

Born into a wealthy family at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Francis of Assisi lived a carefree life into early adulthood. As the heir of a nobleman, he was eager to do battle for the honor of his hometown. His dreams were loftier than his military prowess. Taken prisoner, he suffered a grave illness. Rather than care for him, his captors turned him loose so he could get well at his own expense.

Back home during an extended period of convalescence he recognized the emptiness of the glamorous life he had intended to live. In his pain and suffering he turned to prayer and sought a path forward in life. The Lord spoke to him: “Francis! Everything you have loved and desired in the flesh it is your duty to despise and hate, if you wish to know my will. And when you have begun this, all that now seems sweet and lovely to you will become intolerable and bitter, but all that you used to avoid will turn itself to great sweetness and exceeding joy.”<sup>i</sup> Francis renounced the wealth of his family and sought to live the radical life of discipleship called for by Jesus. “He was, for a time, considered to be a religious fanatic, begging from door to door when he could not get money for his work, evoking sadness or disgust to the hearts of his former friends, ridicule from the unthinking.”<sup>ii</sup>

In Assisi’s San Damiano Church, Francis also heard Jesus speaking to him from the cross, “Go, Francis, and repair my Church in ruins.” Francis began to literally rebuild the stone church that had fallen into ruin. Francis’ manual labor was symbolic of a much larger rebuilding effort that the Lord had in mind.

In Rome, Pope Innocent III had a prophetic dream. “In it, he saw the Basilica of St John Lateran, the mother of all churches, collapsing and one small and insignificant religious brother supporting the church on his shoulders to prevent it from falling... It is interesting to note that it is not the Pope who was helping to prevent the church from collapsing but rather a small and insignificant brother, whom the Pope recognized in Francis when he later came to visit.”<sup>iii</sup>

The spiritual state of the church had fallen into ruin and God wanted Francis to renew the Church. “Go, Francis, and repair my Church in ruins.” This had a much deeper meaning than the solitary stone church Francis helped to rebuild. Francis travelled to Rome in 1209 to propose a new form of witnessing to the Gospel. Francis sought to renew the People of God by challenging them to embrace the wisdom of scripture and be devoutly obedient to Christ. Pope Innocent III recognized that Francis’s vision was truly inspired by our Lord and gave his full blessing to the Lord’s mission.

Francis did not set out to build a religious order, but the Lord guided him through struggles and setbacks. “He understood ... through suffering and pain that everything must have its own order and that the law of the Church is necessary to give shape to renewal. Thus, he placed himself fully, with his heart, in communion with the Church, with the Pope and with the bishops. He always knew that the center of the Church is the Eucharist, where the Body of Christ and his Blood are made present through the priesthood, the Eucharist and the communion of the Church.”<sup>iv</sup> The Order of Friars Minor, the Franciscans, helped to fulfill the Lord’s vision for the spiritual renewal of the church.

In his early 40’s, Francis beheld a vision of the Crucified Lord in the form of a seraph and received the stigmata further identifying with the Crucified Christ. Francis died 2 years later October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1226. Francis’s dying wish was to be buried in a portion of Assisi that people shunned because of its association with outcasts. Even in death, Francis embraced poverty and paved the way for a greater acceptance of the poor and lowly. “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal 6:14).

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<sup>i</sup> franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-francis-of-assisi

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_aud\_20100127.html

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid