

ODE TO FRANCIS

John P. Tuttle on a Saint to Study

Born Francis Bernadone to a rich merchant family, the medieval-era mystic Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) is venerated today as a canonized saint in the Roman Catholic Church. He also formed the Franciscan Order, which remains a worldwide group of consecrated men and women. The following poem addresses the charism and virtue showcased by Francis during his life on Earth. It also delves into several key snapshots from Francis's faith journey.

Enjoying a youth in which he lacked little, Francis eventually turned to extreme poverty by choice, which contrasted greatly with the creaturely comfort and worldly wealth that seemed to characterize the society he found himself in.

Naked feet and a simple brown covering are iconic attributes we see in many of the stylized representations of the saint in art. In the instance of paintings and statuary, he is also often depicted as a figure to whom the creatures of God's animal kingdom are readily drawn. Traditionally, there's a connection between St. Francis and a fondness for animals. Hence, on his feast day (October 4), many Catholic parishes will host a pet blessing.

One animal-related tale that has long been told about the saint goes something along these lines. The Italian town of Gubbio was plagued by a menacing wolf that had stalked and swallowed up livestock and people alike.

Upon hearing of the disturbing affair, Francis traveled to Gubbio, and, having reached his destination, he confronted the wild canine. He then made the sign of the Cross and demanded it in God's Holy Name to cease its savage behavior. This the wolf did, and its disposition became immediately peaceful.

The wolf may be seen as a symbol for the savagery of sin we ourselves are capable of, which must be cleansed. This dual allusion is made in the line "The wolf within to tame," calling to mind our need for continual spiritual conversion – a turning back to God – as well as the intriguing episode often associated with Francis's identity.

A priority for both poverty and peace seems to have swept over Francis after he turned over a new leaf, exchanging his former, hedonistic lifestyle for one that permitted little room for the vanities of worldly pursuits. The change started to occur while he was imprisoned, the result of his enrollment in military service and subsequent failure in conquest. "Ode to Francis" makes use of this knightly imagery, directing the reader's mind to that greatest turmoil which is the turmoil within: the battle between almighty God and the power of evil, a battle we find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of.

Though his own exploits in the realm of earthly warfare amounted to little, Francis would be close to the line of fire once again some years later. On this occasion, however, he was not bearing arms against a fleshly foe but rather came advocating for peace. In 1219, the friar gained a meeting with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, and in that encounter, he brought Jesus close to an unbeliever and advocated for Christian peace. Francis had the audacity to do this in the midst of the religiously-charged

Crusades. He stands out today as an exemplar of interreligious dialogue.

In the poem, this encounter is covered by mentioning "infidels and the bygone chosen." These are terms that carry deeper meanings. "Infidel" is a term Muslims use for those who do not adhere to their own religion. And in several Christian devotional prayers, the Jews and Muslims are referred to as having once been God's "chosen people" and the "children of that race," respectively. Preaching to the Muslims remained a priority for many early Franciscans.

In 1224, Francis received *stigmata*, that is, some form of the wounds of Christ Crucified, in his own flesh. (Other saints to have suffered from these rare, miraculous markings include St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina.) It is this quality that's evoked later in the poem.

The closing of "Ode to Francis" contains, like a few earlier passages, a multi-layered symbolism. All of it is linked to the image of the Sun. Unfortunately, few seem to recall that Francis was a poet himself and that his most famous ballad is the "Canticle of Brother Sun" or "Canticle of the Creatures." This celebratory composition gains its name thus by singing of the beauty of Brother Sun. And my reference to our star as such is a nod to Francis's own poetic musings.

The Sun also offers a hopeful climax to the end of the poem. Francis passed from this world to the next at sunset the day he died. It's nice to think, in reality as much as poetically, that as the Sun continues his course onward beyond our line of view, so too the soul of Francis of Assisi moves onward beyond our mortal senses to that place in which the true Light shines (cf. John 1:4-5, 9), unveiled, more beautiful and brilliant than any sunset.

ODE TO FRANCIS

Oh barefoot wanderer striving
The wolf within to tame
Oh preacher building up the Church
All in Jesus's Holy Name

Well-to-do you came from salesman's stock
But forfeited it for roadways dirty
For greater riches you saw in naught
To pursue a hidden life of poverty

Your life is changed with no remorse for sloth
Soldier once; now with armor cast aside
Conscious of the deeper turmoil
When eyes fall upon the Crucified

Roving in the land plagued by sand and blood
Coming betwixt infidels and the bygone chosen of
late

On meeting the battle-hardened Sultan
Regarding peace you are quick to advocate

So near to the divinely-warm Heart
Your own passion flares, your sin God does rescind
So pierced in flesh you too become
Bearing stigmata like Him Who by nails was pinned

No splendid colors grace your coffin
One tunic had you, coarse, bland, and brown
God's myriad creatures chant your requiem
While Heaven was always home, Assisi was your
town

The nearest star fades, and the day is done
The battle for this one has been won
Angels' wings are beating as they ascend
Carrying you yon past Brother Sun