

# FRANCIS OF ASSISI

## THE LESSON: SETTING ASIDE EVERY DISTRACTION

*“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 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.

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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”.)

## AT-HOME CHALLENGE

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)