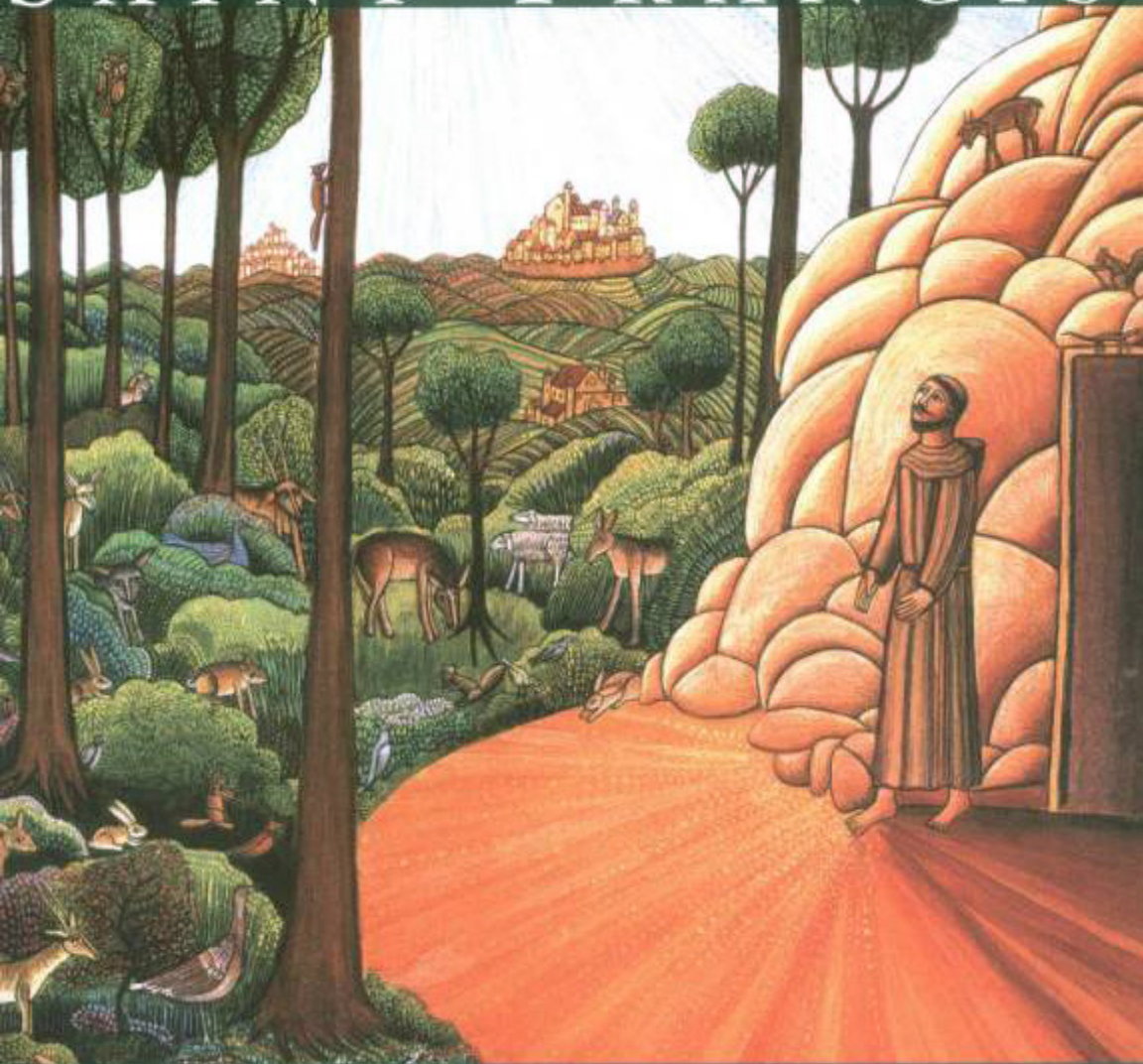




S A I N T F R A N C I S



Marie Dennis *Art by* John August Swanson



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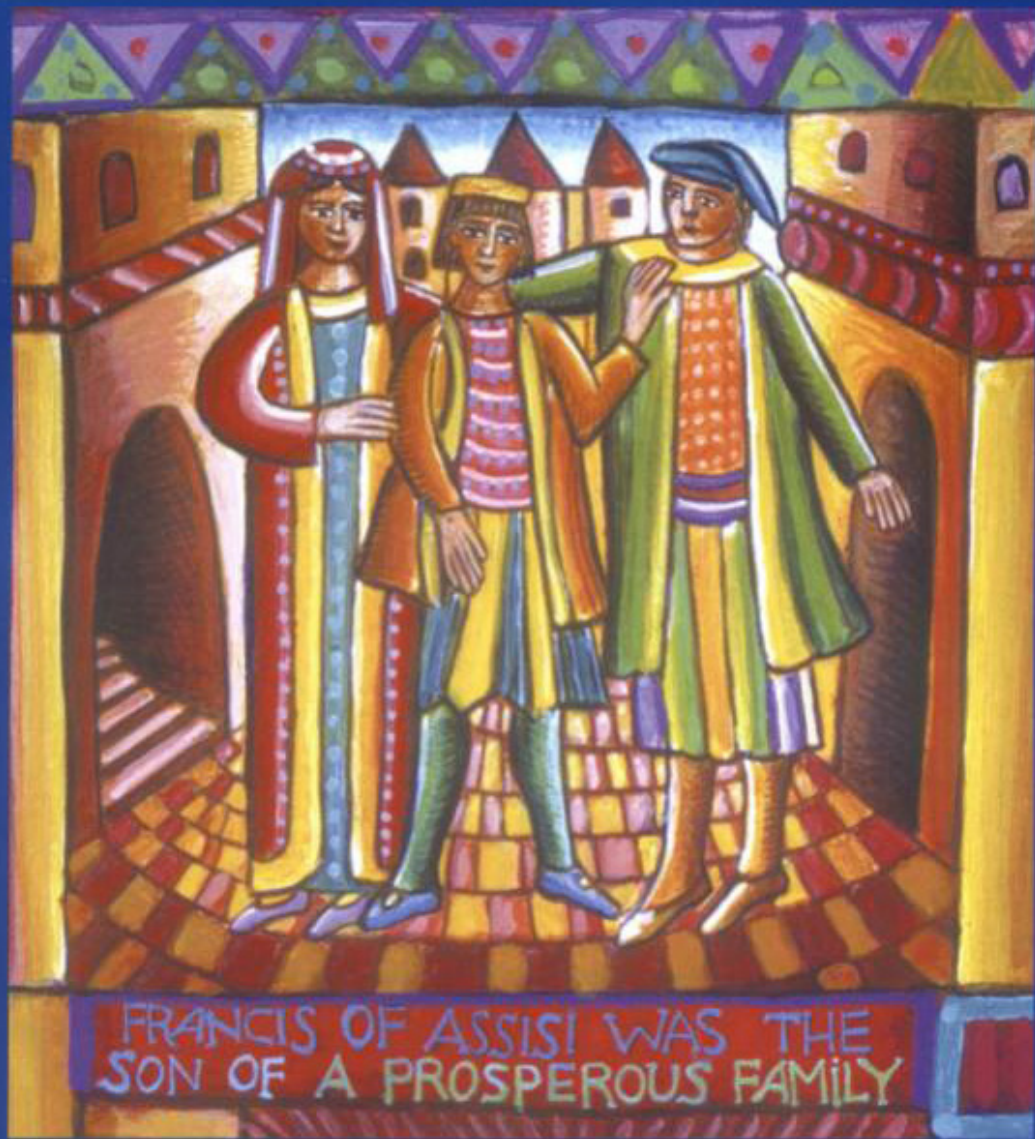
Introduction

Marie Dennis

These few words on the life of St. Francis of Assisi are not intended to tell the whole story—volume upon volume have already done so—but to invite the reader to encounter a holy man whose life is still relevant to our own journeys, even after eight hundred years.

John August Swanson's painting of Francis of Assisi is an evocative, brilliant portrayal of Francis' life. His depictions of Francis form a powerful story by themselves. I invite the reader to sit with each picture for a while, and only then, perhaps, to read the accompanying vignette from the life of Francis that is suggested by the artist's visual expression. Most of the vignettes are taken from the writing of Thomas of Celano, Francis' earliest biographer, whose work drew upon many sources, including the testimony of Francis' companions and friends: Brother Leo, Brother Rufino, Brother Angelo, Pope Gregory IX, Bishop Guido, and Saint Clare. A few pictures are more clearly based upon some of the many legends associated with Francis. For these I have included passages from *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, translated by Raphael Brown, a collection of some of the best-loved stories about the saint.





Son of a Prosperous Family

Almost up to the twenty-fifth year of his age he squandered and wasted his time miserably. Indeed he outdid all his contemporaries in vanities and he came to be a promoter of evil and was more abundantly zealous for all kinds of foolishness. He was the admiration of all and strove to out do the rest in the pomp of vainglory, in jokes, in strange doings, in idle and useless talk, in songs and soft and flowering garments, for he was very rich, not however avaricious but prodigal. . . . And thus overwhelmed by a host of evil companions, proud and high-minded, he walked about the streets of Babylon. . . .

(THOMAS OF CELANO, ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, FIRST LIFE, I, 6)

Francis of Assisi, ultimately a man of poverty and asceticism, stands pampered and protected, his feet firmly planted on the solid ground of prosperity; surrounded by the trappings of wealth; secure in the bosom of his family; sheltered from the harsh and beautiful reality of life.

Born in Assisi in 1182, Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Pietro Bernardone, and a French woman, the Lady Pica. During those last years of the twelfth century and the beginning of the next, the Renaissance was on the distant horizon in Italy. Feudalism was just beginning to wane and a middle class was emerging. The long evolution toward the modern world was underway.

At first Francis reveled in the relative prosperity of middle-class existence. He embraced an apparently empty life with vigor and seemed blind to the underside of rising affluence. His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, painted a harsh picture of what within a few years was an already distant past:

The “streets of Babylon,” paved with the trappings of wealth, separated Francis in his early years from the relationships that would later nourish his life—relationships with the vulnerable of creation, human and other, through whom he would so gloriously praise our God.

In this scene Francis has yet to choose discipleship; he has yet to hear the persistent invitation to follow the One whose voice he could not later resist; he was yet to become the icon of the icon of

God. How often we do the same, filling our days with the clutter of activity and the accumulated weight of possession!

Francis of Assisi began his journey in a place of privilege. His witness, then, is especially pertinent for those of us who also have access to abundance. Francis eventually discovered that he could not bear the separation that was wrought by his wealth, wrought by the pursuit of superficial satisfaction. He could not bear separation from the Good. An exciting but hollow existence demanded response.

Where are we in our world? What separates us from the love of God, the embrace of the leper, the doing of justice, care for creation? What have we to learn from Francis' own experience of “having much”? How would he evaluate our life?





Francis Rides Off to the Local Wars

Now Francis was soon shown in a vision a splendid palace in which he saw various military apparatus and a most beautiful bride. In the dream Francis was called by name and enticed by the promise of all these things. He attempted, therefore, to go to Apulia to win knighthood; and after he had made the necessary preparations in a lavish manner he hurried on to gain that degree of military honors. (CELANO, SECOND LIFE, II, 139)