Contents

Introduction, ix

St. Matthew, Extortionist, 1
St. Dismas, Thief, 4
St. Callixtus, Embezzler, 10
St. Hippolytus, Antipope, 18
St. Christopher, Servant of the Devil, 24
St. Pelagia, Promiscuous Actress, 30
St. Genesius, Scoffer, 36
St. Moses the Ethiopian, Cutthroat and Gang Leader, 40
St. Fabiola, Bigamist, 45
St. Augustine, Heretic and Playboy, 49
St. Alipius, Obsessed with Blood Sports, 57
St. Patrick, Worshipper of False Gods, 62
St. Mary of Egypt, Seductress, 69
St. Columba, Warmonger, 75
St. Olga, Mass Murderer, 82
St. Vladimir, Fratricide, Rapist, and Practitioner of Human Sacrifice, 89
St. Olaf, Viking, 95
St. Thomas Becket, Hedonist, 103
St. Francis of Assisi, Wastrel, 117
Blessed Giles of Portugal, Satanist, 126
St. Margaret of Cortona, Rich Man’s Mistress, 129
Blessed Angela of Foligno, Gossip and Hedonist, 135
St. Ignatius of Loyola, Egotist, 141
St. John of God, Gambler and Drunkard, 149
St. Camillus de Lellis, Cardsharp and Con Man, 156
St. Philip Howard, Cynic and Negligent Husband, 163
St. Peter Claver, Dithering Novice, 172
Venerable Matt Talbot, Chronic Alcoholic, 180

Bibliography, 187
SAN DAMIANO CROSS
(The Cross which spoke to Francis)
Currently located in the Basilica of St. Clare
Assisi, Italy

St. Francis of Assisi, Wastrel

[1182–1226] FEAST DAY: October 4

It often happens that a hardworking, aggressive, entrepreneurial father builds the fortune, and his son squanders it. That’s how it played out in the nineteenth century among the Vanderbilts, and it happened seven hundred years earlier in Assisi among the Bernadones.

Assisi in the twelfth century was in the same situation as many other Italian cities. There were the old aristocratic families like the Offreduccios (the family of St. Clare), who wanted to preserve the feudal system that kept them at the top of the social and political heap. Then there were the ambitious, up-and-coming middle
class businesspeople like the Bernadones (St. Francis’s family), who wanted Assisi to become a republic in which they would have a say in governing themselves. The split between these two factions was as much geographical as it was ideological: the nobles lived in their fortified palazzos on the hill near the Cathedral of San Rufino; the merchants lived in the lower end of town around the aptly named Piazza del Commune. That is where Francis was born, in a room above his parents’ cloth shop.

Pietro di Bernadone and his wife Pica made a very good living as cloth merchants, and no doubt they expected their only child to follow in their footsteps. But a sober, respectable mercantile life did not appeal to young Francis. In a town filled with young unmarried men who had too much time on their hands, and too much money in their pockets, Francis tried to outdo everyone else in extravagant clothes, silly practical jokes, and all manner of foolery. With his friends he ran the streets all night, sometimes drinking in taverns, other times playing the part of an amateur troubadour singing outside a pretty girl’s window. On a feast day, these boys were the life of the party. And when it came to squandering money, Francis would not permit anyone to surpass him.

His reputation for picking up the check attracted some of the worst young men in town. Before, Francis had been frivolous and thoughtless; with this new bad set, Francis discovered the back alleys of Assisi, where, as he recalled later in his autobiography, The Confessions, “[I] wallowed in its filth as though basking in cinnamon and precious ointments.”

Francis’s notion that life was one long party took a dangerous turn when he was twenty years old. In 1202 the long-simmering feud between Assisi’s aristocrats and middle class erupted into civil war. When the nearby town of Perugia threw its support behind the nobility, the non-noble population of Assisi drove the lords and ladies out of town. As the republicans of Assisi girded themselves for war, Francis enlisted. He had gotten the idea in his head that war was just one more bash in fancy dress. His misconception was cleared up in the one and only battle he ever fought, at Collestrada, where the men of Perugia scattered the men of Assisi, taking many prisoners—Francis among them. For the next year Francis and his fellow prisoners of war were confined to a dungeon. The filth, the rats, the bad food, the crowding, the smells, and the confinement all took their toll on Francis. He emerged from prison a profoundly depressed twenty-one-year-old man.

Back home he made an effort to return to the old life of drinking, dancing, and chasing pretty girls, but he had lost the joy of it. No one knew that during the day Francis would slip off to some quiet corner of a church, or to an unfrequented country chapel, and pray. In his depression this was the one activity that comforted him.
Nonetheless, there was a part of Francis that still wished he could be a thoughtless, pleasure-seeking boy again.

Francis was out riding one day when he had an experience that unnerved him. He saw a leper on the road. The old Francis had a deep-seated horror of leprosy and would have galloped away from the poor man. But to his own surprise, Francis found himself climbing down from his horse, kissing the leper’s disfigured hand, and giving him a fistful of coins. Until now Francis thought the trauma of the dungeon had transformed him into a serious, committed, yet conventional Catholic. His reaction to the leper made him wonder if perhaps God was calling him to a more intense form of Christianity.

Outside the walls of Assisi stood the tumbledown chapel of San Damiano. Over the altar hung a painted wooden Byzantine-style crucifix that depicted Christ gazing directly at the congregation. In the fall of 1204, as Francis was praying before this crucifix in San Damiano, he saw Christ’s lips move and heard a voice say, “Francis! Rebuild my church, which as you can see has fallen into ruins.”

Taking the message from the cross literally, Francis hurried back to his father’s shop. Pietro wasn’t around. If he had been Francis would never have been able to pack up the finest cloth in the inventory and ride off to the city of Foligno to sell it. The cloth brought a good price, and Francis gave it all to the priest assigned to San Damiano.

As acts of charity go, this was exceedingly generous. But there was a snag that did not occur to Francis: the cloth was not his to sell. This point, however, did not escape Pietro. Enraged that both the cloth and the money were gone, he dragged his own son to court, demanding restitution. The judge in Assisi was the town’s bishop, Guido. He ruled in Pietro’s favor, ordering Francis to hand over the money. This was easy to accomplish since the stunned (and possibly suspicious) priest of San Damiano had not spent one penny. To all appearances the case was over, but conversion had not diminished Francis’s taste for the flamboyant. Having given back the money, he decided to return everything else he had received from his father. Standing in the public square he stripped naked and handed all his clothes to Pietro. As the crowd buzzed with excitement at the spectacle, Bishop Guido hurried forward, unfastening his cloak as he came, and wrapped the mantle around Francis.

For the next three years Francis was a cause of shame to his parents and confusion to his friends. He wore a long rough robe and went about the streets of Assisi begging for food for himself and for alms to rebuild San Damiano. From the perspective of the down-to-earth Bernadones, if their son had a religious vocation he should enter a monastery, or train for the
diocesan clergy. Panhandling was not piety, it was a disgrace. And to give the Bernadones their due, Francis did not have much of an idea of what God wanted from him.

On February 24, 1208, while attending Mass at the little church of St. Mary of the Angels (now known as the Portiuncula), Francis heard the priest read the gospel text in which Christ told his apostles they should “possess neither gold nor silver, nor money in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, nor two coats, nor shoes.” This gospel was read out in the churches every year, so Francis must have heard it many times before, but on this day Christ’s words pierced his heart. And once again, Francis took the words he heard literally.

Francis committed himself to a life of absolute poverty: he wore the bare minimum of clothing; he had no place to live; he had nothing to eat except what people gave him; he had no money; and he had no idea how he would provide for himself the next day. Christ had said his yoke was easy and his burden light, yet Francis clung to a vision of religious life so difficult to emulate that within his own lifetime his followers felt it necessary to soften their founder’s principle of radical poverty.

Such qualms never touched Francis. His confidence that the Lord would provide was absolute. This trust in God’s goodness spilled over into his preaching. Now when he spoke before crowds, he brought to his message of repentance and salvation the kind of exuberance and contagious joy he had once demonstrated when he stayed out all night singing troubadour songs. He caused a sensation in and around Assisi. Within a few weeks of Francis’s revelation at Mass, half a dozen men had joined him as disciples. They called themselves the frati minores, the lesser brothers.

St. Francis’s spirituality emphasized the humanity of Jesus—poor, abandoned, and crucified. The first Franciscans saw the suffering Jesus in the lepers, the destitute, the sick, and all sinners, and they began their mission among these forgotten, neglected people.

Just as he saw Christ in all men, Francis saw the splendor of God in all creation. The sight of lambs and flowers made him rejoice over the goodness of God, but he felt the same way when he saw spiders and worms. He celebrated the beauty of the universe in his renowned Canticle of the Sun. Some enthusiastic but misguided souls have mangled the meaning of the canticle, portraying Francis as a medieval pantheist or late-blooming pagan who worshipped sun and moon and wind and fire as gods. Good Catholic that he was, St. Francis would have recoiled at such a suggestion: he composed his canticle as a hymn the natural world sings to its Creator.

Whether he had intended to do so originally or not, Francis launched a new type of religious life within the Catholic Church. Previously the clergy fell into two categories: the monks, who lived apart from the world
conceal his wounded hands he wrapped bandages around his palms and wore sleeves that fell past his fingertips. It was not simply a matter of masking the marks of Christ’s Passion; the wounds were also painful. Once a brother Franciscan inadvertently brushed against Francis, chafing the wound in his side. Francis cried out in pain and slapped the man.

In September 1226 Francis fell ill. Too weak to write himself, he dictated a letter to a dear friend who lived in Rome, Lady Jacoba de Settesoli. Francis explained he was dying and begged her to come quickly to Assisi so they could see each other one last time. Then he asked her to bring along a shroud, candles, and incense for his funeral. And he wanted one more thing: a sweet almond confection that was Lady Jacoba’s specialty.

Francis had just finished the letter when Lady Jacoba entered the room asking, “What is the news? Is Father Francis still alive?” In her house in Rome she had heard a voice tell her to hurry to Assisi, that Francis was dying. She had brought everything necessary for the Requiem Mass, and she had Father Francis’s favorite pastry, too.

On the night of October 3 Francis of Assisi died. As the friars prepared the body Lady Jacoba urged them to uncover the stigmata so the mourners could see the miracle. Two years later, in one of the fastest canonizations on record, Pope Honorius III declared Francis of Assisi a saint.