

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 2, 2022 – FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS, TRANSFERRED

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Learning from ‘Il Poverello’*”*

Job 39:1-18 (God is the Creator of all things)
Psalm 121 (Our help comes from the Lord, maker of Heaven and Earth)
Galatians 6:14-18 (We are to boast of nothing except Christ crucified)
St. Matthew 11:25-30 (God’s wisdom is revealed in Jesus’ humility and gentleness)

How would you like to be described by Pope Pius the IX as “the most perfect image of our Lord who ever lived,” and then return to earth nearly 800 years after you died, only to find yourself immortalized as a 3-foot-high concrete statue in someone’s back yard, with a bird bath on top of your head?¹ Arguably, Saint Francis is among the most “popular” of all the saints. And yes, he appears in gardens around the world, enshrined in bird baths and feeders. As one who loved and cared for all creatures great and small, he is the patron saint of animals, ecologists, and peace-makers. He is also known for his devotion to the Holy Eucharist; the blessed Virgin Mary; his sorrow during the Stations of the Cross; and for creating the Nativity Scene.

Also, Saint Francis is associated with works of mercy to the poor and the marginalized, for, having renounced all of his possessions. He was nicknamed “*Il Poverello*,” the Little Poor Man. But these are not the attributes of Saint Francis about which I wish to speak today.

When it comes to saints, too often we think of them as superheroes—divinely gifted, supernaturally empowered men and women, capable of doing the right thing every time, even in the face of unimaginable adversity. As such, we believe the saints are totally unlike us, and so we feel we cannot aspire to being like them.

In a world where we are continually assaulted by conflicting values and contradictory demands, we feel pressured to choose the right thing even while carrying out our everyday lives: Paper or plastic? Regular or low-fat? Recycle or throw it out? Elevator or take the stairs? Save or spend? So many decisions. And when we actually *must* choose, half the time, we get it wrong.

But Francis of Assisi didn’t get it right, either—at least, according to the society in which he lived. Throughout the course of his life, he was ridiculed and considered to be mentally unbalanced for steadfastly refusing to remain among the ranks of the wise and learned, or the wealthy and powerful—those who were certain *they* had it right. Rather, Francis preferred to marry “Lady Poverty,” and to call himself a fool for Christ.³ He *truly believed* what Jesus said in Luke 9:1-3 (NIV): “proclaim the kingdom of God and ... heal the sick.... ‘Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt.’”

When this son of a prosperous merchant went begging door-to-door, giving any surplus to the poor, and telling people enthusiastically about Jesus, his former friends reacted with sadness and disgust; strangers regarded him as a religious “nut.”⁴

But before Francis had any inkling of the vocation God had planned for him, as a young man he dreamed of being a knight. He was motivated by a vision in which he saw himself in a large room, full of knights’ armor and the trappings of chivalry. Jesus was there with him, and said: “Francis, I want you to be My knight.” This romantic fantasy was fueled by the popular literature of the day in which knights in shining armor vanquished dragons, rescued fair maidens, and generally did the right thing for the sake of good and for God.

Francis conveyed his hopes to his father, an up-and-coming cloth seller in Assisi, Italy, and papa was pleased. In the late 12th century, Assisi was engaged in one of many wars with its neighboring city of Perugia, and for a middle-class merchant to have his son fighting for their city outfitted like a lord, would have appealed to Francis' social-climbing father. So he bought his son the armor, sword, lance, and horse that were required.

Yet the Holy Spirit was already at work in Francis, even on the day when he rode off to battle. He noticed that among the company there was an impoverished nobleman who had no armor or horse. So Francis gave away his entire outfit, and marched on toward Perugia unarmed.

Needless to say, the encounter proved disastrous; Francis was captured and imprisoned. When finally he was ransomed, he was ill with a high fever. If Christ had wanted him to be a knight, Francis reasoned, clearly, things were not working out. Perhaps, like a fool, he had misinterpreted the message. So Francis continued to search. What might it mean to be Jesus' knightly champion?

Later, after he had renounced his family, and gone off to live as a hermit, Francis had one of the more extraordinary experiences of his extraordinary life. One day, while praying before the crucifix in the ruined church of San Damiano (a tiny copy of which I keep on the altar), the figure of Jesus came to life and spoke to him saying, "Francis, rebuild my church that is falling down." Francis looked around and saw that, indeed, the Church of San Damiano was in great disrepair. Obediently, he began putting stone on stone, rebuilding the church.

The people of Assisi thought he was a fool to try to reconstruct the old, abandoned church, and few would help him. Once again, Francis began to wonder if he'd gotten it wrong. It wasn't until much later that he understood Jesus was asking him to rebuild His Church with a capital "C."⁵ Once Francis understood that, he also began to comprehend what it meant to be Jesus' knightly champion. He became entirely consumed with the desire to do the Lord's will, out of the profound gratitude and ecstatic joy he felt in knowing Jesus Christ. Saint Paul felt the same way.

Francis astounded everyone by taking the Gospel literally. Not in a fundamentalist way, but by actually following all that Jesus said and did, joyfully, without limit and without a fraction of self-importance. He was torn between a life devoted entirely to prayer, and a life of actively preaching the Good News. Choosing the latter, he always returned to solitude when he could.

Like Jesus, Francis preached wherever people would gather—in marketplaces, in open fields. And like Jesus, Francis could turn a motley crowd into a congregation. Many thousands would leave these open-air meetings filled with a greater love for God and a desire to devote their lives to the Lord's will and service.

Francis did not wish to found a religious order, but in time he and the men who followed him became more organized. As large numbers of people joined him, attracted to Francis' preaching and his example, Francis had to delegate responsibility to others. Eventually, he wrote a more detailed Rule of Life, which was approved by the Pope. Toward the end of his life, Francis gave up leadership of the Order and went into the mountains to live in secluded prayer.

There, during the last years of his relatively short life, he was half-blind and seriously ill. It was in this state that he received the stigmata—the actual, painful wounds of Christ—in his hands, feet and side.⁶ Francis died at age 44 on October 3, 1226. His Feast Day is October 4th, reckoned by his first day in Heaven.

Like Saint Paul before him, Francis "counted all things as loss" for the excellence of knowing and serving Christ, and wishing only to boast of the cross of Jesus Christ. Through his unbounded love, extraordinary kindness, radical simplicity, and profound devotion to Our Lord, the Little Poor Man—whom some have also called "The Other Jesus"—teaches us that not always getting it right is OK with God. We learn that God values our humility and obedience more than our knowledge or success; that our possessions are not so important, and that it's not who we are, but whose we are.

I began by saying we don't think we can be like the saints. But Francis was a practical kind of guy, not an out-of-touch mystic. As part of their Rule of Life, Francis and his Friars Minor, as well as their counterparts, the Poor Clares nuns, lived by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. And so can we. For those of us who are not monastics, these principles—not vows—would mean:

- *Poverty* — surrendering our rights of ownership, such that we live as though everything belongs to God. After all, we came into the world with nothing, and we will leave it the same way.
- *Chastity* — a word that's not popular in our excessively eroticized culture. But it describes a relationship that is pure and exclusive—which is how our relationship with Christ should be. It also means absolute faithfulness for those who are married, and abstinence for those who are single.
- *Obedience* — something to which every Christian is called, Franciscan, or not. We may not like it, but God's way is the “high way,” and it will always go better for us, and for those around us, if we do what God wants.

As today we celebrate the Feast of Saint Francis, I invite each of you to prayerfully think about how Our Lord might be calling you to a life of greater poverty, chastity, and obedience. And I can promise you, practicing these virtues leads to blessings, joy, and peace.

I will close with an adaptation of one of Francis' well-known prayers:⁷

“All highest, most glorious God,
cast your light into the darkness of our hearts,
give us true faith, firm hope, perfect charity and profound humility,
so that with wisdom, courage and discernment, O Lord,
we may do what is truly your holy will.” *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience—Not Just for Saints,” 4 October 2015, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ “Saint Francis: The Little Poor Man,” Religious Education Study, Unit 2, Lesson 9, [Diocesan Catechetical Centre](https://dcccpcne.co.in/wp-content/uploads/esources/catechesis-sections/school-catechesis/standard-7/unit-2/sc-std-7-u2-lesson-9-ho.pdf), Pune, India <<https://dcccpcne.co.in/wp-content/uploads/esources/catechesis-sections/school-catechesis/standard-7/unit-2/sc-std-7-u2-lesson-9-ho.pdf>> 27 September 2022.

³ Adapt. John Bankert, “At That Time, Jesus Said... St. Francis of Assisi,” 4 October 1996, [EpiscopalChurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/at-that-time-jesus-said-st-francis-of-assisi-1996/>> 27 September 2022. Used with permission.

⁴ Adapt. Leonard Foley, “Who Was St. Francis?” [St. Francis of Assisi School](http://www.sfab.org/stfrancisbiography.htm), Braintree MA © 2005, <<http://www.sfab.org/stfrancisbiography.htm>> 27 September 2022. Used with permission

⁵ Bankert, *op. cit.*

⁶ Foley, *op. cit.*

⁷ “Common Franciscan Prayers,” [Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls](http://www.fslf.org/CommonFranciscanPrayers/#BlessingofStFrancis), Minnesota, n.d. <<http://www.fslf.org/CommonFranciscanPrayers/#BlessingofStFrancis>> 27 September 2022. Used with permission.