

St Francis of Assisi A Reflection on his Feast Day

Francis was the popular, carefree son of a wealthy merchant of Assisi, Peter Bernadone. However, events occasioned his conversion to a new way of life. First, on the losing side of a battle with the Perugians, he landed in prison. Incarceration severely affected his health. Then, a year after regaining his freedom, and on another military enterprise, he abruptly turned back. Tradition relates this change of plans to a dream he had on the first night of his journey.

Now he was drawn to poverty, prayer, and service of the poor, especially lepers. Tradition further relates that, while praying in the rundown church of San Damiano in 1207, the crucified Christ summoned him to repair his house. Francis immediately added restoring dilapidated churches to his way of life. Then, on the feast of St Matthias in 1209, at Mass in the church of Our Lady of the Angels, Francis discerned that Jesus was calling him to preach the Gospel, just as Matthias had been called to do.

Perhaps to his surprise, a few laymen of Assisi joined him. *The Legend of the Three Companions*, in the medieval tradition of lives of saints, reports that Francis, with two of his new companions, went to the church of St Nicholas and opened the Bible at random three times, in honour of the Trinity, to discern what God wanted of them.

The Legend continues, "At its first opening, Francis's eyes fell on the text, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell everything you possess and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven.' When he opened the Scripture a second time he read: 'Take nothing for your journey,' and at the third opening the text was, 'If any man wishes to come after me, he must deny himself.' Then Francis said to his companions, 'Brothers, this is our life and the rule of all who will want to join our company.'" That same year Pope Innocent III approved the Rule, referred to later, as the Primitive Rule.

The little band returned to Assisi to live adjacent to the chapel of Our Lady of the Angels at the *Portiuncula* (Little Patch of Land). The community practiced radical poverty, supported themselves by begging and by taking on whatever manual work they could find, and committed themselves to a form of preaching, marked by simplicity, and empowered by the witness of their lives. Francis soon dispersed his brothers throughout central Italy, thus commencing a period of extraordinary growth and transformation of the life of his followers.

Today is the feast day of St Francis and this year it is the occasion of Pope Francis issuing his Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, that draws its inspiration from the *Poverello*, the Poor Man of Assisi. May his intercession, and the encyclical of Pope Francis, promote in our troubled times, the wish of the saint to all he met: Peace and all good!

Fr David Willis op