

PRESS RELEASE

Date: 4 October 2021

SFLG commemorates the Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi

Today St Francis Leprosy Guild celebrates and reflects upon the Feast Day of its patron, who died, aged 45, in 1226.

St Francis was born in the Italian town of Assisi, Umbria in 1182. Named Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, but known as Francesco, he was the son of a prosperous cloth merchant. A charismatic, charming man, he dressed to impress and display his wealth. He was a born leader of people with a retinue of followers who lived a life of privilege and excess.



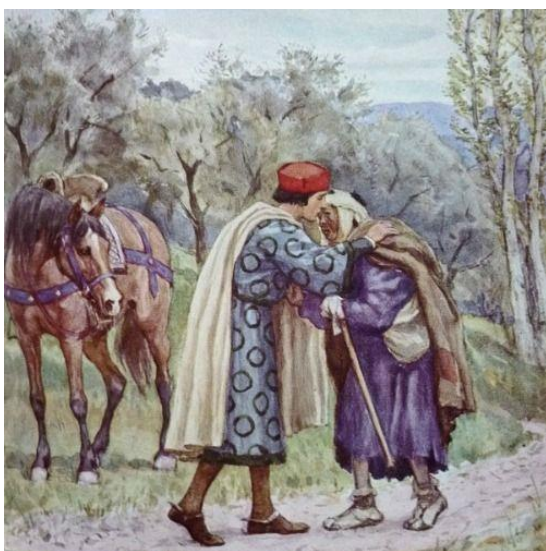
Francis was also a fastidious man; he loved beauty and hated deformity. He avoided people with leprosy whose poverty and smell he found obnoxious. He would make a wide circuit around the leprosarium in the valley below Assisi. His attitude was in tune with the view of

society in general at that time, that people with leprosy did not count as people but were a threat to public health. There was also stigma attached to the disease and this included the judgement that people with leprosy were morally degenerate.



Francis could have spent his whole life with an attitude of prejudice except that his burgeoning Christian faith had taken hold. He pondered words from the Gospel like “For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not?”

One day while riding his horse on the plains below Assisi, he encountered a man with leprosy. A voice within Francis spoke out so loudly, that he leapt of his mount and embraced the man.



This profound experience transformed his life, as Francis found himself freed from his prejudices against others. He could now be a brother to all people through his Christian faith.

He left his family and comfortable lifestyle to begin a new life of poverty. He wanted to follow what he considered to be God's call. Francis preached about returning to God and obedience to the Church. Slowly others started to join him, men who wanted to follow his life of sleeping in the open, begging for food and loving God. His followers came from all walks of life, from the country and towns, noble and common, from universities, the Church, and the merchant class.



Francis practiced true equality by showing honour, respect, and love to every person he encountered whether they were a beggar or a pope. He founded an Order or brotherhood of men called the Friars Minor (which means 'lesser brothers').

Francis' brotherhood included all of God's creation. Much has been written about Francis' love of nature, but his relationship was deeper than that. Francis really felt that nature, all God's creations, were part of his brotherhood. The sparrow was as much his brother as the pope.



Francis did not try to abolish poverty, he tried to make it holy. When his friars met someone poorer than they, they would eagerly rip off the sleeve of their habit to give to the person. Francis would not let them accept money and told them to treat coins as if they were pebbles in the road.

He said, "If we had any possessions, we should need weapons and laws to defend them." Possessing something was the death of love for Francis. Also, Francis reasoned: "what could you do to a man who owns nothing? You can't starve a fasting man, you can't steal from someone who has no money, you can't ruin someone who hates prestige. "

Later in life, Francis encountered persecution and martyrdom from his own kind. The Order had grown to more than 5,000 brothers in ten years. External pressures were forcing him to

introduce controls to make his Order conform to the standards of other Orders. Francis' dream of radical poverty was considered too harsh, and, eventually, he relinquished control.

Francis' later years were filled with suffering. Praying to share in Christ's passion, he had a vision that he received the stigmata, the marks of the nails and the lance wound that Christ suffered, in his own body.

Years of poverty and wandering had made Francis ill. Upon going blind, the pope ordered that his eyes should be operated on. That meant cauterizing his face with a hot iron. Francis spoke to *Brother Fire*: "Brother Fire, the Most High has made you strong and beautiful and useful. Be courteous to me now in this hour, for I have always loved you, and temper your heat so that I can endure it." And Francis reported that Brother Fire had been so kind that he felt nothing at all.

Francis never completely recovered from this illness. He died on 4 October 1226 at the age of 45. He is considered the founder of all Franciscan Orders and the patron saint of animals, ecologists, and merchants. In addition to founding the men's Order of Friars Minor, he founded the women's Order of St Clare, the Third Order of St Francis, and the Custody of the Holy Land.

St Francis is one of the most venerated figures in Christianity and he was canonized on 16 July 1228 by Pope Gregory IX.

Brother David Cunningham of the Franciscan Community of Our Lady of Compassion said: "There are more images of St Francis of Assisi than any other saint. There are more Franciscan martyrs than in any other religious order. St Francis is the most quoted saint. Why? All Franciscans are bonkers, and I include our saint in that... no argument about it."

He continued: "My Blessed Father Francis said: "If God can work through me, God can work through anyone." all I can say to that is, "Thank God."

St Francis influenced the life of many including John Bradburne, *the Strange Vagabond of God* and warden of the Mutemwa leprosy community in Zimbabwe until his death in 1979 at the hands of rebel soldiers. John was reported to have said that he had only three wishes: to help people affected by leprosy, die a martyr, and be buried in a habit of the Franciscan order. The centenary of his birthday, 14 June 2021, is currently being celebrated.



John Bradburne caring for a man with leprosy, at Mutemwa leprosy community, by kind permission of JBMS.

Francis is also patron to St Francis Leprosy Guild which funds projects that actively seek out and care for people affected by leprosy.

Chief Executive Officer of St Francis Leprosy Guild, Clare McIntosh said: “bonkers or not, St Francis embraced people with leprosy at a time when people with the disease were more ostracized, more outcast and more vilified than even today. Our patron was clearly following in the footsteps of Jesus, who also cared deeply for people with leprosy. SFLG takes up the task of caring for people with leprosy in Francis name, today.”



Prayer of St Francis

Make me a channel of your peace
Where there is hatred let me bring your love
Where there is injury your pardon Lord
And where there's doubt true faith in you
Make me a channel of your peace
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness ever joy
Oh 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
Make me a channel of your peace
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we're born to eternal life
Oh 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
Make me a channel of your peace
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness ever joy
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