

BY JENNA DEWITT

WHO IS

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Everyone seems to know the name of this monk born in 1182, but how did he garner such universal fame? Beyond founding the Franciscan order and being posthumously named patron saint of animals and the environment, **we know St. Francis because we can relate to the man so many admire.** As Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "There are many similarities between Francis Bernardone's day and ours – among them greed, racism and self-fulfillment at the expense of others."

As a young man, Francis and his buddies partied hard and enjoyed their fathers' wealth, ignoring the needs of the world around them. As G.K. Chesterson wrote:

"Francis was one of those people who are popular with everybody in any case; and his guileless swagger as a troubadour and leader of French fashions made him a sort of romantic ringleader among the young men of the town. He threw money about both in extravagance and benevolence, in a way native to a man who never, all his life, exactly understood what money was."

When he was 20, Francis fought in a war between his home of Assisi and the neighboring city of Perugia. He was a prisoner of war and suffered from an illness soon after his release, but that didn't keep him from volunteering to join the fight against Emperor Frederick II a few years later. He even declared upon leav-

ing, "I shall come back a great prince!" Before he got far from Assisi though, Francis had a vision from God instructing him to stay home. In his new search for the meaning of this vision, Francis sought God's will for his life. **This different view of life opened Francis' eyes to the poverty around him and challenged him to serve those he had previously avoided,** especially lepers right outside his own town. His father wanted him to take over the prosperous family business, but Francis had received a calling from God to rebuild the Church.

Francis traveled from town to town teaching others what he had learned through God's forgiveness for his wayward past. The 27-year-old son of a rich merchant gained a group of followers and they left all of their possessions behind. He wrote their mission statement: "To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in His footsteps" and took them to see the pope in Rome. With the pope's approval, they officially became recognized by the Church as an "order," allowing them to travel as missionaries across Italy. They were called simply the Friars Minor or the Lesser Brothers (or more accurately, in Latin, *ordo fratrum minorum*).

The order gave up their comfort and privilege to live in intentional poverty, care for the sick and preach on street corners. The Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Francis states: "**Probably no**

one in history has set out as seriously as did Francis to imitate the life of Christ and to carry out so literally Christ's work in Christ's own way. This is the key to the character and spirit of St. Francis."

With their sister order, the Poor Clares, the Franciscans grew rapidly, united by their rejection of earthly treasures and a desire to live as Christ lived. By the time Francis died in his mid-40s, the movement he ignited had even birthed a popular community-based branch, The Third Order, which encouraged average men and women to live out the mission of the Franciscans in everyday life.

Fordham University's Medieval Sourcebook says "The Franciscans proved enormously popular because, like Francis himself, they fulfilled a desperate need, in fact a whole series of them." These needs included their willingness to go where others wouldn't, to provide parachurch pastoral care, to engage in difficult research in major universities and to stand by Truth in the midst of adversity and uncertainty.

Francis' wild past didn't disqualify him from doing great things. By humbling himself, walking in obedience (even when it conflicted with other's expectations of him) and focusing on living like Christ, Francis started a global discipleship movement that has lasted more than 800 years.

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