

God's Fool

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Assisi is a town right smack in the middle of Italy. These days, its population is about 28,000, making it slightly larger than Middleboro. In the days of St. Francis, it was considerably smaller, small enough that pretty much everyone in town recognized the youth named Francis as he led a merry band of singers, dancers and drinkers through the town in the early hours of the morning on many of the mornings of his youth. St. Francis the carouser, we might call him, except for the fact that he somehow found a way to leave all that behind.

The feast day of St. Francis is celebrated in Catholic and Anglican churches in October, sometimes by a blessing of the animals. Calling something a “feast day” may suggest that it’s a day when a large celebratory meal is consumed, but no, not necessarily. It’s the word used to describe an annual religious celebration, such as a day dedicated to a particular saint.

While reading about St. Francis so that I could be well-enough informed to talk about him, I was surprised at how much information is available. Many birth records from that time are still intact, as are details about his father’s business as a merchant. These artifacts are 900 years old now, after all. A lot has changed through the centuries and it’s fun sometimes to open up that door to the past and see what we can find, what new things we can learn, how the culture has changed and how some essential characteristics remain. The story starts in the year 1181 or 1182. This is when a boy named Giovanni was born to a well-to-do silk merchant named Pietro di Bernadone and his wife, Giovanna. Pietro was away on a business trip when the child was born and did not return till the boy was seven months old. When he learned that his son had been named “Giovanni” after St. John the Baptist, he flew into a rage. He had just returned from the Champagne section of France where he had bought finer quality cloth than was available in Italy. In fact, he was infatuated with everything French and he insisted on renaming his son “Francesco,” which means “Frenchman.” A strange name for a little Italian boy. Of course, he had already been baptized, but that made no difference to Pietro di Bernadone-- he insisted that everyone call

the boy “Francesco,” or “Francis,” as we would say. Too bad for mother Giovanna, who thought that by naming him “Giovanni,” she had placed her son under the protection of the most honored of saints. A person’s name in those days, “was part of his being and identity” (*God’s Fool*, p. 5).

Mother Giovanna, often called “Pica” because her family came from Picardy, was considered by her neighbors to have clairvoyant powers. “You’ll see that his merits will make him a son of God,” she would say. Father Pietro was much more practical. He determined that Francesco’s future was behind the counter of his store, selling fancy fabrics to rich neighbors and increasing the family’s wealth in a steady way. Signor Bernadone was well-known as a greedy man. He was a member of the bourgeoisie, very prestigious, but not of the nobility.

Francis was a dreamer from early on in his life. As a result, he did not learn very much in school. By his own admission, he would always remain an *idiota*, a word I don’t think you need me to translate. The story that fascinated him the most was the one about St. George and the dragon. Frescoes portraying the story were prominently displayed on church walls. The story was told over and over and in the way of all such stories, accrued new details over the years. It appealed to Francis’s considerable powers of imagination; he knew that he, too, wanted to be a knight some day. If you were a successful knight, you could earn yourself a place in the nobility. That appealed to him, too.

Good businessman that he was, Pietro sold more and more fine fabrics to the nobility who could not always afford their purchases. Sometimes, they had to give up some of their land in order to pay their bills. Pietro liked that, all right. So Francis enjoyed an easy life, the life of a rich boy. The thing that set him apart from the other boys was his constant gaiety and laughter. It was a kind of charm that made him attractive. He seems to have been aware of this gift and to have been wise enough to know better than to abuse it. He was happy and he did not feel self-conscious about displaying his happiness, so he was well-liked. And he was generous. More than any of his companions, he gave freely to the poor.

He admired beautiful things, jewels, enamels, tapestries, carvings made in miniature. He was respectful; he was obedient; the only reason his parents had to worry was that his health was not good. But, he was a natural-born leader. “He wanted to be first at all cost, and since the others instinctively

followed him, he knew how to make them obey him... simply by being himself" (*GF*)

Francis was a romantic, I think we can say that. Twice a year, caravans of merchants traveled to distant lands to replenish their stocks of goods. While on a trip to France with his father, Francis was exposed for the first time to the French custom of elevating the host at the time of the Eucharist in the Catholic mass. He liked that. It was seeing the mystery of the miracle of transubstantiation. And while in France as a twelve-year-old, he first came across troubadours and traveling minstrels. He loved seeing them and hearing them and learning the songs by heart, especially the ones that involved rescuing damsels from their distress. These things enlivened the life of a boy who otherwise spent his days behind the counter selling cloth. But selling cloth, it turns out, was something Francis was very good at. He had a gift for selling, for saying just the right thing, for handling the beautiful fabrics in a way that was elegant and casually respectful. I think it likely that the customers thought that a little bit of Francis's charm would rub off onto their purchases. This was a time when fashions changed quickly, so there was always a desire on the part of the wealthy to have the newest and most stylish of everything. Which made Pietro rich and let Francesco live a life of ease, but seemed to give the lie to mother Pica's prediction that Francis would be a "son of God."

In those days, you reached your maturity at age 15. To be young and wealthy and to live at a time when there were 150 religious holidays a year and in a place where most of your living was done outside was a combination sure to produce opportunities for singing and dancing and party-making and this became Francis' calling. The other youths were never bored when Francis was around. He knew how to organize a party, how to reserve the best table in a restaurant, how to choose the best of everything. How different things would be in just a few years! And though his father was greedy and tight-fisted, for some reason he indulged his oldest son, so there was always plenty of money to spend, either on festivities or to give to the poor.

Francis, you might say, was in love with life. And why not, seeing as life was so good and so full of ease? But, he also loved the natural world, the meadows, the woods and nothing so much as the light of the region of Italy called "Perugia." The times he lived in were not always happy times, though. There was a famine in the area during Francis' youth and the threat

of the plague and lepers who lived at the outskirts of the town. He found the smells associated with the lepers to be “incredibly disagreeable.” Human misery and death. He held his nose when he sped off on horseback with his friends. Later, he would be ashamed of such acts.

To be a merchant and to spend your days in your store meant that you were constantly the recipient of news from all over and you were also the conveyer of news. And during this time of wealth and ease for some folks and dire poverty for a third of the population, the news on some days was of groups that were popping up devoted to living the message of Christ in a purer way than was generally practiced. “God’s poor” one group called themselves. They wanted to renounce everything; they criticized the princes of the Church for dressing in sumptuous clothes; they wanted to be like the “poor Lord Christ” who had owned nothing (*GF*, p. 30). One monk from Calabria argued that the reign of the Father had ended; that it had given way to the reign of the Son; and that that would soon give way to the reign of the Holy Spirit, the reign of Love. Love would bring happiness to men. This is the kind of message that would appeal to young Francis. The idea of the “Brothers of the Free Spirit,” which called for the sharing of all worldly goods was a very attractive notion. They wanted to change the world with gentleness. They said that you had to be crazy like Christ. “Love, love, love”-- very appealing. Julien Green, the author of *God’s Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*, compared these folks to the hippies of the 1960s. Sounds about right.

But, Francis kept up his high-spirited ways till around the age of twenty-five. By then, his elegance and jokes and never-ending high spirits made him a kind of legend in the town. And because he was so generous, people did not need to feel jealous of him. He was living high on the hog as they say in the South. The nights would end, one author says “in casual copulation” in the alleys and the plazas. Francis was caught between the carnal pleasures that came with the life his father wanted for him and the life of simplicity and sacrifice that would be in line with his mother’s prediction that he would be a “son of God.” Something had to give and at length, it did.

One day Francis was chatting with some important customers in his father’s shop-- the most elegant shop in town, when a dirty fellow, dressed in rags and smelling, well, bad-- showed up “mumbling about the love of God.” Usually, Francis would have given him something, but now he felt

ashamed of this visitor here in the shop where only the best would do. He sent the beggar away. The beggar knew better than to protest; off he went. Francis hated ugliness and now things were right again; he was surrounded by beauty and elegance. But a voice cried out-- the voice of conscience. And Francis couldn't stand it, so he left the astounded would-be shoppers behind as he raced outside to catch up with the beggar. He felt sure that the one he had thrown out was God, himself. Appearances should mean nothing. He filled up the man's hand with silver pieces. The man was astounded.

I don't know if the stories are connected, but there is another story you should know. It's the story of the simpleton. He was a simpleminded fellow who walked the streets of Assisi and received the kind of superstitious respect that was accorded to such folk because they were deemed to be under God's protection. Innocent and inoffensive. He just had one strange habit. Every time he saw Francis, he removed his coat and spread it on the ground so that this "ruler of youth" could walk over it. One day he announced "The young man will accomplish great things and be given magnificent honors by the faithful." You have to wonder what Francis made of that. Maybe he took it as a call.

In January of the year 1200, war broke out with Perugia. Battles were fought off and on for almost two years until the night of December 22, 1202, when a decisive battle was fought in Assisi. Francis, though not a knight himself, rode with the knights and was captured. It was a bloody battle. Archers and infantrymen were butchered. The knights (and Francis with them), were thrown into prison. They shivered through the night in the dark, dank prison. We are told that Francis was the only one not to complain. It was strange, but his behavior remained the same as when he was free to frolic with his friends. He smiled, he joked, he even got a few of his companions to smile, but after a while, his goodwill became irritating to his companions. Exasperated, the others asked how he could remain cheerful when chains were weighing him down at ankles and wrists. He is supposed to have said "I rejoice because someday I shall be venerated as a saint all over the world." One author imagines that this announcement was met by "silent dismay." Apparently, Francis had gone crazy. Or maybe, as Julien Green says, "Francis says it in the grip of divine inspiration." Prison can open up people to all kinds of new experiences. Francis spent a year in prison. His lungs which were not great to begin with, deteriorated over that time. He was lucky, though. There was a charitable organization that

looked after sick prisoners; they obtained his release in exchange for a ransom. The next part of his life was spent in recovering from tuberculosis.

He limped from room to room in the family home, leaning on a cane. The thing he most wanted in life was some kind of glory. He wanted to be adored. And yet, he knew that that was at odds with what it meant to be a saint, to be a son of God. Sometimes he was fascinated with one kind of glory, sometimes with another. I think that we can say truly that he was a dreamer.

A knight named Gautier de Brienne was lord of Sicily for a while-- from 1200 to 1205, actually. His daring exploits as he made his way north through Italy captured the attention of wealthy romantic young men, Francis high among them during those days. His mind was made up. He was going to be a knight. He had made friends with a nobleman, probably one he had met while he was imprisoned and he made plans to accompany that great lord to Apulia to meet up with the troops of Gautier de Brienne. His father, Pietro, approved of the plan because it would bring glory to the family. The suit of armor had to be first-rate. It took weeks for the best craftsmen in Assisi to fashion it. Though it was made of steel, the joints were so flexible that they took into account every movement of the body. When you added up the cost of the armor (set off with decorations of gold, no less) and the horse and the trappings of the horse and the squire to carry his master's shield, the cost was equal to that of a farm. Shameful, eh? And yet Francis' father paid for it all. And the people of Assisi said that he must have lost his mind, squandering all that money while people were going hungry. Crazy Francis. Crazy, lovable Francis.

He traveled to the next town, Spoleto. Exhausted from the journey, he fell sick in the inn where his squire and he took their lodgings. And there occurred the most mysterious episode in his life. He heard a voice speaking to him in the silence of the night. The voice spoke in an affectionate tone. It asked what he was going to do. Francis explained his plans.

The voice asked "Who can give you more? The master or the servant?"

"The master!"

"Then why are you abandoning the master for the servant and the prince for the vassal?"

"What do you wish me to do, Lord?"

"Return to the land where you were born, and you will be told what to

do.”

Our author tells us that the words were harsh, but the tone was gentle, because “it was the Lord’s voice.”

He stayed in Spoleto for a while. Gautier de Brienne was captured and his men were wiped out. Francis suffered a bout of what was called the quartan ague, a fever which fell every fourth day. When he got his strength back, he took the road back to Assisi. But, he could not go home wearing the armor. That would be pathetic. So he sold it and his horse and bought simpler clothes. We can imagine his father’s reaction. He had become God’s fool.

This was the period of the great conversion for Francis. Human language hardly seemed to make sense. Notions of time and space faded away. He lost track of his own identity. He became lost in a kind of sublime happiness. Things such as ambition and money and power and pleasure seemed empty. The only thing that existed was the memory of that voice and its echoes in him. He became a stranger to himself. And yet, somehow, he found himself. He lapsed into silence. No more singing. He gave alms to all the beggars. If he ran out of money, he’d give away his cap or his belt. One day he gave away his shirt. Julien Green says he had a mania for going to extremes. There is certainly evidence for that.

Francis made his way beyond the edge of the town where he found a cave to pray in. He spent hours there in agony, repenting of the years that he had squandered. He took stock of the past; it filled him with horror. He felt that he had been in the grip of sin. He was exhausted when he left the cave. But he came back again and again. Finally, he emerged with a sense that grace once again filled him, that he had surrendered his heart to love. He fell madly in love with Love.

Once again he heard the voice of the Lord, we are told. He was told of the inner transformation that was to be his. “Replace what you still love carnally and vainly with spiritual goods... Prefer bitterness to sweetness if you wish to know me...” What is bitterness in this context? This may be the strangest tale of all. One day as he was riding around Assisi, he heard the familiar leaden-footed tread of the leper, shaking his clapper. Although, he felt revolted at the sight, Francis leapt from his horse and walked up to the leper. We are told that the leper’s face was “one vast sore.” He “took his hand, and placed his mouth-- that once so squeamish mouth-- on the leper’s

rotting flesh. An immense joy swept over the young man, and his kiss of peace was immediately returned. Turning back to his horse, he remounted and wished to glance at the leper but” an early biographer tells us “he looked in all directions to no avail: He could see no one. With his heart pounding, Francis began to sing” (*GF*, p. 74).

Sources:

God's Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi by Julien Green. Harper & Row. San Francisco. 1985.

Wikipedia: “Francis of Assisi;” “Perugia;” “Gautier de Brienne”