

Sister Moon: Family time with St. Francis

by [Elizabeth Myer Boulton](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

It's official: our entire household is obsessed with outer space. Our children have a solar system hanging over their beds, our upstairs hallway is graced by images of the Milky Way, and when nighttime falls, glow-in-the-dark planets sing an eventide song of praise to the God who made them all and yet is mindful of one little family staring up in wonder.

In recent weeks our bedtime ritual has been going like this: after everyone has been bathed and brushed, we descend the stairs and get comfortable on the couch. Then one of us removes the shade from our living room floor lamp. With great ceremony, we turn off all the lights—that is, all the lights but that one floor lamp, whose bare bulb magically becomes the shining sun. Then one of our two children (we're careful to have them take turns) stands facing that light, holding up at arm's length a yellow pencil stuck into the bottom of a large, white styrofoam ball.

The styrofoam ball is the moon, you understand, and the appointed child of the night proudly plays the role of the earth. At first, since the moon is directly in front of the sun, we only see the moon's silhouette—the “new moon,” we've all learned to call it.

Then the child holding the moon slowly begins to pivot counterclockwise, and lo and behold a slim crescent of light appears on one side of the big white ball. The turning continues, and the moon's phases come and go: a half-moon, then a full moon, then another half-moon, and at last another new moon. After the waxing and waning we all climb down out of the heavens and head up the stairs for a story.

Like many families we cycle through periods when one bedtime book or another becomes the favorite. Lately it's been a picture book about St. Francis. In the soft shadow of hand-painted planets, stories of the poor man of Assisi whirl through the air—stories about midwives beside themselves with worry because Pica, the wife of a rich cloth merchant, has been in labor for hours, but the baby will not come. Then comes a knock at the door, and a stranger who declares, “Tell the woman in labor to

go out to the stable—that child will not be born in a decadent house!”

We read stories about how, as a young man, Francis lives a wild life, the life of a lover and a fighter. Intoxicated by romantic tales of the knightly round table, he goes off to war against the neighboring town—and is roundly defeated, captured and held for ransom in a stone dungeon for more than a year.

We read stories about how, after returning home, his broken heart wants nothing but prayer; and about an old crucifix in a ruined country chapel that speaks to him, saying, “Francis, rebuild my church”; and about how he steals and sells cloth from his family’s shop to pay for his rebuilding projects, only to be dragged by his furious father before the town bishop in a public demand that he return the stolen property.

Francis returns not just the cloth he has stolen but the very clothes on his back. As the elegant silk and satin robes fall down around his feet, he becomes a new creation all together. He rips open his tunic as if it were his heart.

From that day forward, he is God’s and God’s alone. Together they tame wolves, preach to the birds of the air and seek out the poor, the sick and the outcast. He gives away everything and blesses everyone. He marries Lady Poverty, as he likes to say, and their love for one another is stronger than death. He goes barefoot in snow and in sun, and at the end of his life his last request is to lie—and die—naked upon the earth.

One day my children will make a connection between their favorite picture book and that big styrofoam ball. A kind of cord, as strong and as humble as the one around Francis’s waist, will tie together our watching of Brother Sun and Sister Moon and our reading about the poor man from Assisi. That will be the day when it dawns on my children that, just as the full moon is full of the sun’s light, so St. Francis is full of Christ’s light, reflecting it simply and beautifully for all to see.

But here’s the thing: after my children marvel at how Francis’s life shines with the light of Christ, they will no doubt turn back toward their parents and be—well, somewhat disappointed. Looking at us, they’ll be struck not so much by light as by shadows. Don’t get me wrong, my husband and I are nice people. But no one would mistake us for saints. We haven’t given away everything—not even close. We like to talk about serving others, but hardly live up to our talk.

The truth is it's hard to live simple, beautiful lives of radiant discipleship. It's hard to give everything away and proclaim God's blessing on everyone. It's hard to let yourself be an instrument of God's peace, to let your clothes fall down around your feet, to become a new creation all together, to lose your life in order to save it.

As surely as there is always food on our plates and shoes on our feet in snow and in sun, my children will one day turn to us and ask why our lives are not as full of bright compassion as was the life of sweet, strong Francesco. After all the prayers have been said and the bedroom light has been turned off, I think about what I will say to ease their disappointment.

The Protestant imagination has developed more than one way to think about God's law, the path God has given us to walk. If the European reformations have taught us anything, it is this: the so-called first use of the law is to humble us, to show us where we fall short and so to encourage us to rely not on our own power, but on God. The second use of the law is to keep us in line, like a bridle on a horse. The law's third and principal use, as Calvin puts it, is to inspire and instruct and sanctify us, to blaze a trail of pilgrim's progress for us to walk along, with God the Spirit by our side.

It strikes me that in Christian life, reading the lives of the saints—Francis or Clare or Martin Luther King Jr. or Dorothy Day—can work in a similar way. On one hand, the saints humble us, showing us in clear, striking terms how we fall short of our full humanity, how small or petty or cowardly or unimaginative we are, how lifeless and barren. Their luminous lives put us to shame.

But at the same time the saints remind us that God makes even the lifeless, barren places shine bright. On its own the moon casts nothing but shadow, yet most every night the moon shines—and what is lovelier than moonlight? It's nothing but a wasteland up there, a cold ball of rock and dust—but can you think of anything lovelier than watching Sister Moon wax and wane?

When my children ask why their parents' lives seem dull or dim or disappointing compared to the saints' lives, I'll begin by agreeing with them. That's why we read the saints' lives, I'll say—to humble us, to help us see where we fall short and to learn to rely not on our own power, but on God.

But there's another reason. Reading the saints' lives can help us to pivot, slowly but surely, counterclockwise. They inspire us, challenge us, encourage us to change.

With the Holy Spirit's help, lo and behold a slim crescent of Christ's love may appear, and after that—who can say? We're all moons, after all, every one of us, and moonlight comes in phases. The luminous love of God's Spirit is not through with us yet.

It's official: our household is obsessed with space and with the life and light of St. Francis—let all the glow-in-the-dark planets sing praises to God! This is a match made in heaven!