

Following Francis of Assisi today: Who are our lepers?

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This is the 785th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi. He is beloved by so very many people the world over, Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers all admire the man who sought simply to follow in the footprints of Jesus Christ, living out his baptismal promise as one committed to living the Holy Gospel. From popes of his day and the Muslim Sultan Malik al-Kamil, to the last communist leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev (who, although maintains his atheism, knelt in silence in front of [St. Francis's tomb in Assisi](#) for more than 30 minutes in 2008 — that's longer than I've prayed there!) and the philosopher Albert Camus, Francis of Assisi has captured the attention of billions of people. He was a man of peace, but an ordinary man who, in striving to live as closely to the Gospel way as possible, became an extraordinary example of Christian living in our world.

There is so much that can be said and done to commemorate this Saint from Assisi, but I think it's worth reflecting on some of his own story and narrative of the emergence and meaning of the religious communities that call him founder. In an important collection of remembrances of the earliest friars called *The Assisi Compilation*, we read a selection that brings us back to the central charism and character of this way of life.

From the beginning of his conversion
blessed Francis, with God's help, like a wise man, established himself
and his house, that is, the religion, upon a firm rock, the greatest
humility and poverty of the Son of God, calling it the religion of
"Lesser Brothers."

On the greatest humility: thus at the beginning of the religion, after the brothers grew in number, he wanted the brothers to stay in hospitals of lepers to serve them. At that time when nobles and commoners came to the religion, they were told, among other things, that they had to serve the lepers and stay in their houses.

On the greatest poverty: as stated in the *Rule*, let the brothers remain as strangers and pilgrims in the houses in which they stay. Let them not seek to have anything under heaven, except holy poverty, by which, in this world, they are nourished by the Lord with bodily food and virtue, and, in the next, will attain a heavenly inheritance.

He established himself on the greatest poverty and humility, because, although he was a great prelate in the church of God, he wanted and chose to be lowly not only in the church of God, but also among his brothers.

I think that these two constitutive elements of the Franciscan life — humility and poverty — are really important aspects of the Christian life upon which we all can reflect today. That Francis desired the brothers all serve the lepers signifies that they were to transcend the boundaries of social and class distinctions, to risk meeting the stranger and the unknown, to “get dirty” in the messiness of human living, and bring peace, understanding and love all the while. The lepers were the voiceless, the marginalized, the ignored, despised and forgotten. Who are our lepers today? Who are the ones that the rest of the Church, society and world wishes to push off outside of our everyday experience so that we never have to encounter them? They are out there and we are called to be among them.

The humility that Francis sought to instill in his brother friars as he struggled to live it himself reflects the very condition of Christian discipleship that provides the possibility of solidarity and ministry among all sorts of people. A life centered on humility means that one does not consider him or herself above, better or distinct from others — the rich and poor, the powerful and weak alike. Instead, freedom comes

with the letting go of one's own interest, ambitions and goals, the desire for power and dominance, in order to approach all people recognizing who it is they really are: our brothers and sisters.

Following Francis of Assisi today means striving to live among the lepers of our own time in a spirit of evangelical poverty and humility, allowing nothing to get in the way of embracing others. Who are our lepers? How will we, following the example of Francis, be their brothers and sisters?

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