

**St. Francis of Assisi**  
**28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**  
**(Lk 17:11-19)**

In today's Gospel Jesus heals a group of lepers, a miracle he was famous for. Jesus was not afraid of people with highly infectious illnesses. Instead of getting sick himself, he had the power of healing and life.

Francesco Bernadone (1181-1226) was a handsome and popular young man whose father was a successful businessman in the cloth industry in the town of Assisi during the middle ages. While serving as a soldier in the year 1202, he was captured in battle and imprisoned. Reading the Gospel, he began to rethink his life. At some point following his release he encountered a leper. Despite his initial horror and disgust, something moved inside him. He got off his horse and kissed the man, giving him some money. Then looking around, he couldn't see the leper anywhere. St. Francis experienced a profound conversion, realizing that it was Jesus he just met.

Later in his Testament, Francis wrote, *"When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."*

St. Francis lost his desire for the world, and desired instead to imitate Christ as perfectly and literally as possible. He abandoned his lifestyle of money, popularity, trendy fashions, and feasting. He told his friends he was getting married to a beautiful woman, "Lady Poverty."

He began to live on the streets, as a beggar. He gave away everything he had, and then started to give away the merchandise from his father's business. It led to a great conflict with his family who thought he was mentally ill, and his father brought court proceedings to cut off his inheritance and prevent him from ruining the business. During the hearing, Francis famously stripped himself naked and handed his clothes back to his father. The bishop presiding over the case quickly jumped up and threw his cloak around Francis.

It was very symbolic of who St. Francis is as a saint. He was a perfectly humble man, unafraid to stand naked before God and men. Instead of being clothed by the vanity of the world, his life would belong to Christ and the Church. Francis began to live in an abandoned church outside the city, called San Damiano, and there he heard Jesus speak to him: *"Francis, rebuild my church."* At first he thought the Lord was referring to the chapel of San Damiano, but soon he realized it was a lot more that the Lord was asking. Some of his former friends followed

his example and joined him in this crazy lifestyle of poverty, prayer, and service to the poor.

St. Francis sought to follow the Gospel literally. He began to send out his brothers two by two, in all directions, to announce the Gospel new, relying entirely on the grace of the Holy Spirit, just as happened in the Gospel. The result was stunning. Miracles happened everywhere, and soon the little friars were recognized throughout Italy and beyond. Hundreds of young men flocked to Assisi. Many women too, such as his friend Clare, wanted to join him. Francis was forced to start organizing his movement, a task which caused much suffering.<sup>1</sup>

He composed a Rule, based strictly on the Lord's commands in the Gospel of St. Matthew, and made a journey to Rome with some of his brothers, to get the pope's approval. Some bishops who knew his work were supportive, but others were critical and hesitant. Despite reservations, the pope gave his endorsement, and Francis was ordained a deacon in order to be able to proclaim the Gospel. Francis did not wish to become a priest however, because of his extreme devotion and humility before the Eucharist.

St. Francis and his friars were very successful in bringing the Gospel of Christ to people of his day who were illiterate. He used visuals, and developed devotions so that people could participate personally in the Gospel stories. For instance, at Christmas he would re-create the manger scene. To this day, Catholics can't imagine celebrating the holy season without setting up a manger scene in the Church.

Likewise for Holy Week and Easter. Francis was very devoted to the Holy Land where Jesus died, and even made a pilgrimage to convert the Muslims to Christianity. Since the people of Europe could not go to the Holy Land, he set up a living "Way of the Cross," so that people could walk step by step with Jesus as he suffered, died, and was buried. Because of St. Francis, every Catholic Church today has a "Stations of the Cross."

As his community grew, Francis handed off the leadership to others, and withdrew more and more to prayer and solitude. He loved to go off into the mountains of central Italy and pray.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Francis was never fully successful. Though he had the charisma for the Order, it proved to be a tremendous struggle finding the way to balance poverty, with the need of a stable and long-term organization that "owned" things such as houses/convents, and means of support. As a result, the Franciscans soon splintered organizationally into several movements (Order of Friars Minor, Third Order, etc.). It remained for the seventh Franciscan superior general, St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), to give the Order an organizational form that integrated the charisma of the founder into a workable and enduring rule for religious life in the Church. Francis' good friend St. Clare (1194-1253) was more successful in organizing a monastic rule for women that allowed them to practice the Franciscan charisma of poverty. They are known affectionately ever since as the "Poor Clares."

During a 40-day fast in the year 1224, St. Francis was on the mountain of Verna. On the Feastday of the Triumph of the Cross (September 14), he had a vision of a great six-winged angel, a Seraph, on a cross. This angel gave him the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ, which he carried in his body with great suffering for the next two years, until he died in 1226 at the age of 45.

There are many miracles attributed to St. Francis. Among them is harmony with nature. Original Sin injured man's relation to the creation itself, so that paradise became a hostile environment. One of the effects of the Resurrection, manifested in the lives of the saints, is a restoration of paradise. For instance, many saints are associated with a sudden blossoming of roses and other flowers. St. Francis instantaneously tamed a wolf who was attacking the citizens of Gubbio. He preached to a flock of birds, who came and listened attentively to him. His most famous writing is the "Canticle of the Sun," a hymn in which he echoes the creation hymns of the Bible.

*Go out and preach the gospel and if you must, use words.*

*He who works with his hands is a laborer. He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman. He who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist.*

*Fix well in mind this maxim: One is as much as he is in the sight of God, and no more.*