

St Francis of Assisi

- Celebrated on October 4th
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Founder of the Franciscan Order, patron of animals, birds, conservationists and naturalists.

St Francis was born in 1281, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. As a young man Francis fought in the war between Perugia and Assisi. He was taken prisoner and became very ill. He returned home and was accused of cowardice. From a very early age he showed a real concern for the poor and sick. Soon after his return from the war, he heard a voice which seemed to come from the crucifix in the ruined church of San Damiano. It said: "Go and repair my house which you see is falling down."

Francis set about the task, having sold some of his father's cloth to finance the project. This led to a prolonged battle with his father which was only resolved when Francis dramatically renounced his inheritance, even returning the clothes he was wearing. The bishop of Assisi provided him with some simple garments and Francis began his new life.

He took literally the rule in St Matthew's Gospel that Christ's apostles should own nothing. Living alone, in great poverty, Francis cared for lepers and rebuilt the church, begging from townspeople. Later, seven men joined him and they lived a communal life at the Portiuncula in Assisi, near a leper colony. Sometimes they went out on preaching tours. Gradually they earned the respect of the community. One of the things which distinguished them from other poor preachers was their respect for and obedience to Church authorities, and their doctrinal orthodoxy.

Their simple Rule was approved in Rome in 1210. Later the group expanded and Francis became famous as a preacher. But they always returned from their tours to a simple life of prayer, work and begging when necessary. They lived in small huts, slept on the ground had no tables or chairs and few books.

Francis longed to travel and convert the Saracens. In 1212 he set sail eastwards but was driven on to the Dalmatian coast by bad weather. In 1214 he set out for Morocco through Spain but became so ill he had to return home. In 1219, with a dozen friars he sailed from Ancona to Accra and Damietta.

Here his illusions about Crusaders were shattered. He denounced them as loose-living adventurers. In one battle he witnessed 600 men killed. Francis wanted to negotiate peace. Somehow he managed to slip through the lines and meet the Sultan who was very impressed with him. Francis refused all the presents he was offered and returned to the Christian army. After a few months spent visiting the Holy Land, he returned to Italy where great changes were taking place in his community.

By 1220, there were more than 5,000 friars, and the Church wanted them to develop rules and get organised. Francis drew up another Rule and instructions for lay people who wished to follow the Franciscan ideal in their lives.

In his later years, while he held no official position in the order, some of the most famous incidents of his life took place: stories of his close rapport with animals, preaching to the birds, taming the wolf at Gubbio, the introduction of the Christmas crib at Greccio, the Canticle of the Sun, and the impression of the Stigmata at Mount La Verna, which he kept secret until his death.

A lifelong friend was St Clare, who first heard him preach when she was just 18. She founded the order of Poor Clares by San Damiano in Assisi.

Francis died when he was only 45, after a miserable illness in which he went blind. He was canonised in 1228 and originally buried in the Church of St Giorgio. Later his remains were moved twice to ornate tombs but eventually in 1932 he was reburied in a very simple one.

The Franciscan Order established 50 houses within a hundred years of Francis' death. They were a powerful influence for reform and exercised a unique role in towns, universities and parishes all over the world. For a time the order was marred by divisions, but in recent years there has been a revival of interest in Francis and his way of life.

Assisi is a pilgrimage centre for devotees from all over the world. St Francis remains one of the most attractive and best-loved of saints.