



RANCIS WAS BORN in 1182 in Assisi, Italy. He was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. After a short military career and time of imprisonment Francis suffered a prolonged illness.

During this time he had a mystical experience which changed the course of his life. After months of prayer, a pilgrimage to Rome and an encounter with a man suffering from leprosy, Francis renounced his wealth and began to follow Christ in poverty. He repaired three churches in Assisi responding to a previous experience through which he heard the Christ of the crucifix say to him: '*Francis, go and repair my Church which, as you see, is falling into ruins.*'

He lived as a hermit for some time before others came to follow him, and in 1209 the Order of Friars Minor was established. Within ten years numbers in the Order had reached over a thousand. Clare another resident of Assisi wanted to live by the same principles as Francis. The Second Order was formed, known as the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. Clare and her sisters lived an enclosed life. Some years after her death, the Order became known as the Order of St Clare. A Third Order was also established in 1221 for people from all walks of life who wanted to live by Franciscan principles.

The Friars Minor lived a very simple life devoted to following Christ in the way of poverty and in community. Unlike other religious orders of the



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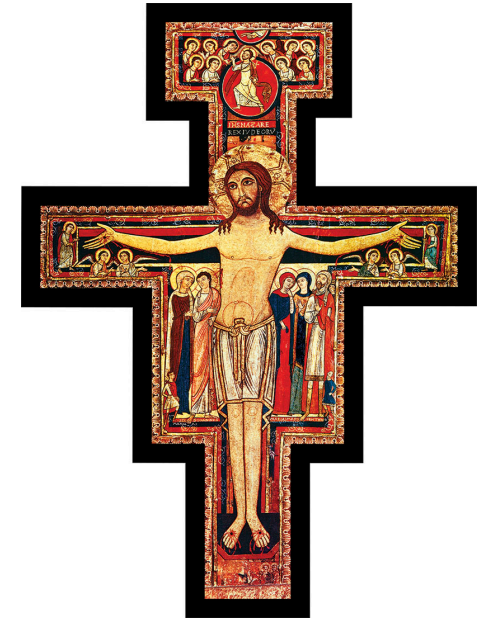
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Praying with...

St. Francis



St Francis of Assisi

day, the Friars were not part of the economic system. They devoted their lives to living alongside the poor and outcast and engaged in missionary work. Francis was drawn to a contemplative life which he achieved without being tied to the cloister. In later years Francis suffered ill health, and relinquished his leadership of the Order to others. In 1224 he received the stigmata while praying on Mount La Verna. He died on 3rd October 1226 at the Portiuncula, the first Franciscan dwelling. His feast day is on the 4th October.

Humility, simplicity, poverty, and prayer are the foundation-stones of Franciscan life and spirituality.

Humility

Francis was always acutely aware of the humility of Christ and the self giving of God. This was particularly expressed in his devotion to the incarnation. Francis created the first Christmas Crib at Greccio.

Simplicity

Francis lived a life of simplicity and encouraged others to do the same. Extravagance was thought to be contrary to the gospel. His simplicity of life gave him great joy. He told his brothers, *Always do your best to be cheerful.*

Poverty

Poverty was Francis' profession. Francis believed that the love of material things distracts devotion to Christ and denies compassion for the poor. His particular view of poverty challenged the people of his day and remains the case to a society which bases self worth to the acquisition of wealth.

Prayer

Prayer is the basis of this particular way of following Christ. Without prayer we stand in danger of projecting ourselves rather than proclaiming Jesus Christ. The regular recital of the Daily Office and a deep devotion to the Incarnation and Eucharistic living is central to Franciscanism. Francis also had a deep devotion to the cross of Christ, where we see the love of God most fully expressed. It was while gazing upon the cross that Francis felt the Lord speaking to him. Three companions of Francis recorded, *'his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord's passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart.'* (Legend of the Three Companions, V). Towards the end of his life Francis carried these wounds in his own body.

Franciscans are contemplatives in the world. The body is the cell and the soul is the hermit who lives within. The whole world was home and Francis loved creation. Created things reminded him of his relationship with God and the deep communion to which God has called us. Everything created was brother and sister to him. At the heart of his love for creation was an even greater love for its creator. He saw creation as a gift of God, and as a means of knowing God. Therefore, in Franciscan spirituality, we are taught to open our eyes to the world to see everything that God has made and to give thanks. The world is not to be seen as a distraction to the soul. The created order is God's gift, an expression of God's love.

The purpose and aim of Franciscan prayer is the imitation of Christ. Francis centred his entire life around Christ. His whole purpose was to follow Christ and nothing more. Prayer begins with a visual gazing. This then leads us to consider, to contemplate and to imitate. Franciscan prayer brings us to the compassionate love of the Crucified Lord and ultimately, a deeper unity with the created order and communion with Christ. Living the Gospel life will lead us further into the mystery of Divine Love.