Saint Francis of Assisi

He was born Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy, in 1181, and lived the high-spirited life typical of a wealthy young man. He went off to war in 1205, but a vision he had made him return home. On a pilgrimage to Rome, he begged with the beggars on the steps of St. Peter's, which experience moved him to live in poverty. Francis returned home, began preaching on the streets, and soon amassed a following. In the Church of San Damiano outside of Assisi, he heard an Icon of Christ Crucified say to him, “Francis, go and repair My house, which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.” He took this to mean the church in which he was praying, so he sold some cloth from his father's store to finance the project, thus enraged his father. Francis then publicly renounced his father's patrimony before the bishop, laying aside even the clothes on his back. Roaming the countryside around the town for the next two years, he restored several ruined churches, among them the Porziuncola. In 1209 he composed a simple rule for his followers: “To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in his footsteps.” That same year Francis led his first eleven followers to Rome to seek permission from Pope Innocent III to found a new religious order. Initially the Pope hesitated to receive Francis and his band of brothers, but after a dream, in which he saw Francis holding up the Basilica of St. John Lateran (the cathedral of Rome, thus the ‘home church’ of all Christendom), he decided to endorse Francis’ order, the Friars Minor, in April 1210. They preached on the streets and had no possessions. After hearing Francis preaching in Assisi in 1209, a young noble woman, Clare, also felt called to a life of holy poverty. Francis then founded an enclosed order for women, the Poor Clares, lodging them in the church of San Damiano.

In 1219, he went to Egypt in an attempt to convert the Sultan. He was well received, but preached to the Saracens without effect, and returned unharmed to the Crusader camp. However, when the Crusader Kingdom eventually crumbled, the Franciscans alone were allowed to remain in the Holy Land, as its “Custodians” on Christianity’s behalf. By this time, the Franciscan Order had outgrown its original primitive structure. Francis returned to Italy to reorganize the order. Once the up-dated rule was endorsed by the Pope, Francis withdrew from external affairs.

He preached to both man and beast about the duty of all creatures to praise God, and about the duty of men to be stewards of God's creation and to treat it with great reverence. At Christmas time in Greccio, around the year 1223, Francis set up the first known Nativity scene, or crèche, placing a straw-filled manger between a live ox and donkey, so the people could visualize the birth of Jesus. In 1224, while praying on Mount Verna during a forty-day fast, Francis had a vision of a six-winged seraph, which left him with the stigmata, the five wounds of the passion of Christ. Suffering from the stigmata and from an eye disease, he was brought back to the Porziuncola, where he spent his last days dictating his spiritual testament. He died on the evening of October 3, 1226, singing Psalm 141.

On July 16, 1228, less than two years after his death, Pope Gregory IX pronounced him a saint.