

FRANCIS OF ASSISI

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of the downloadable “622 service” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader’s notes - *note fifth page re ice breaker, you may want multiple copies*
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: CROSSWORD O’ EXCUSES

As the teens arrive, provide copies of the crossword puzzle (page five of the leader’s notes), and have them see how far they can get in the allotted time. They will need Bibles to look up the references given in the clues. If time allows, take the answers up together, otherwise set the crossword to one side and provide the answer key (to right) at the end of the lesson. Some of the verses will be familiar and others may be obscure. This is intended to act as a teaser introducing the topic of excuses, and how they can become a part of how we relate to each other and to God.

FOR SMALLER GROUPS, YOU MAY EITHER HAVE THE GROUP WORK COOPERATIVELY ON A SINGLE COPY OF THE PUZZLE, OR WORK COMPETITIVELY AS INDIVIDUALS. FOR LARGER GROUPS, TRY DIVIDING THEM UP INTO TEAMS COMPETING TO ANSWER MORE THAN THE OTHER TEAMS BEFORE TIME’S UP.

622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order for service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK’S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

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DISCUSSION: WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK?

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- What is the difference between a reason and an excuse?
- How do we respond when asked to do something that we don't really want to do?
- Are there excuses – or distractions – in your life that hold you back from following Jesus? What are they? What would it take for you to set them aside?

A few things worth pointing out (if they don't otherwise arise during the discussion):

- *A reason is a rational and factual explanation that we give for a choice we have made and its effect. An excuse, on the other hand, is something we use to avoid taking responsibility if things do not go the way they should. When we make excuses, we often point to circumstances outside of our control or blame others. Excuses are often categorically untrue or simply unrelated to the matter at hand, like claiming that you couldn't get to class on time because the cat ate your homework.*
- *Perhaps a parent has asked you to clean your room. Or perhaps a group of people you don't really like has asked you to attend an event with them. In situations like these, we can become incredibly creative in coming up with excuses. But the truth becomes apparent if you imagine that the thing you've been asked to do is something you care about deeply – would your excuse still stand in your way?*
- *Allow your teens a few moments to reflect on this last question. They do not need to share their answers with the group unless they really want to. This may be a good moment to share a story of your own if you wish.*

THE LESSON: SETTING ASIDE EVERY DISTRACTION

Lessons 13-42 follow a slightly different format from previous lessons. The story of the saint being studied is interspersed with verses from scripture that provide added perspective. You may prefer to read the lesson text aloud together as a group, or ask the teens to read it silently to themselves.

“You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”
(Galatians 5:13)

The Christian world had never forgotten the Islamic attacks of the seventh and eighth centuries which had laid claim to many previously Christian territories, including the Holy Land where Jesus had lived, died, and risen again. In the Middle Ages, Pope Urban II claimed authority to call men from all the Christian nations and to march to war in an attempt to take back these lands. He went so far as to say that if they would join these “crusades”, he could promise instant forgiveness for any sin they might commit.

The first crusade reclaimed Jerusalem in 1099, but left total devastation in its wake. The soldiers had taken the pope's words as *carte blanche* to act as they pleased, and often with wicked cruelty. A “spirit of crusade”, with ongoing waves of military campaigning, continued for several centuries. It was during this time that Francis lived. Almost none of the ground that was regained during this “crusading” period was held permanently.

“Lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.”
(Hebrews 12:1)

Francis was an only son, growing up in the mountain town of Assisi (Italy) at the end of the twelfth century. His father was a successful silk merchant, and Francis was an indulged child. He had everything he wanted and he pursued pleasure freely. But as he grew into adulthood, Francis experienced a number of sobering moments

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in which he sensed God calling him away from this life and its distractions and into a life of holiness and poverty. This new calling did not go over well with Francis' father, who was angry and ashamed at the choice his son had made to leave the wealth and security of their family life for one tantamount to homelessness. After much conflict, Francis renounced his inheritance, and left his former life completely.

“Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for the labourer deserves his food.”
(Matthew 10:9-10)

Francis, and those companions who joined him later, were committed to poverty, prayer and preaching. Over the years, Francis' "preaching tours" gained in popularity, and large numbers were drawn to the simple monastic communities he had founded. In due course "Franciscans" spread throughout the west, and were often seen preaching, singing and begging. These communities went on to have a great influence for reform.

Francis had a strong wish to preach to those outside of Italy, and especially to reach out to the Islamic armies. He made a number of attempts to travel to the regions where battle was underway, but was prevented from doing so on more than one occasion. Francis was also horrified by the conduct of the crusaders, which he strongly denounced. Finally in 1219, he managed to meet with the Islamic Sultan of Egypt, who was impressed with him, but did not convert.

“Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created... Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!”
(Psalm 148: 5, 10)

Francis had a special love for creation and is often depicted in art preaching to the animals. One of his most famous poems, "The Canticle of the Sun", was based on Psalm 148, and in the twentieth century was reworked into the familiar modern hymn, "All Creatures of our God and King". Francis wrote poetry in the local dialect rather than in Latin, believing that common people should be able to express themselves in the worship of God using their own language. He cared for the poor, the weak, and the sick. But most of all, Francis was a man who wished to follow Jesus, and to remove from himself any distraction or self-indulgence that might get in the way of his doing so.

At the age of 45, Francis died, poor by human standards, but believing himself to have been greatly blessed. Gerard Sampson, in "The Layman's Book of Saints", says this:

“The last days of St. Francis on earth were very beautiful. It is said by those who were with him that he went to meet death singing. As day was breaking on October 4th, 1226, the soul of St. Francis passed away to God with the words, ‘Thou hast dealt bountifully with me’, on his lips”.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, "OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS" | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, "THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1" | GERARD SAMPSON, "LAYMAN'S BOOK OF SAINTS".)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they've just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- What are some of the excuses that Francis could easily have made to avoid his calling (but didn't)?
- After a life of intentional poverty, why do you think Francis could say that God had "dealt bountifully" with him?
- What can we learn from Francis' example?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *Like the badly behaved crusaders, Francis could have chosen to use the promise of forgiveness as an excuse to participate in wickedness – but he did not. Francis could also have used his father's anger as an excuse to remain in a comfortable and prosperous life – but he didn't. Francis could have given up on his efforts to reach the Islamic armies after the first few attempts failed – but he kept trying. In all of these things there would have been ready-made excuses for anyone who would have preferred to avoid the life of poverty, prayer and preaching that Francis undertook. But Francis was not interested in excuses. He wanted to follow where Jesus had called him!*

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- *The Psalms are filled with this kind of language: “Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death...” (Psalm 116:7-8). No Christian can consider the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus without recognizing that God has not dealt with us according to what we deserve, but instead has gone to the utmost lengths to bring about our salvation. Perhaps Francis also felt that he had been blessed to live a life free from the distractions of wealth, blessed to have been able to preach God’s word, to write songs of praise, and to lead others who wished to live in holiness.*
- *The clarity with which Francis saw events around him was remarkable. It is hardest for us to be objective about the world in which we live, and perhaps especially to recognize when our fellow Christians are not acting in obedience to God’s commands. Moreover, we can be inspired by Francis’ willingness to give up the things that were a distraction to his calling. Our calling may not be the same as his, but Francis’ example challenges us to seek God wholeheartedly, ready to set aside both excuses and distractions so that we can follow where he leads.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON’T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU’LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY “AT-HOME CHALLENGE” IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today’s lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Francis that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you’ve chosen. Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections, *and* share your reflections and your plan of action with a friend.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following prayer.

O God, who by thy Holy Spirit hast given unto one man a word of wisdom, and to another a word of knowledge, and to another the gift of tongues: We praise thy Name for the gifts of grace manifested in thy servant Francis, and we pray that thy Church may never be destitute of the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, POET, OR SCHOLAR, P. 317)

CLOSING PRAYERS (622 AGAIN)

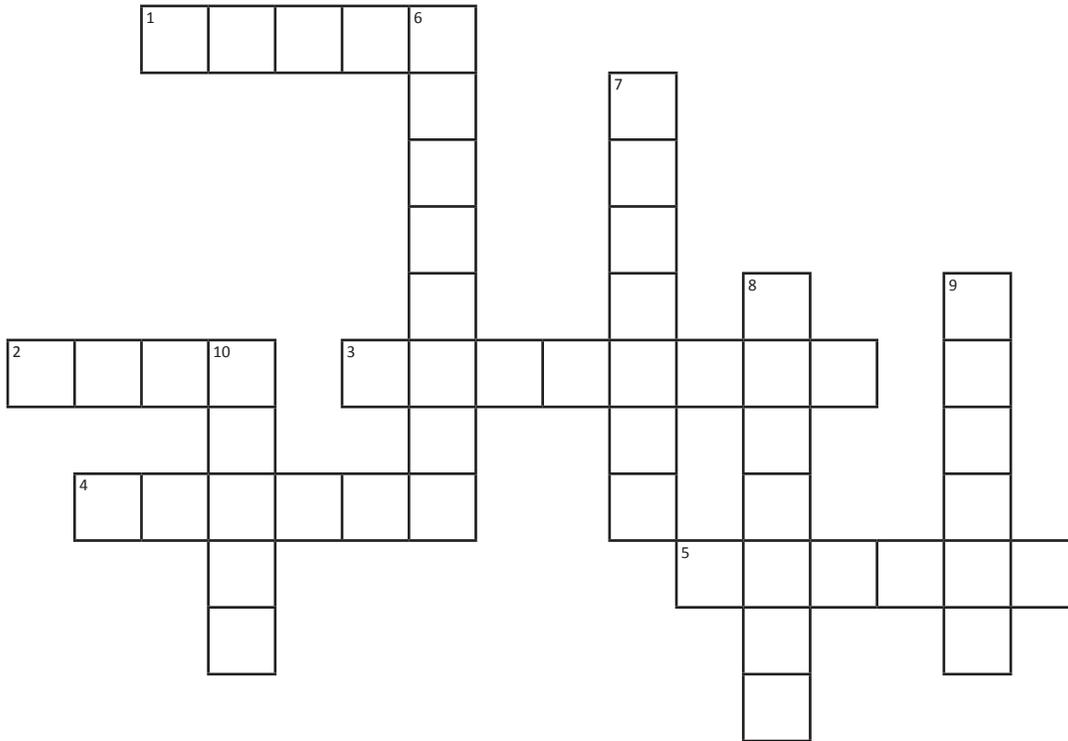
Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE “PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS” SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU’RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the “Grace”, the final prayer in the booklet.

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CROSSWORD O' EXCUSES



ACROSS

1. "I am not able to carry all this people ____;
the burden is too heavy for me." (Numbers 11:14)
2. "Lord, let me first go and ____ my father."
(Matthew 8:21)
3. The woman said, "The serpent ____ me, and I ate."
(Genesis 3:13)
4. The first said to him, "I have ____ a field, and I must
go out and see it." (Luke 14:18)
5. "I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord
and your words, because I ____ the people and
obeyed their voice." (1 Samuel 15:24)

DOWN

6. But Moses said to the Lord,
"Oh, my Lord, I am not ____..." (Exodus 4:10)
7. And another said, 'I have ____ a wife,
and therefore I cannot come.' (Luke 14:20)
8. "Behold, my clan is the ____ in Manasseh,
and I am the least in my father's house." (Judges 6:15)
9. "The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!
I shall be ____ in the streets!" (Proverbs 22:13)
10. Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know
how to speak, for I am only a ____." (Jeremiah 1:6)