

Was the nature-loving Francis of Assisi a secular saint?



CHRIS HIGHLAND
HIGHLAND VIEWS

My daughter was born in the City of St. Francis (San Francisco) on his 300th birthday.

Throughout my chaplaincy years in the Bay Area, I often reflected on the life and message of this remarkable person and always thought he was a good model for people of any faith, and for nonbelievers too.

Francis of Assisi (born around 1181) is known the world over as a Christian saint, a holy man, the Italian monk who founded the Franciscan Order.

As the story goes, he gave up everything to rebuild a little ruined chapel brick by brick. He felt called to be poor and serve the poor. Not many seem "called" to do that kind of thing these days.

Francis is honored for his work with people in poverty but also for his famous Canticle of Creation giving thanks for Brother Sun, Sister Moon and "Sister Earth, our Mother, who nourishes us and sustains us."

Attending a Catholic Mass regularly while in seminary, we often sang his words, "Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace." The themes of care and service, concern for the earth and living as a peacemaker still resound in our day.

There's a story of Francis I particularly like. He was wandering around one day feeling very happy. He asked an almond tree to tell him about God. Leaves shivered in the breeze and blossoms appeared.

He passed by a creek and asked it to tell him of God. The waters bubbled and became calm to reveal his reflection. He met birds and asked them the same question. The birds sang to him.

Then Francis met a pilgrim with a backpack and asked him too. The pilgrim took him through the city to the area where poor people lived. The pilgrim sat on a bench, opened his pack and began to distribute bread to the people. He gave thanks, then he looked around and said, "our bread."

Francis understood. He had met something divine in the sharing of bread among the poorest.

This "preference for the poor" is one spark that has ignited liberation movements around the world. It's a practice of compassionate service going all the way back to the first lines of the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."

I'm not sure why this clear statement is overlooked or ignored by many of his followers, but it may have to do with something I call "scripture scramble" — the wordplay some use to mean what they want it to mean.

For example: one gospel says "Blessed are the poor" and another gospel says, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit." "Aha!," the scramblers say, "See, it's not about real poverty — this



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Chris Highland took this photo and captioned it: "My daughter returns to the city of her birth."

is a spiritual kind of thing."

Some love to spiritualize everything. But what if the "kingdom" (the welcoming sanctuary) actually belongs to those who are really poor? Is that too uncomfortable to consider?

Along comes Francis, crazy enough to take Jesus' words seriously — to assume the most radical meaning. If centering relevant religion on poor folk is the main message, then this is not actually about theology at all.

People can have their views of God and faith. But if the whole point is to respect and assist the poorest — if the heart of "good news" is the call for justice — then secular people are all in for this basic, grounded "new fundamentalism."

It doesn't take faith to look people in the eye to share bread.

If other-worldly beliefs give way to this-worldly cooperation, Francis becomes not only a saint for one tradition but for all of us. Faith or no faith, we can build new "houses of god" from the ruins of the old because these will be real homes for those most in need of housing. "God's People" may simply be the most excluded outsiders and outcasts waiting to claim their rightful home.

Pope Francis spoke to a TED conference in April. He gently called for a revolution — a "revolution of tenderness." He said that he and his family were migrants in Argentina and he could have been "one of the discarded people."

Through solidarity, humility and a sense of serving "the other," we can all practice the path of the saints (ordinary people doing extraordinary things).

A Franciscan priest in Brazil, Leonardo Boff, writes that Francis of Assisi shows us a "genius of seductive humanity and fascinating gentleness,

which causes us to discover what is most true in our humanity" ("Saint Francis," 1981).

We can spend our time arguing religious doctrine or scrambled scriptures. Or we can learn from the gentle, tender revolution of (either) Francis to listen to nature and share our bread.

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Francis-6/3/17

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Thu, Aug 24, 2017