Praise for Pilgrim Paths to Assisi

The tale truly takes the reader on a spiritual journey. This work … is, in many respects, a love story, engagingly describing the author's quest to fulfill his dreams about learning, in as many senses as possible, the ways of the remarkable man who taught simple, truthful lessons and experienced a particularly deep connection to God.

-U.S Review of Books

For thousands of years, humans have been trying to define the meaning of life. Not unlike Francis or Homer, Russ has found a way to describe something of far more value: The meaning of the journey. This book is a treasure. Whether you are a seasoned trekker like me or an armchair traveler, you can find some wonderful stories that might get you out on your own pilgrimage to Spain or Italy someday. This book is an excellent reminder that it is never too late to set out, one step at a time, on a grand adventure that can define a well-lived life.

—Christopher Hurst, *Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro*

Reading Pilgrim Paths to Assisi, the Way of Saint Francis comes alive

—Matt Harms, Author of *The Way of St. Francis* and other pilgrimage guidebooks

GOOD MORNING, GOOD PEOPLE!

Stories for the Way of St. Francis

RUSS EANES

The Walker Press

The Walker Press

www.thewalkerpress.com

ISBN softcover: 979-8-9910673-2-4

ISBN ebook: 979-8-9910673-3-1

All photos are by the author

Cover design by Andre Eanes

Cover image from stain glass in the church of San Damiano, Assisi

Contact the author at russeanes.com

To the Pilgrim Community: you have become my friends, brothers, sisters and family.

Also by Russ Eanes

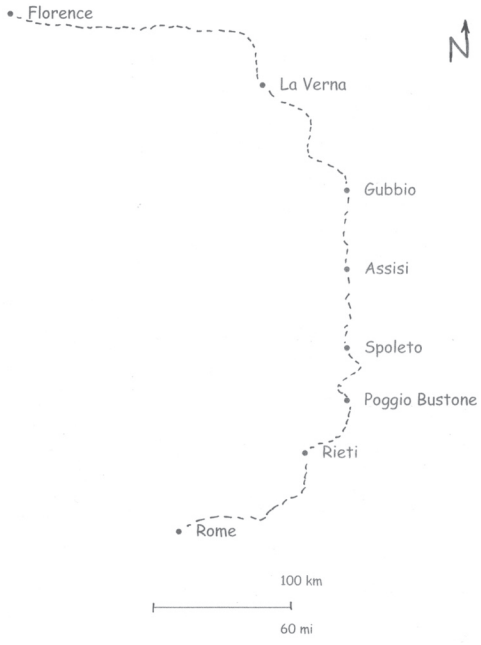
The Walk of a Lifetime: 500 Miles on the Camino de Santiago

Pilgrim Paths to Assisi: 300 Miles on the Way of St. Francis

Contents


Italy
Florence
Assisi
Rome

The Way of St. Francis

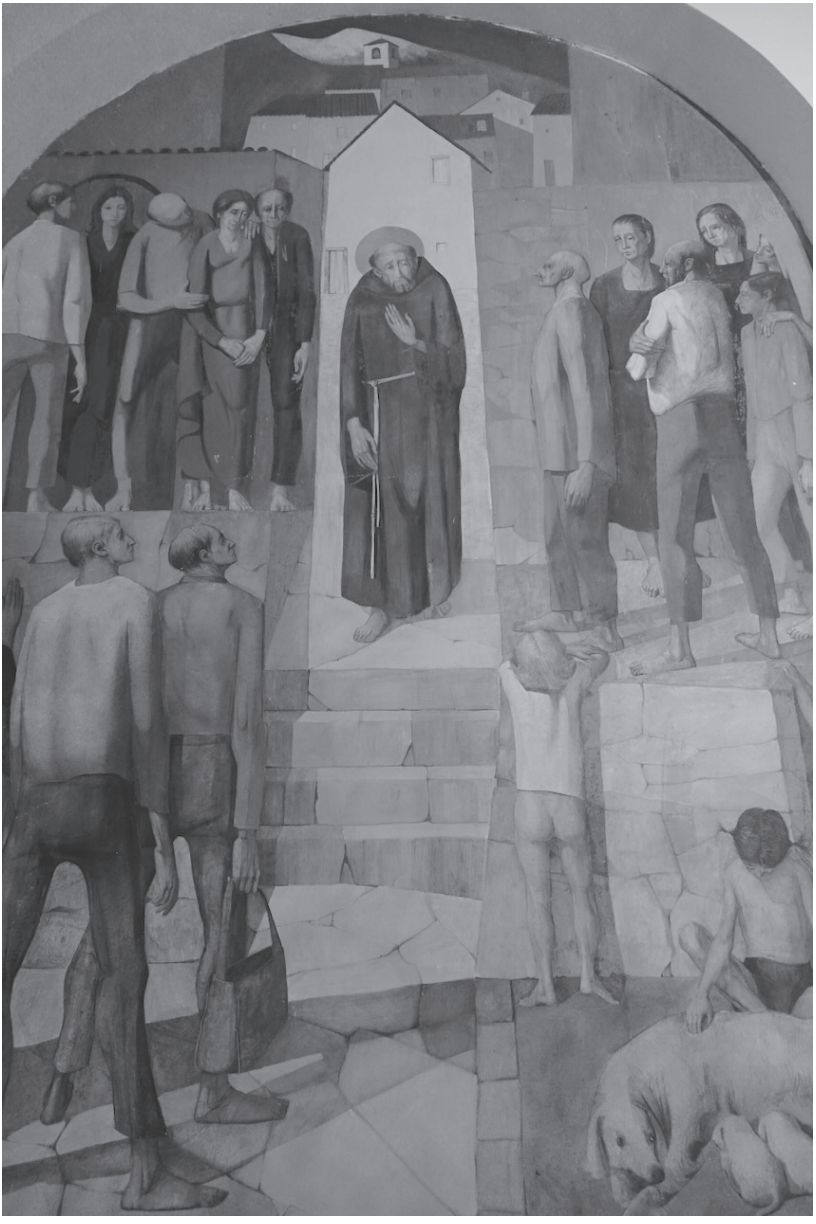


Author's Note

Writing a book about places and people from Italy is always a challenge when it comes to spelling. Which to use? Italian? English? In this book, I have used both.

Italian places have their Italian names, especially churches. When it comes to people, I have used both. If the English version is more familiar to speakers of English (such as Francis vs. Francesco) I have used it. If the Italian name is more familiar (such as Bernardo vs. Bernard) I have used it. For those who would insist on it being one way, or the other, I beg your forgiveness.

Lastly, in Italy, a monastery is a convent, so I use that term.



Introduction

Good Morning, Good People is born out of a love for history's most beloved saint, Francis of Assisi. Even though he died nearly 800 years ago, Francis has been a companion for my entire adult life. I'm not a Franciscan in any formal sense—I'm not even Catholic—but his life has informed and influenced me as I have wrestled with what it means to consider oneself a follower of Christ in the modern, post-Christian age. His love of God and his fellow human beings, his reverence for animals and the natural world and his life of simplicity all have resonated with me from the first time I read about him. His mystical nature appealed to my own mystical bent.

Alongside Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, and Buddha, Francis is one of the world's most widely known, beloved, and revered religious figures. According to contemporary Franciscan speaker and author Richard Rohr, "When Pope John Paul II wanted to gather the leaders of all the world religions to have a respectful interfaith dialogue in the 1980s, the only city in the

world that they could agree to meet in was Assisi, because the memory of St. Francis does not carry any negative baggage, even to other religions."[1] Books about his life and references about him in books proliferate. Apparently, he has the longest card catalog entry of any person in the Library of Congress.[2] In Italian he's *Il Poverello,* "The Little Poor Man," and he's the patron saint of Italy, along with Catherine of Sienna. According to Angela Maria Serrachioli, "Francis is in the DNA of Italians just as James is in that of the Spanish…"[3]

Since 1986 he has also been the patron saint of the worldwide ecological movement. In an age of disbelief, skepticism, evangelical fervor, and religious extremism, his wide acceptance comes as a welcome relief. In an age of overconsumption that is heating an already ecologically threatened planet, his life of simplicity and care for the natural world points to hope. The recently deceased Pope—eager to emphasize his own commitment to the poor of the world—even became history's first Pope Francis.

More than a dozen years ago I learned that there was a new pilgrimage route in Italy—The Way of Saint Francis, now more than 550 kilometers in length—which walks an ancient landscape that still breathes of him. Since 2019 I have repeatedly walked parts of the Way of St. Francis, which traverses the mountains of central Italy between Florence in Rome, with Assisi as its midway point. I have walked it alone, with my wife and with groups, and each time I am struck by how deeply spiritual it is. My hope in writing this book is to inspire

pilgrims to not just walk and appreciate the beauty of this trail, but to understand and learn from Francis as they traverse his beloved countryside. Walking his countryside, his life speaks for our time as powerfully as it did his. And there is no better way to experience it than on foot (as he did) feeling the gentle breezes through the olive groves, seeing the waves of red poppies as they shimmer in the fields, or the sun as it sets from the hilltop towns that seem to be carved out of the sheer rock.

Francis, as an Italian mountain guide told me, was more than anything a pilgrim, a person always on the move, animated by a spirit from God, who loved the world and wanted to experience it all. For this reason, perhaps more than any other pilgrimage, the Way of St. Francis lends itself to stories.

Out of my first three journeys, a book emerged, *Pilgrim Paths to Assisi: 300 Miles on the Way of St. Francis,* a chronicle of walking the entire route. Because of that book, beginning in 2023, I have hosted groups on this route and shared the life and legends of Francis along the way. This book is a collection of those stories and more, all based on some very old collections of legends about the life of Francis.

I am not a scholar or historian, but a writer, and while I have done considerable reading and research, this book is in no way exhaustive. It is not a biography. Scores of biographies have been written about him—and I have read most of the recent and best ones—but they do not always agree with the chronology, dates or actual details of certain events in his life. In this book I

have leaned heavily on one: *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life*, by Adrian House. His affectionate, detailed and occasionally conjectural telling of his life is my favorite, and since the framework of this book is largely chronological, I have followed House's chronology. Not all of the stories in this book took place along the Way of St. Francis, but I included them to give a more complete picture of his life and character.

I have tried as much as possible to tease out and synthesize the *facts* of Francis' life as well as his spirit. I try not to pass judgment on the historicity or facts of the stories, but simply let them speak for themselves; sometimes a work of fiction can be just as "true," as one based on fact. My desire is to get to the essence of what the story can teach us. When you add this to the physical location of the stories, they come alive and stay in our memory.

Many of the legends were written down decades after his death and they were written for particular purposes, often slanted to satisfy the needs of their authors. Dates are almost nonexistent in the tales and all of the best collections are thematic rather than chronological. Of those collections of legends, I have leaned mostly on three: *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* (Anonymous author,14th century); *We Were With St. Francis* (a collection of stories from before 1250, based on a Latin manuscript commonly called *The Legends of Perugia);* and *Legends of the Three Companions* (also written before 1250.) Last two collections probably come from the same source and were told by Leo, Ruffino and Angelo, the three companions who were with him nearly

continually in the last years of his life. They came from a time, just decades after Francis' death, when the Franciscan Order was in danger of losing the original charism of its founder.

There is more on each of these and other sources in the Appendix and Bibliography. At the end the reader can find a timeline of Francis' life, along with that of Clare of Assisi.

While anyone can enjoy what I have written, this small book is intended primarily for pilgrims, so, in addition to the stories, I have added some additional information about some of the places that the stories occurred, some of which you might not even find in a guidebook. There is a location index in the back that cross-indexes geographic locations with the stories, so that pilgrims can find stories that took place in certain towns.

In addition, I have added a few details about some of the other people, including saints, who are connected to St. Francis and whose stories also take place along the way.

The country I live in is currently in political, social and economic upheaval and crisi; a materialistic, fragmented and secular-dominated culture that is paradoxically spiritually starved and searching for authentic and deep spirituality. In that sense, it is not all that different from the time of Francis. I hope that these stories, combined (hopefully) with a walk on the Way of Saint Francis can

inject some hope into our time. Writing them has certainly helped me. Seracchioli, who originally conceived of and then marked out much of the Way of Saint Francis said it well:

> Here it is not a matter of creating an alternative to one of the 'major pilgrimages' from nothing, but of walking with the same pilgrim spirit in the midst of a nature in all its beauty, stopping and staying in places full of history and Spirit, following a route that cannot be chronological but that takes you to the locations where the fundamental episodes of the life of the 'perfect pilgrim' took place[4]

---

1. Rohr, Richard, "A Prime Attractor," daily meditations, May 17, 2015, https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-prime-attractor-2017-06-05.
2. Ibid
3. Seracchioli, Angela Maria, *On The Road With Saint Francis,* p. 4
4. Ibid, p. 5

PART I

A Movement Begins

1

Early Life of Francis

GIOVANNI BERNADONE, known to us in history as Saint Francis, was born in Assisi in 1181 or 1182. He died there 44 years later, a life short by modern standards but outsized in its impact on his own time and on history. He lived more in those four decades than many live in a life twice as long.

Francis's father, Pietro Bernadone, was a wealthy cloth merchant among the emerging middle classes of Umbria in central Italy. Umbria, and Assisi in particular, was also central in the political struggles of the time. The major political powers for nearly 400 years had been the Holy Roman Emperor, whose realm included much of Northern Italy, and the Pope, who ruled a patchwork of states in central Italy much like a secular ruler. In Francis' time, Emperor Frederick II, of German descent, was born and raised in the castle or *Rocca* above Assisi.

His mother, Pica, was possibly French, or at least knew French, and called her son Francesco (Francis in

English), meaning "little Frenchy," and the nickname stuck. Pietro took his son on journeys to France and Belgium where he traded for the latest in fabrics. Along the way the young Francesco would have learned the romantic tales and songs of medieval troubadours, legends of courtly love and valiant knights. They remained with him during his life, the poetry and music influencing his preaching. He was sometimes known as "God's Troubadour," because he imitated troubadours in his manner of preaching. His own poem, *Canticle of the Sun,* also set to music, is credited as being the first poem written in Italian (versus Latin).

The young Francis received an education and enjoyed the privileges associated with being the son of wealth. He caroused with the sons of other affluent merchants and nobility, sponsoring drinking parties and earning a reputation as a bit of a playboy. During his later teenage years Assisi declared itself an independent commune, rebelling against the representatives of the Holy Roman Emperor who had occupied the *Rocca*. The townspeople attacked the castle and tore it down. Many of its stones may have been used to build a new set of walls around the city and Francis may have learned stone masonry during this time. In addition to the emperor, they also drove out most nobility of the town who owned large, fortified houses and also owned much of the land around the city. These nobles fled to nearby Perugia and itched for a fight to regain their lost lands.

Like many other young men of his age, Francis longed for the glories of warfare. The conflict with Perugia would provide that opportunity. To win his

reputation he went with several of his fellows to battle with neighboring Perugia, outfitted in an expensive suit of armor. But he was to win neither riches nor glory; he was captured during the brief battle of Collestrada, which ended in a humiliating defeat for Assisi. He suffered for at least two years in a damp and cold prison, while peace was negotiated, and ransom was raised for his release.

Francis came home a changed man. His time in captivity had been both physically, mentally and spiritually trying. The dank dungeon where he was held captive was conducive to disease. Always frail, he likely contracted tuberculosis while he was there and returned home sick, spending much of the next year being nursed back to health. He would be plagued throughout the rest of his life with bouts of sickness.

Once the center of a group of carousing young men, he no longer felt drawn to his formerly hedonistic lifestyle. He was said to be more serious. Working in his father's business did not interest him. Not quite yet ready to give up the idea of earning honor and glory as a knight, he joined a local nobleman—Count Gentile—on his way to join Walter de Brienne, who was gathering a force in southeast Italy to depart for the Holy Land, part of the Fourth Crusade.

Once again, he adorned himself in armor and splendid clothing and set out in flourish and fanfare. He got no farther than Spoleto, about 30 miles south, when he was overtaken by a bout of malaria and was taken to bed with a fever. In delirium he had a dream where a voice told him to return to home, where, "he would be

told what to do." He abandoned the quest (perhaps to the relief of his traveling companions) and returned to Assisi.

A period of aimlessness set in. At times drawn to the carousing of his companions, he also became moody and depressed. He took to wandering the countryside on horseback. One day he passed near a Lazar house—a place of refuge for lepers—a few miles below Assisi. He'd had a lifetime revulsion for lepers, but he recounted later that in a spontaneous act he dismounted and kissed the leper and gave him money. The leper gave him a blessing. Returning home he took some of his father's money and returned with it to the lazar house. He said that this act of kissing the leper and the resultant donation of money was his turning point and he felt drawn from then on to assist the needy and outcast from society, the numbers of which he would soon join. He felt like a completely different person inside.

As he pondered his future, he took solace in solitude. He wandered the wooded mountainside of Mt. Subasio, south of Assisi, where he sought the solitude of caves. Sometimes he was accompanied by friends (Angelo di Tancredi may have been one) where he would wander off alone to pray.

Another place he favored was the small, decaying church of San Damiano, about a kilometer below Assisi. While sitting in the ruin one day, he gazed up at a painted crucifix hanging above the altar where he heard the voice of Christ say, "Rebuild my church." Whereas

the mission to the lepers had given him a new sense of identity, this voice gave him a concrete, visible mission.

He now had a calling and a purpose in life.

YOU CAN VISIT several of these early, important places of Assisi when you walk the pilgrimage route. San Damiano, less than a kilometer below the town still has the atmosphere of Francis and Clare and is one of my favorite places in the environs of the city. About four kilometers' walk south of Assisi, on the side of Mt. Subasio is the Eremo di Carcieri, which became a Franciscan Hermitage in Francis' life, built around the caves that he frequented before and after his call by God.

2

A break with his family

AFTER HEARING the voice of Christ from the crucifix, Francis left the ruin of San Damiano and soon encountered a country priest who was responsible for the ruined church. Francis gave him the coins he was carrying at the time and hurried home for more.

He would need much more money to restore the church and rebuild its crumbling roof, so over the next weeks he secretly took bolts of cloth from his father's storehouse and rode to the nearby town of Foligno, where he sold them. He returned to the priest and gave him the money, in particular asking him to keep the oil lamp lit on the altar. He began working on the restoration of the church.

Pietro soon realized what Francis had done, and in anger locked him in a cellar in his own house, before setting out on one of his annual trade journeys to France. Francis was humiliated and shamed but remained steadfast. Before long, his mother felt sorry for him and realizing his determination, took pity on him

and let him free. He returned to San Damiano and resumed his work.

His father's return from France brought things to a head. Seeing his son free, he went and found him at work again on San Damiano. Embarrassed and humiliated by Francis's behavior, in a fit of rage he hauled him back to town to face the ruling consuls. In his time, a father had the right to not only to disown, but to banish a son from the town. The local consuls, sensing this might be more a religious matter than secular law, and happy to defer the matter to another authority, referred Pietro to Bishop Guido. Pietro was undeterred and dragged him to the bishop's palace where he demanded justice and the drama reached its peak.

Guido was not totally surprised by the encounter. Francis had come to him on many occasions and Guido was familiar with his spiritual longings and had tried to counsel him. He knew that Francis had been taking his father's goods and selling them, and the priest to whom Francis had given money had in fact brought it to him, afraid to handle money that he knew was raised by the theft of his father's cloth.

Pietro demanded the money that Francis had given the priest, now in the bishop's possession, as he sought to publicly and officially disown Francis. Before his father could complete his case, Francis disappeared through a side door into the bishop's palace and disrobed. Clutching his clothes in his arms, with the bag of coins on top, he returned naked to the bishop's courtyard, and in front of all those assembled he handed the clothes and money to his father, saying, "I give these back to

you. From now on I have one father, the Father in Heaven."

Bishop Guido, either in a gesture of modesty or in a symbol of the protection of the church, removed his own robe and placed it over the young man. Francis's father was speechless; his mother was in tears. Still furious, Pietro received the clothes and money, and then he and grief-stricken Pica disappeared from the scene, and from the historical record.

The matter settled, Francis was given the tunic and trousers of a peasant and allowed to go free, as carried away by the event as he was the creator of it.

TODAY THE PLACE in Assisi where Francis was confronted by his father is marked by a statue that stands in the middle of this courtyard, next to the Santuario della Spogliazione, or "Room of the Stripping." Nearby you can also visit the family home and see the cellar room where his father imprisoned him. In front of it is a bronze sculpture of his two parents, his mother standing with a broken chain in her hands, signifying Francis' break with his family.

In the central piazza of Foligno, south of Spello along the pilgrimage route there is a plaque and sculpture that memorializes the sale of his father's cloth to raise money for the rebuilding of San Damiano