

# Extracts from: Saint Francis of Assisi

Pope BENEDICT XVI – General Audience

Wednesday, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2010

<http://franciscanseculars.com/st-francis-assisii/>

“A sun was born into the world”. With these words, in the Divine Comedy (Paradiso, Canto XI), the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri alludes to Francis’ birth, which took place in Assisi either at the end of 1181 or the beginning of 1182. As part of a rich family his father was a cloth merchant Francis lived a carefree adolescence and youth, cultivating the chivalrous ideals of the time. At age 20, he took part in a military campaign and was taken prisoner. He became ill and was freed.

After his return to Assisi, a slow process of spiritual conversion began within him, which brought him to gradually abandon the worldly lifestyle that he had adopted thus far.....[c.1205]... The famous episodes of Francis’ meeting with the leper to whom, dismounting from his horse, he gave the kiss of peace and of the message from the Crucifix in the small Church of St Damian, date back to this period. Three times Christ on the Cross came to life, and told him: “Go, Francis, and repair my Church in ruins”. This simple occurrence of the word of God heard in the Church of St Damian contains a profound symbolism. At that moment St Francis was called to repair the small church, but the ruinous state of the building was a symbol of the dramatic and disquieting situation of the Church herself. At that time the Church had a superficial faith which did not shape or transform life, a scarcely zealous clergy, and a chilling of love. It was an interior destruction of the Church which also brought a decomposition of unity, with the birth of heretical movements. Yet, there at the centre of the Church in ruins was the Crucified Lord, and he spoke: he called for renewal, he called Francis to the manual labour of repairing the small Church of St Damian, the symbol of a much deeper call to renew Christ’s own Church, with her radicality of faith and her loving enthusiasm for Christ.....

.....Let us return to the life of St Francis. When his father Bernardone reproached him for being too generous to the poor, Francis, standing before the Bishop of Assisi, in a symbolic gesture, stripped off his clothes, thus showing he renounced his paternal inheritance. Just as at the moment of creation, Francis had nothing, only the life that God gave him, into whose hands he delivered himself. He then lived as a hermit, until, in **1208**, another fundamental step in his journey of conversion took place..... While listening to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew Jesus’ discourse to the apostles whom he sent out on mission Francis felt called to live in poverty and dedicate himself to preaching. Other companions joined him, and in **1209** he travelled to Rome, to propose to Pope Innocent III the plan for a new form of Christian life. He received a fatherly welcome from that great Pontiff, who, enlightened by the Lord, perceived the divine origin of the movement inspired by Francis..... Francis and his friars, who were becoming ever more numerous, established themselves at the Portiuncula, or the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, the sacred place par excellence of Franciscan spirituality. Even Clare, a young woman of Assisi from a noble family, followed the school of Francis. This

became the origin of the Second Franciscan Order, that of the Poor Clares, another experience destined to produce outstanding figures of sainthood in the Church.

Innocent III's Successor, Pope Honorius III, with his Bull *Cum Dilecti* in 1218 supported the unique development of the first Friars Minor, who started missions in different European countries, and even in Morocco. In 1219 Francis obtained permission to visit and speak to the Muslim sultan Malik al-Kmil, to preach the Gospel of Jesus there too.....

.....It appears that later, in 1220, Francis visited the Holy Land, thus sowing a seed that would bear much fruit: his spiritual sons would in fact make of the Sites where Jesus lived a privileged space for their mission. It is with gratitude that I think today of the great merits of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

On his return to Italy, Francis turned over the administration of his Order to his vicar, Br Pietro Cattani, while the Pope entrusted the rapidly growing Order's protection to Cardinal Ugolino, the future Supreme Pontiff Gregory IX. For his part, the Founder, dedicated completely to his preaching, which he carried out with great success, compiled his Rule that was then approved by the Pope.

In 1224, at the hermitage in La Verna, Francis had a vision of the Crucified Lord in the form of a seraph and from that encounter received the stigmata from the Seraph Crucifix, thus becoming one with the Crucified Christ. It was a gift, therefore, that expressed his intimate identification with the Lord.

**The death of Francis his transitus occurred on the evening of 3 October 1226**, in the Portiuncula. After having blessed his spiritual children, he died, lying on the bare earthen floor. Two years later Pope Gregory IX entered him in the roll of saints. A short time after, a great basilica in his honour was constructed in Assisi, still today an extremely popular pilgrim destination.'

Benedict XVI (2010)