

# St. Francis of Assisi 1181-1226

October 4

You've got a room stuffed with toys and games and your own television.

Why change?

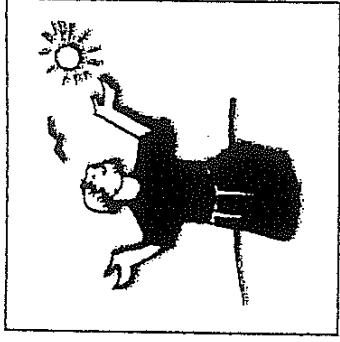
You have lots of good times with your friends at the movies and at the mall. Why change?

You've got a busy schedule filled with lessons, sports practice, and club meetings. Why change?

If you have all the stuff you want, you're comfortable, and you go to bed every night under warm blankets and with your head on a soft pillow, why change?

Hundreds of years ago, the people of a little Italian city named Assisi asked one of their favorite sons, Francis, those kinds of questions. It was long before televisions and malls, but his pleasures had been much the same: comfort and parties, success and a bright future.

But now he was wandering around town in a torn robe, barefoot and with a shayed head. He stood at their doors and under their windows with a great big smile on his face, singing songs about God and asking for crusts of bread. Rumor was that he took care of lepers. Rumor was that he was trying to rebuild an old church outside of town all by himself.



Francis had not been born to wear ragged clothes and beg for his food. His father bought and sold beautiful fabrics, and this had brought wealth to their family. Francis was dearly loved by his Italian father and French mother. Some people said he was spoiled.

Everyone in Assisi loved Francis. He spent money like mad on good times for himself and for all of his friends. Francis was the one who organized parties. He composed and sang beautiful songs in his clear, strong voice. He dressed in the latest fashions.

And like most young men of his day, Francis was always ready for adventure. These were the days of knights in shining armor, damsels in distress, and castles filled with gold. Back before Francis started wandering around in tattered robes, he had wanted to be a knight. He had gone off to war.

Francis went into battle twice. The first time, he and his company, which was full of his friends, attacked a neighboring town. It wasn't anything like Francis expected. It wasn't glamorous and glorious. It was bloody and deadly, miserable and sad. His side lost the battle, and some of his friends were killed. Francis was taken prisoner.

His father got him out of prison and brought him home, but Francis wasn't quite the same. He'd fallen ill in prison, and for a little while Francis slowed down.

But not for long. Soon Francis was back to normal, having good times again and spending his money on fine clothes and good wine.

The chance to fight another battle came up, this time far away. Francis decided he would go, but this time with only a boy (called a squire) to help him.

**Loyola Kids - Book of Saints**

By Anne Walker (1995)

Francis's father spent a lot of money on a beautiful suit of armor for his son. And so Francis went off, covered from head to toe in the finest armor money could buy.

A day out of Assisi, Francis stopped for the night. He took off his heavy armor and lay down to go to sleep, hoping to dream of the glorious battles he would soon meet and the praises people would sing about his courage.

Francis did dream that night. But it was a different kind of dream. It was more like a voice, very strong and very real. The voice asked Francis what he was going to do, and Francis answered.

The voice spoke again and asked, "Who can give you more, the master or the servant?"

"The master!" Francis answered.

"Then why are you abandoning the master for the servant?"

What do you think this meant?

Francis was giving his life to doing what other people wanted and thought was important. That voice—you know whose voice it was now, don't you?—asked him a very sensible question.

Why spend your time doing what other people want when you could be doing what God, the master of all, wants?

So Francis changed. He didn't turn around completely, all at once, but he took little steps as he grew to understand the full meaning of Jesus' teaching. The hard thing for Francis, of course, was that every little step he took to be closer to his heavenly Father pushed him away from what his earthly father believed was

First, Francis sold his beautiful armor and his horse, and he returned home to Assisi. He didn't have much to say to his angry father, but everyone could tell that something was just a little bit different.

Francis lived at home for a while. But even while he stayed in his family's house, he started doing odd things. He prayed a lot more. He put away his fine wardrobe and wore simple clothes. He stopped going to parties. He spread out all the family's bread on the table and invited the poor people of the town to come in and eat their fill.

Francis had changed, and it was making people nervous, especially his father. But there were even more changes to come.

As Francis listened to God more and more, he gradually understood what God wanted for him. Jesus had said many times in the Gospels that the stuff you own is not important at all. Jesus said that money and things can even come between you and God.

Jesus told us that we can find true happiness only in God.

Francis decided to believe Jesus completely. That meant that Francis would give everything up. He wouldn't own anything. He'd live only for God and on God's love, as Jesus did.

As you can imagine, this change of attitude and lifestyle didn't make Francis's father happy at all. In fact, he was embarrassed, enraged, and almost crazy with fury. He really snapped the day Francis sold several bolts of material from his fabric shop to get money to rebuild an abandoned church outside of town, a church called San Damiano.

For weeks, the people of Assisi watched the family's troubles just as people today watch a soap opera on television, holding their breath and wondering what would happen next. They could hear through their open windows and doors the sound of Francis's father beating him. They could hear the silence when he locked Francis in a closet as a punishment for his rebellion.

Francis's mother let him out, but his father soon found him and raged at Francis again. He grabbed him roughly and dragged him through the narrow streets of Assisi to the town square. He wanted the leaders of Assisi to force Francis to give back the money he'd lost when Francis sold the fabrics and put the profits into that old church.

Francis knew the time had come. If he didn't do something now, at this moment, this terrible conflict would never end. His father would never understand anyway, so it was time to go ahead and take that final step.

So in front of the people of Assisi, his parents, and the bishop, Francis made the biggest change of all. He started by stepping right out of his clothes. He stood quietly and looked at his family.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," Francis said. "God is my only father now. I return to you everything I have received—the money and the clothes too."

It was as if Francis were being born all over again, this time as God's child. God was the only one Francis had to obey now. And so Francis walked away, covered now by a shirt someone had dug out of the garbage.

That was fine with Francis. He didn't need anything more in order to spend the rest of his life serving God alone. He tended to the poorest of the poor, kissing and blessing lepers, whom no one else could even bear to look at. He wandered around the country, owning nothing, happy as a lark, singing and preaching about God's love.

He blessed all of creation, bringing calm to even the wildest beasts, such as the wolf he convinced to stop terrorizing a village. He invented a beautiful, brand-new way of celebrating Christmas: by recreating the stable and manger where Jesus was born. We call this the Nativity scene.

And at the end of his life, holy Brother Francis had grown so close to Jesus that the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus' crucifixion, appeared on Francis's own hands and feet.

Francis did all of this with joy. Everyone who met him felt the deepest happiness they'd ever felt. It was a happiness that was so contagious that others were moved to join him, forming a new kind of religious order called the Franciscans.

Francis could have stayed rich and spent the rest of his life getting richer. But instead he listened. He listened to the voice that told him that someday the fabric would rot, the gold would run out, and his young body would grow old and sick.

He listened to God's voice in his heart, promising him a joy that would never fade.

*St. Francis of Assisi listened to God and made big changes in his life. When we listen carefully to God, we can sometimes hear the same encouragement. What changes do you think God might be calling you to make?*



# How to be a modern-day peacemaker

MICHAEL H. CROSBY, OFM CAP

## SAINT FRANCIS CAN SHOW US THE WAY

► When I was growing up, in the yard of every Catholic house was either a statue of Mary or a statue of Saint Francis—sometimes both. Michael H. Crosby gives us some wonderful insight into Francis' popularity. ~ NW

**N**ext to Jesus and Mary, Francis of Assisi has become the world's most popular saint. Why? Francis is an example of embodied faith that appeals to people today. He has been called a "living Christ" because of his passion for building up the church—thus, part of his appeal.

Francis' commitment to Christ and to build up the church did not come overnight. In fact, it took many years. Francis' process of conversion involved three steps, which contemporary people can embody in their own lives.

Recognize violence as a false way of faith. Originally Francis uncritically embraced violence. One biographer says that the people of Francis' day "could not imagine" sustaining their faith in any way but through violence.

At age 21, Francis sought fame through battle. He was taken prisoner and was ransomed by his father. However, his year-long captivity

jarred him deeply. It was not long before he tried to join a small army of a famous knight, Walter of Brienne.

On the way to join Walter of Brienne, Francis had a dream. He saw a room full of the trappings of war and knight-hood. He heard someone ask: "Who can do more good for you? The lord or the servant?" When Francis answered, "The lord," the voice responded: "Then why are you abandoning the lord for the servant, the patron for the client?"

Francis' experience embodied Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel that invites all of us to stop "running after" things that appeal to our senses (eating, drinking, and clothing) as well as our image and reputation to "seek first" God's way in our lives.

### Withdraw from the values of the world

When Francis asked, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" he heard: "Return, and what you are to do will be told to you. You must understand this vision

you have seen in another way."

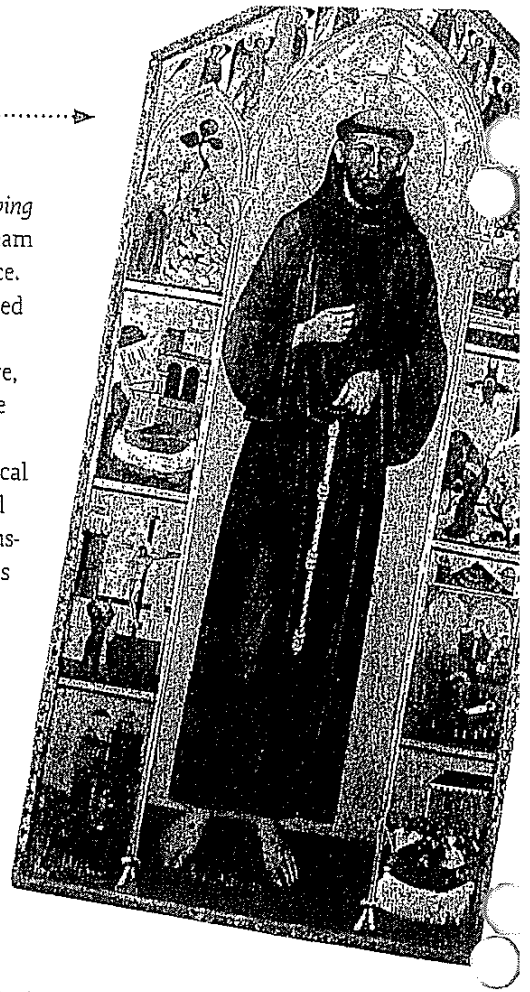
In my book *Finding Francis, Following Christ* (Orbis), I note that Francis' dream offered him an alternative to violence. The dream's compelling power invited Francis to "withdraw" from violence and submit to another, more effective, power. That power is God's word, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel that came to define Francis' evangelical way of life. In other words, in a world that could not imagine any way to sustain faith other than violence, Francis began to imagine a new vision.

It was not long before Francis understood what this new vision might involve.

### Live the gospel

He was praying one day in the crumbling church of San Damiano. There he heard a voice from the Cross: "Francis, don't you see that my house is falling into ruin? Go, then, and repair it for me."

Francis began to repair the physical



building of San Damiano. However, it was not long before he realized the words from the Cross envisioned a kind of "repair" of the church that was not so limited. He was being called to repair the universal church that had begun to fall into ruin because of the violence it had embraced. He was being called to proclaim another way.

Francis ultimately found this new vision in the very words of Jesus himself: to proclaim the gospel not only in his words but in his life. The gospel thus became the new lens by which he imagined a world free of violence. In the process he would become its messenger of the new order and the peace it promised. RTJ

## A PROCESS for becoming a peacemaker

We find a three-part pattern in the Gospel of Matthew that was replicated in Francis' life.

1. Recognize some overpowering violence that also seems to have become a way of faith.
2. "Withdraw" from it lest it become overwhelming.
3. In this process of "withdrawal" from the violence, a person finds a Scripture passage or the Scriptures themselves being fulfilled in him or her.

### SUGGESTION

- ▶ If violence is any force that inflicts injury, what are the forms of violence that have most impacted your life? Have these had any impact on your life of faith?
- ▶ How have you seen others model their own ways of "withdrawal" or "disarmament" to offer an alternative way of becoming peacemakers?
- ▶ What Scripture seems to be inviting you to imagine how you can better make the gospel come alive in the world through you? How might you live in the world in an "evangelical" way?



Michael Crosby is a Capuchin Franciscan living in a fraternity in downtown Milwaukee. It is dedicated

to serve the hundreds of homeless and needy people who come there each day. His book *Finding Francis, Following Christ* has received critical acclaim. His Web site is [michaelcrosby.net](http://michaelcrosby.net); he can be contacted at [mikecrosby@aol.com](mailto:mikecrosby@aol.com).