

St. Francis of Assisi

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St. Francis, the Seraphic, was born at Assisi, towards the end of the twelfth century, of a rich merchant family. His father's name was Peter Bernardine, and his mother, who was descended from the illustrious family of Bourlemont, was called Pica. A miraculous event accompanied his birth: his mother suffered such pain at the time that all believed her to be dying. At this critical moment, a pilgrim of grave and stately appearance came to the door, and after receiving an alms said, "If you take her to the stable and lay her down on a little straw she will be safely delivered; for it is there. God wishes her son to be born." These words of the pilgrim seemed a message from heaven, for as soon as she was placed in a stable close to the house, she gave birth to her first-born child, the subject of this memoir. "Thus, like Jesus Christ," says our Holy Father Leo XIII., "it happened that St. Francis was born in a Stable: little child as he was, his couch was of straw and on the ground. And it is also related that, at that moment, the presence of angelic choirs and melodies wafted through the air, completed this resemblance." A short time after, when the child was carried to the baptismal font, the pilgrim appeared again, and became his sponsor. The child then received the name of John, which was afterwards changed by his father into Francis.

During his infancy, another pilgrim who visited his father's house embraced him very affectionately, and said to his mother, "This child is sent by God into the world to do great things for His glory."

Francis, whilst employed by his father in the pursuit of worldly gain, gave himself to the amusements and gaities of his age. He, however, amongst all the follies of youth, preserved his heart from the stain of mortal sin.

"For," says St. Bonaventure, "though of a gay and joyous spirit, and dwelling among covetous merchants, never did his pleasures lead him into the vicious courses of his wicked companions, or make him to set his heart on worldly treasures. For in his soul there ever dwelt a natural love for the poor of Christ. This instinctive charity grew with his growth, and filled his heart with tender sentiments of compassion for God's poor." One day, being very much occupied with his father's business, contrary to his wonted charity, he passed without assisting, a poor man, who asked alms of him. But speedily recollecting himself, he ran after the beggar, and when he had overtaken him, he gave him a large sum of money. At the same time he made a solemn promise that he would never refuse an alms to any one who would ask it of him for love of God. This promise he faithfully kept during the rest of his life. He was accustomed to say that after this charitable act to the poor man, he could never hear the love of God spoken of without his heart being deeply moved. His natural gaiety of heart with the sweetness and unselfish generosity of his nature made him a universal favourite of his town-fellows and companions. "A man of very great piety and evangelical simplicity who then lived at Assisi, whenever he met Francis in the streets, would take off his cloak and spread it on the ground before him, declaring that this young man would one day do great things for God, and was worthy of every honour."* 3 But Francis did not as yet know the great

purposes of God regarding him, being entirely taken up with his worldly affairs. About this time, he was one day walking alone outside his native town, when he met a gentleman, once rich, but now clad in rags and reduced to the greatest distress. Being moved with compassion at the sad state of this poor man, he took off his clothes and gave them to him. The following night, God, as a reward for his act of charity, showed him a magnificent and spacious palace filled with rich armour, all marked with a sign of redemption. Astonished at this sight, Francis asked for whom was all this rich armour prepared. God answered him, "For you, Francis, and your soldiers." When he awoke, he thought the vision foreboded some great earthly prosperity which he could obtain by the profession of arms. For this purpose he furnished himself with arms, servants and horses, and then set out for Apulia, where he intended joining Gauthier De Brienne, who was at war with the Emperor of Germany. On the first night of this journey, God spoke to him again, and, addressing him as a friend would a friend, said, "Francis, who can do more for you, the Lord or the servant? the rich man or the poor?" "Surely the master and the rich man," answered Francis. "Why then," said the divine voice, 'do you leave the Lord for the servant, and the God of infinite riches for the poor and frail mortal?" Francis immediately cried out, like St. Paul, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do." "Return to your own country," continued the divine voice; "for the vision with which you were favoured signified a spiritual work, which you will accomplish, not by human counsel, but by the intervention of heaven." As soon as the day dawned, Francis returned in haste to Assisi, there waiting in joy and confidence the divine command. From this time he gave himself up to a more perfect union with God in prayer. If at rare intervals he joined in the noisy revels of his old companions, he clearly showed that his heart was not with them.

He now spent his days in deeds of charity, and in the spiritual exercises of mortification and retreat. One day, whilst riding over the plain of Assisi, he met a poor leper. The sudden appearance of this revolting object filled him with disgust and horror: but remembering his resolution of becoming a soldier of Jesus Christ, he alighted from his horse, embraced the poor man, and gave him an abundant alms. Having remounted his horse, he looked around the plain, but could not see the leper. He then understood that an angel had appeared to him under the form of a leper.

St. Bonaventure.

A short time afterwards, as he was praying in a solitary place, and with sighs and tears earnestly imploring our Lord to grant him grace to know the divine will, Jesus Christ appeared to him, nailed to the cross. At this sight, Francis felt his heart melt within him and the remembrance of the Passion was so indelibly imprinted upon his soul, that he could never afterwards think of the cross without sighs and tears. Jesus then spoke to him from the cross and said, "He that will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Hitherto Francis had held the sight of lepers in horror: now for the love of Christ, who had become a leper in His Passion, he sought out, and served those afflicted creatures with the greatest humility and love. About this time, when on a pilgrimage to St. Peter's at Rome, he exchanged his clothes with a poor man clad in rags, and remained all day among the crowd of beggars, who surrounded the church door.

Such was the life Francis led, when our Lord showed Himself to him in a new way. One day, about the year 1206, Francis entered the poor chapel of St. Peter Damian, and poured out his soul before the crucifix, saying, "O God, great and glorious, Jesus Christ my Lord, enlighten, I pray Thee, the darkness of my soul. Give me true faith, a certain hope, and perfect charity; grant that I may know Thee, O Lord, in order that I may always, and in all things, act according to Thy most holy and perfect will." He gazed with tearful eyes upon the cross, whilst saying these words, and he heard a

voice from the crucifix answering him: "Go, Francis, and restore my house which is falling." The Saint was filled with fear at the sound of the voice. He dreaded that he was the victim of an illusion. But the same voice from the crucifix repeated, "Go, Francis, and repair my house which is falling into ruins." Then his fear redoubled. He asked himself whence came this mysterious voice, and a third time the crucifix answered, "Go, Francis, restore my house which is falling into ruins as you see." He now clearly understood that it was God who spoke to him from the crucifix, and his soul was filled with an ineffable consolation at the sound of the divine voice. Thinking that our Lord wished him to repair the church of St. Damian, he hastened to his father's house, took some pieces of cloth, which he sold at Foligno, and offered the price to the priest of this little oratory. The good priest refused the gift; but Francis, full of contempt for earthly things, threw the money on the window-sill of the church, and so left it, as if it had been so much dust.

Now commenced for Francis a series of persecutions and humiliations to prepare him for the great work he was destined by God to perform. When he had lived some days with the priest of St. Damian's, his father, hearing of his intention, and thinking that he would disgrace his family if he were not at once prevented from carrying it out, came in great fury to the church of St. Damian. Francis, in the meantime, foreseeing his father's anger, hid himself in a cave during an entire month. There he unceasingly asked the Lord for strength to bear the persecutions of his father and friends, and to deliver him out of their hands, that he might be able to fulfil the pious purpose with which He had inspired him. Filled with strength from heaven through his holy retreat, he left his hiding-place and boldly proceeded to Assisi. When his companions saw his emaciated appearance, and his change of mind and memory, they thought he had lost his senses; they ran after him, cast mud and stones at him, and treated him as a fool and madman. His father, attracted by the noise, rushed out upon him, and in a rage dragged him to the house, heaped reproaches upon him for the disgrace he had brought on his family; and then he cruelly scourged him and cast him into a dark recess under an old staircase. Francis bore all this without a murmur. The words of his beloved Master: "Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice sake," brought consolation and joy to his heart in the midst of these persecutions and sufferings.

His pious mother, who grieved at his sufferings, and who saw how useless they were to change his resolution, delivered him from his place of confinement, during the absence of his father. Bernardine, on his return, hearing that Francis was set at liberty, flew into a rage with his wife, and rushed to St. Damian's, where he was certain he would find the fugitive. Francis, who had gone to this little church to thank God for his liberty, now went forth to meet his father's wrath. He declared that he was ready to suffer everything for the love of Jesus Christ. Bernardine, seeing that neither threats nor punishments could shake the resolution of his son, sought for the price of the cloth. Francis showed it to him, still lying on the sill of the window, where he had thrown it. This however did not satisfy the angry father; he required his son to make a juridical renunciation of his inheritance before the Bishop of Assisi. Francis gratified his father's wishes beyond his most sanguine expectations. He not only renounced all right to his father's possessions, but stripping himself of his garments, he gave them to his father, saying: "Hitherto I have called you my father on earth, now I can say in truth, Our Father who art in heaven." The Bishop, admiring the fervour of the young man, embraced him tenderly, and shed tears as he covered him with his mantle. A poor labourer in the Bishop's service gave Francis a coarse outer garment. This he accepted with gratitude, and tracing the sign of salvation on it, he wore it joyfully, as it typified the life of a poor man crucified to the world. "Thus," says St. Bonaventure, whose words we have followed in this narrative, "did this servant of the great King of heaven and earth strip himself of all things, that so

he might follow the Lord whom he truly loved, and who died naked on the cross: and thus did he arm himself with the sign of redemption, committing his soul to that sacred wood of our salvation, and so to escape by it from the shipwreck of the world.”

Francis now began a new life. He went forth from the city to a solitary place, where he awaited the manifestation of the divine will. Here in a lonely forest he made the woods resound with the praises of the Most High. Some robbers attacked him, and asked him who he was; he answered, “I am the herald of the Great King.” They beat him unmercifully, and then cast him into a ditch full of snow, saying in mockery, “Go and rest in that hole, you herald of nothing, who call yourself herald of God.” When the robbers had gone he went again through the forest rejoicing that he had been counted worthy to be reputed a fool for Christ’s sake. He continued his journey through the forest, singing aloud his holy canticles, until he came to a monastery, where he received an alms, and remained some days serving the Religious. But not finding what his soul desired here, he went to Gubbio, where an old friend gave him a poor habit like that worn by the hermits of his day.

Having now put on the habit of penance, he redoubled his zeal and works of perfection. He attended the lepers, consoled them in their pains, washed their loathsome sores, and aided them in their necessities. Though, at first, he had the greatest repugnance to perform this work of charity, he afterwards found the greatest delight in it, and “its bitterness now changed into sweetness of soul and body.”* God rewarded his charity towards one of these poor outcasts who cast himself at his feet. Francis, tenderly embracing him, kissed his hideous sores and immediately the sick man was healed. ‘I know not,’ says St. Bonaventure, “which of these two things is most worthy of admiration, the profound humility of such a kiss, or the marvellous power which wrought such a miracle.” In his after life he became the father and apostle of the leprous, and when mightier cares withdrew him from that charge, his heart still turned towards them with a father’s yearning.

Testament of St. Francis.

After practising these holy works of charity for some time, Francis returned to Assisi, and begged an alms from door to door to repair the church of St. Damian, as thus he interpreted the commands he had received, “to repair the house of God which was falling into ruins.” He himself worked without intermission, carrying heavy stones on his shoulders, mixing the mortar, and assisting the masons and workmen.

The priest of St. Damian, seeing the zeal of the holy man, prepared food for him: but Francis said to himself, “This is not the life of poverty you ought to choose. You must go yourself from door to door, to receive the scraps which the faithful may give you. This is how you must live for love of Him who was born poor, who lived in poverty, and who was buried in a sepulchre which did not belong to Him.” The next day he went about the town begging his sustenance like a poor man. When he began to eat this nauseous mixture of different food, he experienced a loathing and disgust which he could not overcome. But having made the sign of the cross over the bowl, he ate these scraps with an exquisite relish that exceeded all the pleasure he had tasted in the most deliciously-prepared viands while in the world. “Henceforth,” says our Holy Father, Leo XIII., ‘amidst the effeminacy and fastidiousness of the time, he is seen to go about careless and roughly clad, begging his food from door to door, not only enduring what is generally deemed most hard to bear—the senseless ridicule of the crowd—but even to welcome it with a wondrous readiness of joy. And this because he had embraced the folly of the Cross of Jesus Christ, because he deemed it the highest

wisdom. Having penetrated and understood its awful mysteries, he plainly saw that nowhere else could his glory be better placed.”

This work of St. Damian's church being finished, he restored another church, outside the city of Assisi, dedicated to St. Peter. He then commenced the restoration of a third church, named St. Mary of the Angels. This holy sanctuary was a mile from the city, and belonged to the Benedictines. His love for the Mother of God, and the favours he received here through her intercession, made him to regard this church as the most endearing place on earth. “It was here he began his career humbly, pursued it courageously, and consummated it gloriously,” says St. Bonaventure. St. Francis in his last moments earnestly recommended the holy sanctuary to all his brothers, as peculiarly dear to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Mother of God. It is now one of the most frequented shrines of the Church of God. The children of St. Francis revere it as the cradle and first home of the Order: here it was commenced, here it was nurtured, and thence it has spread through the entire world.

One day, in the church of St. Mary of the Angels, Francis heard in the Gospel of the Mass, “Do not possess gold nor silver, nor money in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor a staff.” He was overjoyed when he heard these words, for he felt they were addressed to himself. As soon as the Mass was finished, he asked the priest to explain the words of the Gospel. When the minister of God had given their meaning, Francis cried out: “That is what I want, that is what I want, that is the object of all my ambition.” He took his shoes from his feet, laid by his staff, cast away his money, and replaced his girdle with a rough cord. He now clothed himself in a poorer and coarser garb than the hermit's cloak, which he had hitherto worn. He put on the habit of poverty, which his true children have worn in every clime, to our own day.

Clothed with this religious habit, Francis went forth to draw men to repentance. His burning words, in simple and unadorned language, went straight to the hearts of his hearers. The Holy Ghost seemed to inspire him with that “two-edged sword” of the Word “that pierces to the very marrow of the bones and joints.” The world flocked to him, and in a short time he found himself surrounded by twelve disciples.

His first follower was Bernard of Quintavilla, a native of Assisi. He was struck by the strange life of Francis, and invited him to dine and sleep at his house. They both slept in the same room. Francis, believing that Bernard was asleep, arose from bed, cast himself on his knees, and with eyes raised towards heaven, he cried out, “My God and my all, Thou art all to me. Thou art all my good, Thou art my hope, my strength, my riches, my life, my joy, my happiness. Thou art all that I could desire.” The whole night he unceasingly sent forth from his heart those flames of divine love. Bernard on the morrow resolved to become the disciple of Francis. He, however, told Bernard that they should first consult God on the matter.

They went to the church forthwith, and on the way were met by Peter of Cataneo, a learned Canon of Assisi. He also offered himself to become a disciple of Francis. They heard Mass, and invoked the light of the Most High. The Saint then desired the priest to open the book of the Gospel three times in honour of the Most Holy Trinity. The first time he came upon the words, “If thou wilt be perfect, go sell all thou hast and give it to the poor.” The second time, he found, “Take nothing for your journey.” The third time he lit upon, “If any one will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me.” “Here,” said the holy man, “is our life and our rule; the life and rule of all those who shall come and join us. Go then, and if you wish to attain to perfection, fulfil what

you have heard.” Bernard immediately sold all his goods, for he was rich, and gave them to the poor. Peter acted in like manner, and resigned his canonry. Both became the disciples of Francis.

Egidius (Giles), a friend of Peter and Bernard, was absent when they renounced their possessions and followed Francis: seven days after, he also gave up all his worldly goods to the poor and enrolled himself under the banner of holy poverty.

The first disciples of Francis were, for the most part, unlettered and without any human aid, and yet they went forth like the Apostles of old to evangelize the world. They had neither bread to eat, nor whereon to lay their head. Poverty, however, was their joy and their strength. Their confidence in Divine Providence was unbounded, their peace of soul unchangeable: Jesus Christ alone was their love and the ignominy of the Cross was their strength and glory. In many places, their extreme poverty, their coarse habit, and their contempt for all earthly things, made them to be suspected as heretics or treated as fools and madmen. Whilst, on the contrary, their perfect detachment from the world, and their spirit of penance made them to be received, in other places, as the friends and true servants of God. As for themselves, they blessed God when they were humbled and despised, more than when they were treated with honour and veneration. Brother Egidius used to say to St. Francis: “All this respect robs us of our reward.”

Francis, at the beginning of the year 1210, called his disciples around him and said, “Our good and merciful Lord wishes, my dearly beloved brethren, to extend our little family: we must now submit our way of life to the most holy Pontiff of Rome. For without his consent and approval, it seems to me that nothing can be stable or good in matters of faith, or in the religious life. Let us go, then, to our Mother, the holy Roman Church. Let us make known to the Pope what our Lord has begun to do for us. We will then continue our work according to his will, and his commands.” Thus the Seraphic Father would have the approval of the Apostolic See before he would commence the great work of founding his Order. His disciples also, who were imbued with the same spirit of humility and docility as their holy Founder, saw no safety except in perfect obedience to the Head of the Church. In the meantime they all betook themselves to prayer, whilst Francis composed the admirable Rule of his Order. This Rule is founded on the strictest poverty, prayer, humility and self-denial. It contains the quintessence of the Gospel, and the Evangelical perfection, in all its excellence.

After the Rule was written, Francis with his disciples set out for Rome. He found Guy, Bishop of Assisi, in the Eternal City. Francis and his disciples were well received by this good prelate. He introduced Francis to Cardinal John of St. Paul, Bishop of Sabina, a holy and learned prince of the Church. A few days later Francis presented himself before the Pope. The time was very unfavourable. Innocent III., who then sat on the throne of St. Peter, was absorbed in most important business of the Church when Francis appeared before him. Hence he dismissed Francis abruptly, and would not allow him to make any explanations. The Saint retired very humbly, and it was for him a source of joy that his work was begun with the cross and humiliation.

The following night the Pope seemed to see, in his sleep, a palm tree come out of the earth, grow little by little, rise up, produce many branches, and become at last a magnificent tree. The Pope was astonished, and asked what this vision could mean; then a divine light shone on him, and he understood that the palm tree was the poor man whom he had treated so badly the day before. He sent next day for Francis. The Papal messenger found him in the hospital of St. Antony, near the Lateran, and conducted him immediately to the Vatican. The Pope now not only willingly heard his

petition, but tenderly embraced him as a special friend of God. He, however, delayed to give his approbation to the Rule, as some of the Cardinals deemed it a novelty and above human strength. The strict poverty which required renunciation of all property, both personal and in common, seemed to them impossible to be observed. Cardinal John of St. Paul, at a consistory held a few days afterwards, answered these Cardinals thus: If we refuse this poor man's petition as a novelty, and as too hard to be observed, let us take care lest we offend the Gospel of Christ; for he only asks for a way of life conformable to the evangelical counsels. If anyone shall say that the observance of the counsels contains anything irrational or impossible to be observed, he commits blasphemy against Jesus Christ, the Author of the Gospel." Then the Pope said to St. Francis: "Pray to Christ our Lord that He would make known His will to us." A short time after this another vision was vouchsafed to the Pope. He saw the great church of St. John of Lateran sustained by St. Francis, whose strength alone prevented the tottering walls of that great church from falling. "Truly," said the Pope, "this 'is the poor man, who by his works and words will sustain the Church of Christ.'" He then approved the Rule, bestowed many spiritual favours on St. Francis and his followers, and bade them go and preach penance throughout the world.

St. Francis after this returned to Assisi, and gathered his companions around him in a little hut. In a short time, the number of his disciples increased so much, that he was obliged to find a house sufficiently large to receive them all. He applied to the Benedictines, who willingly gave up to him the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels.

The Benedictines, however, obliged St. Francis to promise that this house should be held as the principal and mother-house of the Order in all future time. But as the Saint wished to receive it as a loan, he guaranteed to give the Benedictines a basket of fish every year to acknowledge their right to this house.

St. Francis, when taking possession of this little sanctuary, had hardly knelt in prayer, when he saw our beloved Lord on a throne over the altar. The Blessed Virgin and a host of angels were in His company. Dazzled by this vision, and trembling at the sight of our Lord, he fell prostrate on the ground. While thus in lowly adoration he heard our Divine Lord say, "We are come, My Mother and I, to betroth you and yours to this place of our predilection, to this house which is dear to us in a special manner." Filled with joy, St. Francis cried out, "Yes, this place is truly holy! It is more worthy to be the abode of angels than of men."

In the beginning of 1211 he called his disciples and said to them, "Jesus Christ has chosen you His preachers, men of low degree, men altogether insignificant, so that man may not glorify himself in His presence. Few of you are wise according to the world; few are of high birth; few have many talents, and yet He has chosen you for this great work, that you may glorify Him by your deeds and words through the entire universe." He sent them two and two to the different provinces of Italy. He kept Silvester, who was a priest, to accompany himself. In 1212, he returned to Assisi, the clergy and people of the city came out to meet him singing hymns and canticles. But he referred all this glory to God. He preached that year (1212), the Lent at Assisi, and a great number of his fellow townspeople placed themselves under his spiritual guidance; among others St. Clare, the glorious foundress of the Order of Poor Clares.

'It is impossible,' says our Holy Father, Leo XIII., "to express the enthusiasm with which the multitudes flocked to St. Francis... In the largest cities, as in the smallest towns, it was a common occurrence for men of every state of life to come and beg of him to be admitted to his Rule. Such

were the reasons for which the Saint determined to institute the brotherhood of the Third Order, which was to admit all ranks, all ages, both sexes, and yet in no way necessitate the rupture of family or social ties. For its rules consist only in obedience to God and His Church, to avoid factions and quarrels, and in no way to defraud our neighbour; to take up arms only for the defence of religion and of one's country; to be moderate in food and clothing; to shun luxury; and to abstain from the dangerous seductions of dances and plays.

'It is easy to understand what immense advantages must have flowed from an institution of this kind, as salutary in itself, as it was adapted to the times... The associates of the Third Order displayed always as much courage as piety in the defence of the Catholic religion;* and if their virtues were objects of hatred to the wicked, they never lacked the approbation of the good and wise, which is the greatest and only desirable honour... Our predecessor, Gregory IX., publicly praised their faith and courage; nor did he hesitate to shelter them with his authority, and to call them, as a mark of honour, Soldiers of Christ, new Machabees... Domestic peace, incorrupt morality, gentleness of behaviour, the legitimate use and preservation of private wealth, civilization, and social stability, spring, as from a root, from the Franciscan Order: and it is in a great measure to St. Francis Europe owes these advantages... Amid so many: and so mighty troubles (at the present day), Venerable Brethren, you see clearly that no slight hope of relief may be fairly grounded on the restitution of the Franciscan institutions to their primitive condition. For were they to flourish, faith and piety and all Christian virtue would easily flourish... Wherefore as we have in former times ever had a special interest in the Third Order of Franciscans, so now, being called by God's great goodness to the Supreme Pontificate, as a most fitting opportunity has occurred, we exhort all Christians, not to hesitate to enlist in this sacred army of Jesus Christ... Do your best therefore, that the people may know and really esteem the Third Order. So that all those that have the care of souls, carefully teach what it is, how easily open to all, how abounding in great privileges for eternal salvation, how great utility, public and private, it gives promise of... Then at the end of seven centuries, Italy and the entire Christian world would see itself led back from disorder to peace, from ruin to safety by the favour of the Saint of Assisi.'

Again, on the 5th of May, this year, he addressed the following memorable words to the Tertiaries of Italy.

His Holiness entered the Third Order, May 16th, 1872, at Mount Alvernia. The Third Order now, in Italy, has of the Order of Bishops, Cardinals Monaco and Oreglia; of the Order of Priests Cardinals Simeoni, Parrochi and eleven other Cardinals; of the Order of Deacons, Cardinal Pecci and four others. It has also in Italy four Archbishops and fifty-two bishops; besides the Patriarch of Alexandria,

"I will that the Third Order be widely spread; let us increase, let us increase the ranks of the Third Order; let us labour unceasingly to that end... I will that all may become Tertiaries; but above all I desire the Franciscan spirit."

Encyclical Letter of our most Holy Father, Leo XIII., "To all the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops and Bishops of the Catholic World," 17th Sept. 1882.

One night, as the Saint was praying for sinners, an angel appeared to him and bade him hasten to the church of St. Mary of the Angels, where our Lord Jesus Christ and His Blessed Mother awaited his coming. He immediately went to the church, and there he saw our Saviour in the midst of His angels, with His beloved Mother on His right hand. Francis fell down in lowly adoration, and

poured out his heartfelt thanks for this great favour. Then he heard the voice of our Divine Lord, who said: ‘Francis, you and your children have great zeal for the salvation of souls: you have been placed as a light to the world, and as a support to the Church. Ask, then, whatever you will for the benefit and consolation of mankind and for My glory.’ The Saint humbly replied: “My Lord Jesus Christ, though I am but a miserable sinner, I beseech you grant that all who visit this church may receive a plenary indulgence for all their sins, after they have confessed to a priest. And I beseech the Blessed Virgin, your Mother, and the advocate of the human race, to intercede for me that I may obtain this grace.” Then our Lady inclined towards her Divine Son to ask the favour. Our Blessed Lord replied, “Francis, you ask great things; but you shall receive still greater. I grant what you demand; but go to My Vicar, to whom I have given power to bind and loose on earth, and ask him to ratify what I now declare.”

St. Francis repaired the next morning to Perugia to see Pope Honorius III. When admitted to an audience he addressed the Sovereign Pontiff in all simplicity thus: “Holy Father, some years since I repaired a small church in your dominions. I beseech your holiness to grant that those who visit it may obtain an indulgence without making any offering.” The Pope replied: “Francis, you ask a great favour, and one contrary to the usual custom? ‘Holy Father,’ answered the Saint, ‘I do not ask this in my own name but in the name of Jesus Christ.’” Then the Pope, uttered these words, three times: “It is my will to grant what you desire.” But he added, ‘I grant this indulgence in perpetuity, but only on one day during the year.’” At these words Francis, having received the Pope’s blessing, prepared to depart. “Simple man,” cried out Honorius, “where are you going, and what proof have you of what has been granted to you?” “Holy Father,” replied the Saint, “your word is sufficient forme. If this indulgence is the work of God He will make it manifest. Jesus Christ will be the notary, His Blessed Mother the parchment, and the Angels the witnesses.”

Two years afterwards, in the month of January, St. Francis, assailed by the tempter, rolled himself on a bush of long and sharp thorns till the blood poured out from every vein. He then beheld the thorny bush covered with red and white roses. Angels also appeared to him and said, “Francis, hasten to the church, where you will find Jesus and His Blessed Mother.” The Saint arose; gathering twelve roses of each colour, he went to the church, and there, prostrate before Jesus and Mary, he asked our Divine Lord to fix the day for the indulgence. Our Lord then told him that it should be from the Vespers of the day on which St. Peter was delivered from his chains, until the Vespers of the next day.

This indulgence of Portiuncula has been repeatedly attacked by Protestants, but what injury have they done to this favour? Year after year during the last six centuries, the Sovereign Pontiffs, Alexander IV., Martin IV., Boniface VIII., Clement V., John XXII., Benedict XI., Sixtus IV., Leo X., Paul V., and Urban VIII., have recognized and authorized it by their Bulls. Men eminent for piety, learning and eloquence as St. Antonine, St. Bernardine, Bellarmine, Bossuet, Bourdaloue, and a host of others, have undertaken its defence. The Christian people flock in crowds every year not only to this sanctuary, but to every Franciscan church in the world — to which this great favour has been extended since 1622, by Gregory XI. — protesting by their faith in this indulgence, in spite of the scoffs of men who are as ignorant of the merciful designs of God, as they are of the wants of the human heart.

Love, as the Saint himself tells us, so transformed the heart of Francis that he saw all God’s creatures as so many steps to raise his mind and soul to God. He gives to the sun, to the stars, to animals, the sweet name of brother or sister; he invites them all to praise the goodness of their

common master and to testify their gratitude to Him. "When the servant of God came to a place where a number of birds of all kinds had perched, he ran towards them with joy and saluted them as if they were rational creatures. They all listened and turned towards him; then he preached to them, and as he spoke the birds testified their joy, stretched forward their necks, clapped their wings, opened their beaks, steadfastly looking at the servant of God. After he had given them his blessing, the whole flock flew away" (St. Bonaventure). He was particularly fond of sheep; he kept for years one which used to attend church, and show its respect for the sacred mysteries. One day, when walking on one of the lagunes of Venice, with another brother, the Saint heard a number of birds singing amongst the rushes. He immediately said to his companion, "Our brothers, the birds, have begun to praise their Creator, come let us also praise God by chanting the Divine Office." But the birds sang so loud that Francis and his companion could not hear each other. Then the Saint said, "My brothers, the birds, cease your songs till we have finished our Office," and at once they ceased singing, and remained silent whilst Francis and his companion recited the Office.

Birds, hares, and even wolves found a friend and protector in Him. We here give the charming legend of the wolf of Gubbio. A savage wolf was the terror of the inhabitants in the suburbs of Gubbio. The dreadful havoc and loss of life caused by this creature excited the compassion of Francis. He resolved to go, accompanied by some of his brothers, to slay the wolf. He soon saw that his companions were filled with fear, so he left them behind, and went alone along the path which led to the brute's lair. The wolf, seeing Francis, sprang towards him, with his jaws wide open ready to devour him. The saint stepped forward to meet it, making the sign of the cross saying, "Come here, brother wolf, come in the name of Christ, I order you to do no harm to me or to others." The wolf at once came, meek as a lamb, and lay down at the feet of Francis. He continued, "Brother wolf, you have caused terrible ruin in this country, not content with devouring animals, you have had the audacity to kill men created to the image and likeness of God. You deserve, brother wolf, as a murderer to be put to death for your many crimes. Now I know it is hunger that makes you do this, and I require you to promise that if the people give you enough to eat for the future, you will not do them any more harm." The wolf bowed his head as a sign of consent. "Give me proof that you will keep your promise," said the Saint, stretching out his hand. The wolf in answer, lifted up his paw and placed it in the hand of St. Francis, and followed him to the public square of Gubbio. For the two years it lived afterwards, it came every day to Gubbio for food, which was joyfully given it by the inhabitants.

St. Francis' zeal for souls inspired him with the thought of going to the East to join the Crusaders. He desired to convert the Mahometans, or to die the death of a martyr at their hands. He arrived at Damietta, then besieged by the Crusaders. No one could pass from one camp to the other except in peril of their life, as the Sultan had promised a reward to any one bringing him the head of a Christian. Francis and his companion undaunted by these threats went boldly towards the town, saying: "For though I should walk in the shadow of death, I will fear no evils, for Thou art with me." They were taken prisoners by the Mahometan sentries, and having been loaded with chains they were led before the Sultan. He asked them in a fury why they had entered into his kingdom. The Saint answered: "I come on the part of the Most High God to preach the way of Salvation to you and your people, and to announce to them the Gospel of truth." Then Francis spoke of the great truths of our holy religion with such divine eloquence and conviction that the Sultan listened to him with pleasure and wished him to remain in his dominions. Francis replied: "If you and your people will be converted, I willingly will remain with you. But if you hesitate to give up the law of Mahomet for that of Jesus Christ, order a great fire to be made and I will walk through it with your

priests; you can then judge which is the true faith.” The Sultan answered that he did not think that any of the priests of Mahomet would accept such a proposal. “Well then,” said the Saint, “if you will promise me for yourself and for your subjects to embrace the faith of Jesus Christ when you see the flames do not touch me, I will go alone into the flames.”

The Sultan would not agree to this proposal, and St. Francis, seeing that his preaching was useless, and that his desire for martyrdom could not be satisfied, returned to the Christian camp. The Sultan, however, in private begged of Francis to pray that our Lord would give him light to know the true faith: and many years after, the Saint appeared to two of his brethren in Syria, and ordered them to go to the Sultan to administer baptism to him. This journey of Francis to the Holy Land was the cause of the many conquests made by his Order for the Faith in the Holy Places during the last six hundred years. What all the power of Europe was not able to effect, the humble children of the Saint have achieved in the preservation of the Holy Places since that memorable visit of the Seraphic Patriarch to the Holy Land.

St. Francis had a great love for the Church. “The Mother of all the Churches,” said the Saint, “is the Holy Roman Church. I shall go and commend my brothers to her: under her protection nothing bad can happen to our Order. Holy Church will be a jealous upholder of the glory of our poverty. She will preserve the bonds of charity and peace unimpaired among us.” Having asked for a Papal Protector of his Order, he said to the Pope: “We fear and we blush to come knocking at the door of the Supreme Head of the Church. I therefore pray your Holiness to give us the Lord of Ostia in your place, that we may have recourse to him in our needs, not, however, interfering in anything with the pre-eminence of your Holiness, from whom all the strength of the mystical body emanates, and all power is derived.” In the Rule he enjoins, that being always “subject and submissive at the feet of the same holy Church, and steadfast in the Catholic faith we may observe the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the holy Gospel, as we have firmly promised.” We have already seen how he went to Rome to get his Rule approved of by the Pope, and how he got the famous indulgence of the Portiuncula, given by Jesus Christ Himself, ratified by the same infallible authority. “For,” said the Saint, “without his consent and approval, nothing can be stable or good in matters of faith, or in religious life.”

“The burning love of St. Francis for the Most Holy Sacrament,” says St. Bonaventure, “seemed to consume the very marrow of his bones.” In his letters and instructions, he beseeches the entire world, with words of fire, to show every possible reverence to this mystery of Divine Love. “I conjure my brethren,” he says, “embracing your feet with all the love of which I am capable; I implore you to show all respect and honour to the Body and Blood of Christ, by whom we have been reconciled with God the Father Almighty, and peace has been established in heaven and on earth. And yet how unworthily the Sacred Body of our Lord is treated; how It is left in unbecoming places, irreverently carried, disrespectfully received, and carelessly administered. Shall we not grieve over these outrages? Remembering how lovingly He gives Himself to us, how He leaves Himself with us, and how we touch Him and receive Him every day in Holy Communion.” He then cries out in an ecstasy of love and gratitude, “Incomprehensible Greatness! O inconceivable Goodness! O excess of humility! that the Sovereign of the universe, God, and the Son of God, should descend so low as to hide Himself under the species of bread. Reflect, my brethren, on the abasement of God, pour forth your hearts in His presence, humble yourself before Him, that He who gives Himself to you without reserve may take full possession of you.” We can truly say, Francis practised and taught all the devotions of our day for this most holy mystery — frequent

communion (at least for that age), aid to poor churches, visits, spiritual communion, love of the Most Holy Sacrifice, and the like, St. Francis communicated often “and so devoutly,” says St. Bonaventure, “as to move others to devotion.” “Wherever he found a deserted church,” says the same Seraphic ‘Doctor, “especially in the country, he used to sweep and clean it and adorn it by every means in his power. Fearing that hosts might be wanting for the celebration of the Most Holy Sacrifice, or that they might not be carefully prepared, he used to make great numbers himself, and would take them to churches that required them. This care he extended to everything that concerned the Sacred Mysteries.”

He earnestly exhorted his brethren to meditate unceasingly on the Sacred Passion. “Have always before your eyes,” he used to say, “the way of humility, poverty, and the Holy Cross, by which our Saviour Jesus Christ redeemed us.” Like the great Apostle, he saw nothing on earth but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. “My soul,” he cried out, “is so fully occupied with the consideration of the Passion of my Lord, that, were I to live until the end of time, I should require no other subject for my thoughts.” When reproached for the tears he continually shed whilst meditating on this subject, he answered, “I weep for the sufferings of my Lord Jesus Christ, and I ought not to be ashamed to weep for them before the whole world.” This love of Jesus crucified obtained for him the signal honour of bearing on his body the Stigmata of his Saviour. St. Bonaventure thus describes this wonderful prodigy: “On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, whilst praying in the morning on the side of Mount Alvernia, St. Francis beheld a Seraph, having six wings inflamed with the most resplendent fire, descending to him from the height of heaven. And, as he flew with great swiftness towards the man of God, there appeared between the wings the form of one crucified, having his hands and feet stretched out and fixed to the cross. When he beheld this vision he marvelled greatly, and his heart was filled with mingled joy and sorrow; he at once clearly understood that he was to be transformed into Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of the flesh, but by the fire of love. The vision disappearing left behind it a marvellous fervour in his heart, and a no less wonderful impression on his flesh; for nails began to appear in his hands and in his feet, and on his right side a red wound as though it had been pierced with a lance; and from this wound blood often flowed.”

St. Bonaventure adds, “the Sacred Stigmata were seen by more than fifty of the brethren, and also by St. Clare. The Supreme Pontiff Alexander, when preaching to the people in the presence of many of the Friars, of whom I was one, affirmed that, in the lifetime of the Saint, he had seen the Sacred Stigmata with his own eyes.” The Church commemorates this great favour on the 17th September, by a special festival in honour of the Stigmata of St. Francis.

In order that the name of the Lord, not only in thought, but in speech or writing, should be honoured with due respect, St. Francis obliged his brethren, whenever they found any writings with His Holy Name, to lay them up carefully in some fitting place, lest perchance the Sacred Name thereon might be trodden under ‘oot. In his last Testament he says: “Whenever I find His most Holy Name or written words in unseemly places, I will collect them, and I wish that they may be gathered up and honourably kept.” He recited the canonical hours with the greatest reverence and devotion. When travelling, he always stopped to say them, standing erect and bareheaded: he never omitted this holy practice, however inclement the weather or abundant the rain. For he said: “If we endeavour to be at rest when we take the food of the body, which will soon be the food of worms, with what peace and tranquillity should not the soul take the food of life, which is the Word of God.”

His Holiness Leo XIII., speaking of this wonderful prodigy, says: "As a last mark of resemblance (to Jesus Christ), St. Francis received on his Calvary, Mount Alvernia, by a miracle till then unheard of, the Sacred Stigmata, and was thus so to speak crucified."

St. Bonaventure tells us that St. Francis had an extraordinary devotion and love for the Blessed Virgin. He calls her, "his Lady and his Queen, in whom is all. fulness of grace and every sort of good: The palace, the temple, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is as sweet as she is amiable." "When I say Hail Mary," said he, "Heaven smiles, the angels rejoice, the world exults, hell trembles, and the devil takes to flight."

He made her Patron of the whole Order: and he fasted every year from the Feast of the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul, in her honour. The little church of Portiuncula was especially dear to him as being dedicated to her Immaculate Heart here he received untold favours through her intercession; here she interceded for him and his Order with her Divine Son. Here also she appeared to him in the midst of that Angelic Choirs, and obtained for him the great indulgence of Portiuncula. As early as the first General Chapter St. Francis ordained that a Solemn Mass should be sung every Saturday, in her honour, in all the Convents of the Order.

St. Francis enjoined on all his religious of the First and Second Orders, and on all the brothers and sisters of the Third Order, the great duty of charity towards the Holy Souls. In the first Rule, he says, "The Clerics shall perform the Divine Office for the living and the dead... and for the departed brethren recite the De Profundis with Pater Noster. The lay-brothers shall say for the dead, seven Paters, &c." In the Rule of St. Clare she prescribed that "the sisters who can read are bound to recite the office of the dead." In the Rule of the Third Order, he enjoined: "Within a week after the death of any member, the brothers, who are priests, shall say one Mass for the repose of the soul. Those who know the Psalter shall each say fifty psalms, and those who cannot read shall say as many Pater Nosters, adding at the end of each, Requiem æternam. Besides this they will have three Masses celebrated every year for the brothers and sisters, living and dead; those who know the Psalter will say it, and others will not fail to recite one hundred Pater Nosters, adding at the end of each, Requiem æternam."

"We ought," says St. Francis, "to confess all our sins to the priest, that we may receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, because whoever does not eat His flesh and drink His Blood cannot enter the kingdom of God." In the first Rule he strictly commands his children to "confess their sins to priests of the Order," and, 'if they cannot do this, let them confess to any other discreet and Catholic priests; believing firmly that from whatever priest they receive penance and absolution their sins will be undoubtedly pardoned; for to priests alone is given the power of binding and loosing."

When he felt his end drawing nigh, Francis sent for Brother Benedict of Piratro, to whom he said, 'Priest of God, write down the blessing I now give to all my Brothers in the Order, and all those who shall ever belong to it, until the end of the world. As my weakness hinders me from speaking, I will declare, in a few words, my will and intentions with regard to my Brothers, present and future, as my blessing and testament which they must never forget. Let my Brothers love one another, as I have loved, and do love them. Let them always cherish the Lady Poverty, and never swerve from her laws; let them be ever faithful and submissive to the Prelates and Priests of the Holy Roman Church, and may the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost always bless and protect them."

He was then at Siena, under the care of a distinguished oculist as his eyesight was nearly lost from incessant weeping for the sufferings of his Saviour.

St. Francis now requested his brethren to carry him to Assisi, that he might have the consolation of breathing his last sigh where he received the grace of spiritual life. He was accordingly carried to our Lady of the Angels by a strong guard from Assisi. His patience in his sufferings was most admirable; he called his pains his dear sisters. Once a brother said to him, when suffering more than usual, "Brother, pray to God that he would deal more gently with thee, for it seems to me that His hand is heavy on thee." The holy man cried out: 'Brother, if I did not know the simplicity, I would never more allow thee near me,' and casting himself on the ground, he cried out, "I thank thee, O Lord my God, for these my pains, and I beseech Thee to increase them a hundred-fold, for the fulfilment of Thy will is my greatest consolation in this world."

He asked his brethren to read the history of the passion, saying: "Nothing can give me greater pleasure than to hear again and again what my beloved Master suffered for me."

When dying, the Father Guardian, who knew his love of holy poverty, offered him an old habit, and cord, and said: "Brother, I bring you these as an alms for the love of God; receive them with the Spirit of holy obedience." This the Saint did most joyfully, showing — to the end his great love for his spouse, holy poverty — He then cast himself on the ground, and he commanded his brethren to leave him thus, after his death, for the time that would take a man to walk a mile.

The hour of his departure having come, he spoke to his children at length on patience, poverty, and faithful obedience to the Holy Roman Church. And extending his hands in the form of a cross over all the brethren who were around him, he blessed all his children present and absent in the name of Jesus crucified. Then he added: "Farewell, my children, abide in the fear of the Lord, and ever persevere therein. And when temptation or trouble assails you say; Blessed are they that do persevere unto the end. And now, I go to God to whose grace I commend you all." When he had said these words he asked his brethren to read a chapter of St. John's Gospel; after which he recited the hundred and forty-first psalm, till he came to the verse: "The just wait for me, until Thou reward me." All these mysteries being now fulfilled in him, his most holy soul being set free was absorbed in the abyss of the Divine Glory. "Many of his brothers," says, St. Bonaventure, a contemporary, "saw his soul like a brilliant star borne to heaven on a white cloud." Such was the death of the great servant of God, St. Francis the Seraphic, on the 4th of October, 1226, in the forty-fifth year of his age, the twentieth from his conversion, and the eighteenth from the foundation of the Order. At the moment of his death Brother Augustine, Provincial of L'Avanzo, being in his agony, cried out aloud, "Wait for me Father, wait for me, I am going with you." When those present asked him to whom he thus spoke, he answered, "Do you not see Father Francis going to heaven?" At the same time the Saint appeared to the Bishop of Assisi, and said: "Behold, I leave the world to go to heaven."

Now were seen the nails which had been wondrously formed out of his flesh. On his side also appeared the wound like to the wound on our Lord's side. The nails were as black as iron. The wound on his side was red and rounded, resembling a beautiful rose. All the rest of the body, which had been dark by nature, and also by reason of his continual infirmities, was now of a dazzling whiteness, and his limbs were as soft and flexible as those of a child.

As soon as the Saint's death was known, the people of Assisi hastened in crowds to our Lady of the Angels to examine the wounds of the Stigmata, and to satisfy their devotion by touching the holy body. Next morning, a vast multitude with lighted torches and branches in their hands accompanied

the sacred remains to Assisi, singing hymns and canticles of joy. As the procession passed the church of St. Damian, where St. Clare lived, the body was exposed to the veneration of the holy Virgin and her sisters. St. Clare tried in vain to detach one of the miraculous nails: she then steeped a linen cloth in the blood oozing from the bleeding wound of his side. The body was carried with all reverence to St. George's church, where St. Francis had been baptized; where he had first preached, and where he now finds his first resting place after death. He had expressed a wish to be buried in the Colle d'Inferno, or hill where criminals were executed. But this humble desire could not be fulfilled until the people of Assisi had erected a suitable monument over this place of ignominy. Many miracles having been wrought through his intercession, he was canonized on the 16th June, 1228, by the Sovereign Pontiff, Gregory IX.

We close this life of St. Francis with the words of the Vicar of Christ, His Holiness Leo XIII.: 'Such miracles worthy rather of the songs of Angels than of the lips of men, show us sufficiently how great was this man, and how worthy that God should choose him to bring back his contemporaries to Christian ways... It is manifest that from this one man a host of benefits has accrued to the civil commonwealth. But inasmuch as his spirit, so thoroughly and so pre-eminently Christian, is wondrously suited to all times and all places no one can doubt that the Franciscan institutions will be of the greatest benefit in this our age.'
