

SOLEMNITY OF SAINT FRANCIS, CONFESSOR

October 4

Today is the feast day of Saint Francis. Ora pro nobis.



Of the Value and Dignity of the Soul

The greatest care ought to be taken of the soul, for man has not many, but only one. If God had given us two souls, as He has given us two eyes, or two feet, then should one be lost or taken away, we might guard and save the other. But as we have received only one, very weak and languishing, assailed by three most powerful enemies, and exposed to the fiery darts of the world, the flesh, and the devil, it is not lawful for it to repose securely for one single day, but it must always be striving and fighting. The Apostle gives us to understand how continual this warfare must be, when he says: 'Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers.'

In war, or in a battle, some time is granted to the soldiers to refresh their bodies, to lay aside their arms, to rest from their labours, and to recruit their strength; nor are they, during severe cold, compelled to rest at night exposed to the inclemency of the season, but are allowed to pass the winter in the city. But it is different with wrestlers; for then only can they be permitted to breathe, when one being overcome and thrown to the earth, the other goes away in triumph. The strife with our enemies can never cease, the time of fighting is the whole time of our life, the end of our life will be the beginning of rest; and only after death will the demonwrestler retire, after having endeavoured most strenuously to conquer us in death. Let us, therefore, most earnestly beseech Our Lord to protect us by His grace, and, in the midst of so many dangers, mercifully to defend us from our enemies. Nothing, alas! is more vile than the price for which we sell our precious souls. On the slightest occasion we cast it into hell, and for the smallest and most insignificant reward we deprive it of the inestimable treasure of Divine grace.

Saint Francis, the son of a merchant of Assisi (Pietro Bernardone and his French wife Pica Bourlemount), was born in the year 1182. While his father was on a business trip in France, Pica gave birth to a boy whom she called John – a good religious name – but Pietro on returning called him Francesco – in his appreciation of all things French – and it stuck.

by Father Francis Xavier Weninger, 1876

St. Francis, the great founder of the order which bears his name, a man endowed with heavenly wisdom and especial gifts, and who, on account of his fervent love to the Almighty, is called the Seraphic, was born at Assisium in Umbria, and in a stable to which, by the advice of an unknown beggar, his mother had been carried to be relieved of the pains she suffered. His father was a wealthy merchant, and he destined Francis to follow the same occupation. Although the child was bright and cheerful, he never associated with evil companions, in order to keep his innocence unspotted. To the poor he was ever extremely compassionate, having made the resolution to dismiss none without alms. One day, when he was overwhelmed with business, a beggar asked for some money to buy bread. Francis, in his hurry, refused it, but no sooner had the man gone, than he remembered his resolution, and running after the beggar, gave him a rich alms and vowed never again to refuse any one who asked him: and this vow he faithfully kept.

Hence, when one day he met a poor man in the street, he gave him his new clothes and clothed himself in the rags of the beggar. At another time, while he was taking a ride, a leper came to him begging; Francis dismounted, took a piece of money and gave it to the poor man. When the latter stretched out his hand, deformed and emaciated by the terrible disease, Francis took it into his own and kissed it most tenderly. When he had remounted, he turned to look for the leper, but could no where perceive any sign of him; from which he supposed that either an angel or Christ Himself had appeared in that shape; the thought of which filled his heart with great comfort, and, at the same time, animated him to still greater liberality. After this event, he began to wean his heart more and more from all temporal things, sought solitude and became more fervent in his prayers. He begged the Almighty most earnestly to favor him with the grace to know how he should serve Him henceforth as his Lord and Master. During this prayer, Christ appeared to him, hanging on the cross and covered with wounds. This vision filled the heart of St. Francis with such devotion to our beloved Saviour, that he could never think of His passion, or look upon a crucifix without shedding tears.

After several miraculous events, by which the Almighty gradually manifested to St. Francis His will, it happened that, one day, when he assisted at Mass, he heard in the Gospel the words of Christ: "Do not possess gold or silver, or money in your purse ; nor script for your journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor a staff." (Matt, x.) At these words, the holy man felt his mind illuminated and his heart stirred with deep emotion. It seemed as if God said to him that this was the rule by which he was henceforth to regulate his life ; and immediately giving his money to the poor, he put off his shoes, clothed himself in a rough penitential garment, which he girded about him with a knotted cord, and determined to lead henceforth an apostolic life. Going among the people, he began to exhort them to penance with such force and zeal, that he not only converted many sinners, but also drew several pious men to offer themselves as disciples in his austere manner of living, and as co-operators in his holy work.

When the number of these had reached twelve, St. Francis sent them into different villages and hamlets to preach penance after his example. Instead of money, he gave them the verse of the Psalm: "Cast thy care upon the Lord, and He will nourish thee." As greater numbers came daily, who desired to be his disciples, he gave them certain regulations. Pope Innocent III. confirmed these regulations in 1209, at which time St. Francis and his companions most solemnly made their profession of the three vows of religion. This was the beginning of the celebrated Seraphic Order, which, divided into several branches, has worked, and still

continues to work so well for the honor of God and the salvation of souls. When the Order had thus been confirmed, the holy founder went with his disciples to Assisium, where he made his dwelling in a small lonely cottage, that stood near the little Church of Portiuncula. At this place, where the Blessed Virgin was especially honored, St. Francis passed much time in prayer and fasting. He lived on alms, and sent his disciples into the surrounding country to exhort the people to penance and to teach them to lead a Christian life. The Benedictines, to whom the above mentioned church and the ground near it belonged, gave both to St. Francis, that he might build there the first house for his Order.

The greatest care of the Saint was bestowed upon his disciples and spiritual children, whose number daily increased. He endeavored to lead them in the path of virtue, and to make of them useful members, that they might work for the salvation of men; and to effect this more thoroughly, he tried to be an example to them. Penance, which he and others of his order preached, he practised most austere on his own person. He very seldom partook of food that was cooked, and when he did so, he strewed ashes over it, or destroyed its taste with water. Besides the usual forty days' fast, he observed another fast of the same length, after the festival of the three holy Kings. The same he did from the feast of the holy Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, until the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. To these he added another forty days' fast in honor of the holy Archangel St. Michael and all the Angels. At night, he slept, on the bare floor; a stone or a piece of wood served him for a pillow. He scourged himself almost daily to blood, and exercised himself in all possible bodily mortifications. The cause of this rigor towards himself was not only to do penance for his former sins, but also to prevent himself from falling into others, and to keep his purity unspotted. Hence, when the evil spirit tortured him with unclean thoughts, he cast himself into the snow, and remained in it until he was almost frozen.

His humility was not less than his mortification. He would not allow any one to praise him. "Praise no one," said he, "who does not stand securely. No one should be praised, until we see how he ends." And again: "No one is more or less than he is in the eyes of the Almighty." One day, a pious brother of the Order asked the Saint, what he thought of himself. The Saint answered: "I think that there is no greater sinner upon earth than I am." When the brother asked how he could say so with truth, he replied: "If as many mercies had been bestowed upon the most wicked of all men, as have been bestowed upon me, I do not doubt that he would have been more grateful and more pious than I." His humility made him refuse the priesthood, as he deemed himself unworthy of it. He greatly honored the priests, saying: "If I should meet an angel and a priest, I would first kiss the hand of the priest and then duly honor the Angel; because I owe him the greatest veneration who holds the most holy body of Christ in his hands and administers the same to others."

What shall we say of the poverty which the Saint chose and most warmly recommended to his followers? What of his love of God and man? What of his devotion to the passion of Christ, to the divine Mother and the Saints? What of his other virtues, of which the examples are so numerous, that this whole work would hardly suffice to relate them? He refused, after his conversion, to possess anything as his own, and rejoiced when he had to suffer want. During his prayers, he was frequently transported out of himself, by the intensity of his devotion, and could say nothing but, "My God and my all!" Only to name the most High, filled his heart with such burning love that his whole countenance seemed to be on fire. Charity towards men actuated him to nurse the sick most tenderly, to aid the poor to the best of his ability, to comfort the sad, and to be all to all. His wish to convert the infidels and to give his life for Christ's sake, moved him to repair to Syria and Egypt, where he preached fearlessly before the Sultan of Babylon the truths of Christianity, saying that they should kindle a great fire and he would go into it in order to prove the truth of the Christian faith.

His devotion to the Passion of Christ was so great, that God would recompense it with a miracle until then never heard of. When St. Francis, two years before his death, kept, according to his custom, the forty days' fast in honor of St. Michael, on Mount Alverno, he fell into ecstasy on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and saw that a shining Seraph came down from heaven towards him. The Angel had six wings, and between these appeared the crucified Saviour with His five holy wounds. At the same moment, the Saint perceived in his side and on his hands and feet, bleeding wounds, like those which the Saviour bore. These wounds or Stigmata remained until the death of St. Francis, and although he endeavored to hide them, he could not prevent their being sometimes seen during his life and many times after his death. The Saint suffered great pain in these wounds, which was a source of great joy to him, as he hoped that this would make him more conformable to his Saviour. Two years later, the Saint became mortally sick, and knowing the hour of his death, he requested to be carried into the little Church of Portiuncula, where, after having received the holy Sacraments, he lay down on the ground, and gave up his soul to his Creator.

Before he expired, he exhorted his disciples to follow punctually the rules of the Order, blessed them, and among other things said: "Remain always in the fear of God. Happy are those who persevere to the end in the good which they have begun. I am now on my way to the Lord, and will commend you to His favor." He then told them to read to him the passion of Christ from the Gospel of St. John. After this, he began to recite the 141st Psalm, and when he had reached the words: "Bring my soul out of prison. The just wait for me till thou reward me," he ended his holy life. This took place in the year of our Lord 1226. Long before while bitterly weeping over his sins, he had received the divine assurance that they were forgiven. In the same manner, it had also been revealed to him that he would go to heaven. Although this gave him great consolation, he did not mitigate the severity of his penances, nor cease to repent of his sins, as he said: "If I had only once committed a small sin, I would think it sufficient cause for weeping as long as I live." Many books have been written about the life of this Saint and to relate the many and great miracles which he wrought both whilst he lived on earth and, after his death, by his intercession in heaven.

Francis had acquired land and set up a hermitage on Mount Verna. While praying there during a forty day fast in preparation for Michaelmas, he had a vision on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross 1224, where he received the stigmata or the five wounds of Christ.

Suffering from the wounds as well as from an eye disease, for which he received treatment but to no avail, he returned to the Portiuncula where he spent the last days of his life and died on the evening of 3 October 1226, singing Psalm 141. One legend says that on his death bed Francis thanked his donkey for carrying and helping him throughout his life, and that his donkey wept.

In 1228 Francis was pronounced a saint by Pope Gregory IX, who as Cardinal Ugolino di Conti had been his friend and protector of the order.

SAINT FRANCIS

From "The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi," 1476

At the time when St Francis was living in the city of Gubbio, a large wolf appeared in the neighbourhood, so terrible and so fierce, that he not only devoured other animals, but made a prey of men also; and since he often approached the town, all the people were in great alarm, and used to go about armed, as if going to battle. Notwithstanding these precautions, if any of the inhabitants ever met him alone, he was sure to be devoured, as all defence was useless: and, through fear of the wolf, they dared not go beyond the city walls.

St Francis, feeling great compassion for the people of Gubbio, resolved to go and meet the wolf, though all advised him not to do so. Making the sign of the holy cross, and putting all his confidence in God, he went forth from the city, taking his brethren with him; but these fearing to go any further, St Francis bent his steps alone toward the spot where the wolf was known to be, while many people followed at a distance, and witnessed the miracle.

The wolf, seeing all this multitude, ran towards St Francis with his jaws wide open. As he approached, the saint, making the sign of the cross, cried out: "Come hither, brother wolf; I command thee, in the name of Christ, neither to harm me nor anybody else."

Marvellous to tell, no sooner had St Francis made the sign of the cross, than the terrible wolf, closing his jaws, stopped running, and coming up to St Francis, lay down at his feet as meekly as a lamb. And the saint thus addressed him: "Brother wolf, thou hast done much evil in this land, destroying and killing the creatures of God without his permission; yea, not animals only hast thou destroyed, but thou hast even dared to devour men, made after the image of God; for which thing thou art worthy of being hanged like a robber and a murderer. All men cry out against thee, the dogs pursue thee, and all the inhabitants of this city are thy enemies; but I will make peace between them and thee, O brother wolf, so be thou no more offend them, and they shall forgive thee all thy past offences, and neither men nor dogs shall pursue thee any more."

Having listened to these words, the wolf bowed his head, and, by the movements of his body, his tail, and his eyes, made signs that he agreed to what St Francis said. On this St Francis added: "As thou art willing to make this peace, I promise thee that thou shalt be fed every day by the inhabitants of this land so long as thou shalt live among them; thou shalt no longer suffer hunger, as it is hunger which has made thee do so much evil; but if I obtain all this for thee, thou must promise, on thy side, never again to attack any animal or any human being; dost thou make this promise?"

Then the wolf, bowing his head, made a sign that he consented.

Said St Francis again: "Brother wolf, wilt thou pledge thy faith that I may trust to this thy promise?" and putting out his hand he received the pledge of the wolf; for the latter lifted up his paw and placed it familiarly in the hand of St Francis, giving him thereby the only pledge which was in his power.

Then said St Francis, addressing him again: "Brother wolf, I command thee, in the name of Christ, to follow me immediately, without hesitation or doubting, that we may go together to ratify this peace which we have concluded in the name of God"; and the wolf, obeying him, walked by his side as meekly as a lamb, to the great astonishment of all the people.

Now, the news of this most wonderful miracle spreading quickly through the town, all the inhabitants, both men and women, small and great, young and old, flocked to the market-place to see St Francis and the wolf. All the people being assembled, the saint got up to preach, saying, amongst other things, how for our sins God permits such calamities, and how much greater and more dangerous are the flames of hell, which last for ever, than the rage of a wolf, which can kill the body only; and how much we ought to dread the jaws of hell, if the jaws of so small an animal as a wolf can make a whole city tremble through fear.

The sermon being ended, St Francis added these words: "Listen my brethren: the wolf who is here before you has promised and pledged his faith that he consents to make peace with you all, and no more to offend you in aught, and you must promise to give him each day his necessary food; to which, if you consent, I promise in his name that he will most faithfully observe the compact."

Then all the people promised with one voice to feed the wolf to the end of his days; and St Francis, addressing the latter, said again: "And thou, brother wolf, dost thou promise to keep the compact, and never again to offend either man or beast, or any other creature?" And the wolf knelt down, bowing his head, and, by the motions of his tail and of his ears, endeavoured to show that he was willing, so far as was in his power, to hold to the compact.

Then St Francis continued: "Brother wolf, as thou gavest me a pledge of this thy promise when we were outside the town, so now I will that thou renew it in the sight of all this people, and assure me that I have done well to promise in thy name"; and the wolf lifting up his paw placed it in the hand of St Francis.

Now this event caused great joy in all the people, and a great devotion towards St Francis, both because of the novelty of the miracle, and because of the peace which had been concluded with the wolf; and they lifted up their voices to heaven, praising and blessing God, who had sent them St Francis, through whose merits they had been delivered from such a savage beast.

The wolf lived two years at Gubbio; he went familiarly from door to door without harming anyone, and all the people received him courteously, feeding him with great pleasure, and no dog barked at him as he went about.

At last, after two years, he died of old age, and the people of Gubbio mourned his loss greatly; for when they saw him going about so gently amongst them all, he reminded them of the virtue and sanctity of St Francis.

