went out and found the nearest pig-sty. He then proceeded to roll in the muck until he was covered with dung from head to foot. Francis then returned to the Pope's office and presented himself to Innocent III, saying, "I have done as you told me. Now, please grant me what I ask." Innocent III decided that at least Francis was not a rebel, so he granted him conditional approval for the Franciscans.

The new Order was called "Friars Minor", and within eight years, there were 5,000 followers. Pope Innocent III died in 1216. Honorius III succeeded Innocent III as Pope. He was an elderly man with a reputation for holiness, who had given almost all of his possessions to the poor, and appreciated the ideals of Francis and his Brothers.

The Bishop from Sabina, Cardinal John of Saint Paul, was the Order's first protector assigned by the Church to assist and oversee the Order. Cardinal John was a pious, prudent and discreet man who enjoyed a great deal of influence with the Pontiff. His death in May 1216 was one month before the death of Pope Innocent III. After the death of Cardinal John of Saint Paul, Cardinal Ugolino was appointed the new protector and advisor in 1217. Cardinal Ugolino had formerly been the Bishop of the city of Ostia, Italy. When Francis stayed with Cardinal Ugolino and was invited to eat at his table, Francis ate from a bowl of crumbs he had brought with him from begging in the streets.

Ugolino saw from this action that Francis despised all earthly things, and also observed that Francis was lit with the fire of the Holy Spirit. The soul of the Cardinal and the soul of Francis were knit together from that moment, and Ugolino devoutly asked Francis to pray for him and offered Francis his support and protection.

On March 19, 1227, six months after the death of Francis, Cardinal Ugolino became Pope Gregory IX.

CHAPTER SEVEN – The Second Order – Poor Ladies (Clares)

Clare was born into the noble Offreduccio family, whose ancestry could be traced to Charlemagne and boasted of seven famous and wealthy knights. Her father, Favarone, was a count who probably fought and died in one of the Crusades. Clare's own birth was heralded by a prophecy to her mother.

In 1193 while praying before a cross, Clare's mother, Lady Ortulana of Assisi received these words about her unborn child, "Do not be afraid, woman, for you will give birth in safety to a light which will give light more clearly than light itself." When the child was born, Ortulana named her Chiara (Clare), which means "The Clear One".

During her early teen years, Clare prayed regularly and earned a reputation for good works and virtue. As a beautiful noble woman, Clare had many suitors, but she refused them all. When she turned down one particularly favored by her family, they became annoyed with her, and Clare sought comfort at the home of her aunt, Madonna Bonna de Guelfuccio.

Francis' dramatic conversion and his eccentricities were prime gossip in Assisi, and as a special treat, Madonna Bonna took Clare to hear the "Little Poor Man of God" preach. After listening to his sermon, Madonna Bonna took Clare to the small Portiuncula Chapel to meet the town's sensation and his group of little Brothers who lived in such simple and joyous poverty. Clare was eighteen at the time and probably longing for something remarkable to happen in her own life.

Chaperoned by Madonna Bonna, Clare secretly visited the Friars Minor for about a year, and at some point during that time, she decided the vocation of Francis must be her own. On Palm Sunday, the 18th of March 1212, Francis preached to the congregation in the cathedral of Assisi. During the service, Bishop Guy II, apparently informed of her coming decision, singled out Clare, and placed a palm branch into her hands.

Late that night, Clare let herself out of her house by the little "door of death", the small side door that in many houses was opened only to carry out the dead, symbolic of her dying to self to follow Christ. She went to the Portiuncula chapel dressed as a bride, complete with veil and carrying her jewels. Clare was met by Francis and the Brothers, and Francis cut her blond hair in the form of a 'Tonsure'. The tonsure was a clipping off or shaving off of part or all of the hair of the head, done as a sign of entrance into the clerical or monastic state.

Clare then gave up her jewels, removed her bridal gown and veil, and put on the un-dyed garments that were a trademark of the Franciscans, becoming fully accepted as an equal by the Friars Minor. Since it would not be proper for her to stay on with the Friars, they brought her to a nearby Benedictine convent in Bastia. Her family condemned her decision to join the Franciscans, and went immediately to the convent and demanded her to return to her home. They tried in vain to convince Clare that her action was most unbecoming to someone of her family's class. Clare took hold of the altar clothes, and showed them her tonsured head, thereby making it clear that she would not be deterred from her service of Christ. Seeing her determination, the family went away and let Clare have her way.

When Clare's younger sister, Agnes joined her at the convent, their uncle Monaldo, the head of the family, came with an armed force to bring back this second rebel. As Agnes was being dragged from the

church, Clare confronted her uncle and the others, and convinced them to allow Agnes to remain with her.

Clare and Agnes found haven at the church of San Damiano, where Francis had first heard the call to rebuild God's Church. Soon, other noble women came to live and pray with them. First another sister named Beatrice, then their mother Ortulana followed by Pacifica, the traveling companion of Lady Ortulana. Later they were joined by Benvenuta, Cecilia, and Philippa. The group took the name "Poor Ladies", and Clare called them her Sisters rather than nuns, for she believed they equally shared in the humanity of Jesus. They held equal status with the Poor Brothers, as free as Francis to do good deeds, care for the lepers and those in need, and share the good news of Jesus Christ. However, in 1219, Cardinal Ugolino, fearing for their safety and reputation, forced the Poor Ladies to become enclosed nuns at San Damiano, no longer able to mix freely with their Brothers and the public.

Despite this minor setback, Clare's reputation as a healer spread and many came to be touched by her. She always made the sign of the cross over the person in need of healing, indicating from whom the healing came. Francis sent one of his followers, Brother Stephen to her because he was afflicted with madness. Clare made the sign of the cross over him and then permitted him to sleep in the place where she usually prayed. Shortly he arose healed, and returned to Francis freed of his insanity.

On another occasion, while Clare was ill, the armies of Emperor Frederick II attacked Assisi. Clare was carried to the wall of the city where she held up a piece of the sacramental bread. The attacking army immediately fled in panic.

When Pope Gregory IX (formerly Cardinal Ugolino) came to visit San Damiano and speak with Clare, she instructed her Sisters to prepare some loaves of bread for a humble meal with the Pope. As was her custom for meals, Clare knelt on the floor, and asked the Pontiff to bless the loaves of bread. He requested that Clare bless the bread with the sign of the cross of Christ. When she blessed the bread in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a beautiful, clearly marked cross appeared on each loaf. Clare wrote of Christ, "If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him. If you weep with Him, you shall rejoice with Him. If you die with Him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints, and in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among all".

The involvement of women in the work of the Franciscans was of great importance to Francis. He often asked Clare's advice and she encouraged him greatly. She probably understood Francis and his work better than anyone. Second only to Jesus, the constant prayer of Clare uplifted Francis and enabled him to minister more successfully. As Clare lay on her deathbed, her "Rule of Life" was finally given Papal approval - the first Rule written by a woman to be so approved. She died on August 11, 1253, after forty years of Christian ministry to the poorest of the poor.

In the year 1893, the body of Saint Clare was exhumed and transferred to a crystal reliquary. Discovered within the folds of her dress was the Rule of the Poor Clares which included Article 16, a personal letter to Saint Clare from Saint Francis encouraging her to remain faithful to Lady Poverty.

Frederic Ozanam (French Catholic historian and scholar who helped found the Society of St. Vincent de Paul) stated, "It appears that nothing great can be done in the Church without a woman having a share in it."

Clare's unique contribution to the Church was made possible, not in spite of the fact that she was a woman, but precisely because of it. She cultivated a specifically feminine approach to the Franciscan ideal and therefore, one that is valid for Franciscan women the world over.

CHAPTER EIGHT – Missionary Expansion

Francis could see that while Europe was mostly Christianized, its Christians were apathetic, leaving the Muslim world shut off from the Gospel, and the Far East unreached. Francis wanted very much to change this situation, and following the Friar's Minor's Pentecost General Chapter gathering of May 5, 1217, he determined to send apostles to the world. Francis decided to follow the example of Jesus and send his apostles two by two, with the aim of penetrating the militaristic rigidity of the Muslims as well as the mystical, multi-god centered religions of the Far East.

Francis sent Brother Giles to Tunisia, Brother Elias to Syria, and other Friars to France, Spain, Germany, Hungary, Bohemia, Morocco, and to the Holy Land. And, in early June 1224, missionaries were sent to England. Beginning in 1294, Franciscans would be the first missionaries to significantly reach China. In January 1220, five Friars were tortured and executed in Morocco for aggressively preaching in the Mosques. Though their behavior was an unpolished, overly passionate expression of the real beauty of Franciscan courtesy, Francis was joyous. Now he had Brothers in heaven.

After hearing of the Moroccan martyrs, a brilliant Augustinian scholar named Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) joined the Friars Minor. Francis wrote to Anthony, "Brother Francis sends his wishes of health to Brother Anthony, my bishop. It pleases me that you teach sacred theology to the Brothers, as long as, in the words of The Rule, you do not extinguish the Spirit of Prayer and devotion with study of this kind." Anthony was an extremely popular preacher, sometimes attracting 30,000 people to hear him speak. He was so successful at converting heretics in southern France and northern Italy that he was called "the Hammer of the Heretics".

On one occasion, as Anthony preached to an international gathering of clergy, all present could understand him as if he spoke in their own languages, a repeat of the miracle of the first Pentecost. In June of 1219, Francis, with Peter Catani (one of the first followers of Francis), Illuminato of Rieti and Leonard of Assisi accompanied the Christian army of the Fifth Crusade. Along the way they passed from Acre to Damietta, Egypt, where they were joined by an old friend, James of Vitry, who was the Bishop of Acre.

Francis became disillusioned while ministering to the crusaders. The Pope's troops were greedy, drunk, and immoral. Sicilian harlots wandered through the tents, as well as relic hawkers who tried to sell more and more pieces of the cross of Jesus.

On September 26, 1219, while there was fierce fighting between the Christians and the Muslims, both armies were so close together that there was no way of passing safely between them. As if to make matters worse, Sultan Melek-Al-Kamil decreed that anyone who brought him the head of a Christian should be rewarded with a Byzantine gold piece. Despite the decree, Francis and Brother Illuminato started for the enemy lines, unarmed and singing Psalm 23. They were captured by the Sultan's army and severely beaten. Despite the beating, and to make their mission known, Francis kept calling out for the Sultan. Finally, Francis and Illuminato were put in chains and dragged before Melek-Al-Kamil. The Sultan asked who had sent them and for what reason they had been sent. Francis told the Sultan that he and Illuminato had been sent not by man but by God, and that their purpose was to share the Gospel with him and his troops.

Noticing Francis' enthusiasm and courage, the Sultan listened intently while Francis shared the Gospel with him. The Sultan was so impressed with Francis' sincerity and humility; he offered him many valuable presents. When Francis politely refused the gifts, the Sultan greatly respected him for his disregard of worldly wealth.

Celano records that Francis was "treated with kindness in his sickness". This is the first datable indication of any physical illness since his conversion. From this time onward, references to growing blindness, fever, and illness are common. It may be that Francis contracted "the fever" which devastated both the Christian and Muslim armies in 1219.

To protect Francis and his Brothers, Sultan Malek-Al-Kamil put them under his personal security which provided them safe conduct everywhere in the Muslim world. He also gave them permission to preach to his subjects. Two first-hand accounts indicate that the Sultan became very humane to Christian prisoners of war after his encounter with Francis.

The crusaders respected Francis actions in the Sultan's camp, which they regarded as a knightly deed of valor. When the Christian soldiers returned to Europe, they told everyone what Francis and Illuminato had done. The fame of the Friars Minor spread throughout Europe, and they were accepted wherever they went.

CHAPTER NINE – The Third Order / Lay Ministers

By 1221, many people were inspired by Francis way of living the Gospel, and entire communities wished to follow Jesus as he did. Everyone joining the Friars Minor had to give away all their possessions to the poor and live as the poorest of the poor. Francis knew that some who truly wanted to become Friars were not legally permitted to do so.

Bishops, for example, were not allowed to renounce the income and prerogatives of their Sees, and married people could not tear apart their families and take vows of poverty and celibacy. Francis, therefore, supported what he called the "Third Order". This order permitted people to follow a "Rule of Simplicity and Devotion to Jesus", yet remain in the callings which they could not abandon.

Members of the Third Order were to live within their means, abstain from vanities and luxuries, donate their excess to the poor, swear no oath to feudal lords, and carry no weapons. During this period of aggressive feudal warfare, however, rejection of military service and feudal oaths was regarded as subversive, and brought the anger of public officials.

On December 16, 1221, Pope Honorius III ordered the Bishop of Rimini to protect the Third Order and later Pope Gregory IX had to step in and threaten canonical penalties to any public officials who persecuted or harassed members of the Third Order.

Even today, the Lay Franciscans of the Third Order remain active throughout the world. They show Christ's love and compassion to the needy and hurting people in the modern world. In the simplest of terms the calling of all who are associated with Saint Francis is: "To heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart and to bring home those who have lost their way."

CHAPTER TEN – Stories of Inspiration

One of the best known stories about Saint Francis concerns his preaching to a flock of birds.

As the story goes:

Near the town of Bevagna, a four hour walk from Assisi, Francis and some of his Brothers came upon a flock of mixed birds. When Francis saw the birds, he left his friends on the roadside and ran toward the birds, greeting them as if they understood him. The birds perched on bushes bent their heads toward Francis when he came near and watched him, curiously. Francis spoke to the birds, saying, "My brothers, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator. He clothed you with feathers and gave you wings to fly, appointing the clear air as your home, and He looks after you without any effort on your part". As he spoke to the birds, they stretched their necks toward him, flapped their wings, and opened their beaks as if they understood his words. In his enthusiasm, Francis walked among the birds; his habit brushing against them, yet not one of the birds moved until Francis made the sign of the Cross and gave them permission to leave. Then, with Francis' blessing, the birds flew away together.

Another story was told by Saint Clare and tells of a visit of Francis to the Poor Sisters of Saint Damiano. To demonstrate his desire for them to rely on God for their spiritual encouragement and direction, Francis asked the Sisters to bring ashes and gather around him. With the ashes, Francis made a circle around himself on the floor, sprinkled some on his head, and then in a most sorrowful voice, he sang the penitential Psalm 51, The "Miserere". "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness; according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free Spirit... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise..." Clare understood the lesson. Even Francis was nothing but ashes, and she also was ashes, though pure and chaste. Spiritual pride could be the ruin of the penitent's soul and could take all love for God from their hearts.

Another story relates what happened once when Francis asked one of the Friars Minor to preach in Assisi. Brother Rufino, one of the original twelve followers of Francis, was a slow speaker, quiet natured, and a small, easily overlooked man, yet Francis asked him to preach in Assisi. Brother Rufino begged to be excused from the assignment. When Francis saw his unwillingness to obey, he ordered Rufino to remove his habit and preach in Assisi wearing nothing but his underwear.

Later, Francis repented of his harsh treatment of Brother Rufino, stripped off his own habit, and hurried to join Rufino in his preaching. They spoke to the congregation about the nakedness and humiliation of Jesus when He suffered for our sake on the Cross of Calvary. All who heard the message wept and repented of their sins.

After preaching one day concerning fasting and repentance, Francis had a chicken for his supper. Later, he felt such strong conviction about eating a hearty meal after such a sermon, Francis donned a halter, and had one of the Friars lead him through town while Francis shouted, "Look here, you people. This is the man who asks you to fast and repent while he himself feasts on a tender bird because his stomach hurt him a little, that glutton, that reveler, that hypocrite!"

Another story relating to fasting tells Francis' reaction when one of the Friars fainted due to the fast. Francis stopped his own fast and prepared a meal, and then he instructed the other fasting Brothers to stop, also. Then, Francis instructed everyone to eat, so the one Brother who fainted would not be shamed by eating alone. Francis instructed his followers: "Let each consider his own nature; because one needs less sustenance than another, let not the brother who needs more be held to imitation of him who needs less, but let him consider his own nature and give it that nourishment which it requires that it may serve the Spirit, for we must abstain from too great abstinence as from too great superfluity." When Francis died, he apologized to 'brother ass', his nickname for his own body, for being overly harsh on it.

Once, after several requests and with the approval of the Friars, Francis agreed to invite Clare, with a chaperon, for a meal. Francis prepared the food and when all was ready, he set the table on the bare ground at the Portiuncula Chapel, the place Clare had first accepted the Franciscan way of life.

As the meal began, Francis spoke of God in such a holy way that all at the table were consumed in ecstasy by an overabundance of Divine Grace. While they sat with their eyes and hands raised to heaven, it appeared to the people of the surrounding area that the Portiuncula was on fire.

Hoping to save the Portiuncula from certain destruction, the men of Assisi ran to douse the fire. When they arrived at the Portiuncula, however, they found Francis, Clare, and their companions seated at the table, rapt in God and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The glow seen by the people of the area that night had not been from a natural fire, but from a heavenly one. After their communion with God, Francis, Clare, and their friends, were so refreshed from spiritual food, they had no need of the meal Francis had prepared.

Another story records how Francis came upon the idea of creating the first live nativity. On an evening near Christmas, Francis and another Friar were on their way to the town of Greccio. As they passed some shepherds tending their flocks, Francis remarked how Mary and Joseph must have seen such a night while on their way to Bethlehem.

Francis had always been fascinated by the humbleness of Christ's birth, and such a pastoral scene caused a creative spark to ignite in his brain. He began planning a way of incorporating the simple, unpretentiousness of that momentous event into a dramatic presentation.

As darkness fell on Christmas Eve, torches carried by men, women, and children lit the paths from Greccio to a nearby mountain cave. The light from the torches lined the paths with streams of soft light. Francis had prepared the scene that greeted the torch bearers as they reached the mountain cave. A donkey and ox stood watching over a tiny baby, who was wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Francis stepped from the shadows, and returned the baby to his mother, a local peasant woman. Everyone from Greccio knew the woman, but for a brief moment, she could have been Mary holding the baby Jesus so many years before in Bethlehem.

Then, Francis read from the Bible the story of Jesus' birth. He told the gathered people of God's love for humankind and of the angel's song on the night of Jesus' birth. Later, as the people returned to their homes, the torches went out one by one, and the little town of Greccio slept under the stars of heaven.

The following story shows how Francis regarded even robbers as people to be treated with kindness.

The city of Assisi and the surrounding area had been plagued by bandits - a band of three in particular. Once when Francis was away, these bandits came to the Friars at Monte Casale and demanded that Brother Angelo give them something to eat.

Instead of feeding them, Brother Angelo rebuked them for their behavior. "You robbers and cruel murderers, not only are you not ashamed of stealing from others the fruit of their labor, but in your audacity, you even dare to eat up the offerings which have been donated to the servants of God." The bandits left highly insulted.

When Francis returned later that day, he brought with him a sack of bread and a small jug of wine that he had begged for the Friars. When Angelo told him about the robbers, Francis was very upset. He said, "You acted in a cruel way, because sinners are led back to God by holy meekness better than by cruel scolding." Francis had previously instructed the Friars Minor to "Let whoever may approach them, whether friend or foe, or thief or robber, be received kindly."

Francis told Brother Angelo to take the sack of bread and the jug of wine and go and find the robbers. Then, he must offer them the bread and wine, and kneel and ask their forgiveness for his sin of cruelty to them. Lastly, he was to ask the robbers to please not do evil anymore, but to fear God and not offend their neighbors. Francis promised that if the robbers would cease their evil ways, he would supply their future needs.

While Brother Angelo went to find the bandits, Francis prayed for the Lord to soften their hearts and bring them to believe in Jesus. Angelo found the robbers and fed them, obediently following Francis' instructions. As the robbers ate, they became ashamed of their way of life in the face of Brother Angelo's humility and simple way of life. They decided to return to the Portiuncula with Angelo, hoping to obtain God's mercy for their sins.

Francis welcomed the bandits and assured them of God's mercy for the repentant sinner. He also explained how the infinite greatness of God's mercy surpasses all our sin, and how Jesus came into the world in order to redeem sinners. Francis was overjoyed when the three robbers repented of their sins, renouncing the devil and his works, and joined the Friars Minor, and were faithful Brothers the rest of their lives.

Once when Francis was visiting the town of Gubbio, a wolf so ferocious with hunger stalked the territory. It not only ate animals, but attacked humans as well. Everyone in the town was so terrified, no one ventured beyond the city gate. Francis felt sorry for the townspeople, and putting his faith in Jesus, the master of all creatures, he went to meet the wolf. The frightened townspeople watched from the city gate as the snarling wolf charged at Francis.

Making the sign of the cross toward the wolf, Francis called out, "Come to me, Brother Wolf". The wolf approached Francis slowly, lowered its head, and lay down at Francis' feet as gently as a lamb. Francis proceeded to tell the wolf that he knew the reason the wolf had been causing so much terror in the region was because he was hungry. Francis bargained with the wolf, asking him to not bother humans or their animals in return for his being fed regularly by the townspeople. The wolf put his paw into Francis' hand, as if giving his pledge. Francis and the wolf walked side by side back to the city gate where the greatly amazed townspeople had gathered.

For two years, the wolf was accepted as a large, friendly dog and fed regularly by the townspeople, who grew to love the once maligned animal. The entire town was saddened when the wolf grew old and finally died. In remembrance, a district of the town took a wolf's head as its emblem in 1349, and in the late nineteenth century, a very large wolf's skull was discovered in the walls of the old church of San Francesco della Pace in the town of Gubbio.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - Re-Organization and Spread of the Franciscan Order

During the twelve years after the first disciples joined Francis, the small group had grown into a large religious institution. The Friars Minor reached from Paris to Syria, and in 1224, they sent missionaries to England. Along with such rapid success, came difficulties and the need for adapting the strict standards which Francis and the first followers had set forth.

Francis was an inspiring leader who scrupulously guided his followers, but this way of personal leadership was only effective for a small, close-knit group. The order was growing very large, with over zealous Brothers, and those needing more discipline. Francis could see that the administration of the Friars Minor needed a complete restructuring. Francis, however, would not plan very far in advance because he depended upon the hourly guidance of the Holy Spirit and never knew for certain just where God was leading.

During the gathering of the Friars Minor, called the Pentecost Chapter of 1219, some of the frustrations of the ministers rose to the surface. Missionaries who had been sent out in 1217 had not been properly prepared for the tasks that lay before them. Some of the missionaries did not even speak the language of the people to whom they had been sent. They had perhaps expected miracles to supply all their deficiencies.

A sensitive Francis may have over-reacted to their criticism by abdicating his responsibilities of overseeing the Order he founded to Cardinal Ugolino, the Papal advisor to the Friars Minor. Francis may have genuinely believed that God and Ugolino would manage the affairs of the Order better than he could. Cardinal Ugolino may have seen it as his duty to help the Order adapt into the general work of the Church. Whatever their reasoning, changes were certain to take place which Francis would quietly anguish over.

When Francis returned from the crusade in Egypt and his attempt to convert the Sultan to Christianity, he was told that the general gathering of the Friars Minor of 1220 had met in disorder. A new constitution for the Order had been drawn that was unacceptable to many of the Friars. Francis' return to Italy brought comfort to the loyal Friars who expected him to restore stability and calm to the Order. Also, in September of 1220, Pope Honorius signed a Papal Bull instructing the Friars to only admit people after a novitiate of one year. The Bull also forbade the Friars from missionary journeys without proper letters of obedience to the Church.

When Francis returned from Egypt, he was exhausted and sick with a fever from which he never fully recovered. Wanting only to return to his life of contemplation instead of fighting to keep stability in the Order, he nominated Peter of Catania, one of his oldest and most trusted friends to the position of Minister General for the Friars Minor.

Peter was known as a true Franciscan, and had been chosen by Francis to accompany him in many adventures. However, his tenure as Minister General was cut short when he died suddenly in March 1221. Brother Elias of Cortona was promoted, perhaps a bit hastily to fill the position vacated at Peter's death.

Elias' reputation was for organizational skills, and was probably recommended by Cardinal Ugolino. Francis was more than ready to accept Elias, because Francis wished to avoid the day-to-day

management of the Order. Elias, however, was not like Peter or Francis. He was an ambitious man who wanted to build the Friars Minor into a powerful Order. But in doing so, he neglected the simple, innocent values of Francis' vision for the Order. In 1239, Elias was relieved of his duties for this very reason.

Elias and Cardinal Ugolino drew up a new Rule for the Friars Minor. In November 1223, the new Rule was completed, and relaxed many of the original Rule's standards for the Order. The original Rule stated "If any man shall come to join the Brothers, let him sell all his goods and take care to give everything to the poor", while the revised Rule stated, "If he cannot do this, then his good will shall be enough." Clearly this addition to the original Rule changed its meaning entirely.

Also, the original Rule stated that the Brothers were only allowed one tunic (habit), with a rope to tie it, and short pants to be worn underneath. With the new Rule, a Friar could own a second habit, sandals, and also a large hooded cape. The Friars were also permitted to build expensive monasteries in which to live, and to own books. Francis saw books as a distraction to the active and contemplative life for which the Friars were well known. (Books, to Francis, were as much a distraction to a Godly life for the Friars, as television is to us today).

Due to great dissension to the new Rule by the loyal Friars, Pope Honorius sealed a new Bull in December 1223. The Bull ordered prelates to treat as excommunicated any Brother who refused to obey the new Rule of 1223. Celano, an early biographer of Francis, records Francis' reaction to the subtle, yet definite changes to the Friars Minor' everyday life. "Who are these men who have torn from my hands my own Order?" Francis asked, "The Order of my Friars."

Despite his strong disagreement with the changes made to the Order of the Friars Minor, Francis would not start nor have any part in a rebellion against the people who had brought the changes to the Order. Francis chose to avoid any action, except to live by the simplistic Rule of Life he had established. The Franciscans have always struggled to discover how to smoothly fit their literal interpretation of the Scriptures and their uncomplicated lifestyle into the overall work of the Church. After long years of struggle toward this goal, the Friars have succeeded, and today the Franciscan Order is the largest Order in the Roman Catholic Church.

The eight major branches of the Franciscans are:

- 1) Observants (OFM), itinerant ministers
- 2) Conventuals (OFM CONV.) reside in study centers and urban monasteries and have parishes and retreat houses.
- 3) Capuchins (OFM CAP.) founded in 1528, living a contemplative life, their name comes from the "Capuche" or hooded cowl worn by members.
- 4) The Poor Clares or Clarisses, Franciscan women founded in 1212, they live in monasteries and are chiefly devoted to prayer. (Also known as Urbanists and Colettines).
- 5) The Third Order Regular, follow a Rule of Simplicity and Devotion to Jesus, while remaining in callings they are not free to abandon.
- 6) The Secular Franciscans, a type of Christian Peace Corps.
- 7) The Lutheran Franciscans.
- 8) The Anglican Franciscans,

There have been five Franciscans thus far who have served the Roman Catholic Church in the office of Pope: Alexander V (1409–1410), Sixtus IV (1471-1484), Julius II (1503-1513), Sixtus V (1585-1590) and Clement XIV (1769-1774).

Interestingly, Saint Francis had a great influence on the exploration of the United States of America. In 1492, a group of Franciscans led by Father Juan Perez accompanied Christopher Columbus on his first voyage to America and established the first convents in the New World at Santo Domingo and La Vega on the island of Haiti.

In 1539, a Franciscan scouting for the explorer Coronado in the area between present day Arizona and New Mexico, raised a flag and named the vast territory of southwestern America as "the Kingdom of Saint Francis". Today, the highest mountains in Arizona are called the "San Francisco Peaks."

In 1609 Santa Fe, New Mexico was named "the town of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis" (La villa de Santa Fe de San Francisco), which remains the correct name of the capitol of New Mexico to the present day.

In 1769, the Spanish explorer Ortega founded the city of "Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels of Portiuncula" (Nuestra Senora La Reina de Los Angeles de Portiuncula), in honor of the Portiuncula chapel which was originally called "Saint Mary of the Angels". Twelve years later, the name of the city was shortened to Los Angeles.

In 1776 an expedition was sent to the central coast of California to establish a city in honor of Saint Francis. The city was named San Francisco. A few miles south of San Francisco, is the city and the county of Santa Clara, commemorating the founder of the Poor Clares.

A portion of the Ozarks in Missouri is called the Saint Francois Mountains. The Saint Francois River begins there and flows through Saint Francois County, Missouri, as well as the city of Saint Francis, Arkansas.

Franciscans spread Christianity not just in Europe or America, but in all parts of the world and were the first to bring the true Christian Gospel to the people of China. In 635 the heretical group known as the Nestorians, which had been condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, attempted to penetrate the northwestern part of China with their theology, but had been unsuccessful.

Later, in 1275, Marco Polo traveled to China and through him the Mongolian ruler, Kubilai Khan, invited teachers of science and religion to come and share their beliefs. The first Christian to accept the invitation was a Franciscan monk named John of Monte Corvino, who arrived in China in 1294. Within eleven years, this lone missionary had baptized 6,000 Chinese. From the work begun by one Franciscan missionary, and built upon by succeeding Roman Catholic missionaries, by the mid 1300's there were an estimated 100,000 Christians in China. However, in 1368 the Ming dynasty came to power and began a century long repression against Christians, and within 200 hundred years there were no churches left in China.

CHAPTER TWELVE – Stigmata and the Death of Saint Francis

In 1224, two years before his death, Francis and two of his closest friends went to the hermitage of Mount Laverna, located in the Tuscany region of Italy. The hermitage had been provided to the Order by Count Orlando of Chiusi.

Francis asked the Friars to build a small hut of branches for him beneath the shade of a large beech tree growing on an isolated mountainside overlooking a chasm 120 feet deep. Then, he told the Friars that he expected to die soon and wished to be alone to confess his sins to God. Francis told them to receive any lay people who may come by, because he only wanted to see Brother Leo. Leo was asked to bring him bread and water once a day, and to return at midnight to recite Matins (special prayers said between midnight and 4 A.M.) Francis then blessed the Friars and went into his hut. He only emerged occasionally to sit under the beech tree and admire the scenery.

Brother Leo diligently did as he was instructed. Sometimes, when bringing food to Francis, Leo would hear him lamenting over the Order, asking God what would become of the Friars Minor when he was gone. Leo often heard Francis singing praises to God, or sitting in rapt ecstasy. Leo even saw Francis lifted up several yards above the ground, and sometimes he witnessed Francis being lifted to the top of the beech tree.

On September 14, 1224, (the Feast of the Holy Cross), just before sunrise, Francis was praying, "O Lord, I beg of You two graces before I die; to experience in myself in all possible fullness the pains of Your cruel passion, and to feel for You the same love that made You sacrifice Yourself for us".

Suddenly, a six-winged seraph, as described in Isaiah 6:2 flew from the sky. Francis saw that the seraph carried the likeness of a crucified man, and thought it was Jesus taking this form to manifest Himself to Francis. The crucified Christ stared at Francis, and soon Francis was filled with joy and pity. Once the seraph had gone away, Francis stood in wonderment, not understanding the vision's meaning.

From that day onward, there were pierce marks on his hands and feet, with round, black heads on his palms and upper side of his feet and fleshy points on the other sides, as if nails had been driven through and bent backward. Francis also had a wound like that of a lance on his right side, which drenched his clothes in blood from time to time.

The Greek word, "Stigma" means brand mark or scar. The word occurs in Paul's letter to the Galatians 6:17, which reads, "I carry the brand marks (ta stigmata) of Jesus on my body". The same word was carried over by Jerome in his Latin Vulgate translation. The Friars used the same vocabulary as Paul to describe the wounds on Francis' body when they reported that he bore the wounds of Jesus. Francis' stigmata was the first recorded in the Christian west, and the idea of such wounds had an enormous impact on the medieval imagination and was the subject of many paintings.

Shortly after receiving the stigmata, Francis' health began to deteriorate rapidly. He still suffered from the fever he had contracted while with the crusades, and he was nearly blind. Concerned for Francis' health, Cardinal Ugolino arranged for him to be examined by a physician. A treatment of cauterization from his earlobe to his temple was prescribed.

As the doctor heated the rod to be used for the cauterization, Francis began to pray. "My Brother Fire", he said, "The Most High has given you a splendor that all other creatures envy. Show yourself to be kind and courteous to me...I pray the Magnificent Lord to temper his fiery heat so that I may have the strength to bear the burning caress." During the treatment, Francis didn't flinch. When it was over, he said, teasingly, "If it's not cooked enough, you may begin again".

The cauterization failed to improve Francis' health, and soon his liver and stomach began to fail, and he returned to San Damiano to be near Clare and the Poor Sisters. During this time of extreme pain for Francis, he composed his "Canticle of Creation", a testament to the renewal of his spirit. (The canticle is in the next chapter)

As Francis was dying, he was moved to the Portiuncula Chapel to be with his Brothers. On the first of October 1226, he dictated a letter to Lady Jacoba Da Settesoli in Rome, requesting her to bring certain items for his burial. Lady Jacoba was a widow of the house of Frangipani, and was the administrator of considerable wealth and estates. She was also one of the prominent members of the Lay Penitents and frequently had offered Francis hospitality during his visits to Rome.

Just as the messenger was about to leave with the letter, Lady Jacoba arrived with all the items that Francis had requested in his letter. She brought an ashen colored cloth to cover the body, candles, a veil for his face, a little pillow for his head, and some almond sweet cakes (probably marzipan), which were a favorite of Francis. Knowing there was a rule barring women from the Portiuncula, Francis turned happily to the Friars and said, "Blessed be the Lord who has sent 'Brother' Jacoba, for the rule is not meant for her." Therefore, Lady 'Brother' Jacoba was admitted to tend to her dying friend.

On Thursday, October 1, 1226, Francis asked the Friars to strip him and lay him on the ground, because he wanted to die in true poverty. Then he blessed them, beginning with Bernardo of Quintavalle, his old friend and first disciple. The next day, he ate with the Friars, as Jesus had done with His followers. On the third day, 03 October, 1226, the Friars laid Francis once more on the ground and he died.

At the time of his burial, cities fought over the relics of saints. Knowing the city of Perugia had plans to steal the body of Francis, the Minister General of the Order, Brother Elias of Cortona, determined no one would steal the body.

Francis' body was placed in a sarcophagus of solid rock weighing two hundred pounds. Over it was placed a grill weighing 190 pounds, and ten bands of iron were welded to a large circular bar of iron, binding them all together. Next, gravel was placed over the iron bars and a stucco-like material was spread over the gravel. Finally, a slab of granite was placed on top of the grave, which was under the main altar of the Basilica of Saint Francis in the city of Assisi.

The ingenious plan worked well and the coffin was not discovered until December 10, 1818. On March 4, 1978, a team of experts opened the tomb and found the skeletal remains to be in very good condition. While the bones were being scientifically evaluated, the crypt was cleaned and repairs made before the remains were returned and the tomb re-sealed.

On July 16, 1228, less than two years after his death, Francis was declared a Saint of the Church. His was possibly the fastest canonization in church history, and Francis' old friend Cardinal Ugolino, now Pope Gregory IX, presided over the service.

The Church commemorates Saint Francis of Assisi annually on October 4.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – Poetic Writings

Though embodying the spirit of his faith and character, the poem beginning with "Make me an instrument of Your Peace" (see, next paragraph) was not written by Saint Francis. The poem was actually written at a Roman Catholic congress in 1925, centuries after the death of Saint Francis.

"Make me an instrument of Your peace
Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love
Where there is injury, Your pardon
And where there is doubt, true faith in You
Where there is despair in life, let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light and where there is sadness, ever joy
Master, grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled as to console,
To be understood, as to understand
To be loved, as to love with all my soul.
It is in pardon that we are pardoned in giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we are born to eternal life"

"May the power of Your love, O Lord, Fiery and sweet as honey,
Wean my heart from all that is under heaven, So that I may die for love of Your love,
You who were so good as to die for love of my love."

"Where there is love and wisdom,
 there is neither fear nor ignorance
Where there is patience and humility,
 there is neither anger nor annoyance
Where there is poverty and joy,
 there is neither cupidity nor avarice
Where there is peace and contemplation,
 there is neither care nor restlessness
Where there is fear of God to guard the dwelling,
 there is no enemy that can enter
Where there is mercy and prudence,
 there is neither excess nor harshness"

The Canticle of Brother Sun (My own translation from the original Italian)

"Most High, Omnipotent, Good Lord,
To You belongs all praise, all glory, all honor, and all blessings
And to You alone, Most High, do they belong.
And no human lips are worthy to mention Your Name.
All praise is Yours, my Lord, through the total of Your creation
Especially sir Brother Sun, who brings us the day and through whom is given significant light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor. Of You, Most High, he bears Your likeness
All praise is Yours, my Lord, for Sister Moon and for the stars in the high heavens.
You have made them clear and precious and beautiful.
All praise is Yours, my Lord, for Brother Wind and for air and clouds.
The serene weather and storms through whom you created and sustain all that You have made
All praise is Yours, my Lord, for Sister Water, liquid of multiple uses, humble and so precious and pure.

All praise is Yours, my Lord, for Brother Fire through whom You illuminate the night.
How beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

All praise is Yours, my Lord for Sister Earth our mother, who sustains and governs us and produces the various fruit, with colorful flowers and herbs.

All praise is Yours, my Lord, for those who grant pardon for love of You and endure infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace, by You, Most High, they will have a coronation.

All praise is Yours, my Lord, for Sister Bodily Death, from whom no human can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

Blessed are those whom death will find voluntarily doing Your will

The second death shall not harm them.

All praise is Yours, my Lord, give Him gratitude and serve Him with great humility."

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