

## OUR SERAPHIC BROTHER SAINT FRANCIS

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*BRO. AUGUSTINE SKEHAN, O. P.*



IN the cool twilight within one of the old churches of Rome — we know not exactly which — two strangers paused and looked at each other. Both wore the shabby clothing of poor men, one the rough tunic of a workman circled with a rope girdle, the other the dusty apparel of a pilgrim. He of the hempen girdle was a small, mild Umbrian with a twinkle of disarming friendliness in his eye; the other, a bearded Spaniard of assured carriage, of grave demeanor, and with the glowing zeal of an apostle manifest on his earnest countenance. These two, hitherto utter strangers to each other, now each recognized in the other a kindred spirit. Each saw in the other a heroic idealism, an all embracing charity, and a burning love for the things of God.

Perhaps to the casual observer this meeting would have small significance. Seemingly it was but the chance encounter of two poor pilgrim acquaintances glad to see a familiar face amid the transient throngs of Rome. But to one who could have read the inner souls of these two chosen saints and to us who know the subsequent story, it has a tremendous import. For this quiet meeting of two unassuming strangers was the meeting of the founders of two of the Church's greatest religious Orders. This was the first meeting of St. Francis and St. Dominic.

Up until this time, though their paths led in the same direction, they had not met. They had been specially called by God to found new bodies of religious under distinctively new forms of organization and they were pursuing this appointed task along very similar lines. Almost at the same time the two had laid the foundations of their work, St. Francis at the little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels situated at some little distance outside the city of Assisi and famed under the name of the Portiuncula; St. Dominic at the church of Our Lady of Prouille at Prouille in France.

After the first small bands of followers had been formed, each founder saw the necessity of definite organization and ecclesiastical recognition. About the same time each sought

approval from Rome. Already there manifests itself that singular parallel in the lives and works of these two saints which was to draw them together as the closest of friends and to make them truly brothers.

The night before their meeting, St. Dominic in a vision saw Our Lady present two men to her Divine Son, two men who would go forth as His special champions to combat the rampant heresies of Europe and to arouse the tepid faith of a worldly Christendom. In one of these envisioned men St. Dominic recognized himself, but the other was a stranger to him. He closely observed this unknown man and so fixed in his mind the recollection of his appearance that it remained vividly present to him even after the vision. What then was his joy on the following day to encounter this very stranger in a church where he chanced to stop for prayer as he passed its door. Here before him was the man he had seen in his vision. Here was the associate of his labors, the man who was treading a path parallel to his own.

Their embrace was a sacred ceremony. It initiated that great friendship which was to continue throughout their lives and to be perpetuated in the intimate brotherhood enduring between the sons of the two orders which they founded. Ever since that meeting of the two sainted founders more than seven hundred years ago, the same close bond of mutual esteem and affection has joined all Dominicans and Franciscans.

The parallel which continued in the lives of the two patriarchs and in the histories of their respective orders has been clearly noted by Père Lacordaire. He points out their similar procedure in founding orders of a three-fold division with one part for religious men, one part for religious women and one for lay persons still in the world. The same sovereign Pontiff, Pope Honorius III confirmed their institutes by apostolic bulls. At a later date, one pope, Gregory IX, canonized both.

Both were fired by the same apostolic zeal to convert the Saracen. Francis succeeded in penetrating the lines of the invaders in Spain and in preaching Christ in the presence of Melek-el-Kamil, the sultan. But both were forced by the urgent need of their labors at home to forego their cherished ambitions of a personal apostolate to the heathen; both subdued their own yearnings for a martyr's crown. Both were imbued by a love of poverty—Francis preeminently so as he esteemed poverty as

a knight esteems his lady; it filling for him much the same position as Truth held for Dominic. Their entire lives, indeed, coursed side by side in holy amity and their friendship did not die with death. That love still lives on in their sons.

The fraternal love between their descendants finds its most shining exemplification in the beautiful friendship between the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bonaventure, the Doctor Seraphic. These two learned saints, the intellectual lights of their respective orders and of the University of Paris when that institution was at the zenith of its Catholic glory, vied in turning each his own honors to the honor of the other. By a singular coincidence, St. Bonaventure was born in 1221, the year of St. Dominic's death, while St. Thomas was born in 1226, the year that St. Francis died.

Side by side the Franciscans and Dominicans have pushed forward into heathen lands, sowing and watering the seed of Christ. Side by side they have borne the brunt of envious persecution as, for instance, that waged against them by William of St. Amour over their admission to the professorial chairs in the universities; and side by side they have many times spilled their blood in defense of their Faith, as they did at Gorkam.

This special connection between the two orders is further emphasized by numerous customs preserved down to our own day and is officially enshrined in the Constitutions of the orders. On St. Dominic's Anniversary each year, the Franciscans repair to the Dominican convents and there celebrate the Mass in honor of the apostolic patriarch, while on St. Francis' Day the Dominicans go in turn to the Franciscan convents to solemnize the Mass in honor of the Seraphic Francis. In the Dominican Constitutions we read injunctions in several places to revere Franciscans in a particular manner.

These few citations evidence the high regard in which St. Francis and all things Franciscan are held by Dominicans. This esteem is perennial, but the present year which marks the seven hundredth anniversary of St. Francis' death makes the expression of this feeling in some more specific tribute especially timely. A rapid review of the outstanding incidents in St. Francis' life will be well worth recalling.



From youth Francis was a lover of the beautiful. Born in 1182 in the pleasant Umbrian Valley at the town of Assisi he

grew amidst surroundings the equal in quiet beauty to any that Nature has anywhere to offer. Assisi itself stands on a ridge in the valley and all around the steep hills raise a borderline of peaks that are tipped with snow in the winter months, but in summer seem softened by the flowered slopes that hang like variegated draperies from their crests. This was the charming setting of his boyhood years.

From his French mother he learned music and singing and the legends of the Troubadours. It was she who taught him the musical language of Provence and told him the tales of its chivalry and knight errantry. His father, Peter Bernardone, was a merchant of sufficient wealth to insure a luxurious home and a gentleman's education for his son. It was his father's ambition to see the Bernardone name exalted by his son to the rank of the nobility, and this eagerness made an otherwise niggardly parent lavish in indulging every whim of the gay young Francis so long as it tended to increase the youth's popularity with the young nobles of the locality.

The boy's naturally merry disposition and the generous resources upon which he could draw soon made him a prime favorite among his associates. In short order he became the leader in their civic frolics and a veritable king of youthful revels. No one delighted more than he in their feasting, their sports, their feats of strength and their princely display. He was always in the midst of their merry-making, bubbling over with the gay exuberance of youth. Yet in spite of his high spirits he never descended to anything base or evil and his prodigal largess was frequently bestowed on the poor as well as on his boon companions.

When he sallied forth with the fighting men of the town to wage war on the neighboring city of Perugia, he seemed well started toward the knighthood which his father longed to see him attain. But in reality it was the first step toward an entirely different mode of life. The military expedition was unsuccessful and for over a year Francis lay imprisoned in Perugia. While suffering this confinement he contracted a fever and was released. During the dreary days of his illness his thoughts for the first time turned to a life in the service of a greater than earthly King. But this first presentiment of his future course did not persist long after his recovery, and restored health found him back again in the midst of his accustomed revels. Yet a

change had occurred. The pleasures that satisfied his boyhood now palled and he looked for glories of a more substantial kind.

His fancy was caught by the reports which reached Assisi of the noble Prince of Taranto who was in arms defending the Church and the cause of Italian liberty against the emperor. Stirred by dreams of romantic adventures and restless for activity, he set out in the company of a small force raised by Count Gentile, a knight of Assisi. The call of God, however, was not to be resisted. The farther he rode the more pensive he became. A short way beyond Spoleto, illness again seized upon him and the voice of God came to him during the night so clearly that he could not disregard the command.

This was an instance of one of the numerous prophetic dreams and visions which constantly recurred through the life of St. Francis and surround his story with an aura of supernatural romance. The words which he heard on this occasion were these: "Francis, is it best to serve the Lord or the servant?" He replied: "Assuredly it is best to serve the Lord." "Why, then," continued the voice, "do you make a lord of the servant?" Francis as he heard these words perceived their inner meaning and, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, humbly petitioned: "Lord, what dost Thou wish me to do?" The voice then bade him return to Assisi and there God's designs for him would be made known.

His sudden reappearance in Assisi was hailed with delight by the thoughtless merry-makers seeking his company, but Francis no longer had taste for their gaieties and his abstracted manner drew gibes that he had fallen in love. "Yes," replied Francis, "it is true. I am thinking of a wife more beautiful, nobler, and richer than any you have ever seen." It was his prophetic betrothal to Lady Poverty.

The next few years were for Francis a period of torturous uncertainty. He had heard the divine call but was still uncertain of the direction in which it summoned him. His soul was a turmoil of emotions. He burned with intense longing for an unknown ideal and cherished high resolves for a future that remained completely dark. At the same time he experienced the keenest of revulsion for his former extravagant life and bitterly repented his sins. Much of his time and most of his money was now given to the poor. It is related that one day while riding through the country he encountered a leper. The

hideous appearance of the scabrous beggar aroused such revulsion in his beauty loving soul that his first impulse was to spur his horse in the other direction. But this occasion seemed to present a test of special importance. Checking his repugnance, he dismounted, placed his purse in the beggar's hand and kissed it. Then embracing the leper he besought of him the kiss of peace. Francis was entering a new and loftier world of conquest.

He was now about twenty-five and the ground plan of his life's work was becoming clear. Still, however, the full understanding of his future vocation and the details of its execution remained a problem. About this time he made a pilgrimage to Rome. Here he was grieved to notice the smallness of the alms left at the tomb of St. Peter and he emptied the contents of his own purse upon it. Next he exchanged his costly garments with a beggar and stood for the rest of the day at the door of the basilica in tattered rags.

On his return journey to Assisi he stopped in a neglected little chapel known as San Damiano's. While praying before the altar for more enlightenment in the matter of his vocation, he heard the customary voice of his visions coming from the crucifix: "Francis, repair My house which you see is falling into ruin." His ardent nature was quick to act upon the literal meaning of the words. Hastening home Francis bundled together a quantity of draperies and then riding with these to the busy mart at Foligno, he sold both the cloth and his horse to raise funds. With the money thus secured he returned to the poor priest in charge of the run-down San Damiano and offered it for the restoration of the edifice. The priest was deeply moved, but he knew something of Francis' strange actions of late and he feared to accept so large a sum. Francis, unable to persuade him to take the money, refused himself to have any more to do with it and casting it on the ledge of the church window returned home.

His father, who had been absent on a trading journey in France for several months, returned about this time and was outraged at the reports of Francis' lavish charities. Francis fled to a cave near San Damiano to avoid his father's wrath. After a month of near starvation he summoned up courage to return home and was at once locked up by his irate parent. His mother, however, succeeded in releasing him during the elder Bernardone's absence and Francis returned to San Damiano's and gave himself unreservedly to God.

When next his angry father came to seize him, Francis pleaded immunity because of his dedication to the service of God. His father then appealed to the Bishop of Assisi, Don Guido Secundi, and before that prelate there occurred the event which has always been recognized as the mystic espousal of the Poverello to Lady Poverty. After he had, upon the advice of the bishop, sent for the money, which was still lying undisturbed at San Damiano, and returned it to his father, Francis renounced his heritage, and stripping himself of the very clothes he wore with the exception of his hair-shirt, he cast them at the feet of his father exclaiming: "Hear ye all and understand, until now I have called Peter Bernardone my father; but because I propose to serve the Lord, I return to him his money, and all the clothes I had of him; for I wish now to say only: Our Father who art in heaven." Such was the espousal of St. Francis to Lady Poverty.

From thenceforward his life was one of mendicancy. Hardship and rebuff met him at every turn. He resumed the manual labors he had commenced in restoring San Damiano and from his former playfellows he humbly begged gifts of stone, mortar, and other building materials. When he finished repairing the chapel, he turned attention to other dilapidated shrines and sought the aid of others in carrying on this good work. These labors filled several years and were a preparation to his great life's work, the building of a world-wide edifice, the Franciscan Order.

The time was ripe. One morning at Mass he was particularly struck by the gospel of the day describing the manner in which the Apostles were sent forth with "neither gold nor silver, nor money in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor staff. . . ." After asking the priest to explain it to him, he joyfully accepted it as his rule of life. "This is what I have been seeking!" he exclaimed. "This is what my heart yearns for."

In rapid succession others came and asked to be associated with him. The little band grew and as each new perplexity in the guidance of the community arose, Francis turned as usual to the Gospel for light. When their number had reached twelve Francis found it expedient to draw up a rule, and when this was composed the twelve Penitents of Assisi as they called themselves went to Rome to seek the pope's approbation. After a

first rebuff, they succeeded in obtaining a kindlier welcome and were empowered to preach repentance everywhere. At the same time all received ecclesiastical tonsure, Francis himself being ordained deacon later on.

The institute grew rapidly and soon demanded a revised constitution. This was drawn up and the Order finally solemnly approved by Pope Honorius III on November 29, 1223.

St. Francis' story from this point is principally the story of his order, and a record of its phenomenal growth demands a larger treatment than is possible here. His own personal life became each day more like that of his Divine Master. Indeed, his eagerness for closer imitation of Christ was the burning desire that fired his every action. When at last he received the sacred stigmata, the likeness was wonderfully complete.

His last years were spent in great physical anguish and his eyesight gradually failed. Yet his spirits remained buoyant to the last. It was at this time that he composed his beautiful "Canticle of the Sun," a "Benedicite Domino" in which his poetic soul thanks God for the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth and the elements. When he felt that his end was near he asked to be carried once more to the little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, the cradle of his Order. As he was carried out of the city of Assisi he instructed his brothers to set down the litter on which he lay, and there on a little hill outside the gates of Assisi, he turned his face for the last time toward his beloved city. His sightless eyes could no longer behold the fair panorama, but his vivid memory pictured the place for him and he raised his hand in final benediction.

In a little cell at the Portiuncula "Sister Death" came to claim him. His last hours were spent in the midst of his brothers singing the Canticle of the Sun and the 141st Psalm. As the last strophe was sung, he cried out, "Welcome, Sister Death." Lying on the ground and with ashes sprinkled over his body, he died just after sunset on October 3, 1226.



That was seven hundred years ago. But the world has not forgotten. This Seventh Centenary finds more friends than ever gathered to honor the Seraphic Saint of Assisi. The celebrations of the event are world-wide. His Holiness Pope Pius XI issued a remarkable encyclical on St. Francis on May 6. After reviewing the saint's life, His Holiness discusses his virtues, giving as

the most prominent poverty, humility, obedience, devotion to the Holy See, purity, and charity. While praising the world's present interest in St. Francis, His Holiness takes occasion to vindicate the true figure of the saint. He refutes the distortions which would paint him only as a poet, or admirer of nature, or national hero, or precursor of socialism.

The Franciscans, naturally, have charge of the official program and they have drawn it on generous lines worthy of the greatness of their father. The First Festival of the Pardon opened the Franciscan Year. At Assisi, Pontifical Mass was celebrated on the morning of August 1, and at evening on the same day, the procession of religious bodies and laymen left from the Franciscan Basilica of the Portiuncula in memory of the ancient procession which was the opening of the Jubilee. On the 11th of August was celebrated in all its antique solemnity the Festival of the Patron of Assisi in that Cathedral which has been the witness of the most renowned Franciscan events.

On the 12th was celebrated the festival of St. Clare who brought to the Franciscan Order the unlimited virtue of the female heart. Between the months of September and October are distributed the most important festivities which represent the nucleus of all the centenary celebrations. The weeks of September have been dedicated to the commemoration of the return to Assisi, according to the statements contained in the "Mirror of Perfection"; to the commemoration of the Hymn of the Creatures in the Church of San Damiano; to the commemoration of the Holy Stigmata and its celebration at Verna, near Florence, and to the commemoration of the transferal of the dying saint to the Portiuncula and to the Benediction of Assisi. The first week of October will be marked by festivals in the Church of St. Maria degli Angeli honoring the Translation of St. Francis, and at the triple basilica erected over his tomb and at the Church of St. Clare, those honoring his Glorification. The three following weeks will be dedicated to the celebration of the Franciscan virtues of Poverty, Humility, and Fortitude. The second part of the celebration extends through the latter part of 1926 and into the first half of 1927, and during that time will be celebrated the Institution of the Crib, at Christmas; the disrobing of St. Francis before the Bishop, on February 2; the Sermon of St. Francis and the Vocation of St. Clare, on Palm Sunday; of the Love of the Creatures near the Hermitage of the Prisons in the

Abbey of St. Benedict, on Ascension Day; and the Celebration of the Third Order on August 1. In the spring of 1927, in Assisi, will be inaugurated the exhibition of the Franciscan Arts.

Throughout Italy various monuments, such as the reminder erected at Rome in front of the Cathedral of St. John Lateran, have been raised this year. Premier Mussolini has declared October 4, 1926, a national holiday and has called upon all official representatives of Italy in foreign countries to celebrate that day with becoming solemnity. The Italian Government has likewise issued a series of Franciscan postage stamps.

American Franciscans have been particularly active. A Franciscan pilgrimage to Assisi, Lourdes, Lisieux, and Rome left from New York on July 3. Every convent has its own program of celebrations, but the large event will be the National Convention of the Third Order of St. Francis to be held in New York City on October 4, 5, and 6. Plans have been matured for large sacred and secular functions.

Even outside of Catholic circles the Franciscan significance of the year is appreciated. President Butler of Columbia University, writing to Premier Mussolini in connection with the start on the \$1,000,000 Italian House devoted to Italian culture which is to be opened as a part of Columbia University, declared: "It is my intention to give the inaugural ceremony the dignity it deserves. . . . Accordingly I should like to celebrate its establishment with a worthy and solemn commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi, whose high spiritual glory is today justly associated with the national ideal of the Italian people—of the Italian nation."

The Little Poor Man of God has captured the world. His name is one that endures and grows rather than wanes in popularity as time passes. His life was a ceaseless exemplification of that true Christian charity of which the world always and everywhere stands in need. His heroic example of self-abnegation and his catholic love of all God's creatures because of God have an unexpected yet compelling appeal for a world which in too great part reveres far less noble ideals. For Catholics he holds a place of prominence as one of the greatest of God's elect—as one who can at once stand close to God and close to the hearts of his fellow men; but among all his reverent followers there are none to be counted more devoted than the sons and daughters of his contemporary and friend, St. Dominic.