

St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis: What do they have in Common?

By Maria J. Falco, PhD

I'm sure to many people the answer to this question is obvious: Humility and Love of the poor! But are there any other characteristics that these two Holy Men share, even though the time they each lived on this earth is separated by approximately eight hundred years?

Most people believe that the Pope chose his name as Pope deliberately to reference the Saint from Assisi whom many consider to be his principal inspiration and model. It is also true that Francis is the name of the founder of the Jesuit Order, of which he is a member, St. Francis Xavier, a Spaniard---and that he himself grew up in Argentina, once colonized by Spain. His behavior, however, appears to reflect more that of the earlier St. Francis than that of the latter. So, while it should not really come as a surprise to anyone, in the eleven months since he was elected Pope, his behavior has indeed never ceased to amaze.

But let's see how many aspects of Pope Francis' life are really similar or dissimilar to those of St. Francis of Assisi.

First of all, the Pope was ordained a priest in 1969. St. Francis did not think he was worthy of the priesthood

and only yielded to the wishes of his followers to the extent of agreeing that he and his group be “tonsured” as a form of recognition that his “Order of Friars Minor” were not heretics, as so determined by Pope Innocent III. Toward the end of his life he was ordained a Deacon.

Second, the Pope was a chemist and a “nightclub bouncer” early in his life; St. Francis’ father on the other hand, was a wealthy silk merchant, so he lived the high life of “fun and games” while a young man.

Third, St. Francis became a soldier, went to war in 1201 and was imprisoned for a year as a result. Pope Francis lived during the “Dirty War” in Argentina and helped a number of people escape imprisonment by the dictatorship there.

Fourth, St. Francis threw away his fancy clothes when he decided to walk in Christ’s footsteps and preach to the poor to seek reconciliation with God. His father had tried to talk him out of this behavior and beat him a number of times and even locked him in a closet. But St. Francis renounced his patrimony, became a barefoot wandering beggar, and according to Dante, took the “Lady Poverty” as his spouse. Eventually, he obtained a coarse woolen tunic of “beast color” and tied it around his waist with a knotted rope—the uniform of the Franciscans to this day.

Pope Frances, upon being elected Pope, refused to wear the traditional vestments of the Papacy, and decided to

reside in a Vatican guesthouse rather than the Papal Apartments of the Apostolic Palace. He chose to wear an iron pectoral cross and papal ring rather than the traditional gold. He was also well-known for his preference to ride the bus to work while he lived as an Archbishop in Argentina, and today, he leaves the glass enclosed “popemobile” to walk among the people gathered in the courtyard before St. Peter’s Basilica after Mass on Sundays. There he greets and hugs children, the elderly, the crippled and maimed and anyone else who seems to need it.

Fifth, even before he threw away his fancy clothes and decided to become a barefoot beggar, St. Francis came upon a poor leper who initially filled him with disgust, but he controlled his feelings, embraced him, and gave him all the money he had. Recently we saw a similar reaction by Pope Francis when he came upon a man whose face was incredibly disfigured by an incurable condition, and instead of avoiding him he hugged him and kissed his blotched face.

Sixth, at the age of 21 Pope Francis suffered from a life-threatening pneumonia and three cysts, resulting in his having to have a part of his lung excised. St. Francis suffered repeated illnesses, including the periodic loss of his sight, dropsy, and eventually, the “Stigmata” or the wounds of Christ on his hands, feet and side. (Hardly equal in gravity, but similar in the fact that neither individual allowed himself to be deterred by illness from continuing to follow his mission in life.)

Seventh: St. Francis became such a celebrity through his preaching that thousands of people flocked to hear him at every opportunity and hundreds joined his order to follow in his footsteps. A young woman, named Claire begged him to accept her as a follower as well, so he created “the Second Order”, or as they are known today, the “Poor Claires”. At one point an entire town begged him to receive them into his ministry, so he created the “Third Order” for the “non-tonsured” or ordinary citizens who wished to follow him. In each case, the “rules” of each “Order” were similar in urging the members to follow the example of Christ in humility and care for the poor.

Pope Francis has become such a celebrity in his own right that today major TV and news outlets have broadcast and published his sermons, celebratory Masses (Christmas Eve, etc) and public appearances at every opportunity. He has been quoted as saying that women have a very important role to play in the Church, and that if a person is a homosexual but that he loves God, “Who am I to judge?” He has washed the feet of both women and men, thereby breaking with a long tradition of “men only”, and even included a muslim in his last performance of this rite. Most importantly, he publicly declared that “God has redeemed all of us, (including atheists) not just Catholics.”

Finally, it has been said that St. Francis is Christianity’s “most popular Saint”, and in December of 2013, Time Magazine named Pope Francis, “Person of the Year”.



Painting of St. Francis of Assisi by Giotto.



Photo of Pope Francis

