

“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”

A Historical Series of the Murals on the Walls of Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Church

Saint Francis of Assisi

13th Century Italy



St. Francis was born around 1182 to a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy. To better fit in with the sons of the nobles in town, his father gave him money and fine clothes as a youth. St. Francis spent the money freely and wanted nothing better than to have a good time.

It was the age of chivalry and knighthood, and St. Francis dreamt of being a knight and earning honor and glory. He joined the company of a knight to fight in an army for the pope, but fell ill and had a dream telling him to turn back, to serve the Master rather than man. This prompted a spiritual crisis during which he was quietly searching for something worthy of his complete devotion. He became very compassionate towards the poor and the outcast, but this transformation was initially very difficult for him.

One day as he was praying in a small church near his home, he heard Jesus from the crucifix tell him “to rebuild my house for it is falling down.” So, St. Francis sold a bunch of his father’s cloth and gave the money to the priest of the church to rebuild it. St. Francis’ father was furious and locked his son up. He brought him to the bishop and demanded the money back. The bishop asked St. Francis to return the money, which he did. St. Francis then stripped off his clothing, and giving it to his father, renounced all title to his inheritance. Cut off from his family, he roamed the woods alone, singing God’s praise.

After two years of this, he returned to the church and began begging for money to rebuild it and others also in disrepair. At one small church, he heard the Gospel of Jesus sending out the

Apostles to preach the kingdom with no bag or second tunic or the like. He took this Gospel as God’s direct mission for him. So he renounced what little he had and began preaching. He soon attracted others who gave up everything and joined him. When St. Francis went to Rome to obtain the pope’s permission to start a new order, the pope hesitated. This new order, based directly on Gospel poverty, seemed too impractical. Yet, in a dream, the pope saw St. Francis holding up the Lateran church, the Cathedral in Rome, on his shoulder. So, he gave St. Francis permission.

Returning to Assisi, St. Francis and his companions lived in simple poverty and preached the Gospel. This preaching attracted St. Claire, an 18-year-old girl, who left her father’s castle and became his disciple. St. Francis’ new order, the Friars Minor, soon spread throughout Europe.

During Christmas in 1223, St. Francis wanted a way to visualize the hardships and poverty into which Jesus was born, so he created the first crèche or Nativity scene. His tenderness for and his power over animals were noted again and again. There is the story of his rebuke to noisy swallows who were disturbing his preaching at Alviano: “Little sister swallows, it is now my turn to speak; you have been talking enough all this time.” It is said that birds would perch attentively around him when he told them to sing their Creator’s praises. These events are depicted in the mural.

As the order grew, more precise administration was needed, and St. Francis reluctantly wrote new rules to guide it. He feared for its ability to follow Jesus’ poverty and simplicity.

On retreat on September 14, 1224, the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, St. Francis had a vision of a winged seraph nailed to a cross. He soon felt pains in his hands and feet. St. Francis received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, on his body, the first person reported to have received them. Only a few years later, St. Francis became ill and he died in 1226. St. Francis is the patron saint of merchants, ecologists, traders, poets, and is the patron saint of Italy.

His Feast day is October 4.

Each month, this series will feature the murals painted on the walls of Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Church along with history and commentary. You can also find this series on our website at www.hcscchurch.org.
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