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St. John's Tappahannock
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How St. Francis found his Vocation

St. Francis was born John Giovanni Francesco Bernardoni in the late 12th century, with Francis actually being a nickname. He grew up in a merchant family when Italy was drowning in a polarizing political climate and an unrepentant Christianity full of excess.

Of the merchant and noble classes, and it was no different for Francis. At this time in his life, he loved chivalry. Even greater he loved the way chivalry was sung and spoken of by the French troubadours, as he loved to sing.

Chivalry was a set of values that permeated every aspect of the Middle Ages. To be a knight was to ascend to the height of chivalry, embodied by great acts of military service and the love of a beautiful maiden. Likewise, knighthood could be expensive. However, being the son of a merchant, Francis would have had the means to finance this dream, putting it within reach.

At the age of 20, fueled by the military glory that he long desired, he ran off to join the civil war between Assisi and Perugia. Ultimately, it didn't end well and he was taken as a prisoner of war. It appears he was not too detoured in his pursuits since around the age of 25, he agreed to set out for another war, this time in Apulia, in dreams of finally being knighted.

However, before his quest even began, it ended quickly and much differently than Francis had expected. Before he could even set a

foot on that battlefield, Francis was given two life-changing visions.

The first was before he left Assisi for Apulia. At night he saw a vision of his house as a palace filled with everything a Knight would own, including a beautiful woman. This vision gave him great hope and the success that he thought awaited him. To young Francis, still absorbed in the cares of the world, it seemed as if he was given confirmation that God would bring him the great reward of military success.

Setting off the next day, he had barely made it out of Assisi on his way to Apulia when the second vision occurred. After stopping for the night, he heard a voice speak to him.

Franciscan brothers Leo, Angelo and Ruffino, authors of The Legend of the Three Companions, recount this vision. “Half-awake he heard someone asking him where he wanted to go. When Francis reveals to him his entire plan, the other said: “Who can do more for you? The lord or the servant?” When Francis answered him, “The Lord”, he again said to him: “Then why are you abandoning the lord for the servant, the patron for the client?” And Francis said, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” “Go back to your land,” he said, “and what you are to do will be told to you. You must understand in another way the vision which you saw.”

Francis had misunderstood his previous vision indeed. The great success of a knight was not for mortal men, but was meant for God. This now seemed a clear directive, one he was ready to embrace. To the shock of his friends, he admitted to them he was abandoning the earthly glory he so earnestly sought but with the hope of a greater purpose with God.

During this time of awakening, it was chronicled that Francis saw a leper on the road. Lepers, with their disfiguring disease were repulsive to a young Francis, who upon sight of them, would often steer his horse in the other direction. However, at this time it was different. Francis felt the Lord calling him to dismount from his horse and make way to the outcast. Francis obeyed, and at that moment something unheard of happened in the merchant's pampered son. He was overcome by compassion, ran to the leper, kissed his hand and gave him money. After embracing, Francis departed the encounter a changed man.

13th century biographer of Francis, Saint Bonaventure would write: “From that time forth. He put on the spirit of poverty, the feeling of humility and the love of inward godliness.”

In his new spirit of poverty and desire to serve the Lord as a knight and his Kingdom, he was consumed to meditate and pray for the Lord to reveal what he desired. Yet nothing came immediately, and in this time Francis simply practiced acts of charity the best he knew. He served the poor with whatever he could give for him. This meant selling his father's merchant goods and lavishly giving away the proceeds to the poor. In his pursuit of God's purpose for him, he took a pilgrimage to Rome.

Adorned in his fine merchant clothes and bag of gold, he visited Saint Peter's tomb. While there Francis judged at the tomb how other pilgrims gave so little to the collection, so he responded by throwing his gold coins before the tomb with a great show, which drew much attention and admiration.

However, after Francis spent time praying in the church, his actions of display with the coins compelled him to switch places with a meager beggar outside the church. Giving this beggar his

clothes, probably made of velvet and intricate embroidery, Francis then lived among the poor in Rome, at the mercy of others to provide for his means of survival. It was in seeing the generosity of others, seeing them give to him as a disguised beggar, that Francis became even more certain of the status of the Lord was calling him to in his lowly estate.

He received peace and happiness by denying himself and relinquishing all to the Lord. He began to receive what Francis would come to call the “sweetness of the Lord.”

Shortly after, the Lord urged Francis to go to the lepers in the outskirts of the Italian town of Assisi. Moved by that new sweetness of the Lord, Francis went into the lazaret of San Lazaro d’Arce where lepers lived, and begged forgiveness from them for how he had previously despised them. He gave them his money and kissing them all departed only after spending a long enough time in their company.

It is after a series of all these events that we come to the culmination of Francis [early life] and the start of his true calling. In 1206, what seemed a usual day of reflection and prayer, Francis was moved by the Holy Spirit to venture inside an unassuming and dilapidated church known as San Damiano. He knelt, as he often did before an old Byzantine crucifix, when, miraculously, the crucified Christ spoke audibly and clearly to Francis.

“Francis, don't you see my house is being destroyed? Go then and rebuild it for me.” Stunned and trembling, he said “I will do so gladly, Lord.” He was filled with such joy and became so radiant with light over that message that he knew in his soul that it was truly Christ crucified who spoke to Him. He was so overcome and

so moved by these words that he took them literally (to repair that very church) and sold more of his father's business assets to give the money to the priest for supplies to rebuild the ruined Church of San Damiano.

The priest, thinking it was a joke, refused to accept any offer from him knowing the reputation. And the potential backlash of the Bernadone family. The priest was right to be afraid of Francis's father, who was so enraged at Francis's behavior and the family business, his money he was so freely giving to everyone, that he summoned his son to court in hopes of shaming his son to abandon this absurd life of prayer and waywardness, and return to the family business.

He demanded his son return the money. Francis refused to obey, saying he was under the service of God, not the civil court. So Francis father took the matter to the Church and thus into the hands of the Bishop of Assisi.

In the public square of Assisi, Francis stood with the Bishop before his father. The Bishop ordered Francis to give away to give back any goods acquired by his father, but added, “My son, have confidence in the Lord and act courageously. Do not be afraid, for he will be your help and will abundantly provide you with whatever is necessary for the work of his Church.” Comforted by these words, Francis removed all his clothes and standing mostly naked, declared “Until now I have called Pietro de Bernardone my father, but because I have proposed to serve God, I returned to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also the clothing which is his, wanting to say now on: “Our Father who art in heaven”, not “My father Pietro de Bernardone. With this event, Francis completely surrendered everything he owned to

serve the Lord and was on his way to becoming Christ's knight. He was discovering that his promised Princess from his first vision was to be “Lady Poverty”, as he put it, a lady he would serve well.

Francis, actions speak profoundly to an inward surrender of spiritual poverty. The merchant's son had emptied himself spiritually of all he had in his heart, his hopes, his dreams, the favor of his family, and the admiration of others. In this emptiness, God had filled him with His sweetness, and Francis moved forward with true and satisfying happiness.

In the future he fought for his 12 companions who devoted their lives to poverty, chastity and obedience, to have papal approval to become an Order, or a brotherhood.

His brotherhood grew, and they repaired and renewed many abandoned churches, not just the church of Damiano.

And of course, you know the rest, St. Francis had a particular love of nature and animals, which often came to him, and rested in his peaceful presence.

Finally, in today’s gospel of Luke, chapter 17 verse 5, the disciples urge Jesus to “increase their faith.“ They did not just say this ‘out of the blue’. If we look at the previous verses 3-4 we see what compelled their urgent request.

Jesus had just said, “Take heed to yourselves, if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times and says, ‘I repent’, you must forgive him. Jesus said the same thing about limitless forgiveness once to Peter saying, “You must forgive your brother seventy times seven times.” (Matthew 18:22)

Then Jesus uses an astounding image - "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, `Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." First, he is saying, 'Don't worry, you can practice radical forgiveness. Trust me!'

Secondly, this is an extreme image of the impossible being made possible. In this agrarian culture everyone would have known that a mulberry tree had delicious fruit, and had wood that was used in carpentry; they also know it had a large root system that could not survive in the sea. But with faith, even this outrageous possibility was deemed possible.

This type of possibility is witnessed in the life of St. Francis, and his perseverance to become a servant of Christ, who prayed hard for specific things, as such starting the Order of St. Francis, serving and healing leper communities, and working hard to bring struggling churches back to new life.

For Francis, it was no sacrifice, he would have said, 'I was just doing what needed to be done, what we all ought to do."

May we lean in as individuals and as a church community at St. John's Tappahannock, discerning ways is which we are particularly called to grow anew. And pray together for those things. In the meantime, let us be loving, forgiving and living with the generosity of spirit that creates miracles.

Amen.

Source:

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