

Francis of Assisi

by

Dan Lindholm

Translated by Ted Warren

Storytelling in the second grade in the Waldorf schools usually consists of fables and legends. Were it only fables and legends it would be as one-sided as merely fairy tales in the first grade. We readily discover that fables and legends are opposites. Fables express human weaknesses masked in the characters of the animals. There is little to look up to and little to admire. A weak, pharisaic-like attitude might arise: We are not like them! As counter-weight we need stories with honorable characteristics, and these are found in legends. Not only because of their heartiness but also their drama, the legends of the life of Francis of Assisi are special. They have a historical core, yet he was already legendary in his own time. People must have felt the supersensible power in Francis's messages. They experienced courage and love that won over everything else. There were miracles. People witnessed actions that did not have their origin in human desires but in spiritual, moral impulses. Where such actions take place we often have miracles. That is what children learn to admire.

One fall day in 1182 in the town of Assisi a woman was giving birth to her first child but could not deliver. She labored in severe pain. That she was from a rich family did not matter; the child did not want to come forth. A pilgrim knocked on the door. When he saw the condition of the woman, he said, "This child does not want to be born into a wealthy house. Carry the woman to the barn and have her lie in an empty stall. The new child must be born on straw. For he who shall be born shall be unlike any other who has journeyed in the Master's footsteps." The pilgrim left, no one knows where or who he was.

The father of the house, a wealthy merchant named Pietro Bernadone, was abroad at the time. The mother, Donna Pica, moved quickly to the stall where she painlessly gave birth to a healthy boy. The child was baptized Giovanni, Johannes in Norwegian. When the father returned from France he was very happy. For his love of France, which was also his wife's native country, he called the child Francis. In world history we know him as Saint Francis of Assisi.

As Francis grew up the pilgrim's prophecy was forgotten. No one in Assisi could imagine that Francis would become a saint and spread his light over his hometown as well as all of Italy. There was a huge difference in Assisi between the rich and the poor. The rich had many servants, plenty of food and fancy houses. Most people were so poor they suffered from hard work, poverty and illness. Though Francis's parents were not nobles, they belonged to the most illustrious class in town. Young Francis learned that for him, life would be a dance upon roses. He was a happy boy who sang and danced with the best of them. As a popular friend he often led the jovialities at the local inns. They say he never spoke a nasty word no matter how wild a party became. With plenty of money he paid for friends' drinks so often that his father remarked, "You would think you had holes in your pockets!"

Pietro Bernadone decided to raise Francis to be a successful merchant like himself. At an early age Francis accompanied his father on business trips and he learned to please difficult customers with a smile. When Francis bought fancy clothes and took part in every possible gaiety his father proclaimed, "You act as if you are royalty more than the son of a merchant!" Francis was not big and strong but confident, good-looking and persuasive. When neighborhood women complained to Donna Pica about his flamboyant lifestyle she replied, "I believe he will one day become God's child."

It seemed there was no rush for Francis to do so. These were difficult times in Italy. The poor in Assisi revolted against the nobles. When it appeared the nobles would lose their control Assisi, they sought help in Perugia. There were old enmities between Assisi and Perugia. When war broke out Francis decided to save his hometown from the "helpers." Francis and all of his comrades lost the war and were imprisoned for one year in Perugia. Francis played tricks on the guards, laughed about the chains and kept his spirits high. The others could not believe how enthusiastic he remained. "Just wait, said Francis. "One day the world will be at my feet."

Peace was declared and the prisoners were sent home. One day while working in his father's house for noble customers, Francis showed a beggar the door. He felt a jolt in his heart. Had he not heard the words, "What you do unto my people, you do unto me?" It burned in Francis. He sprang out the door and onto the street where he filled the beggar's pockets with money.

Prison did not make Francis shy away from war. He dreamt of heroic acts upon the battlefields, becoming a knight and declared royalty. At night he dreamt his father's store was no longer filled with bolts of cloth, but shining weapons, helmets and armor! He thought he heard a voice proclaiming: "All this shall belong to you and your followers!" This is what Francis wanted to hear! He

would no longer be a foot soldier but join one of the most famous warriors in the world.

His conquests were over quickly. A burning fever left him stricken in a bed while his comrades disappeared in clouds of dust. That night while half awake another voice spoke to him: “Francis, where do you want to go in this world?” He thought he heard himself reply, “In the world to become a knight.”

“Answer me, is it best to serve the Lord or the servant?”

“The Lord,” answered Francis.

“Then why have you left the Lord?”

Francis awoke. Had his angel spoken? He realized the warhorses, armor and weapons were meaningless, he gave them all away and returned home. A few days later a more humble lad entered the gates of Assisi. His friends did not recognize their generous joker but found another person. “He walks in poisonous thoughts,” they thought. “No wonder he had fever during the battle. A beautiful virgin must be teasing his thoughts.” His parents felt it was time to find one of the local beauties to be his bride. Francis agreed but was in no rush.

One evening his friends tumbled out of the local bar and found a beggar for whom they felt contempt and pity. They pointed fingers at him and laughed. Francis distanced himself from them. Feeling his heart opening, he ran over to the beggar, wrapped his expensive coat around him, and put all of the coins he owned in his pocket. A new sense of joy filled the boy. He realized the truth: “It is better to give than to receive.”

Francis thought day after day about his wealth and others’ poverty. One day he told his parents whom he would marry. His parents were excited to hear the good news. They asked, “Is it she?” A prominent name was suggested.

“No, not she.”

Another prominent name was proposed. They continued guessing eagerly, but none of the names was correct. “Tell us who it is Francis,” inquired the parents curiously.

“Poverty,” answered Francis.

“Poverty? Have we heard correctly? Do you want to marry poverty?”

“You heard right. Poverty and nothing else will be my bride.” The words were spoken and could not be taken back. But how would he find his bride? Until this point Francis had appreciated wealth and everything it gave him. He loved the clothes, the money, the generosity, to hear himself sing and talk. In truth he loved himself. He was a slave to this love. Now he realized it was all in his way.

We do not know whether Francis knew the story of the youth who asked the master what he should do to enter the kingdom of heaven, “The Expensive Pearl” as the parable is called. The youth was told to leave everything behind, to give

everything away. If Francis married poverty, would he have anything to give away? He found no answers and decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome to prove that he knew what poverty really meant.

Before the entrance to St. Peter's Basilica stood a raggedy group of beggars. They stared at people and grabbed whatever was handed to them. Francis caught the attention of one and asked him to step aside where they could exchange clothes. Standing among the beggars in Rome, Francis felt awkward. He was not a beggar; rather it was he who was always asked for help.

When Francis returned to Assisi, his father was trading for goods in France, and Francis was responsible for conducting the business at home. At this time he made a mysterious friend who regularly followed him to a cave in the mountains. There he would wait until Francis finished praying. No one knows about what they spoke or to where he disappeared.

Francis waited patiently for a word. He visited God's house often, a small, impoverished church where he spent long hours contemplating. Above the altar hung a picture of the Christ. One day he felt the picture speak to him: "Rebuild my house!" It was the same voice he had heard earlier. Looking about the rundown church, he realized it needed repair. Not long after Francis helped the priest repair the foundation and he actually became a decent mason.

At that time leprosy was prevalent all over the world. The medical profession did not know how to treat it. Lepers were kept away from healthy people because of contagiousness, the smell and the ugliness of their wounds. If they ventured into areas where healthy people traveled, they warned them by ringing the bells they carried. Francis had never thought much about these wretched of the wretched. When he returned to the cave in the mountains, he prayed: "Lord, show me Your path and let me follow it."

One day he rode through the countryside so deep in thought that he did not notice that his horse wandered from the path. A bell rang and he stopped suddenly in his path. Along the road sat a leper. Francis wanted to turn around and ride away from the awful sight but considered that this meeting may be the answer to his questions. The Lord had taken him seriously and was now testing his commitment to follow the path shown him. Carefully Francis dismounted the horse and approached the leper. A disgusting sight met him. The leper's nose was gone, from his mouth came a terrible smell, the hand with which he greeted Francis had a few remains of fingers. Francis bowed, kissed his hand and laid a coin upon it. When Francis remounted his horse he felt penetrated by deep thankfulness. He now hoped to win a great victory, the greatest victory a human can win, victory over himself.

Many rumors spread in Assisi about what had become of the young Bernadone. People consoled his parents on their struggles with the boy.

Whenever the father traveled abroad, Francis ran the family business. One day he decided to rebuild the church by taking a couple bolts of expensive cloth from the shelves, packing them on a horse and selling them in a nearby town. He also sold the horse. Francis gave the money to the priest who felt uneasy receiving such a large sum, so the coins were left untouched on a windowsill. When Bernadone returned home and learned of the sale, he became enraged! “Where is Francis?” he cried throughout the house. But Francis was gone. He realized he had done wrong and his conscience burned. Rather than look his father in the eye, he hid in the basement of the priest’s house for a couple of weeks, fasting and praying to God and his Savior.

When he finally showed his face in public, the former handsome boy looked terrible. Only in his mid-twenties, the young man was ugly, pale, skinny and dirty. As he approached his father’s house, a gang cried out, “Crazy man!” Bernadone saw his son on the street and was filled with anger. He ran out and pulled Francis into the house, threw him into a dark room and locked the door. Francis said not a word, not even when his father beat him and cursed him.

The next time Bernadone left the house on a journey, his wife pulled Francis out of the room, whipped him brutally and gave him decent food and clothes. Francis recuperated but knew his days at home were over. A totally new life lay ahead of him. He returned to the priest’s house and continued to help him repair the church.

Was his father relieved to have him out of the house? Not at all. He took Francis to court and wanted him convicted of theft even though the priest returned all of the money. Francis refused to attend the earthly court. By rebuilding God’s house he considered himself under the protection of the Church, as was accepted custom. People assumed the kind Bishop of Assisi felt sorry for the young man. Before the Church’s court, father and son met; many curious spectators attended. It was a trial like the world had never seen before. Pietro Bernadone accused his son of theft and wanted compensation for his losses. The Bishop turned to Francis and said: “If you want to serve God’s house, young man, give your father his mammon in return. Who knows whether the merchant’s gold is honestly earned and should enter the house of God?”

The accused was asked to speak, “Listen everyone,” began Francis. “Not only what I have left of money and other goods will I return, but also the clothes on my back. Until now I have called Pietro Bernadone my father. From this moment on, I no longer say father to him, but rather: ‘Our Father who art in heaven...’” Before everyone he took off his clothes and stood before the judges in almost naked. Collecting the clothes in a pile he handed them to his father who took them and he fled the court pale in the face.

The Bishop laid a cape around Francis's shoulders and led him to the nearby church where he accepted leftover clothes from the gardener. Francis was now free. He had found his bride. Behind him lay his youthful errors, ahead lay the way of the Lord.

Francis left his home for Gubbio, a nearby town farther up the mountains. With chalk he drew a large cross on the back of his cape. Now he followed in the footsteps of the Christ. The first day robbers in the woods captured him. "Who is there?" he heard.

"I am the great King's herald!" answered Francis. "What do you want?" The robbers wanted everything he owned. They searched his clothes, found nothing and threw him down the bank into a snow bank. "Thankfully you received me softly, snow bank," Francis spoke as he climbed the hill where the sun already stood low upon the horizon. Praising the Creator he wandered towards Gubbio.

Late that night he pounded on the door of a cloister high up in the mountains. The monks were reluctant to take in the stranger but gave him the floor on which to sleep. Francis remained a couple of days to work to repay the favor, but they were happy when he went upon his way. Once Francis became famous, they proclaimed they had been the first to give him shelter.

So many stories chronicle the life of Francis that we call them Fioretti, meaning "little flowers." In this article are included ones in which the history surrounds the core of the huge spiritual power that worked into his life.

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Francis arrived in Gubbio where he had a friend. The villagers were in bad shape. A wolf roamed the forests and women did not dare look for wood, children dared not pick berries and farm animals were in danger. Even the woodsmen armed themselves when they went to work in the woods.

"I will enter the woods and speak with Brother Wolf," declared Francis.

"No, you should not do that. The wolf is so large and smarter than any other animal. It is dangerous for people and animals," the people of Gubbio warned him. Francis did not obey. He walked into the dark forest followed by some armed men to see where he went. Not long thereafter the wolf walked in his path opening his wide mouth.

Francis walked up to the monster and crossed himself, saying "Brother Wolf, what do I hear about you? Sit down and sharpen your ears to hear my message. You are guilty of horrible deeds. Not only have you ripped animals to shreds, you have killed people that are made in God's name. No wonder the whole village hates you. You deserve to be hung. Would you like to be hung as a lousy scoundrel? I know that you also belong to God's creations. Now I want to create

peace between you and the townspeople. But you must stop damaging. In return the people will forgive all of your evil deeds. Do you want that?"

By waving his tail the wolf showed he agreed to the deal. Francis continued, "Brother Wolf, as long as you accept the deal you shall not be hungry. The people will give you all you need to live. I know you have only ripped apart animals because of your hunger. You must stop that now. Do you promise?" And as Francis gave his hand, the wolf gave his paw to demonstrate accord. "Follow God's name, and you shall see how well you will be treated by the people." Together they walked into town, Francis first, the wolf after him. The people were scared to death at first, but when Francis and the wolf stood quietly in the marketplace, curiosity became so great that large and small approached them.

Francis preached that worse dangers awaited all souls after death if they did not turn their backs on evil. "Now the wolf has new thoughts and will begin a better life. It is also time for people to change their lives. Forgive your enemies. Give the wolf voluntarily all he needs so he will no longer rob you. Do not save the goods you own they may be alms for sins you have committed. Look here, now Brother Wolf will give me his paw so you witness his promises. Then you must be good to Brother Wolf. Do not forget that you are all God's creation."

Again the wolf gave his paw. They say he lived two more years in Gubbio and became a trusted playmate for children. His coat grew thick from all of the good food they fed him. When he died many people mourned.

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Francis received many followers but never tired of declaring he was a self-learned follower of the Master's footpath. The path was small and steep. Those who wanted to take part in many heavenly riches must say farewell to earthly pleasures. But soon there were so many that an order was created. Life was tough for his younger brothers, the Franciscans. All of the new brothers promise to be true to poverty, own nothing of their own, live as beggars, and work for others. "They have neither money nor purse on their path," told a contemporary, "No bread in their pack, and no shoes on their feet. They have no vineyards, household animals, not a bed to rest upon. All they have are some wool clothes, a cape, a hood and a belt around their waste."

There are many stories about the Franciscans, how they quickly grew in numbers, fought among each other, became powerful and authoritative. But power and authority were not in Francis's heart. Living with the Franciscans he experienced both good and bad. He was also tempted. The Savior remained his model through all of the temptations.

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Francis loved all creations, from the smallest birds to “Brother Sun.” He saw the Creator’s revelations in everything that lived, and he sang his “Canticle of the Sun.”

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
All praise is Yours, all glory, honor and blessings.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong;
no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.

We praise You, Lord, for all Your creatures,
especially for Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
of You Most High, he bears your likeness.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars,
in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

We praise You, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air,
fair and stormy, all weather’s moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Water,
so useful, humble, precious and pure.

We praise You, Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night.
He is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Earth,
who sustains us
with her fruits, colored flowers, and herbs.

We praise You, Lord, for those who pardon,
for love of You bear sickness and trial.
Blessed are those who endure in peace,
by You Most High, they will be crowned.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in their sins!
Blessed are those that She finds doing Your Will.
No second death can do them harm.

We praise and bless You, Lord, and give You thanks,
and serve You in all humility.

We often hear of Francis's friendship with all creations. Once he came to a village called Alviano. As night approached Francis wanted to share some comforting words with the villagers who collected in the marketplace where he stood. But around the village's gray walls and towers many flocks of swallows flew back and forth to their nests. As the birds sang Francis and his companion tuned their voices. The villagers came closer as the swallows gathered above Francis's head whose voice was drowned out by their song.

Speaking kindly Francis asked, "Dear Sister Swallows, I think we should soon be given a turn to speak. You have spoken a while. Be quiet now and listen to the words of God." In that moment they all remained quiet while he preached. Apparently the miracle was so convincing that all of the villagers wanted to follow Francis. But he told them, "Rush not into leaving house and home. We will all be saved in God's name. Who will give bread to the poor who wander like me?"

He spoke with the birds on another journey. By the road stood fruit trees with a large flock of birds at the top. "I must say a few words to my small sister Birds." proclaimed Francis to his companion. The birds flew down to the field and stood before the wanderer. He preached, "Birds, my sisters! Praise be to the Lord who created you. He gave you life, the air to fly upon and the freedom to go wherever you please. You need to neither sow nor harvest. The Creator gave you food to eat, streams to drink from and the trees to build your nests. And because you cannot spin, weave or sew He gave you feathers to keep you warm. Yes, the Creator loves us all and does great things for us. Therefore my sisters, do not be unthankful. That would be a shame. Do all you can to praise and please the Lord." As Francis spoke the birds opened their bills, stretched their throats and flapped their wings. Finally they bowed their heads to show their thanks. Francis was no less happy. He wondered how many of them were collected and admired their feathers.

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A few hours from Assisi a band of brothers sought lodging in an abandoned house, among them a former knight. Like the others he had given up all he had to live in poverty and piety. The area was not free from robbers who also had little on which to live. Once a couple of them knocked on the door to the brothers and asked for bread. The old knight opened the door, but told them he had no bread or crumbs for robbers. "Get out of here, the sooner, the better!" he thundered.

That same evening Brother Francis arrived at the house. They received him with honor and great love. When he heard what had happened earlier that day he

explained, “Everyone who knocks on our door, friend or foe, walking or riding, beggar or thief shall be received with kindness. But that did not happen today. If you will do as I say, there may still be hope for the robber’s souls,” he continued. ”Go out in the forest with bread and wine and call out, ‘Brother thieves and robbers, come her! You shall have the best food we have. Come and be our brothers!’

“And when they come spread out the table clothe on the field, cover it with goodness and kind words. When they have eaten all they can, speak the words of the Lord and finish by asking them never to kill or hurt anyone again. If they promise to that, reward them by spreading out the tablecloth the next day with wine, eggs and cheese. Again when they have eaten, ask them, ‘Why walk around all day, suffer hunger and spread evil to others? It must be better to follow God’s message. Do so and live well. He will forgive you and in the future take care of you like all the others on the earth. And if you repent, he will save your souls.’ “

The brothers follow his advice. The old knight became humble and offered bread and wine in the forest. He asked the robbers for forgiveness. They were astonished that he meant what he said. They all ate and drank. In the end the robbers repented, and they helped the brothers with forestry and other useful deeds. Once they had been robbers, now they were helpers.

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Among the countless lepers the Franciscans took care of one was so impossible that the brothers thought he was beyond help. He made fun of God and the Virgin Mary. He had ugly words about everyone. The brothers could no longer tolerate his behavior and they left him alone. ”If only he criticized us we would have tolerated him,” they told Francis. ”But the ugliness to others was too much for us.”

Francis entered the sick man’s room silently: “God’s peace be with you, dear brother!”

The leper answered: “ What kind of peace has God given me? He has taken all I own and turned my body into a smelly corpse.”

Francis answered: “Be patient, brother! Remember that sickness in this world is given us to save our soul and health in the kingdom of God.” The sick man did not want to listen to this. Instead he complained about the brothers who did not bathe him. “I will wash you,” said Francis. He quickly warmed up water with fine-smelling herbs in it. He unclothed the man and cleansed his body. As Francis touched the man’s body with his hands, a miracle happened. The man’s illness departed and his skin was healed. As his body healed so did his soul.

Regret filled the once angry man, and he cried for all of his sins. “Poor me, I am not worth such a great miracle, after so much ugliness I have spread, so much

pain I caused those who wanted to help me!” He cried for forty days before his sins were forgiven, and he became healthy in body and soul.

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On one of his many journeys Francis met a young man who had trapped a flock of wild doves and was on his way to sell them at the marketplace. Francis felt sorry for the little birds. “Good young man,” said Francis, “Will you give me the mild birds, those who are like the souls of compassionate people?” The young man saw the love and light in Francis’s eyes and realized if he sold them they would be killed. Instead he gave them to Francis.

“O, my sisters, pure doves! How could you allow him to capture you? Now I will help you make nests so you can lay eggs.” He blessed the doves and made nests for them. They became as tame as chickens. When Francis called them they sat on his shoulders.

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Great sorrow troubled Francis when he learned how much his brothers disagreed. Some thought that the Franciscans should also study and acquire great Knowledge. Some respected knowledge while others found it the cause of arrogance. They were convinced, as was Francis, that the Franciscans should remain with humble knowledge but great deeds of helpfulness and the fear of God.

Not only men wanted to live like Francis but also women. They respected the rich man’s son who owned nothing, ignored the riches of the world and wandered in the footsteps of the Master. Clara Scifi, a rich young noblewoman, was the first female follower. Although her mother had taught her daughter to love God, she never expected her to become His poor servant.

At the age of twenty Clara heard Francis speak. A flame was lit in her heart that never stopped burning. In secret she decided to serve his mission. Her father had died and she had a large inheritance waiting for her. According to the traditions of her day, her uncle had authority over her hand and her inheritance. He wanted her to marry a man of her standing, become the dame of a castle and enjoy the riches of the world. But Clara could not imagine that life and instead spent every night praying. From prayer she became strong enough to seek out Francis and ask for sisterhood among the Franciscans.

That was impossible. Francis could not tempt his brothers with a beautiful woman among them. Before the altar of a church he cut her hair and took her to a cloister for nuns. Her uncle hoped he could at least keep her inheritance.

She wanted none of it but wanted it to be given to the sick and poor. The Bishop supported her.

When Clara's younger sister left home and entered the same cloister, the uncle arrived with armed soldiers to take her back. He tried to pull her by the hair. The sister cried for help and Clara fell to her knees to pray. Neither the uncle nor his soldiers could lift the sister. The uncle had to leave her alone. Later the Bishop gave Clara and her sister their own place to live. They soon converted it into a hospital for the sick and homeless. So many women joined them that Clara became an admired saint. The women sewed, spun and wove for the poor.

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Francis of Assisi did not live long enough to become an old man. He nicknamed his body "Brother donkey." It was the only creation he was not kind to. His daily bread was hard work, little rest and no care. His friends tried to make him take care of himself, but he did not want to listen to them until an illness made him so weak he could not stand on his own two feet. His eyesight failed and he could barely see other people. But his soul light unfolded. He could see the world of angels. It was so beautiful he was constantly in joy. As death appeared he asked those at his bedside to sing the "Canticle of the Sun." After the final verse he added, "Welcome, Brother Death who shall inherit my body."

The brothers and sisters wept but Francis's face was clear. At his departure he blessed each one of them. Before their eyes his soul sailed free, his face was transformed, the traces of illness fled and a beauty none had previously seen appeared over him. The church bells rang as the heavens opened for the soul of Saint Francis.