

## Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

### *Mystics for Skeptics* FRANCIS OF ASSISI Patron Saint of Ecology



*As many across the globe celebrated Earth Day last week, the Rev. Charles Brock devoted his latest “Mystics for Skeptics” article on St. Francis of Assisi, “Patron Saint of Ecology.” There couldn’t be a more perfect fit. Rev. Brock recounts Francis’ story, sainthood, stigmata, and unworldly relationship with the environment: birds, animals, plants, and all of nature.*

– Pat Cuneo, Jefferson Publications Coordinator

## Rev. Charles Brock April 2020

Francis of Assisi was born around 1182, one of several children of an [Italian](#) father, Pietro di Bernardone dei Moriconi, a prosperous silk merchant, and a French mother, Pica de Bourlemont, a noblewoman originally from [Provence](#). He was a roustabout in his young days cavorting about wearing loud clothes and having rich friends. He joined the local army against neighboring Perugia, was captured, and held prisoner for a year. Reenlisting, he had a vision to return to Assisi and decided to marry – to his fair bride “Lady Poverty.”

His father disowned him and took away his inheritance, but Francis did not object.



*St. Francis Abandons His Father: Francis breaks off his relationship with his father and renounces his patrimony, laying aside publicly even the garments he had received from him.*

He had a profound mystical [vision of Jesus Christ](#) in the forsaken country chapel of [San Damiano](#), just outside Assisi, in which an [Icon of Christ Crucified](#) said to him, "Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." He took this to mean the said ruined church, and so he sold some cloth from his father's store to assist the priest there for this purpose.

After his disinheritance by his father, Francis begged and spent some time in a nearby monastery laboring. He took to nursing lepers near Assisi.

His example drew others to him. Within a year, Francis had eleven followers. Hearing Francis preaching in the church of [San Rufino](#) in Assisi in 1211, the young noblewoman [Clare of Assisi](#) became deeply touched by his message and realized her calling. On the night of [Palm Sunday](#), March 28, 1212, Clare clandestinely left her family's palace. Francis received her at the Porziuncola and thereby established a woman's branch now known as the Poor Clares.



A third order was also established later called the Secular Franciscan Order. There are several groups in the world. One form is present in America in the mountains of New Mexico and Arizona known as the *Penitentes*. They are a secretive order, but by luck I was invited to spend Holy Week with them in Truchas, New Mexico, a village over 9,000 feet high founded in the 1700s. There are some private aspects, especially self-imposed flagellations, imitating St. Francis.



Lay-led services are held in moradas, Truchas seen above, and I attended their reenactment of the Last Supper (with enchiladas), Good Friday Processional, and a late night Tenebrae where at midnight 12 candles were extinguished, one by one, and chains were smashed into the wooden floor signifying Christ breaking the bonds of Hell. It was dark and dramatic. Later I also had the privilege of mounting a pilgrimage to the most important Italian sites of Francis' life.



## Nature and the Environment

Pope John Paul II declared Francis the Patron Saint of Ecology in 1979.

Francis preached the Christian doctrine that the world was created good and beautiful by God but suffers a need for redemption because of human sin. In the [Canticum of the Sun](#) he gives God thanks for Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Water, Fire, and Earth, all of which he sees as rendering praise to God.

Many of the stories that surround the life of St. Francis say that he had a great love for animals and the environment. The "Fioretti" ("Little Flowers") is a collection of [legends](#) and folklore that sprang up after Francis' death. One account describes how one day, while Francis was traveling with some companions, they happened upon a place in the road where birds filled the trees on either side. Francis told his companions to "wait for me while I go to preach to my sisters the birds." The birds surrounded him, intrigued by the power of his voice, and not one of them flew away. He is often portrayed with a bird, typically in his hand.

Another legend from the [Fioretti](#) tells that in the city of [Gubbio](#), where Francis lived for some time, was a [wolf terrifying and ferocious, who devoured people as well as animals](#). Francis went up into the hills and when he found the wolf, he made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to come to him and hurt no one. Then Francis led the wolf into the town and, surrounded by startled citizens, made a pact between them and the wolf. Because the wolf had "done evil out of hunger, the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly. In return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks." In this manner [Gubbio](#) was freed from the menace of the predator.



*St. Francis talking to the [wolf of Gubbio](#) ([Carl Weidemeyer](#), 1911)*

According to tradition, Gubbio gave the wolf an honorable burial and later built the Church of St. Francis of the Peace at the site. During renovations in 1872, the skeleton of a large wolf, apparently several centuries old, was found under a slab near the church wall and then reburied inside.

On November 29, 1979, Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis the Patron Saint of Ecology. During the World Environment Day in 1982, John Paul II said that St. Francis' love and care for creation was a challenge for contemporary Catholics and a reminder "not to behave like dissident predators where nature is concerned, but to assume responsibility for it, taking all care so that everything stays healthy and integrated, so as to offer a welcoming and friendly environment even to those who

succeed us." The same Pope wrote on the occasion of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, the saint of Assisi "offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. ..." He went on to make the point that: "As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, St. Francis invited all of creation – animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to give honor and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples." <sup>[1]</sup>

## Islam

In 1219, Francis went to Egypt during the [Fifth Crusade](#) where a Crusader army had been encamped for more than a year besieging the walled city of [Damietta](#) two miles upstream from the mouth of one of the main channels of the Nile. A bloody and futile attack on the city was launched by the Christians on August 29, 1219, following which both sides agreed to a ceasefire that lasted four weeks. It was most probably during this interlude that Francis and his companion crossed the Muslim line and were brought before the Sultan, remaining in his camp for a few days. One detail, added by Bonaventure in the official life of Francis (written 40 years after the event), has Francis offering to challenge the Sultan's "priests" to trial-by-fire in order to prove the veracity of the Christian Gospel.

According to some late sources, the Sultan gave Francis permission to visit the sacred places in the Holy Land and even to preach there. The Franciscan Order has been present in the [Holy Land](#) almost uninterruptedly since 1217 when Brother Elias arrived at Acre.<sup>[2]</sup> Francis and the Sultan obviously got on and set an example for later interfaith activities.

<sup>[1]</sup> *St Francis*, Wikipedia, (edited)

<sup>[2]</sup> *St Francis*, Wikipedia, (edited)



*St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata, fresco attributed to Giotto c. 1300; in the Church of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.*

## The Stigmata

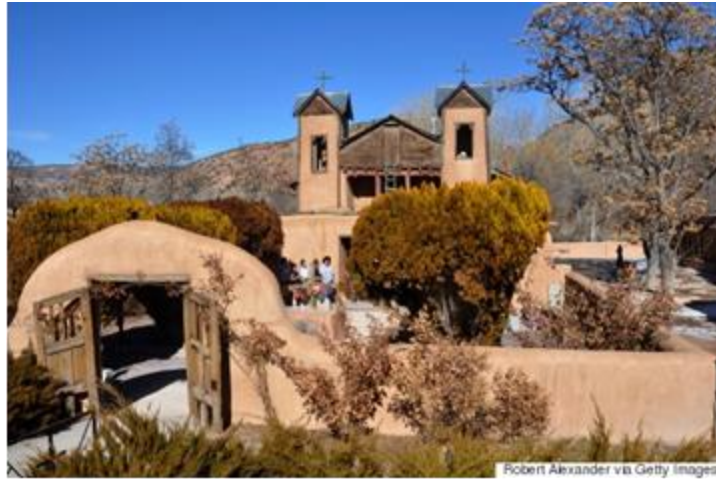
[St. Bonaventure](#), minister-general of the [Franciscans](#) from 1257 to 1274 and a leading thinker of the 13th century, described the scene: “As it stood above him, he saw that it was a man and yet a Seraph with six wings; his arms were extended and his feet conjoined, and his body was fixed to a cross. Two wings were raised above his head, two were extended as in flight, and two covered the whole body. The face was beautiful beyond all earthly beauty, and it smiled gently upon Francis. Conflicting emotions filled his heart, for though the vision brought great joy, the sight of the suffering and crucified figure stirred him to deepest sorrow. Pondering what this vision might mean, he finally understood that by God’s providence he would be made like the crucified Christ not by a bodily martyrdom but by conformity in mind and heart. Then as the vision disappeared, it left not only a greater ardour of love in the inner man but no less marvelously marked him outwardly with the [stigmata](#) of the Crucified.”

For the remainder of his life, Francis took the greatest care to hide the [stigmata](#) (marks resembling the wounds on the crucified body of Jesus Christ). Francis lived two years longer, in constant pain and almost totally blind. He died at the Porziuncola. On July 15, 1228, concluding a process of unprecedented speed, Francis was [canonized](#) by his former protector, Pope [Gregory IX](#). On the following day, the [pope](#) laid the foundation stone for the basilica that Brother Elias would build in Francis’ memory, and in 1230 the saint’s body was transferred to the lower church of the basilica.<sup>[3]</sup>

[\[3\] Ignatius Charles Brady](#) *St Francis* Encyclopedia Britannica (edited)



*Cross in New Mexico (note strange head)*



*The Santuario de Chimayo is a Roman Catholic church in Chimayo, New Mexico, built by Spanish missionaries in 1816. It is an important sacred place for the Penitentes in the region.*



*As many as 40,000 pilgrims journey to El Santuario de Chimayo each year during the Easter weekend*

#### Photo Citations

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