

THE HEART OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

by [Fr. Damian Ference](#) · October 4, 2017



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I am a diocesan priest, but I like to tell people that I am part-Capuchin. That's because in addition to the diocesan priests that staff our college seminary, we also have three Capuchin friars on formation faculty—it's been that way since I was a seminarian. Those friars played an important role in my priestly formation, inside and outside of the classroom.

When I was heading off to do graduate work at Catholic University, my bishop told me that I could live on campus, in a rectory, or with a religious community. So I asked the Capuchin friars if they would have me, and soon I had my own room at Capuchin College in Washington, DC. For two years, I celebrated Mass, prayed the office, took meals, washed dishes, watched football, and shared my life with about thirty men who were devoted to the witness of St. Francis of Assisi.

After the Blessed Mother, St. Francis is arguably the most popular saint in the Christian tradition. Everybody loves St. Francis of Assisi, even some atheists. After all, who wouldn

love a guy who has a nice beard, wears sandals and a simple brown habit, loves creation, and is often depicted with a cute bird on his shoulder or in his hand?

To be honest, most of the Capuchins I lived with in DC loved animals too. Their little slice of land in the northeast corner of the district was a sanctuary for birds, squirrels, deer, and even a red fox. And if you were lucky, inside the friary walls you might see (or at least hear) a mouse or two late at night. *All creatures of our God and King.*

Unfortunately, this *Precious Moments* version of St. Francis of Assisi is [the only version that many people know](#). Granted, St. Francis loved animals and he loved creation, but his first love was the Triune God. For it was God who created the earth, the skies, the seas, the trees, the animals, and finally, men and women in his image and likeness.

God wasn't always the first love of Francis, however. In his youth, Francis loved spending money and having a good time. One biographer notes, "No one loved pleasure more than Francis." Indeed, the young Francis sought to have the finest clothes, was overly concerned about making a good appearance, and liked to party. Coming from a wealthy family of silk merchants, he got whatever he wanted. If he lived in the twenty-first century, we would describe the young Francis as a self-absorbed, spoiled materialist with plenty of disposable income.

Deeply concerned about building his reputation, the young Francis was excited to represent Assisi as a soldier in a battle against neighboring Perugia. Many of his fellow soldiers were slaughtered in the skirmish, and Francis was taken prisoner. He spent a good deal of time in an isolated dungeon, and he began to wonder about eternity for the first time in his life. Upon his release, however, he went back to his merrymaking ways. But something had changed deep within him.

In time, Francis would have a dream in which God spoke to him. Francis responded to the dream by making more time for prayer in order to figure out who this God was and what He wanted of him. Francis went off to a cave and spent some serious time with the Lord, and there he wept for his sins and began to find real satisfaction in a new friendship with the Crucified and Risen Lord. His conversion was not sudden, but it was real. God was calling Francis to a new way of life, and slowly, Francis was responding.

A watershed moment in Francis' life was the day he encountered a leper. (Keep in mind that Francis had very expensive taste and was used to the finer things in life. He loved beauty and

hated deformity. He purposely kept himself from all things ugly and repulsive, especially people he perceived to be that way.) One day, Francis was riding his horse through the countryside when he came across a leper. Although he was repelled by the sight and smell of the leper, he got down off his horse and offered him the kiss of peace. When the embrace was returned to him, Francis was filled with an inexpressible joy that he had never thought possible. In the leper, Francis encountered Jesus. And the truth is, an authentic encounter with Jesus changes people.

Soon, Francis would hear Christ asking him to rebuild his Church from the cross of San Damiano. At first, Francis thought the Lord was speaking about a physical church building, which eventually led to a serious showdown with his father in the town square. Francis renounced his father and the family business for the sake of his heavenly Father's will to become a new creation. Rejecting all his material possessions and his former lifestyle, Francis donned a brown habit and devoted himself entirely to serving Jesus Christ, whom he called "the poor and crucified one." Over time, Francis realized that what Jesus wanted from him was to renew the Church and rebuild it by bringing people to a deep and authentic encounter with the crucified and risen Lord. And that is just what Francis did.

At the core of the identity of St. Francis of Assisi is his love for Jesus. Better yet, the heart of Francis' spirituality is the ability to recognize and accept God's unconditional and never-ending love for him, through the self-donation of Jesus on the cross.

If you ever make your way to Capuchin College in Washington, DC, there is a cute statue of St. Francis with a bird in his hand out in one of the flower gardens. It's a nice little statue, and you've probably seen a million like it. But if you want to gaze upon a piece of art that speaks to the real depth of Franciscan spirituality, you'll have to step inside the friary and set your eyes upon the almost life-size statue of the crucified Lord with Francis at the foot of the cross—a suffering Jesus is reaching out from the poverty of his cross, embracing Francis with all his love. Francis is receiving the Lord's embrace and is reaching back to the Lord, comforting him in his poverty with a tender embrace of his own.

And this is why Francis loved the poor so much. It was in embracing the poor that he embraced Jesus. It was in serving the poor that he served Jesus. It was in loving the poor that he loved Jesus. All because Jesus first embraced, served and loved him.

At the heart of Francis is the heart of Jesus. There's nothing cute about that.

This piece was originally published on October 4, 2017 in the [Word on Fire Blog](#).

Artwork: After Anthony Van Dyck, “St. Francis at the Foot of the Cross,” c. 1625.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Fr. Damian Ference is a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland and is a doctoral student in philosophy at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome. Fr. Ference graduated from Borromeo Seminary/John Carroll University in 1998, and after earning his MA and MDiv from Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology he was ordained for the Diocese of Cleveland in 2003. He served as parochial vicar at St. Mary Parish in Hudson, Ohio from 2003-2007. In 2009, he earned his licentiate in philosophy from The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Fr. Ference has been part of the formation faculty at Borromeo Seminary since 2009. In addition to writing for Word on Fire, Fr. Ference has published articles for *America*, *Catholic Universe*, *Bulletin*, *Commonweal*, *Dappled Things*, *Emmanuel*, *First Things*, *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, *Human Development*, *Pastoral Life*, *Seminary Journal*, *The Plain Dealer*, *The Priest*, *U.S. Catholic*, and *Worship*. Fr. Ference also regularly preaches retreats and parish missions. He is the founder and director of the Tolle Lege Summer Institute and is a lifetime member of the Flannery O'Connor Society.

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