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FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Feast Day: October 4
Canonized: July 16, 1228

Two events changed Francis Bernardone. First, enemy soldiers captured him and put him in prison. Second, he met a leper.

Francis had been born to wealthy parents in Assisi, Italy, in 1181. As a teenager, Francis wanted only money and fun. He loved parties! But in 1202, when he was 21, Francis went to war and spent a year in prison. There, he had time to think and pray.

In prison, Francis realized that money had not bought him happiness. But later, Francis went back to his old ways. Then he met a leper. Pus oozed from the leper's sores. People turned away from him, but Francis walked right up and hugged him.

He had seen God's beauty in another human being. For Francis, life changed then and there.

In the years that followed, Francis gave away all his money. He preached and begged barefoot on the streets. A group of followers gathered around him, and he wrote a rule of life for them. They became the first Franciscans. He then founded the Order of Poor Clares, a religious order for women. He traveled to Spain and to Egypt to try to convert people there.

Francis asked his followers to praise God for the beauty of all creation. Everywhere he looked, Francis found God's love. And so he called the earth his mother; the sun, his brother; the moon, his sister. They showed him God's beauty. With all creatures of the earth, Francis shouted, "Praised be my Lord!"

And when he died at age 44 in 1226, people praised God for the beauty of Francis of Assisi. In 1228 he was proclaimed a saint.

When we see a manger scene at Christmas, it is said that we should thank St. Francis for this. Around the year 1220 he created a scene using real animals so that the local people could recall Jesus' humble birth in a more realistic way.

