

Leader's Guide for
THE WORLD OF ST FRANCIS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
Saint Francis of Assisi

Would I might wake Saint Francis in you all...Vachel Lindsay

CONTENT/THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Is the Gospel life possible? Francis Bernardone of Assisi, Italy, (1181-1226) lived an uncompromising YES to that question. His answer has encouraged and invigorated millions for nearly eight centuries. To understand Francis and the continuing vitality of the Franciscan movement is to realize the power of the gospel. It is to believe that what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John recorded is serious business that leads to intense pain and ecstatic happiness. Francis himself could be considered a parable, a scriptural commentary, a book of revelations recorded in the weakness and the strength of a medieval minstrel.

The town of Assisi was Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem to Francis although his pilgrim mission journeys sometimes took him elsewhere. Biographers depict him as a popular, fun-loving teenager who was sobered by war and illness. His lively imagination was ripe for dreams. The God of great dreamers, the God of Jacob, Joseph and Daniel, also whispered to young Francis in the night.

Those dream whispers led to long, solitary vigils in the caves near Assisi. Prayer led him to care of the poor, and his ministering threw him back into prayer.

Trial is the stuff of every human story, but for Francis it was more than metaphor. The challenge to conversion in his life did not come gently. Francis' truest inspirations seemed to contradict his parentage and his peers. The call to poverty confronted his father Pietro's wealth and the pleasure that Pietro took in it. The call to peace whispered against the clamor of feudal war and the fleeting glory that the Bernardone family hoped to win through the warrior son Francis.

Francis continued to choose the gospel, and this radical choice made his father almost irrational with rage.

He took his son to court where, furious, Pietro regained his money and lost his son.

From this time forward, Francis' theme was, "May the Lord give you peace!" And the Lord not only brought the young man peace, but he populated his life with men who shared his vision. When their number matched that of the apostles, they walked to Rome to beg a papal blessing for their way of life.

In Rome, Francis, the dreamer, figured in Pope Innocent III's dream. The pope dreamed that the little band who had been restoring churches would indeed restore the universal Church of God.

Restoration or renewal is a communal, hands-on, hearts-in kind of process. The hands and hearts of old friends, young couples and women with the courage of Clara Schifi joined with Francis, rejoicing in the challenge of renewing the Church.

The life of Francis is the stuff of epic. He, a little ragged pilgrim, confronts the powerful Sultan in his desert tent. He, the lay brother, convenes 5,000 followers from across Europe for a council or chapter. Francis, the lover of the literal, builds the first Christmas crèche scene in Greccio. Inviting the village people with their livestock to recreate the Bethlehem scene, deacon Francis was inspired to preach at midnight Mass. Biographers record that the Child Jesus came and rested happily in the arms of Francis on that Greccio Christmas Eve.

And then, the mountains of Tabor and Golgotha are merged into one for Francis. The builder who had been first commissioned to rebuild the Church by a voice from the crucified image on San Damiano's cross experienced the wounds of crucifixion on Mount La Verna. We can grope for explanations, but the people of Assisi sensed the sanctity sealed by those wounds. And they knew that this man's song was a celestial tune.

"Brothers and sisters," he called the elements of the universe. One by one he named them—until he called out "Sister Death," and she gently welcomed a man who had no cause to fear. And his challenge stands: "I have done what was mine to do. May Christ now teach you yours."

MEDIA ORIENTATION

St. Francis of Assisi is an animated film. Powerfully drawn, the film begins by lingering over the works of medieval masters who have been moved to record the life of Francis.

Giotto's frescoes are the film's first frames. As the real inventor of pictorial art, he would have been

fascinated with animation. Three of his subjects, “St. Francis Renounces All His Heritage,” “The Miracle of the Water” and “The Sermon to the Birds” are used. After the title frame, a detail of the portrait by Cimabue, Giotto’s teacher, is featured. This is traditionally thought to be a true likeness of Francis.

The bird from Giotto’s fresco flies right into the animated film, where the same image is right at home. It is as if medieval frescoes are connected, enlivened, contemporized under the direction of animator Cornelius Cole.

Cinematically, the simplicity of the animation is not only consonant with the life and message of Francis, but the focus of the animation serves as an accent, a highlighting of one variable in a setting which is otherwise immobile or static. Viewers are sure to notice the movement, but the story will be enhanced by noticing the subject which is moving. Stars, an aureole or halo, a flame, a hand . . . as they move, these aspects take on a large, symbolic dimension.

The austere lines of San Damiano’s ruins look almost skeletal, an image which visually emphasizes that the Church Francis is to restore is not built of stones, but of people in need of renewal.

Tilted angles and the expansion of a worldview expressed in a “zoom out” are other visual statements which complement the narrative message. Earthen brown crowds and the stark black and white of the stigmata sequence are particularly significant color cues.

Visually, the film concludes with a return to Giotto’s fresco, a device which completes for us our own animated life-parable of the Saint of Assisi.

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE

1. Before viewing this film, depending on the age and sophistication of the audience, you might wish to discuss:
 - a. Cimabue and Giotto, 13th-century artists, whose work is portrayed in the film (consult Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages*, Chapter 11 for some analysis);
 - b. Some orientation to the animation medium. (See MEDIA ORIENTATION.)
2. When Francis was asked for advice from Lord Bernard of Quintavalle, who was ready to give up everything to follow the poor man of Assisi, the saint suggested that both of them consult “the book of the Gospel.” Before viewing this film,

- a. Consult that same book, inviting three persons to proclaim the three passages to which the two men opened: Matthew 19:21; Luke 9:3; Luke 9:23.
- b. Allow some moments of reflection between the proclamation of each passage.

SHOW FILM (28 min)

1. Because the film is necessarily long, encompassing the major events of a whole lifetime, there may not be much time for discussion and other activities within the class period or meeting schedule. It is recommended that “less is more” under such circumstances. The film can stand alone or with minimal preparation and follow-up. Any activities should be done with the simplicity that the film illustrates so beautifully and that would be in keeping with the saint whose story is told.
 - a. Reread the three gospel passages and invite participants to mention aloud how each was fulfilled in the life of Francis.
 - b. Distribute copies of the Peace Prayer attributed to St. Francis and conclude with the recitation of the prayer.
2. If more time is allotted, the suggested discussion questions will help to highlight the significant events in the life of St. Francis and their meaning for the life of the viewer.
3. Many musical settings of the peace prayer are available. “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace” by Sebastian Temple is very familiar to many groups and could be used instead of reciting the prayer.
4. Many collections of the prayers of Francis are available. The “Canticle of Brother Sun” is a beautiful poem of praise. This prayer/poem is an excellent context or conclusion for the study of many themes in this film and in the life of Francis.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you remember about St. Francis that encourages you in your life as a Christian? That challenges you? That rebuilds you?
2. Francis of Assisi is a saint of the Church. Would you have canonized him? Why or why not?
3. St. Francis recognized Christ in the leper. Who passes along the roads you travel that seems horrible to you? Who is a “leper” in your neighborhood? How can you respond as Francis did?
4. God spoke to Francis, “Go and repair my house.” If God gave you that order today, what would you begin to do?
5. Francis embraced “Lady Poverty.” What kind of lady do you think he imagined? Does poverty seem like a lady to you? How? Why could Francis seek out such a lady? How? Why would anyone do it today?

6. The crib and the cross are two central facets of the spiritual life of St. Francis. The Eucharist is the third. How do you see these three linked together? Why do you think each was so important to him?
7. If you were writing a canticle in praise of God through his creatures, what would you praise? Can you call any difficult or threatening aspects of life your brother or sister? Why or why not?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES/USES

1. Do you know any people who follow the Franciscan rule? Invite them to join you in viewing this film. Ask them to share their reasons for being a Franciscan.
2. Study the art of Cimabue and Giotto. Review St. Francis in the arts from the 13th century until now. Note common themes, the understanding of Francis, the application of his life to our time
3. Review the life of the saint using a chronology or any simple biography. Suggest another scene for the film. Create a fresco of that scene or act it out dramatically (suggestions: stories that illustrate the concern of Francis for the poor, his search for perfect joy, the friendship of Francis and Clare).

Leader's Guide written by: Carol Ann Munchel

©MCMLXXXI St. Anthony Messenger Press. All rights reserved.

NOTE: This guide can be printed and cut down in size to be stored with the DVD version of this video program. Simply cut $\frac{3}{4}$ inch from each side of the page for a guide that, when folded, can be placed inside of the DVD case or attached to the DVD or VHS case.

For use with: *Saint Francis of Assisi* on VHS (7130V) and *The World of St. Francis: Past, Present and Future* on DVD (D1223)

St. Anthony Messenger Press
28 W. Liberty St.
Cincinnati, OH 45202-6498
800-488-0488
www.AmericanCatholic.org

Leader's Guide for
THE WORLD OF ST. FRANCIS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
Franciscan Holy Ground: Where Francis & Clare Found God

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Assisi, a lovely quiet town in central Italy, is the birthplace of St. Francis and St. Clare. For admirers and followers of these two saints, Assisi is sacred ground. It was in this town with its olive trees, pink stones and winding narrow streets that Francis and Clare first found God.

We will take a video journey through this charming medieval town and to many other places of beauty and importance in the lives of these two founders of the Franciscan movement of the 13th century. As we move along, let us try to immerse ourselves in the love and beauty of God. We will visit the geographic settings which tell the story of these two great saints. These historic places were the sacred stage upon which Francis and Clare approached the God of love.

AFTER WATCHING THE VIDEO

An open-ended question like the following might be good for starting off the discussion: *What place or event described in this video made the strongest impression on you? Why?*

ADDITIONAL POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Baptismal commitment. Francis and Clare were baptized in the Cathedral of San Rufino. They lived lives that were a reflection of their baptismal commitment. They conveyed the gospel message to all they met along the way.

- *Identify some of the ways that Francis and Clare lived out their baptismal commitment.*
- *Do we see any message for ourselves in their example? In what ways do you try to live out your own baptismal commitment?*

Contemplative prayer. As we journey around Assisi and through the mountains and valleys beyond the town, we find many caves and hermitages where Francis sought silence and solitude. A deep contemplative prayer life was a necessity for Francis, just as it was for Clare.

In these sacred spaces he contemplated and plumbed the depths of his soul and came face to face with

“Mystery.” In these moments he came to know himself more clearly and was able to turn to the Lord ever more securely. Silence and solitude enabled Francis to fall more deeply in love with the person of Jesus, whom he so wished to become.

- *Both Francis and Clare made contemplative prayer a priority. What meaning does this focus on prayer have for you?*
- *Do you have special places of prayer? What are they?*
- *Can time spent in silence and solitude change you? How?*

Christian vocation. San Damiano was a small tumbledown chapel just below Assisi. This place was to become a blessed place of new beginnings for both Francis and Clare. Here in this humble chapel Francis prayed. Looking deep into the eyes of the crucified Christ (represented on an icon crucifix hanging there), Francis became transfixed when the image spoke to him, “Francis, rebuild my Church.”

In this poor crumbling ruin Francis met God and began his search to know the Father’s will for him. We might say he began a search to know his vocation in life.

Francis responded to Jesus’ wish by physically repairing San Damiano. Maybe he sensed that God had a plan for this sacred space. Indeed, in 1212 Clare moved into San Damiano. There she gave birth to the Order of St. Clare, the contemplative branch of the Franciscan movement.

- *Does Francis’ or Clare’s experience at San Damiano speak to you in terms of Christian vocation? How do you personally hear God’s call in your own life?*
- *At first Francis responded to Jesus’ call by repairing the small chapel. This became a symbol of his deeper call to reform the whole Church. Is there something deeper to which God is calling each of us?*

The Portiuncula. St. Mary of the Angels, also known as the Portiuncula or the Little Portion, was another small chapel that Francis repaired. This chapel is often considered “the cradle of the Franciscan Order.”

- *Give all the reasons you can why this tiny church is an important historical treasure for the whole Franciscan family.*
- *Why is this church important to the Poor Clares?*

Greccio. In 1223 Francis visited Greccio, a rugged mountain retreat. It was Christmas time. There, in a cave outside the town, he organized and celebrated the first manger scene, thus initiating the tradition of the Christmas crib as we know it today.

Christ Incarnate was an important facet in the life of Francis and Clare. Over and over again, they found God in the reality of the here and now.

- *Francis and Clare were both deeply moved by the mystery of God becoming human. What meaning does Francis' reenactment of Jesus' birth have for you?*
- *What special meaning does Christ's coming in human form have for you?*

Mount La Verna. Two years before his death, St. Francis received the five wounds of Jesus at Mount La Verna. This was the climactic mystical experience of his life. The event gave Francis a deeper understanding of Jesus' great love for him as revealed in Jesus' willingness to suffer for him and for all humanity.

- *What significance do you see in Francis' receiving the stigmata? What kind of statement might God have been making by conferring this honor upon Francis?*
- *God's great love for Francis was revealed through this sign. How might we experience a similar revelation each time we look at an image of the crucified Christ? Explain.*

Canticle of Brother Sun. The time is now 1225, Francis has received the stigmata and there is a growing sense within him that his journey in this world is coming to a close. Sick and worn from years of fasting and faithfulness, he retires to a hut in a little garden at San Damiano.

Here he allows Clare and the sisters to minister to his needs. These are moments of joy for him as he watches Clare and the Poor Ladies. Clare and her sisters have held steadfastly to their life of holy poverty. Nothing could dissuade them from following the poor Christ. And this made Francis' heart soar. In these happy surroundings Francis wrote his Canticle of Brother Sun, praising God for all the gifts of creation.

In this wonderful song, Francis gives praise and thanks to the Creator for Brother Wind and Sister Water, for Brother Fire and Mother Earth, for Brother Sun and Sister Moon and for every other creature.

- *In 1979, St. Francis was named the patron saint of ecology by Pope John Paul II. In which ways do you find God in creation?*
- *What can we do to help save Mother Earth?*

CONCLUSION AND PRAYER.

We have traveled through Assisi and through the valleys and hills loved by St. Francis and St. Clare and their followers. We have seen the sacred places where they found God and deepened their love for God.

Let us pray that we, too, may find God in our own sacred places—in the beauty of nature surrounding us, in our own churches and shrines and liturgies and in many other places where God speaks to us today.

Leader's Guide written by: The Poor Clares of Cincinnati

© MCMXCVII St. Anthony Messenger Press. All rights reserved.

NOTE: This guide can be printed and cut down in size to be stored with the DVD version of this video program. Simply cut ¾ inch from each side of the page for a guide that, when folded, can be placed inside of the DVD case or attached to the DVD or VHS case.

For use with: *Franciscan Holy Ground: Where Francis and Clare Found God* on VHS (V1223) and *The World of St. Francis: Past, Present and Future* on DVD (D1223).

St. Anthony Messenger Press
28 W. Liberty St.
Cincinnati, OH 45202-6498
800-488-0488
www.AmericanCatholic.org

Leader's Guide for
THE WORLD OF ST. FRANCIS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
The Message of St. Francis for Today

PROGRAM ONE

2. What is your favorite story of St. Francis?
3. Why do you think he is so popular?
4. What new insight did you gain from this video about St. Francis?
5. What do you think of St. Francis' father? How would you have reacted to a father like that?
6. Do you have a "hole in your heart"? Did you develop a "less than" approach from it? Or a "better than" way of thinking, feeling and acting? Or did you respond to it in a different way?
7. Do you view God as far away or intimate? How do you see God in Jesus?
8. How does Francis' view of creation challenge our environmental decisions today?
9. How do his views of community and enemies challenge our political decisions?

PROGRAM TWO

1. How did Francis change in his interpretation of "Rebuild my Church"? What needs rebuilding in our Church today?
2. Francis was repulsed by lepers, yet he reached out to them. Is there a group that provokes negative feelings in you? How can this change within you?
3. What danger did Francis see in the acquisition of property? Does that same danger lurk for you?
4. What is the "pearl of great price" for you? Have you found it yet? What do you need to sell in order to buy it?
5. Are you seeking something now?
6. Did you ever experience the "surrender and catch" that Michael Crosby speaks of?

©MCMXCIX St. Anthony Messenger Press. All rights reserved.

NOTE: This guide can be printed and cut down in size to be stored with the DVD version of this video program. Simply cut ¼ inch from each side of the page for a guide that, when folded, can be placed inside of the DVD case or attached to the DVD or VHS case.

For use with: *The Message of St. Francis for Today* on VHS (V1261) and *The World of St. Francis: Past, Present and Future* on DVD (D1223).

St. Anthony Messenger Press
28 W. Liberty St.
Cincinnati, OH 45202-6498
800-488-0488
www.AmericanCatholic.org