

# Songs for the Little Flowers



by L. Katherine Cook, OEF

*These twelve meditations, "Songs for the Little Flowers," are inspired by legends and stories about St. Francis of Assisi, told by his contemporaries. Most of these stories and sayings are collected in the work entitled  
The Little Flowers of Saint Francis,  
which can be found in the  
St. Francis of Assisi Omnibus of Sources.*

*-lkc  
written in 1986*

## ANNOTATION for Meditation 1: 'Perugia Prison'

Until his twentieth year, "Francesco" Bernadone was a lighthearted reveler—generous of nature, but generally unconcerned with the serious matters of life. Then, in 1202, the city-state of Assisi was involved in a border dispute with nearby Perugia. Francis, son of a wealthy merchant, and his noble-born friends fitted themselves with splendid armor and set forth to do battle as the "pride of Assisi." Francis, who led a group of lancers in a disastrous assault on the bridge at San Giovanni (halfway between the two warring cities), was taken prisoner. In the Perugia prison for undetermined length of time—several months, probably—he contracted a deadly fever and was released. Somehow, despite his illness and delirium, he found his way on foot back to Assisi. There he began a long recovery process in which no one knew whether he would live or die.

# 1.

Perugia Prison

Darkness all around...  
Consumptive coughing,  
                 the dizzy haze  
                 a veil over the sunless world.

The resplendent parade—  
                 flowers flying  
                 incense hovering  
                 bugles blasting  
                 townfolk cheering—  
Forgotten.  
Pedigreed stallion—  
                 the color of ivory  
                 strong and bold  
                 loyal through hardship—  
Lost in the chaos  
                 of hand-to-hand combat.

Gleaming armour—  
                 the envy of Assisi—  
Confiscated.  
Voices,  
                 laughter,  
                 firelight with friends  
Gone.

Only darkness,  
                 silent  
                 and empty.  
No more revelry,  
No more youthful abandon.  
Instead  
The stumbling,  
                 staggering  
                 walk to Assisi.

This  
Is death. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 2: 'Divine Madness'

After Francis recovered from his fever, he acted strangely: he was preoccupied with the sun; he wandered through the meadows, talked to birds and beasts, embraced peasants, and generally abhorred the life of luxury he had once loved. Over time, some of his friends began to understand what he meant and what he now saw. Several of them took on the tonsure of penance and the humble shepherd's robe. The established society of the thirteenth century thought them to be mad; many still do.

## 2.

Divine Madness

The pride of Assisi,  
strong young men:  
virile,  
attractive,  
witty,  
accustomed to taking  
what they want.

"Keep from us the ugly sights,"  
they say;  
"Only the pretty  
and the clean,  
Only the best  
and the finest,  
Is good enough for us.

Keep from us the lepers,  
the dirty,  
the disfigured.  
We do not want to see them."

Until a fever breaks through  
the demonic madness  
And leaves their leader  
Sane.  
With the wisdom of the world  
a-kilter  
They are once again aligned  
with the center  
of the universe. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 3: 'Chapel in the Meadow'

During the wanderings that followed his recovery from the fever, Francis came upon an old ruined chapel in a meadow not far from Assisi. There he had a vision of Christ speaking to him from the icon that still hung on the remaining wall. He reported that he heard Christ say to him, "Do you not see that my temple lies in ruins? Go. Rebuild my church." Immediately, Francis began rebuilding San Damiano chapel by hand; before long many peasants and some sons of landowners had joined him, and San Damiano was restored.

### 3.

#### Chapel in the Meadow

Desolate,  
Windswept  
rubble and ruin—  
the stones and altar  
that once had been  
San Damiano.

Out in the meadow  
where the grasses and flowers  
scatter their brilliant colors  
joyfully in the wind;  
where the buzz and hum of insects,  
the chatter and chirp of wild fowl  
make the only choir;  
where the stark and chaste  
Byzantine Christ  
with honest and sad expression  
hangs  
on the sole remaining wall.

How novel is the little chapel  
to all that Francesco has known—  
In the town cathedral, incense chokes and colors  
the air;  
in this chapel, wild storm and sweet meadow  
breezes are free to blow.  
In the cathedral, the mass is mumbled in Latin;  
at Damiano the eloquent winds and rains  
and creatures  
are the only litany.  
In the city the wealthy are esteemed  
and given the honored places;  
In the meadow there is no respecter of persons.  
Above all, the center of worship  
in each  
tells of its true axis:

The likeness of Christ in his passion  
    which is suspended above the altars—  
in the town he is heavily crowned,  
    sumptuously robed,  
        his neatly groomed face  
            complacent;  
in the chapel he is simply painted,  
    humbly clad,  
        of loving and suffering face.

Is it such a wonder  
    that the restless troubadour  
        having denounced the empty trappings  
            of the town cathedral,  
should hear the voice of God  
    among the debris,  
        the silence,  
            the simplicity?

Assisi's church was a whitened sepulchre;  
Damiano was a joyous site  
    for rebuilding God's house. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 4: 'Lover of the Least of These'

One matter in which Francis had to conquer his natural tendencies was in his response to lepers. It was difficult for him to look at them or be near them; it actually nauseated him. But one day, he saw a leper walking toward him on the road. His instinct was to turn away, but he forced himself to walk toward the man, whose face was badly disfigured by the disease. Then Francis forced himself to stop and greet the man, to give him a coin, and to kiss him on the hand. Some of the stories say that the leper disappeared instantly; others say that the face changed into the face of Christ. Whichever is true, he learned that even lepers were included in the saying of Christ, "Whatever you do to the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you do it to me."

## 4.

Lover of the Least of These

Yes, Lord;  
I hear your mandate:  
“Care for the least of these  
as if it were me.”

But what does it mean?  
Lepers?  
Not lepers!  
Ah, I knew there was a catch.

It is so hard;  
I cannot look at them.  
It makes me sick.

There—on the road—  
There walks a leper  
with his bell ringing  
to warn off “normal” folk  
his body a rotten bag of skin,  
his face hardly recognizable...

A princess kissed a frog once.  
Yes; yes, she did;  
and freed him from his curse—  
the curse of being unlovely  
loathsome  
despised.

The frog became a prince.  
What if a troubadour kissed a leper?  
Help me, Lord,  
And I will do it...

Waves of nausea  
Sharp sensations of revulsion.  
Help me, Lord.  
There! It is done!

Look! Look at his face!  
He is not repulsive;  
He is beautiful—very beautiful.  
His is the face of Christ. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 5: 'Channel of Peace'

St. Francis taught that the only way to lasting peace was through Lady Poverty. If we do not own things, he said, we have no need to fight; for it is over possessions that most wars are fought. Following the words of the Sermon on the Mount farther than perhaps any other human being has ever gone, Francis disarmed would-be foes with his simplicity, his love for people, his humble spirit and his attractive personality. He truly was an instrument of peace, as the "Prayer for Peace," which is often attributed to him, says. In fact, we can find his secret of peacemaking in those words, whether he actually penned them or not. Let me sow love, faith, pardon; let me seek to understand, not to be understood; to love, not to be loved. Francis had discovered the secret Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13, which that apostle prefaced with "and now I will show you a better way than any."

## 5.

### Channel of Peace

One who had no possessions,  
and therefore nothing to protect—  
One who had no public office,  
no image to project,  
no need to maintain dominion  
over any one or thing—  
He knew how to make peace.

One who smiled at those who spat and cursed,  
who loved the ones who feared and hated,  
who said true joy was in not feeling anger  
toward an angry person—  
He knew no bounds of peace.

He dispersed hatred with his manner—  
with his disarming love.  
He knew how to forgive  
without much consciousness  
of having done so.

He plunged into the darkness  
the world  
had made of itself;  
and he created,  
in the midst of doubt,  
despair,  
and grief  
a song.

The meaning of peace for him was simple  
but devastating  
The essence of peace was charity. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 6: 'Innocent's Dream'

One of the legends surrounding St. Francis' relationship with the papacy, and particularly with His Holiness, Pope Innocent III, was of the dream that Innocent was said to have dreamed the night before he met Francis. (Some stories say that Innocent shooed the young man off the porch where he was taking an evening stroll, and had the dream later that night.) He dreamed that the basilica of St. John Lateran was falling to the ground, and suddenly a barefoot beggar in a brown tattered shepherd's robe came and pushed it upright again. Whether the stories are exactly true is not important. What is important is that, with or without the help of a dream, Innocent III was wise enough to know that this simple little man could bring the masses back into the Fold. He could save Holy Mother Church from crumbling to pieces. It was Innocent who gave the new Franciscan Order his blessing and support, without which they would likely have been condemned as heretics.

6.

## Innocent's Dream

Lothario dei Segni—  
strong of character,  
innocent,  
zealous for the work of God.

Alas! How heavy the tiara has become!  
How complicated the kingdoms and armies  
and bands of heretics!  
The Church is crumbling;  
the Lateran is falling.

What can I do?  
I, Innocent III?  
With all my treasures

I cannot stop it falling  
But what is this?  
I cannot see clearly—  
    a dirty y  
    a small i  
    barefoot  
    robed in r  
What is he doing?  
He is pushing the side

What a dream!  
Would that there were such a young man,  
                  strange as he seemed...  
Would that I could find such a man.

What? What is this?  
Hermits from Assisi?  
Oh, yes; Assisi—Bishop Guido.

What? A cloth-merchant's son gone mad?  
Why is he quoting from the holy gospels?  
    Treasures in heaven?  
    I wish that my treasures were  
        in heaven  
        and not on earth.

Wait! Do not take him away.  
I wish to speak to him.  
A brown-robed beggar...

Little brother, I must speak with you. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 7: 'Sister of the Poor'

One of St. Francis's closest friends, one who gave him aid and comfort throughout his life and during his fatal illness, was St. Clare of Assisi. She was the founder of the second order of Franciscans for women, called the Poor Clares. According to some stories, she openly defied her father's orders to have nothing to do with the Little Brothers, by escaping in the night through an upper-story window—with Francis's help. After this unusual elopement, she set up residence for the sisters in the chapel of San Damiano, which Francis and his followers had rebuilt. Rumored to have, as a child, been promised to him in marriage by her parents, she took her place beside Francis as a chaste companion and fellow servant.

## 7.

### Sister of the Poor

She was illumined first;  
    baking bread for the lepers,  
    seeing the true insanity.  
She first disapproved of the irreverent jester.

What a friend she became!  
A solace in innocent intimacy,  
A comrade in toil,  
    hunger,  
    thirst,  
    and tears;  
Always there  
    as guide  
    and strength  
Always there  
    to the very end—  
In times of joy,  
In times of doubt.

Clare.  
Lover of the earth,  
Lover of the sun and stars,  
Lover of the poor. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 8: ‘Greccio Crèche’

During one of many missionary journeys, Francis happened to travel through Greccio at the time of the Christ mass. This was one of his favorite times of the year, and he realized a wish to make the mass a special event by creating a replica of the scenes of the nativity stories in the Gospels. He gathered livestock, people to portray the Holy Family and the shepherds, and candles. He even included a real baby. (Some of the stories say that this was a doll, which became a real baby.) The worshippers, led by Francis, sang all night beside the crèche, in the candlelight. This was the first nativity scene, or—if you will—the first Christmas pageant.

## 8.

### Greccio Crèche

I love the wooden and ceramic figures  
we take out at Christmas time:  
the Holy Family,  
livestock,  
shepherds in their shyness,  
anachronistic astrologers,  
at least one angel,  
and the glorious star.

With or without the stable or cave,  
or sleeping Bethlehem  
as a backdrop,

I love them.

Francesco,  
I can visualize the tableau that you created  
in the hills of Greccio,  
the first nativity scene  
(since the original)  
that I know about.  
I can imagine the little cave  
with an ox and an ass  
and a roughhewn trough  
and the candles and torches  
of the Little Brothers and their  
friends  
As the Christ mass was sung  
over the hay-filled altar.

I am glad that you  
celebrated the birth of Jesus  
and not only his death.

I thank you for the gift of the crèche,  
a reminder that Jesus was born  
in a rustic place  
among humble people  
in the presence of stable creatures,  
heralded only by Sister Star  
and some dreadful angels;  
For with this gift, you yearly remind us  
that it was in a poor birth  
that Christ was truly rich  
and in a humble nativity  
that he was truly King. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 9: 'Hugolino'

Cardinal Hugolino, who became Pope Gregory IX, was a friend and admirer of Francis, and was closely associated with the organization of the primary Franciscan order. Hugolino and some of the brothers, Elias of Cortona and Pietro Cataneo, led the order away from the stark discipline of poverty which Francis had taught and which Innocent III had approved. By 1221, Francis had washed his hands of the order and abdicated leadership, saying, "My free larks are imprisoned in the cages of their monasteries." In 1228, less than two years after Francis's death, Gregory IX canonized him as a saint, while supporting the interpretations of Brothers Elias and Pietro.

## 9.

Hugolino

It would have broken your heart,  
Francesco, to see how the Little Brothers  
established themselves—  
to see their building programs,  
their treasures,  
their organization.

Or perhaps you saw the direction  
in which they were moving.  
Perhaps that is why you abdicated  
leadership of your own order.

I think you would have stopped Hugolino—  
Franciscan-turned-pontiff—  
from canonizing you,  
making you yourself into an institution.  
He was enticed by business acumen,  
political clout,  
the wisdom of the world.

He loved you:  
why did he not see  
that what he did made you unhappy?  
He meant well, you say.  
You would. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 10: 'Stigmata'

In September of 1224, Francis was resting on Mount Alvernia (sometimes spelled *Alverna*) in the Appenines at a retreat given to him and his followers by the Lord of Chiusi. It was there that he received the five wounds that Christ suffered on the cross. According to most of the stories, the wounds, called *stigmata*, were given to him by Christ in a vision. Some believe that he asked a friend to inflict them upon his body. However the wounds were imposed, Francis did bear them for the remainder of his life. They were a source of considerable suffering and illness; indeed, they certainly hastened his death.

10.

Stigmata

A gory tale.  
Nails disfiguring hands,  
marring feet.

How much you could have done  
if you had lived more years:  
years of love  
and joy,  
years of beautiful  
poverty and simplicity  
under Brother Sun!

I cannot understand...

And yet,  
whether practical  
or mystical  
it was the ultimate conclusion  
of one whose life  
was bathed in  
the Passion of Christ.

You were determined, Francesco,  
To be  
a Suffering Servant. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation #11: ‘Only the Blind Can See’

On a missionary trip to Egypt and the East during 1219, Francis contracted trachoma. After this, the sun—which he had loved so much—was painful to his eyes. Even so, during his last illness he composed his most famous poem, “Canticle of the Creatures.” It has been said to be the first poem written in the Italian language. In it, Francis praised God through all of creation, with a glorious roll call beginning with “Brother Sun” and ending with “Sister Death.”

# 11.

Only the Blind Can See

He did not write his  
song to the sun  
Until after his eyes were blind.  
Perhaps it was then  
    that he truly saw  
    the wonders under Brother Sun. ♦

#### ANNOTATION for Meditation 12: ‘Sister Death’

St. Francis had taught that death is only a step to eternal life. When he knew that he was dying, he asked to be taken back to Assisi, to the Portiuncula (“Little Portion”), which he had rebuilt for the Little Brothers to live in. He lingered for some months, suffering from the wounds of the stigmata, and from trachoma. The brothers first carried him to the court of Bishop Guido of Assisi, to whom Pietro Bernadone (Francis’s father) had dragged Francis to be judged for giving all of Pietro’s goods to the poor in 1219, and who now was moved to kiss the hem of Francis’s dirty robe. After a time, the brothers took him to the Portiuncula, where he asked to be laid naked on the bare ground, “For thus,” he said, “in the arms of my dear Lady Poverty, I wish to die.” At sunset on October 3, 1226, Francis died, surrounded by friends and a wealth of love.

## 12.

Sister Death

He did not evade  
the coming of Sister Death  
Nor did he avoid her kiss.  
He sang his canticle to the sun  
until death came for him.  
He knew that only through her  
could he  
be born to eternal life. ♦



*Daniel Mauk/Sojourners*