

TOR-VIAN NOTES

WHO ARE THESE BLACK-ROBED MEN?

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, T.O.R., Loretto, PA



The friars who serve our parish are known as TOR Franciscans. But where do they fit into the large and diverse Franciscan family? Franciscans come in many colors, literally! Some wear black habits, some brown, some gray. Some friars are priests, some brothers but the priests are brothers too! Confused yet? We're just getting started. There are dozens of congregations of Franciscan sisters.

Some are active, some contemplative. There are secular Franciscans, some married, some single. There are even Protestant Franciscans.

In starting to sort this out, let's just say that Saint Francis of Assisi started something that went viral, not just in his day but down through the ages. People of all walks of life were attracted to the simplicity and genuineness of his way of following Jesus, and he found a place for everybody.

The friars of our parish belong to a particular branch of this movement: religious men, vowed to poverty, chastity, and obedience, known by the formal title Third Order Regular of Saint Francis (hence the initials TOR). But even knowing that much leaves questions unanswered: if we are the Third Order, who are the first and second?

Briefly, the first order is made up of three branches of Franciscan religious men: The Order of Friars Minor (OFM), the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (OFM Conv.), and the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (OFM Cap.).

The second order consists of contemplative women, originally called the Poor Ladies, now known as Poor Clares (PC).

That leaves the place for the Third Order, but (again nothing is simple in Franciscan history) that too is divided into one group of vowed religious men and women (TOR) and another of lay persons known as Secular Franciscans (OFS).

Obviously, there is a great deal of history that has produced this large and diverse family of Franciscans. Continue reading, below.

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A REALLY BIG FAMILY

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, T.O.R., Loretto, PA



If we give much thought to the large and diverse family of Franciscans in the world, we might wonder why Saint Francis would create such a complex structure. But he didn't. Francis didn't set out to start a religious order at all. In one of his most memorable statements, he said: no one told me what to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.

Francis began to follow Christ by living the solitary life of a hermit. In time he attracted a following of men, and he declared: the Lord has given me brothers. Wondering what the Lord had in mind next, Francis and the little band of brothers went on pilgrimage to Rome where they received the blessing of Pope Innocent III on their movement.

When young Clare Offreduccio declared that she and some other women wanted to join the movement, Francis hastily arranged a convent for the sisters at the little church of San Damiano which he had restored.

But the number and kind of followers continued to grow. Now lay men and women, with their households, their jobs, and families, were also drawn to this radical form of discipleship. Were they to abandon everything and follow him? No, Francis said: remain in your homes and villages and observe the Holy Gospel in your secular lives. This gave rise to what was known as the Third Order of Saint Francis. It was a large and diverse group of men and women, diocesan priests, nuns, and hermits, some living in their own homes, some in small communities. In 1447 Pope Nicholas V separated the regular third order – vowed religious – from the secular third order composed of lay members only.

Little did Saint Francis know what the Lord would accomplish when he began to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel. The pebble cast into the pond in the early thirteenth century continues to ripple through every sector of society today.

Continue reading...

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THE STARTING POINT

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, TOR, Loretto, PA



Where did it all begin for Saint Francis? As with the life stories of many of us, we'd have to say there were ups and downs in his early life. It started well. As the son of a prosperous cloth merchant at the end of the twelfth century in a small Italian town, he was a happy child. And as he got older, he became the life of the party, leading nightly gatherings of young people in song and dance in the town square.

Things went downhill quickly for Francis when he joined the local militia in a war against the neighboring city of Perugia. He was injured in battle and taken prisoner, where he languished in a miserable dungeon for a year. After his release his youthful vigor went missing. He lost interest in the family business, and in the nightly parties. In fact, he began to live in a cave.

Francis was baptized and raised Catholic, but he didn't take it very seriously in his youth. Later in life he tells us in his Testament about the turning point of his conversion.

"The Lord granted me to begin to do penance in this way. While I was in sin it seemed very bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world."

The story of the second half of Francis' life is a story of many steppingstones in a journey that would take him from feeling lost and helpless while living in a cave to becoming the spiritual father of a worldwide movement of grace. In popular culture Francis is renowned as an artist, a poet, a peacemaker, lover of animals and patron of the environment. But none of these elements explain his true greatness. The key to understanding Francis is simply this: he fell in love with Jesus, and that made all the difference.

But it's still early in the story. There's lots more to come.

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THE JOURNEY OF CONVERSION CONTINUES

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, TOR, Loretto, PA



I left the world, Francis said, after his life-changing encounter with the lepers. But where would he go now, and what would he do? As he prayed over these questions in a little abandoned chapel, he suddenly heard the voice of Christ speaking from the great Byzantine cross above the altar, “Francis, go and rebuild my house, for it is falling into ruins.”

It seemed like the answer to his quest, so Francis immediately began to clean and repair the run-down chapel. But gradually he came to realize there was more to Jesus’ command than this. The house of God is not just the church; it’s the whole world. Now Francis understood that he was to spread Jesus’ message: this is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.

No longer a solitary hermit, Francis now joined a movement of holy men and women called penitents. Neither clerics nor professed religious, these voluntary penitents chose to live a life of poverty and simplicity according to the gospel. It was here that the Franciscan Order was born. The regular orders of Franciscan men and women, and the secular branch of the order were rooted in this penitential movement. All Franciscans profess to observe the Holy Gospel through a life of penance, that is, a continuing turning toward God. The full title of the TOR community is Third Order Regular of Penance.

As Francis began to attract more followers, and after they had received the approval of Pope Innocent III on their life and mission, the friars began to preach the gospel, not so much in churches as in marketplaces. In one memorable scene, when the crowds weren’t paying attention, Francis said: I might as well be preaching to the birds! And so, he did. And now it’s hard to find a statue of Francis without a bird.

The grassroots movement that began in the “peripheries” of Umbria soon reached the end of the earth, and the little man of Assisi one day found himself in the palace of the Sultan of Egypt – but that’s a story for another day.

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ST FRANCIS MEETS THE SULTAN

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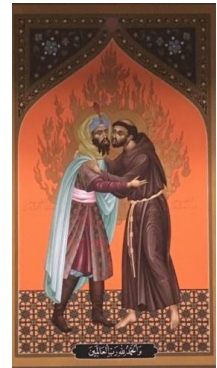


Unlike some of the fiery preachers of his day, Francis of Assisi was a gentle soul who developed a reputation as a peacemaker. When Pope Innocent III called for still another crusade to take back the holy places in Jerusalem, Francis quietly opposed the move and insisted that his friars would not bear arms.

So, it came as quite a surprise when Francis showed up in Damietta, Egypt amid some of the heaviest fighting of the crusade. Had he changed his mind and decided to enlist? No, but his presence on the battlefield prompted many questions and led to one of the most historic encounters of all time between Christians and Muslims.

Some believe Francis went to Egypt to minister to the Christian troops, a kind of military chaplain. Others thought he wanted to be a martyr of the faith, the highest form of discipleship. And still others thought Francis was there to bring about a peaceful settlement to the conflict or to achieve victory not by force of arms but by converting the Muslims to Christianity.

Any of these theories seems possible, but none was achieved. Instead, Francis undertook a dangerous trip across enemy lines to meet personally with Sultan Malik al-Kamil. To his surprise he found the sultan to be a courteous, respectful, well-educated leader, who also desired peace, but the warring forces on both sides made it impossible. They parted as friends, and Francis carried with him a newfound respect for the Muslim people and especially their commitment to daily public prayer.



When it came time to write a rule of life for the friars Francis, alone among Christian leaders, included a chapter urging his followers to go and live peacefully among the Muslims, not engaging in disputes, but sharing their faith once they had come to know and befriend their neighbors. Francis was a pioneer in the work we now call inter-faith dialogue.

Given the ever-growing conflicts of our time, particularly between the Christian and Muslim world, we would do well to embrace the spirit of Saint Francis, to learn the art of dialogue and become instruments of peace in our day.

TOR-VIAN NOTES

WHO ARE THE FRANCISCAN SAINTS? – PART 1

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, TOR, Loretto, PA



Spoiler alert: 2026 will be a major milestone for Franciscans and Franciscan-hearted people. It will mark the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis. So, you can expect to hear a lot about Francis and his legacy in the lead-up to this anniversary year.

Given the long history of the Order it's not surprising that there are many Franciscan Saints. Some are well known in Catholic circles and beyond; others though less familiar have an important place in the family and an important message for our day.

Chief among Franciscan Saints, of course, is Francis himself. The key to his sanctity was his desire to simply live the Holy Gospel, to do what Jesus did and live as Jesus lived. A popular saying of our time asks: WWJD - what would Jesus do? For Francis the question was more direct: what *did* Jesus do?

Francis' companion Saint Clare combined contemplative prayer, gospel wisdom, and works of mercy. She received from the pope "the privilege of poverty," the right for her community to live as mendicants, without visible means of support.

Great Franciscan scholars drew upon the life and message of Francis to develop a body of sacred teachings that form the basis of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition. Saint Anthony of Padua and Saint Bonaventure were both declared doctors of the church for their sacred preaching and writing. On a more practical level Saint Anthony has become famous for finding lost articles. Saint Bernadine of Siena developed the devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus. Blessed Duns Scotus helped the church develop a foundation for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

So far, we have one American Franciscan Saint. Marianne Cope was a Third Order Regular Franciscan Sister from Syracuse, NY who responded to a call to serve the lepers of Hawaii in 1883. She set up hospitals for the dying on several Hawaiian Islands, eventually moving to Molokai where she cared for the dying Fr. Damian and continued his work. Marianne died of natural causes in 1918 and was declared a saint by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012.

Those are a few of the most prominent Franciscan Saints. Continue reading for stories of some lesser-known ones.

TOR-VIAN NOTES

WHO ARE THE FRANCISCAN SAINTS? – PART 2

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, TOR, Loretto, PA



Not all who became saints were born that way. Some began as sinners or slackers or even slaves. Which means there's hope for all of us. Take the case of Saint Margaret of Cortona.

Margaret was born into poverty in the region of Tuscany in 1247. At the age of 17 she ran away from home and moved in with a young man she had recently met. She lived with him for nine years and bore him a son. When her lover was murdered, Margaret fled with her son and found refuge with the Franciscan friars of Cortona. There she began a life of prayer and penance. After three years of probation, she joined the Third Order of Saint Francis and her son became a friar.

Margaret devoted the rest of her life to prayer, penance, and works of mercy. She opened a hospital for the poor, sick, and homeless. She was widely sought after as a counselor for other penitents who were looking for help to turn their lives around. Saint Margaret died at the age of 50 and was canonized in 1728.

Saint Angela of Foligno, born into a wealthy Italian family in 1248 married at an early age and had several children. By her own testimony she loved the world and its pleasures. At age 40 Angela had a profound conversion experience. She entered the Third Order of Saint Francis and began to devote herself to a life of prayer and service to the poor. She enjoyed many mystical experiences and came to be known as "Teacher of Theologians." Angela was canonized by Pope Francis in 2013.

The journey of Saint Benedict the Black began in slavery. He was born to African parents in Sicily in 1526. Freed at age 18, he was eventually received as a lay brother in the Order of Friars Minor. While Benedict preferred the lowest place, his community often called him to positions of leadership because of his wisdom and holiness. Benedict was canonized in 1807 and declared patron saint of African Americans.

These brief notes far from exhaust the list of Franciscan Saints or their amazing accomplishments. Maybe they'll entice you to go deeper – on the internet or in the bookstores - to be enriched and inspired by this tradition.