

# GOD'S TROUBADOUR

## FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT (DRAFT)

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In 529 Benedict founded Monte Cassino, the first monastery to live under his Rule. For centuries, monasticism, guided by the Rule of St Benedict, was a powerful force in the renewal and expansion of the church. But by the thirteenth century it was facing the crisis of its own decline and inability respond to the opportunities and challenges thrown up by a world in transition.

Into this world came Francis of Assisi—rich playboy, soldier of fortune and one of the greatest movement founders of all time.

### Context

The Middle Ages is regarded as an age of faith. It was also a period of mounting crisis.<sup>1</sup> There was both popular dissent against the church hierarchy and popular superstition when it came to religion. Rationalist and skeptical thinkers increasingly dominated academic theology. The Church was a burden on the common people. The poorest workers were compelled to pay tithes, the proceeds of which went to absentee clergy.

The older religious orders were in decline. They had abandoned poverty to live in comfort that was only rivaled by the nobility and wealthy merchants. In the mid thirteenth century, Cardinal Hugh stated that the monastic orders “oppress the poor and fleece the naked by rapine and extortion.”<sup>2</sup>

The long-established Benedictine monasteries had become significant owners of land and property. They occupied an important social position. Southern writes, “They ruled men, collected rents, maintained buildings, provided hospitality for the great and kept up a ponderous dignity... No one looked to them for new ideas or new forms of spiritual life: they looked to them for stability, pageantry, involvement in the aristocratic life of the upper classes and a visible display of continuous religious and family history.”<sup>3</sup>

Pope Innocent III tried to revive monasticism by passing legislation but a more radical transformation was required. A return to the monastic ideal was needed but not as it had been expressed before. Monasticism had been at home in a rural environment. What was required now was a return to the ideal that would restore its spiritual vitality and also enable monasticism to respond creatively to the urban environment. The Franciscans were one such response.

### Enter Francis

Francis of Assisi was born Giovanni Bernadone in 1181 or 1182 into a wealthy merchant family. His father, Pietro, was a cloth merchant of Assisi. He nicknamed his son Francesco—Francis, “the little Frenchman.” He hoped his son would one day take over the business and become a leading man of the city. Francis was to disappoint him.

In search of glory and adventure, Francis enlisted in 1201 in the campaign against the rival city of Perugia. He was taken captive and ransomed one year later. In 1202 he joined the campaign against

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<sup>1</sup>G. S. M. Walker, *The Growing Storm: Sketches of Church History from AD600 to AD1350*, Paternoster Church History Vol. II. Ed. F. F. Bruce (London: Paternoster, 1961), 174

<sup>2</sup> Walker, *The Growing Storm*, 176.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), 237.

Apulia. On the way the contingent camped at Sopleto. Half asleep, half awake he heard a voice asking, "Is it better to obey the servant or the lord?" When he answered, "Lord, what would you have me do?" he was told to return to Assisi for further orders. "Overwhelmed by self-doubt and conscious of the vanity of his past, Francis entered a protracted period of introspection."<sup>4</sup>

At home his friends took his silent and withdrawn mood as indication that he had fallen in love. But something deeper than romantic love was at work, transforming an adventurer into an apostle.

In 1205, he made a pilgrimage to Rome where, to experience the reality of poverty, he exchanged clothes with a beggar and begged for his dinner on St Peter's steps. The conviction was growing in him that the poor are the closest to the kingdom of God and that wealth is a hindrance to the spiritual life. Back in Assisi an encounter with a leper further strengthened his commitment to love Christ in the poor. He later wrote, "When I was in sin the sight of lepers was too bitter for me. And the Lord himself led me among them, and I pitied and helped them. And when I left them I discovered that what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness in my soul and body."<sup>5</sup>

### **Call to Mission**

Up to this point, Francis' spiritual journey had been a personal one of renunciation. To what cause was God calling him? While praying in the dilapidated church of St Damian he heard a voice speak to him from the Cross commanding him to "Go and repair my house." He took the command literally and loaded his horse with fabric from his father's store, sold the horse and the cloth and began restoring the church at St Damian and ministering to outcasts.

His father infuriated, dragged him before the Bishop Guido of Assisi. The bishop was sympathetic but told Francis that the Church could not accept stolen money. Francis' response was to strip naked and give his father every stitch of his clothing, he renounced his family and inheritance and declared that he would rely on his Father in heaven to meet his needs.

He began to beg for stones to restore the church of St Damian and others. Among them was the Portiuncula (Little Portion). In that church, probably in 1206 when Francis was twenty-four years old, the words of Christ to the Apostles struck him:

"As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town." (Matt. 10:7-14)

These words became his marching orders for a new missionary band. They were the answer to what he was seeking. They were his call from God to live as a disciple of Jesus. He would preach repentance and trust God for his provision without purse or property or home. He would imitate Christ in absolute poverty and absolute love for those in need.

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney L. Petersen, "Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Ideal," in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*. Ed. John D Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 162.

<sup>5</sup> The Testament of Francis, trans. David Burr. [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/stfran-test.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/stfran-test.html).

## **Birth of a movement**

Most of the people of Assisi could not decide if Francis was a saint or a madman. A few could. His first disciple was Bernard of Quintavelle. A wealthy and prominent man, he sold his possessions, gave to the poor and joined Francis as a beggar. The next to follow was Peter of Catanii, a learned lawyer of Assisi. As the numbers grew they were broken up into small groups and went about preaching repentance. Keen to avoid any sign of being an heretical sect, in 1211 Francis sought and obtained recognition from Pope Innocent III. Permission was granted to preach, even though his followers were laymen. Their preaching attracted large crowds and the brotherhood continued to grow, doubling and tripling in size.

The Rule that Francis prepared for the Pope has not survived but it is clear that it was more of an “idealist manifesto” than a “monastic constitution”.<sup>6</sup> Francis’ aim was to live the life of Jesus and the Twelve. He sought an apostolic brotherhood with no distinction between clergy and laity in complete obedience to God’s leading. Possessions were a hindrance to this vision. According to his follower and biographer, Bonaventure, Francis became a lover of the beauty of poverty and “rejoiced to exchange perishable treasure for the hundredfold.”<sup>7</sup> The source of this self-denial was a passionate love for Christ. “He seemed to be completely absorbed by the fire of divine love like a glowing coal.”<sup>8</sup>

The early Franciscans were to earn their livelihood by applying themselves to a trade as casual workers. Begging was a last resort. Wages and gifts were to be paid in kind. The friars were forbidden to even touch money. Every candidate for admission was to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and dress as a beggar.

In 1212 a second order for women was founded by Clare Schifi, a wealthy heiress of Assisi. At just seventeen she had run away at night seeking to join the Franciscans. Sometime between 1209 and 1221 a third order, the Franciscan Terriaries, was founded as a lay order. Members were married or single, and continued in their secular vocation as they sought to live according to the Gospels. Numbers continued to increase. In 1221 five thousand followers attended the annual chapter meeting.

## **Expansion and conflict**

Pressure grew within the order to adopt one of the older monastic rules. Some within the movement sought a more settled monastic life. They were supported by Cardinal Ugolino, the advisor to the Order. Francis would have none of it. His thoughts were not to settling down but to widening the scope of the mission. He sent friars to Germany, France, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Tunisia and many regions of Italy. Though unlimited in their zeal, their effectiveness was hampered by ignorance of the languages and their strange appearance as beggars. In many places they were mistaken for heretics.

Francis’ leadership style was intuitive, even impulsive, and certainly inspirational. It was not unusual for him to be led by the immediate promptings of the Spirit. On one missionary journey, arriving at a crossroad, he prayed and then told the brother accompanying him to twirl like a top in order to determine which way they should go. His preaching was spontaneous, powerful but hard to recall in detail.

Unperturbed by setbacks, Francis decided to lead a mission to the Muslims. In 1219 he set off with twelve companions for the holy land. There he met with the sultan of Egypt Melek el-Khamil, who

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<sup>6</sup> Walker, *The Growing Storm*, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Bonaventure quoted in Petersen, 164.

<sup>8</sup> Bonaventure quoted in Petersen, 164.

was impressed by him but not converted. In the midst of his mission he received an urgent message to return. The Order was in crisis.

Arriving back in 1220 he found an order in turmoil. A monastery had been built by some of the brothers seeking to settle down. He ordered that they divest themselves of it. There was conflict and a fear that the lay brotherhood was being turned into an order of priests. The growing numbers had led to a push for a more tightly structured organisation. Under Cardinal Ugolino's influence regular fast days were imposed and more restrictive controls were placed on the women's order.

The reality was that from the time of his mission to Egypt and Syria, Francis' effective leadership of the Order had ceased. Under the influence of Ugolino and Brother Elias the brotherhood was being transformed into a full monastic order.

Francis chose not to fight to regain control of the movement. He reluctantly accepted the changes and handed the leadership over to Peter Cantanii and Elias of Cortona. Francis spent the rest of his life alone and in prayer in a hermitage on Mount Alverno. He died in 1226 in Portuincula, the church he so dearly loved.

That same year, orders were founded in Spain, France and Portugal. Following his death the movement continued to grow and expand into England, Scotland, Austria, Hungary, Ireland, Denmark, Bohemia, Sweden and Norway. By 1280 it had grown to 20,000 members and peaked in 1350 at 35,000.<sup>9</sup> The first Roman Catholic missionary to reach China was John of Montecorvino, a Franciscan. Before the end of the thirteenth century Franciscans were to be found at the farthest points of the known world. For the next hundred years the order was torn by bitter conflict between Francis' strict followers, the Spirituals and the Conventuals who sought to moderate his ideals. The Conventuals were backed by the church hierarchy. Eventually the Spirituals became a separate order.

The spectacular expansion of the Franciscan movement was accompanied by bitter internal conflict regarding how Francis' ideal was to be lived out. In his lifetime, Francis refused to accept the need for tighter organisation. His one desire was to follow Christ in simplicity and to inspire others to do likewise. The Rule he provided to guide the movement contains clear-cut precise ideas "expressed with vigor; but how they were to be implemented was not spelled out."<sup>10</sup>

The paradox of the Franciscan order is that it grew and expanded like no other order. Yet it experienced more dissention and internal struggles than any other order. Hostie reflects, "The fighting parties forgot what was dearest to their founder...."<sup>11</sup> Despite his great achievements Francis was not an organiser or an administrator. He was unable to prevent the movement he founded from drifting from its early ideals into factional disputes.

## Legacy

Despite his limitations as an organisational leader, Francis was one of the great founders of church history. In an era in which the church and the monastic orders were in serious decline Francis heard the call of Christ to forsake all and follow him. For over five hundred years the monastery had been the centre of the Church's missionary efforts but they had exchanged stability and wealth for the mission of Jesus. Now, in a new era, monasticism became the mobile bands of friars, trusting God for their provision. Francis made the poor and the outcast the special concern of his order. He

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Hostie, *The Life and Death of Religious Orders*. English trans. (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 1983), 109.

<sup>10</sup> Hostie, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Hostie, 112.

personally demonstrated his commitment to reach people for Christ outside of the borders of Christendom. Thousands followed his example.

It was as a founder that Francis excelled. Not organisational skill but who he was spoke loudest. His authority flowed from his uncompromising commitment to Christ and to the poorest of the poor. He had little time for organisational structures and external requirements. He excelled as a founder and visionary but struggled to ensure the movement he birthed grew into maturity while at the same time keeping the dream alive. Regardless of these limitations he remains “one of the most winsome figures of Christian history.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* . Vol.1, *Beginnings to 1500* . Revised ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 429

# 7 THINGS TO NOTICE

## **1. Decline and rebirth**

This story of new life begins with the story decline. As the church drifts into unfaithfulness and ineffectiveness God is faithful to bring renewal through His Word and His Spirit.

## **2. Always on the fringe**

God chooses the playboy son of a wealthy merchant, the soldier of fortune, an untrained layman to found a movement that would last for centuries and inspire Christians of all persuasions. The breakthroughs in the renewal and expansion of the church always begin on the fringe, never at the centre of ecclesiastical power (Dr Paul Pierson).

## **3. Divided no more**

Francis' authority as a founder came from the simplicity and naivety of his commitment to live life as though the Gospels were true and to inspire others to do the same. He chose to "live divided no more" (Parker Palmer). At the heart of this decision for Francis was a encounter with God through Christ.

## **4. Commitment to the cause**

What energized the Franciscan movement was a cause embodied by Francis which empowered a new generation and succeeding generations to forsake all and follow Christ. Francis began with no other resources than his calling. No financial resources. No grand buildings and institutions. No theological training. No official title or position. History is made by committed people.

## **5. Mission structures**

Catholics have religious orders. Protestants have mission agencies. Both structures fulfill the purpose of channelling the energies of their most committed members into mission. They continue the pattern established by Jesus and his disciples and Paul and his apostolic band. The impact of Francis' life was multiplied thousands of times over through the centuries because of the missionary movement he founded.

## **6. Division—symptom of vitality?**

The paradox of the Franciscan order is that it grew and expanded like no other order. Yet it experienced more dissention and internal struggles than any other order. Could it be that this conflict was an expression of the vitality of the Franciscan movement? There is a parallel with the emergence of Pentecostalism which has experienced both factionalism and rapid growth. There is also a reverse parallel with liberal Protestantism in which organizational unity has been a symptom of decline.

## **7. The power of precedent**

If it's happened once, it can happen again.

# REFLECTION

1. What distinguished Francis as a great founder of a movement?
2. What were Francis' limitations as a founder?
3. Do you think there is a relationship between vitality and conflict in a movement?
4. What can Francis teach us about pioneering new ministries today?
5. What have you learn from this case study that you need to do something about? What will you do?

# GOING FURTHER

There is no shortage of material on Francis. I've enjoyed Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi* (London: Pimlico, 2000).