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Brother Sun: The Saint in the Garden

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In early June an article in the Buffalo News caught my eye. It reported the death of identical twin brothers Julian and Adrien Reister at the age of 92. Born within minutes of each other they had both died on the same day.

The brothers were well known on the campus of St. Bonaventure University in Buffalo where they worked as woodworkers and gardeners. They were a familiar site on campus cycling together with identical bicycles, helmets and brown homespun robes. You see, the Reister brothers were brothers - for 65 years they were members of the Order of the Friars Minor, more commonly known as Franciscan friars. They claimed to have confounded the Order's seniority system by walking in the door together and never saying who was born first. The story of the brothers sparked a memory of my own journey with the man who inspired their lifelong vocation, St. Francis of Assisi.

In the spring of 1988 I spent a month in Italy with my friend and neighbour Alison who lived in an apartment below mine in Banff, Alberta. I want to begin by stressing that we remain good friends although I don't see her nearly enough as she now lives in Vancouver. Having said that, by the 3rd week of our trip was very likely that we were going to strangle each other.

Years later I did some of those personality tests like Myers Briggs and True Colours. I am pretty sure that Alison and I are completely opposite types and this often reveals itself while traveling together. For example, when we arrived in Rome she produced a list of the top 10 sites we needed to visit on our first day. I on the other hand, wanted to find a sunny spot in one of the great piazzas and sit there people watching.

And so, in the interests of our friendship and mutual survival we decided a short time out was in order. I chose to do a solo day trip to the hills of Umbria and the fortress town of Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis.

Saints had never been a big part of my life. I grew up protestant in the west end of Sudbury but through my exposure to Catholic friends I had some knowledge of the major ones. Then in 1972 Franco Zeffereilli's movie "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" was released and we were presented with the image of St. Francis as a counter-culture hero leading a merry band of hippies in medieval Italy. As a teenager I was rather taken by the portrayal of this free spirit who had rejected the material world of his parents. The soundtrack by Donovan only added to the appeal. With that image in mind I boarded an early morning train bound for the hills of Umbria.

I travelled as a lover of history, art and architecture but soon realized that other passengers had more spiritual motivations. Listening to English speakers on the train I learned that the trip to Assisi was a pilgrimage for some, a very significant event in their lives.

Ninety miles north of Rome I stepped onto the platform in the valley below Assisi and looked up. The medieval town sat on the heights above me, remarkably well preserved. I got on the crowded orange bus with the other tourists, pilgrims and local people who live below but work above and up we went, a journey back in time.

Giovanni Bernadone was born in 1181 to a family of wealthy merchants in Assisi. His mother named him after St. John the Baptist but when his father returned from a business trip to greet the new baby he insisted on a different name. He was an ambitious entrepreneur, not religious and he didn't want his son named after a saint. Bernadone chose the name Francesco in recognition of his admiration for the culture of southern France.

By his late teens the well-dressed Francis was working in his father's textile business and leading a pack of rich kids who partied around town on their parent's tab. He was well known for his troubador songs in the Provencal french dialect. In 1202 Francis and his pals decided to do their civic duty as knights. Hostilities had erupted between Assisi and the town of Perugia just 25 km away. Picture Hamilton marching against Brantford. Off they went, infected with that same misguided sense of adventure and invincibility that has seduced young men into battle for centuries. The army of Assisi was butchered at the battle of Collestrada. A few soldiers were recognized as being the sons of the wealthy and Francis was among them. He was taken hostage and kept in solitary confinement for a year until his family was contacted and paid a large ransom. During that year it appears he contracted malaria and was tormented by the disease for the rest of his life. He returned home, sick, broken and eventually a different person.

I spent my first hours in Assisi wandering the narrow winding streets lined with pink stone buildings. Religious pilgrims have been coming to Assisi since the 1400s and it is one of the most popular shrines in the world. Dispersed throughout the throngs were Franciscan monks in their plain brown robes, belted with a rope. Some appeared to be pilgrims, others were clearly on the job and one even carried a briefcase.

The highlight of the town is the Basilica of San Francesco, completed in 1253, just 30 years after his death. It is actually two churches, the newer above the other and they both sit over his grave. The day had become quite warm and I took a refreshing break in the coolness of the church. The walls were lined with beautiful frescoes depicting scenes from the life of the saint. The framed print in front of me shows one of the most loved frescoes, Francis preaching to the birds. I was saddened when an earthquake struck Assisi in 1997 and damaged some of the Giotto frescoes beyond repair. Eventually I sat out on a covered walkway beside the basilica, looking out over the surrounding hills and valleys and thought about the man who had inspired all of this.

After drifting aimlessly for a year Francis decided to pursue knighthood again and join a crusade. En route to the battlefield he suffered some sort of emotional breakdown and turned back. Thomas Celano, an early biographer says that "he was seized with a disgust of himself, his former ambitions seemed to him ridiculous or despicable". He began to attend church and listen to the preaching. He also made retreats to the wild areas outside

of Assisi to pray and meditate. Eventually he took shelter in the ruins of a church at San Damiano just outside the town. Legend has it that Christ spoke to him there saying “repair my church which is falling into ruin”. At first Francis interpreted the message as a call to construction work and began it and two other nearby churches. He also began to wear plain robes and stopped carousing with the other wealthy young people.

Before long others joined the reconstruction but Francis's strange behaviour had set tongues wagging in Assisi. Things came to a head when he sold some of his father's textiles without permission to raise funds for his charitable works. This led to a famous confrontation in the main square and a permanent estrangement between father and son. Francis is said to have removed his clothes in front of the crowd, signaling the shedding of the past and the start of a new life.

American writer Paul Moses has speculated that Francis' battle experience and captivity in Perugia triggered post traumatic stress disorder and that this may account for these events. I am leery about applying modern filters to historical events but it is worth noting that the even the ancient Spartans referred to a post battle condition called “The Trembler”.

A few years later in 1209 Francis journeyed to Rome with twelve followers, seeking permission to begin a new religious order founded on the fundamental teachings and methods of Christ that we heard earlier. Francis had captured them in a document called the Rule. Pope Innocent III was aware of the growing popularity of the radical new movement and was a bit nervous about it.

Paula Huston described the state of the Italian church at that time in her book *The Holy Way*. “Much of the church had become decadent, swollen with the power it held over an uneducated public. The great monasteries of Italy had grown wealthy on the patronage of aristocrats, losing their original simplicity. Some were shamelessly commercialized, using relics of saints, jugglers and courtesans to attract the faithful and their money.

Francis finally got papal consent and began sending his followers in pairs to spread the gospel, even to far flung areas where the crusades were raging. Around the year 1210 an 18 year old woman named Chiara Offreduccio joined his followers. She was the daughter of a rich family from Perugia and they wanted her back to marry her off. He arranged to have her sheltered in several convents for a few years. He eventually established a second order for women founded on the strict Franciscan principles and put Clare in charge. Known as the order of Saint Claire or the Poor Clares this contemplative order is found today in 76 countries. A lake and a river in Ontario are named for her. Considering that her order was committed to solitude and prayer I find it somewhat bizarre that the Vatican made Clare the patron saint of television in 1958.

Francis eventually established a third order, open to people with families and regular jobs who wanted to live their everyday lives in accordance with Christ's example. He established a very big tent for those who wanted to follow a life of simplicity and service.

It would be impossible to cover all aspects of the St. Francis life here today. But something about this man has captured the imagination of people within and outside the Catholic faith for centuries and I think his appeal falls into three key areas.

First and most importantly, he rejected the accumulation of wealth and power, attempting to return the Christian faith to its core values. The members of his order were expected to live simply and share what little they had with others. They were also mendicants, meaning that like Jesus and the disciples they travelled empty handed, trusting that their needs would be met. The friars were not a cloistered or academic order but were action oriented, tending to the needs of the poor and sick. They believed in a democratic church and did not seek ordination, Francis was never a priest. He said "Preach always. With words if necessary".

His authenticity and focus on a simple faith, trust in a community and service to others retains its appeal even today. Franciscan friar John Talbot said that Francis was a startling example of someone who lived his faith more than he talked about it.

Nowadays however he might be best known as the patron saint of animals and the environment, a designation he received from the Vatican in 1980. You may have seen his statue in a garden, quite often holding a bird bath. Francis was not a pagan, he did not worship nature but felt that all creation was the work of God. Disrespecting nature was disrespect for God. His devotion to nature was captured in "The Canticle of Brother Sun", finished late in his life. This song of praise to nature is believed to be the first poem written in the Italian language rather than Latin. In it he praises, Brother sun, Sister moon and stars, wind, air, water, the earth and ultimately even Sister death. His spiritual connection to the works of nature was unusual in his day. His failed effort to enact laws against cruelty to animals was certainly groundbreaking considering that the first known conviction for the crime occurred in England in 1824. Like many mystics, Francis made pilgrimages and retreats and considered interaction with nature to be an important manifestation of his spirituality. Obviously this aspect of the saint has great resonance with the modern environmental movement and is a big part of his enduring appeal.

But in my mind the most intriguing attribute of St. Francis was his commitment to tolerance and peace, notably with regard to Muslims.

In recent years there has been considerable interest in the attempts made by Francis to end the crusades. The conventional interpretation was that he sought to end the horror by converting Muslims to Christianity but that may be too simplistic. There is some evidence that he was actually interested in leaving in peaceful co-operation with Islam.

Francis travelled in the Islamic world on more than one occasion including an extended pilgrimage to Spain. Writer Idres Shah believed that Francis had been strongly influenced by the Sufi branch of Islam. In fact he adopted the greeting "Peace be upon you" which is commonly used in the Arab world. Like the Sufis, he sought to spread the movement among all the people.. This was "the first reappearance in the Church, since its earliest

days, of the democratic element—the Christian people, as distinguished from the simple sheep to be fed, and souls to be ruled."

In his 2010 book *The Saint and the Sultan* American Paul Moses describes an intriguing episode in the life of St. Francis. In 1219 Francis followed the soldiers of the Fifth Crusade and found himself on a battlefield in Egypt. He crossed the enemy lines with a companion, somehow managing to survive and request an audience with Malik al-Kamil, the Sultan or ruler of Egypt

His audience with the sultan lasted three days during which they discussed all matters of theology. Afterward he was escorted safely to his own lines and shortly afterward the Crusaders were forced back across the Nile River and out of Egypt for good. Some versions of the event report that when the Sultan saw Francis in his brown robes he assumed he was a Sufi.

Later, in letters to Rome Francis commended the discipline of the Muslim faith and their regular prayers, suggesting that Christians had something to learn. In time the Vatican negotiated an agreement with the Muslim leadership in the Holy lands giving the Franciscans the role of stewards for the holy sites of Christianity. They continue in this role today in partnership with the Christian churches of the east.

The recent controversy over the establishment of an Islamic centre in Manhattan near Ground Zero prompted the American Franciscans to produce a movie for Youtube. In it they remind viewers that Francis sought peace and understanding with Muslims and encouraged the same tolerance in modern New York.

In 2000 Time magazine named him one of the 10 most important people of the past millennium. British historian Sir Kenneth Clark named him a religious genius, the greatest, he believes, that Europe ever produced.

The Franciscan movement is now worldwide and quite diverse with a variety of orders and branches. Before his death in 1226 at the age of 44 Francis found himself arguing against those within his own order who felt that they should retain control of the money and properties donated to them. Although the moderates won out he never relented and it is said that at the time of his death he asked to be laid naked on the earth.

Assisi is often described as a powerful place on our planet and I have to admit that there was indeed something special about it. I made my way back to Rome that day with a sense the events of the day would stay with me and it has. I know that others in this community have had a similar experience.

As I worked on this service over the summer I found myself reflecting on the

Franciscan perspective on the economic upheaval and political chaos around the world.

Episcopalian priest Chadwick Vaughn said that "Franciscan spirituality is a

discipline of not possessing, not controlling, but risking the vulnerability of

participating in that which will unfold in ways we cannot foresee. Think of how this spirituality might play out in all aspects of our life, family, community and work. Life so lived may not be smooth nor predictable but it promises to be interesting.