

THE CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES

composed by Saint Francis of Assisi (c. April-June 1225)

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention your name.

Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Brother Sun, Who is the day and through whom
You give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with
great splendor; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air,
cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather
through which you give substance to your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you
light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us, and who produces
varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Praised be you, my Lord, through those who give pardon
for your love and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You,
most High, they shall be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.

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Saint Francis of Assisi

Feast Day: October 4



"Lord make me an instrument of Your peace..."

Saint Francis of Assisi

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by: Susan Pitchford

Francis of Assisi was born in 1181 or 1182 to Pietro Bernardone, a wealthy cloth merchant, and his French wife Lady Pica. Pietro was away trading in France when his son was born, and the child was christened Giovanni, but his father changed it to "Francesco" (the little Frenchman) on his return. Pietro had an affection for all things French, which Francis himself came to share: at his most joyful, he liked to improvise love songs in French and sing them to God. Francis was not much of a student, however, nor did he have any great enthusiasm for taking up his father's business.

In his youth Francis had a reputation as a playboy and a *bon vivant*, treating his friends to good times at his father's expense though he was equally generous with the poor. He dreamed of distinguishing himself in battle, but at about age twenty he was taken prisoner in Perugia, and languished there ill for a year before being ransomed by his father. His convalescence back in Assisi was marked by uncertainty about his future, but eventually he made another attempt at a military career. This one ended when a dream turned him back to Assisi, and he withdrew from his former pleasures, embracing beggars and lepers and spending much of his time wandering the countryside in search of direction. He finally found it at a little half-ruined church called San Damiano. "Francis, go and repair my house, which as you can see, is falling into ruins." Francis took this command literally at first, and restored several derelict churches in the area before coming to understand that it was not the churches he was meant to rebuild, but the Church itself.

The changes in Francis' life made him appear increasingly eccentric in the eyes of the citizens of Assisi. Relations with his father became more and more strained until eventually, humiliated and fed up, Pietro hauled his son before the Bishop of Assisi and demanded that he renounce his inheritance. Francis, in a gesture that has resonated through the centuries, took off his clothes before the bishop and assembled people. Handing what remained of his possessions to Pietro, Francis said, "Until now I have called you my father on earth, but from now on I desire to say only, 'Our Father who art in Heaven.'" The bishop took Francis under his care, and soon Francis was himself receiving followers, who joined him in renouncing worldly goods, and began nursing lepers, restoring churches and performing works of charity. Dressed in the clothing of beggars, Francis and his companions set out without money or supplies to preach repentance and the kingdom of God. The brothers took shelter where they could, and offered manual labor in exchange for food, but when work could not be found, they accepted alms.

The hunger, cold, sickness and the general physical misery they experienced were forgotten under the spell of Francis' charm. Their radical attempt to live the gospel initially made them objects of derision, but in time the scorn turned to respect and even veneration.

The movement grew rapidly; within ten years of having their Rule accepted by the pope, they were able to draw some 5,000 friars and further 500 aspirants to a Chapter held outside Assisi. The movement was widening as well. In 1212 Francis had received the vows of the eighteen-year-old Clare, who went on to found the Second Franciscan Order of Poor Ladies, known after her death as the Poor Clares. In 1221, the Rule of the Order of Penance or "Third Order" was accepted by the pope, opening the way for still greater growth by making room for people from all walks of life. Francis continued to travel around Italy exhorting the people, and ultimately traveled as far as Egypt where he preached the Christian faith to Sultan Malek Kernel. But by the time he returned to Italy, already infected with the trachoma that would leave him nearly blind, his Order was in disarray. Growth was making it increasingly difficult to remain true to the original vision of gospel simplicity, and the attempt to inject a bit of realism and prudence into the organization looked to Francis like compromise and betrayal. He resigned his leadership of the order and spent the remainder of his life trying to lead by example alone.

Like Christ himself, Francis alternated periods of preaching with times of seclusion and intense prayer. Two years before his death, he retired to Mount Alverna for forty days of prayer and fasting. Passing his time in solitude and meditation on the Passion of Christ, he asked two favors of the Lord: that he would know both the pain Jesus had experienced in his Passion, and the love that compelled him to go through with it. This prayer was dramatically answered when Francis received the Stigmata: the five wounds of Christ's crucifixion impressed in his own flesh. His body already frail from poverty and self-denial, his eyes burning from trachoma, the Stigmata added to Francis' suffering. Yet he returned to Assisi and paid a visit to Saint Clare at San Damiano where, in anguish and virtually blind, he dictated his magnificent hymn of praise, the *Canticle of the Creatures*. There, faithful to Lady Poverty to the end, he lay naked on the ground surrounded by his brothers, and gave them his final exhortation: "I have done what was my duty to do—may Christ show you what is yours." He was taken at last by "Sister Death," whose praise he had sung in a verse added to the *Canticle of the Creatures* just before his death on October 3, 1226, at the age of forty-five. Francis was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in 1228, and his feast day is celebrated on October 4th.