



SAINTS ALIVE!

THE FAITH PROCLAIMED



“A glorious introduction to those who have been raised to the glories of the altar.” — JAMES MARTIN, SJ

MARIE PAUL CURLEY, FSP, and MARY LEA HILL, FSP



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By Marie Paul Curley, FSP, and Mary Lea Hill, FSP

With a foreword by Celia Sirosis



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Part I

The Beatitudes

Saint Francis of Assisi

Holy Fool

Francis saw his father, Pietro, frown at him as he walked in the front door of the textile business. Francis didn't even stop to greet his mother, but walked right past both parents into the back storage room.

He could hear his father sputtering to his mother as he continued folding and piling the material from the new shipment. "I don't understand him! He joins the duke's army . . . a splendid knight . . . he had the whole town in the palm of his hand. And in two days—*two days*, mind you—he slinks back home, a disgrace to the Bernardone name! He's a fool!"

His mother's soft voice trembled. "I don't pretend to understand him, but you know he hasn't been himself since he came back. Maybe he just needs time to find his way."

In the next room, Francis cringed. He had decided to join the duke's army to reclaim the glory he had lost languishing as a prisoner of war. But something hadn't felt right. Then he'd heard that

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voice, that compelling voice too demanding to ignore: “Serve the Master, rather than man.” He could still hear it ringing in his ears. Coming back had made him seem a cowardly fool, but he couldn’t help it.

Francis had never experienced anything like this before. He was used to being the carefree merrymaker, the life of every party. But that sort of tinsel held no more appeal for him. He yearned for something deeper, more real—but what? He slid off the pile of material he had been perched on. “Mamma, I’m going out to Saint Damian’s,” Francis called over his shoulder as he strode out the door. His father just shook his head, folding and piling more furiously.

As Francis walked through the winding streets toward the city walls, he was hardly aware of anything around him. Hands stuffed in his belt and head hunched forward, he worked his mind hard. *I can’t just keep drifting*, Francis thought. *What am I really looking for? Had that voice belonged to God? How can I “serve the master”?*

Francis was already outside the city walls and nearly at Saint Damian’s Church when a shadow fell across the path, startling him out of his reverie. Instinctively he pulled back in horror as a leper extended his trembling, rotted hand, pleading for coins. From the purse at his belt, Francis drew a few coins and threw them at the human wreck. As the leper struggled to retrieve the coins, Francis circled widely around him and tried to settle back into his interrupted thoughts. Sights like this always left him a little queasy, and he shook his head to clear it. Now, where had he been . . . oh, yes, he had been thinking of how to serve the Master. . . .

Francis stopped dead in his tracks. His stomach tightened in a knot of realization and remorse, and he spun around in time to see the leper shuffling around a bend in the road. “Wait!” he shouted hoarsely, breaking into a dead run. He

caught up with the man. Panting, torn between desire and revulsion, Francis gripped those thin ragged shoulders and looked searchingly into the surprised leper's face. Before, he had seen only the ugliness of disease; now he marveled at the light that appeared in the leper's eyes. Francis embraced the leper energetically, as if he were a long-lost friend instead of a man dying of a repulsive, contagious disease. Quickly, simply, Francis emptied the entire contents of his purse into the leper's hand—not throwing the coins, but pressing them warmly into the filthy palm. Then, without a word, he turned back and walked on briskly to Saint Damian's. Francis thought to himself: *This is where I'll find my Master, not only in prayer but also in suffering, and in those who are rejected.*

Kneeling before the altar of the little, dilapidated stone church, Francis contemplated the large crucifix. His searching eyes studied the twisted, agonized face. *This* was the face he had seen reflected in the eyes of the leper. It would be in serving others—whether poor or rich, simple, or wise—that he would serve his God. But *how*? He still looked for something concrete that he could do.

As he continued praying, Francis thought he heard someone calling him. Startled, he glanced around, but no one was there, nothing stirred. Yet as soon as he had settled down again, a voice repeated his name: “Francis!” The voice came from the crucifix! “Restore my church, Francis, which is falling into ruins.” Francis nodded. This was something he could do—Saint Damian's could use more than a little fixing up.

Francis returned to his father's shop, loaded some of the best brocades and silks on a packhorse, and carted them off to nearby Foligno, where he sold everything—even the horse. He went back to Saint Damian's and offered the money to the pastor. Guessing where the money had come from, the priest hesitated to accept it, so Francis left the bag of coins

on a windowsill of the church. When Pietro Bernardone learned what his son had done, his long-seething temper exploded. He physically hauled his son before the bishop to demand his money back.

As his father raged on with his public accusations, Francis realized that his anger was not about the money—after all, his father had indulged Francis all his life with fine clothes, food, and luxuries. His father only wanted to stop Francis from his new way of life. It was time for Francis to choose—even though he didn't feel ready, even though he didn't know exactly what he was supposed to do. If he *really* wanted to follow the way of the servant, suffering Christ, then he must put aside everything else. He must rebel from mediocrity.

Francis squared his shoulders and turned to the bishop. “Your Excellency,” he began, “I'll return not only his money, but even his clothes.” So saying, he removed everything he was wearing and added, “Pietro Bernardone is no longer my father; I give everything back to him. From now on I shall say to God, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven. . . .’” The bishop was deeply moved. He covered the shivering Francis with his own robe, later giving him an old gardener's tunic to wear. A furious Pietro Bernardone gathered the clothes and money and left Francis there. From then on, Francis would have to rely completely on the providence of God, having nothing to call his own.

Francis dedicated himself completely to the Lord's service. He divided his time between helping at a refuge for lepers and rebuilding the crumbling church of Saint Damian. At first he was the laughingstock of the town, but as he persevered in his determination to radically live Gospel poverty, the laughter began to lessen.

With the bishop's permission, he began preaching simple sermons to the townspeople. Before long, his Gospel lifestyle

and irrepressible joy began to attract others who were dissatisfied with their lives. When Francis and his followers numbered a dozen, he decided it was time to ask the Church to recognize this order that was forming almost spontaneously around him. Together the poor men set out for Rome to seek an audience with Pope Innocent III.

When the dusty, tattered man from Assisi entered the Pope's audience hall, Innocent gasped. The Pope had seen this very man in his dream the night before: Francis had been holding up the crumbling wall of the Lateran Basilica. Surely God must have something great in store for this unknown servant!

With the Pope's full approval, the little group returned to the vicinity of Francis's hometown. They lived in a borrowed stable until they outgrew it. Then a chapel, Our Lady of the Angels, was lent to Francis by a Benedictine abbot, and the growing community built rugged shacks around it for shelter. This tiny church was called the Portiuncula, or "little portion," and was always Francis's favorite, even years later when his friars had spread all over Italy.

Francis guided his men along the simple lines of the Gospel—prayer, poverty, work, and preaching. As he gradually realized that his new order would "build the Church"—not physically but through spiritual renewal—Francis gave himself to preaching tirelessly. He alternated his preaching with times of retreat from the world, either by himself or with a few companions, dedicating himself to prayer and contemplation. Despite his many sufferings, the lighthearted cheerfulness for which he had been known as a youth blossomed into a deep, persistent joy. He would often sing his now-famous Canticle of the Sun: "Praised be my Lord for Brother Sun . . . for Sister Moon, for Mother Earth, for fruits, flowers, grass, for Sister Death. . . ."

Francis's biggest concern was that his followers—who numbered in the thousands—would remain faithful to a life of poverty, service, and obedience. Only fifteen years after the Pope's approval, Francis's health began to fail. When a doctor told him death was near, he exclaimed, “Welcome, Sister Death!” because he knew he would soon see the Lord of his canticle, face to face.

Francis asked to be taken back to the Portiuncula, and a sorrowful procession wound its way out of Assisi and began climbing a small hill. Francis motioned to the brothers to stop. Slowly, painfully he raised himself on the stretcher, breathing hard from the effort. As the stretcher was lifted once more, he begged his brothers to sing the canticle with him, for him. Their voices quivering with emotion, they began the song so loved by their spiritual father.

Francis lay for a week in a hut at Portiuncula. Toward evening on a day early in October, Francis asked to be brought into the chapel itself and laid on the floor. He joined his whispered voice to those of the friars singing his favorite song of praise to God. The last verse died away; Francis intoned Psalm 141 and then fell silent.

As darkness shrouded the chapel, the forty-four-year-old holy fool of Assisi entered the eternal light of the Master he had so faithfully served.



Prayer

Saint Francis of Assisi,
you radically lived the beatitude
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom
of heaven.”

In a materialistic age that pressures us to focus on
possessions as a means of happiness,
help us to discover the true joys of following Christ:
the joy of service,
the joy of a free heart and uncluttered life,
the joy of living in reconciliation,
the joy of living in communion with all creation.
Give us the courage to live
in always greater freedom
as your instruments of Christ's joy and peace in the
world. Amen.

About Saint Francis

Born: ca. 1182 in Assisi

Died: October 3, 1226, just outside Assisi

Feast Day: October 4

Canonized: 1228 by Pope Gregory IX

Patron: Italy and the environment

Notes on His Life

-  Just after his commitment to his new way of life Francis was beaten by robbers—and rejoiced about it.
-  Known as the “holy fool,” Francis sought out opportunities to be ridiculed.
-  Francis gave away the community’s only prayer book so they could give alms to a beggar.
-  Along with the Dominicans, Francis and his followers rebuilt the medieval Church by renewing it spiritually.
-  In ten years, Francis’s followers grew to more than five thousand.

- ✿ Francis inspired his contemporary Saint Clare to begin the order that was eventually known as the Poor Clares.
- ✿ Francis was the first known stigmatist—mystically, the wounds of Christ were reproduced physically on his body two years before his death.

Lesser-Known Facts

- ✿ Saint Francis didn't actually write the prayer, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."
- ✿ When he wrote (and set to music) the exultant prayer, "The Canticle of the Sun," Francis was suffering excruciating pain.
- ✿ He went to the Holy Land to preach to the Muslims, who greatly respected him.
- ✿ He wanted to be buried in a cemetery for criminals.
- ✿ "Friars Minor" is the name Francis gave to his new order (later known as Franciscans).
- ✿ One of the most beloved and popular saints, his feast day is celebrated not just by Catholics but also by the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and others.

In His Own Words

"We adore you, O Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all your churches which are in the whole world, and we bless you, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world."

Saint Juan Diego

“Am I Not Your Mother?”

On a clear morning Juan Diego made his way along the dusty road to Tlatelolco (Tlat-el-co), his usual route to attend Mass and to hear instruction from the priests. During the three-and-a-half hour trip, he was thinking of how life had changed in these past ten years. The conquerors had come and taken away the greatness of his people. *Our land is now their land*, he thought. *They are our rulers, we are like slaves. However, I have accepted their religion because. . .* Suddenly he heard the strains of lovely music. *What is it that I hear? Such music must be of heaven!* And then someone called his name, “Juanito,” but with such sweetness, “Juan Dieguito.”

He began to look around, staring off to the east, curious about the sounds he was hearing. He was so taken by the music that, without realizing it, he began climbing Tepeyac Hill. At the top he was surprised to find a beautiful young woman, not a Spaniard, but one of his own people, a *morena*. In an instant he took in the scene: she was standing in

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a field of emerald hues where the ground was usually brown and dusty; the blaze of sun was behind her, whereas it should have still been rising toward midday; her clothing was regal; and she appeared to be pregnant.

She was looking at him with such a loving expression, as if she really knew who he was. “Juanito,” she continued. “My smallest child, where are you going?”

“My Mother,” he replied, returning her gaze, “I am on my way to your house in Tlatelolco to hear the divine things taught by our priests, our Lord’s delegates.”

“Know and understand, dearest of my children,” the lady continued, “that I am the ever-holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God who gives life, Mother of the Creator of heaven and earth. I have an ardent desire that a temple be built where I can show forth all my love, compassion, assistance, and defense because I am your loving Mother: yours, and all who are with you, and of all who live in this land, and of all who love me, call to me, and trust in me. I will hear their cries and will give remedy to their sorrows and sufferings.”

As he listened, Juan Diego felt great love and confidence toward this motherly figure. She urged him, “So that I can actually show my mercy as I desire, go to the bishop and explain that I have sent you to manifest what I wish, that a temple be built for me on this very site.” Without losing a moment, Juan Diego said, with a slight bow, “I am on my way to do as you ask, my Lady.”

As he hurried along, Juan Diego reflected on what had happened. *My heavenly Mother did not suddenly appear to me as in a dream. No, she was right there speaking to me as a mother to her son. And I could address her as I would my own mother. I must hurry and faithfully carry out her wishes.* In his heart he kept hearing her voice calling, “*Juanito, Juan Dieguito.*”

Although he was fifty-seven years old, Juan Diego had no difficulty covering the miles quickly. He was received at the door of the bishop's palace and directed to a place to sit until called. He sat quietly and waited, and waited, and waited, going over and over what he must say. Bishop Juan de Zumárraga was a kindly man, who when eventually informed of his visitor, invited him in. He listened attentively to Juan Diego, but decided to give the story the test of time. "Thank you for what you have related to me, Juan Diego, but I must ask you to come again another day when there is more time. Then you can repeat what you have said and give me all the details." Juan Diego expressed his gratitude to the bishop, but outside he expressed his disappointment with a deep sigh.

Back at Tepeyac he again found his Lady waiting. "My dear Mother," he began, "I went and delivered your message, but I don't think the bishop believes me. He might think this is my invention. Please, give your commission to someone more worthy than I. I am nobody. I am like a tail or a dead leaf. You ask me to go where I do not belong. Forgive me for saying this. Do not be angry with me, my Lady."

Mary was looking attentively at Juan Diego when she replied, "My littlest one, my son, listen to me. There are many servants and messengers from whom I could choose, but I desire that you take my message so that through you my wish will be fulfilled. I beg and command you, my dearest son, go again tomorrow to the bishop. Greet him in my name and tell him that work must begin on my temple. Tell the bishop that I have personally sent you—I, the ever-holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God."

Again, this humble man accepted the Lady's mandate, but feared he would be rebuffed a second time. After all, he was only an Indian.

Early the next morning he made the trip once more to the bishop's residence, and once more he was made to wait. When kneeling before the bishop this time, Juan Diego was peppered with questions. Bishop Zumárraga wanted a description of the lady and the place where Juan Diego had seen her. Juan Diego held back nothing of what he had seen, of his impression of the lady, or of what she had requested of him. Even after all that, as he later recalled to his heavenly Mother, the bishop said he must ask for a sign, a proof of some kind that her appearance was true. In fact, however, the bishop was so intrigued that he sent men to follow Juan Diego, but they lost him somewhere near the hill.

He went home with the Virgin's assurance that tomorrow she would provide the sign the bishop requested. At home, to his dismay, Juan Diego found his beloved uncle, Juan Bernardino, very ill. He tried without success to find someone with medical expertise. So, early next day, Juan Diego set out for Tlatelolco to bring back a priest to anoint his uncle, now close to death. To avoid running into his Lady, Juan Diego went around the other side of Tepeyac Hill. In passing he glanced up at the hill just as Mary was descending toward him. "My little one, my son, what is happening? Where are you going?"

"My dear Lady," he stammered, "I hope you are well, and happy, but what I tell you may sadden you. My uncle is dying and I am rushing to call a priest to confess him and prepare him for death. As soon as I have done this, I will return to you. Please know I am being truthful. I will be back here tomorrow."

Looking at him with love, the Virgin assured him, "My son, fear not; what worries you now is nothing. Do not be frightened by that illness. Am I not your Mother? Your uncle will not die; believe me, he is healthy." Juan Diego was

overjoyed by her words and immediately set off to do as she instructed. “Go, my son, to the top of the hill and collect the flowers you find. Bring them to me.” At the place where he had first encountered the Lady, he found a large number of fresh, fragrant roses. When he presented all that he had cut to her, Mary took them from his arms and arranged them neatly in his cloak, or *tilma*. “Do not open your cloak for anyone but the bishop,” she told him. “Tell him that I have sent you as my ambassador. You are most worthy of trust. Say that I sent you to the top of the hill to cut these flowers. Explain to him all that you saw and experienced so that he may be persuaded to build the temple I request.”

This time, as Juan Diego knocked at the palace door, he felt sure of success, but again the servants tried to turn him away. As he pleaded for an audience with the bishop, one of the servants caught sight of what looked like a rose sticking out from under Juan Diego’s tightly held garment. The man attempted to grab the flower, but Mary’s ambassador held strong. Because of the tantalizing aroma of the roses, the servants finally decided to inform the bishop. He hurried from his study and invited his visitor to come in. Juan Diego gladly accompanied the bishop and after properly greeting him recounted his wondrous story from the beginning.

“Señor Bishop, as you ordered, I went to my Lady, Holy Mary, Queen of Heaven, and made your request. I told her that I had promised to bring a sign back for you. She agreed. And that is how, very early this morning, she sent me to the top of the hill where I first met her to cut roses. She herself arranged them in my *tilma* to be brought to you. Only cactus and dried brush grow on that hill, but this morning it was full of every variety of Castilian roses. Now I am to present them to you as her sign that I am to be trusted and that she truly wants her request to be granted.”



As Juan Diego unfolded his *tilma*, not only did a glorious array of roses fall to the floor, but a stunning portrait of his Lady appeared on his *tilma*. Before the bishop and those present with him, the miraculous image of Mary, the Mother of God and of the Americas, our Lady of Guadalupe, was revealed on the poor, simple *tilma* of her faithful son.

Juan Diego was a man of his civilization, one that had been viciously subjugated, a member of a trusting people who had been sorely tried by their conquerors. Because of his personal openness to God's call, he epitomized the true disciple of Christ's kingdom, the poor in spirit. And he had personally met that kingdom's Queen. He had conversed with her. She had shown him the utmost love and respect and had commissioned him to begin the process of getting a temple built in her honor on the very place of their meeting. It was this very spot on which he now stood. "Most beloved and beautiful lady, my mother, my little one, I will be here always at your service. I will tell everyone about your tender concern for my people, for all people. I will lead them to you where they can lay down their burdens and lift up their hearts to you and to the Giver of Life."

He spent the rest of his life as caretaker of her chosen shrine and spokesman for the Mother of God. This holy and humble man, ever faithful son that he is, can still be encountered at the glorious Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



Prayer

Saint Juan Diego, Cuauthlatoatzin, "talking eagle,"
among your people the eagle is the messenger of
the Divine.

Truly you were the messenger of the Queen of Heaven,
her most trusted son.
Our Lady of Guadalupe met with you as one meets
a friend,
inviting you to cooperate with her
in the great work of evangelization among your own
people.
Help us to be devoted to this Queen and to trust her
with our needs,
and those of our world today.
Inspire us with the openness of heart needed to hear and
act upon God's word
so that we too may be worthy of the kingdom. Amen.

About Saint Juan Diego

Born: 1474 in Tlayacac, Cuauhtitlán (north of present-day Mexico City)

Died: May 30, 1548

Feast Day: December 9

Canonized: July 30, 2002, by Pope John Paul II

Patron: Mexico; those devoted to Our Lady of Guadalupe

Notes on His Life

- ✿ His given name, Cuauthlatoatzin (Cuau-tla-to-át-zin), means “speaking eagle” or “one who speaks like an eagle” in his native language, Nahuatl (Aztec).
- ✿ He and his wife were early converts to the Catholic faith, though his wife died before the apparitions.
- ✿ He worked as a farmer and a weaver of straw mats.
- ✿ In studying the image on the *tilma*, scientists have found that a reflection of Juan Diego unfolding the *tilma*

appears in the eye of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The bishop and several other people can also be seen.

- ✿ For seventeen years Juan Diego lived next to the shrine as caretaker and guide.

Lesser-Known Facts

- ✿ The *Nican Mopohua*, “here it is written,” is the earliest extant document of the apparition.
- ✿ The dialogue, in Nahuatl, refers to Juan Diego with the suffix *tzin*, a sign of respect and tenderness (“Juantzin” or “Juan Diegotzin”).
- ✿ The word “Guadalupe” is really Tequantlaxopeuh (Tequa-tla-supe), which the Spaniards confused with the Shrine of Guadalupe in Estremadura, Spain.
- ✿ Juan Bernardino went to Bishop Zumárraga to explain his cure from smallpox.
- ✿ In Nahuatl the appearance of flower and song together designates the presence of the divine.
- ✿ Tlatelolco, a suburb of Mexico City, means “in the little hill of land.”
- ✿ The *tilma* (cloak), which is still intact today, is made of maguey, or agave. Fabric made with maguey usually lasts just twenty years.

In His Own Words

“Please, give your commission to someone more worthy than me. I am nobody. I am like a tail or a dead leaf. You ask me to go where I do not belong. Forgive me for saying this. Do not be angry with me, my Lady.”