

People who come to the Episcopal Church from some Protestant denominations or from other religions are often curious about the saints. They wonder if we have different saints than the Roman church or the Orthodox church. (We do.) They wonder if the way someone gets named as a saint is different in the Episcopal Church. (It is.)

And if you ask them to name a saint or two, some folks come up with one or more of the Gospel writers or St. Paul, and a few remember St. Patrick, St. Louis or St. Nick. Hardly anyone comes up with St. Agnes and even fewer have ever even heard of St. Hrotsvit.

But almost everyone can name St. Francis. And not just because there is a Roman Catholic Church with his name just down the street from us. It seems like anyone who has ever heard of St. Francis thinks of him with a certain fondness.

How could you not like a guy who shows up as a garden statue hand-feeding the birds while bunnies and baby deer rest at his feet?

That's a lovely and sentimental image and it *does* capture part of his story. With Francis, though, perhaps more than with many other saints, we are in danger of over-simplifying who he was. If we tidy him up too much, we run the risk of missing why theologians and scholars refer to him as the Second Christ.

Francis was a complex figure and, like many of the saints, a bit of a troublemaker. He was born in Assisi, Italy, in 1181 or 1182 into a privileged family, the son of a wealthy silk merchant. Now, typically, people take new names when they enter religious life. But that's not how Francis got the name we know him by. His given name was Giovanni di Bernardone, but in his infancy, his father, Pietro started began calling him Francesco, Italian for "the Frenchman."

We are not sure why.

Like many young men, the young Francis chose a lifepath that was radically different from the one his family had planned for him. He was not very studious and never finished his education. He worked with his father, but was not drawn to the career of a merchant. His parents seemed to have indulged his every whim, including his love of fine clothes and showy display.

As a teen-ager, he belonged to a gang of rowdies from prosperous Assisi families who, of a night, would eat a fine dinner, get drunk, and, in the words of Francis's first biographer, commit "every kind of debauchery."

When he was about twenty, Francis went out with the townsmen to fight the Perugians in one of the frequent petty skirmishes of the day. He was taken prisoner and held captive for more than a year. In prison, he caught a long-lasting fever that caused him to start rethinking his life priorities. And when his health returned, he decided to embrace a military career.

When he got back home to Assisi, he was praying in front of an ancient crucifix in a run-down chapel called St. Damian's just outside town. And there he heard a voice saying: "Go, Francis, and repair my house."

Francis took the command literally, assuming that the voice was referring to the decrepit chapel he was kneeling in. So, he went to his father's shop, gathered an armful of drapery and then rode to a market where he sold his horse and everything he had taken from his father's shop to get money for the restoration of St. Damian's. You can imagine his surprise when the parish priest at the chapel refused to receive money collected dishonestly. Francis threw the money and left.

He hid from his irate father in a cave near St. Damian's for a month. And when he finally came out, people mocked him as a madman and pelted him with mud and stones. His father finally dragged Francis home, beat him, tied him up and locked him in a closet. When his father left, Francis' mother freed him and he immediately returned to St. Damian's, where he found a shelter.

When his father demanded that he give up his inheritance, by now Francis was only too eager to comply. Francis stripped off his clothes, gave them to his father and said: "Until now, I have called you my father on earth. From now on, I desire to say only 'Our Father who art in Heaven'." From then on, the disowned Francis lived a life of poverty.

Now, you know that you've become an influential saint when you are featured in a six-page article in *The New Yorker* almost 800 years after your death. In 2013, an article about Francis described him as "scrawny and plain-looking" wearing "a filthy tunic, with a piece of rope as a belt, and no shoes. While preaching," the article goes on, "he often would dance, weep, make animal sounds, strip to his underwear or play the zither. His black eyes sparkled...people regarded him as mad, or dangerous. They threw dirt at him. Women locked themselves in their houses."

Not exactly the saint of fuzzy bunnies and sweet little chickadees, is it?

But as he continued to serve the poor and follow God's urgings, things changed for Francis. He felt increasingly responsible to those around him who represented Christ more and more tangibly. And that led him to care for lepers, the sickest and most powerless people in his society. He finally began to understand that the instruction in the chapel, "Go and repair my church," was less about buildings and more about God's creation.

Over the next few years, Francis scavenged stones that he used to rebuild damaged churches with his own hands while continuing to care for lepers and taking on manual chores to earn his own food.

As Francis became better known and loved, the qualities that once made people nervous began to endear him to people. "When he arrived in town," the New Yorker article says, "church bells rang. People stole the water in which he had washed his feet; it was said to cure sick cows."

Throughout Francis' life he wrote poetry filled with a deep affection for the created order: birds, animals, earth, sun, moon, stars, water, fire, all named by Francis as brothers and sisters who praise God in their own way.

That love of nature is why it's so easy to romanticize Francis into some kind of a medieval flower-child, feeding squirrels all over the Tuscan landscape. But his connection to nature was grounded in his experience of poverty: sleeping outside, walking barefoot, washing the wounds of lepers.

So, when I called Francis a troublemaker, I didn't mean the kind of relatively harmless trouble of youth. Francis makes trouble for you and me. His example prods us into re-examining our own attachments, motivations and dependencies. His life dares us to let go of everything except Christ.

But maybe the reason people tend to love Francis the way they do is that his life in Christ also invites us into a joyful love of all creation. Despite the hardships of his early life, ironically, by giving away everything he had, Francis found a share in God's euphoric enjoyment of creation.

In a minute, we will offer our gratitude to God for all that God has made. We aren't ignoring the hard truths of the world we live in. Like Francis, we are saying thank you *anyway*. We aren't forgetting the people wounded and killed in Las Vegas. Like Francis, we choose to see and be grateful for God's presence in creation *nevertheless*. We aren't ignoring the thousands of people in Puerto Rico, Texas and Florida who are suffering tonight. We realize that there is horror and evil in the world.

But for just a moment tonight, we join with St. Francis in recognition that God's overpowering truth and beauty and goodness are at the loving heart of all creation.

And so, we give thanks to God; thanks, in particular, for the evidence of God's love manifested in the creatures given into our care. We take a deep breath this evening with Francis and notice that we are bathed in the love and care of God, surrounded by Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Sister Water, and, yes, even Sister Death.

All these expressions of God's love, our companions the animals, our brother Francis and sister Clare, all our sisters and brothers in the faith, and our Brother Jesus himself – with these, we are truly rich and have all we need.

---

Works consulted or cited

Joan Acocella, "Rich Man, Poor Man," *New Yorker*, January 13, 2013.