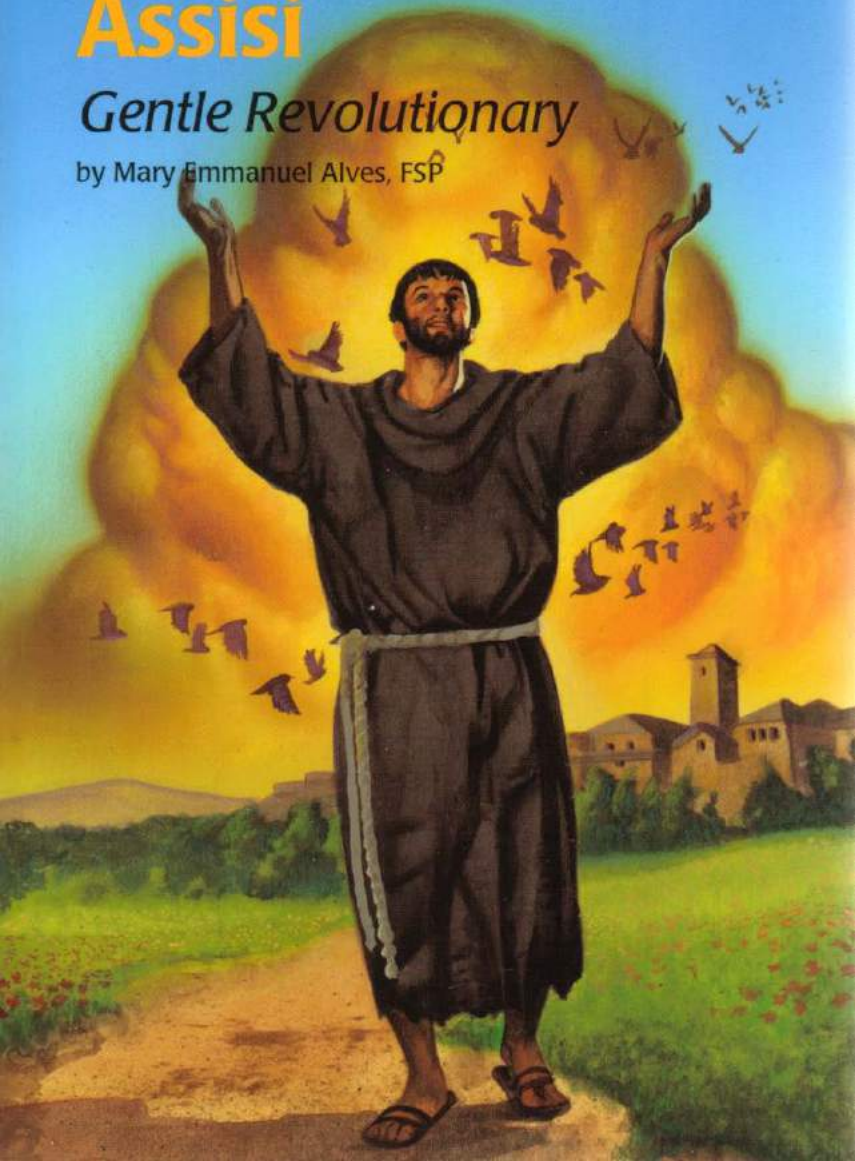


# Saint Francis of Assisi

## *Gentle Revolutionary*

by Mary Emmanuel Alves, FSP





## NOTHING BUT THE BEST

Heavy footsteps split the air, shattering the midnight silence. Just as suddenly they came to a halt. The hollow sound of knocking echoed in the street. *Who could it be at this time of night?* the gray-haired maid wondered as she slid back the bolt. The heavy door squealed open, light from within casting eerie shadows around the gaunt stranger who stood in its frame. Before the frightened maid could ask what he wanted, the man delivered his prophetic message.

"Tell Lady Pica," spoke the deep, steady voice, "that unless she leaves the house and goes to the stable, the child cannot be born." He turned abruptly and disappeared into the night. The startled maid closed the door. *Strange, wasn't it,* she thought as she hurried to relay the message. *Maybe he was sent by God!*

"Please, my Lady, do as the stranger said," begged a young servant girl watching

by Lady Pica's bedside. "You have suffered much already."

"Yes," Pica whispered in a weak voice. "I will obey the visitor. Call the attendants to help me...to the stable."

No time was lost in carrying the noblewoman from her plush room to the damp stable. Servants made her as comfortable as possible amid blankets and straw. Even more unusual, Lady Pica seemed quite contented to be there.

The rays of a lone candle danced on the stable walls. There was an expectant hush and then...the cries of a healthy, new baby broke the tension.

"It's a boy! A boy is born for Bernardone!" a maid shouted through the mansion halls. "Come and see my Lady's baby!"

The entire household, servants and maids clustered around the mother and child in the stable. "It reminds you of Bethlehem and the Christ Child," spoke an old gentleman, removing his woolen cap.

Everyone wondered about the "why" of it all. But another thought preoccupied all present that night. The baby's father was soon due home from his trip. What would he say? "Oh," one of the servants groaned, "he won't be happy about the stable part. I

don't think the man's got an ounce of common blood in him."



Pietro Bernardone scooped his child into his arms. "My son...in a stable? *Never!*" He whirled around. "My son will be a fine merchant! The finest in Assisi!" he bellowed. "Never mention the stable again, do you understand?" The servants bowed and nodded.

"Yes, Sir."

"Of course."

"Never again, Sir."

But what if God had different plans? No one dared to ask.

Signor Bernadone turned back to his wife. "John! You had him baptized John, like John the Baptist in camel skins? Absolutely not! I'm his father and I say he will be called 'Francis,' after the refined and cultured French. I want him to have the best the world can offer; I want him to *be* the best."

"That he will be," whispered the elderly maid. "That he will be—the best in the eyes of the Lord."



## A NEGLECTED KING

Assisi is a small town in North Umbria, Italy. White alabaster houses with their orange tiled roofs glow in the bright sunlight. Steps wind their way around homes and shops in the narrow streets. The majestic Apennines pretend to touch the sky. Summers bring colorful flowers, and winters are a wonderland of ice and snow. Beautiful Assisi is a place where all nature seems to sing the praises of God.

An old washerwoman leaned out her window surveying the town. "Here he comes again," she chuckled, as she saw a smiling teenager heading her way.

Francis looked up. "Hello, Signora!" he waved.

"A song, Francis! Sing a song just for me!" she called out.

"Ah! Signora! Only the best song for you! And in French, of course." Francis tipped his bright red hat and swooped a gracious bow as though the toothless washerwoman were a queen.

"And where are you off to this time?" the woman cackled.

"Nowhere special, just out to have some fun," Francis replied shrugging his shoulders. "And now for your song!"

Walking backwards down the street, Francis began to sing in French at the top of his lungs. (Italian was the language spoken in Assisi, but whenever Francis was especially happy—which was almost always—he sang in French.) The old woman's face broke into a thousand smiling wrinkles. "You clown!" she called after him. "Come by and see me again!"

Francis came to a stop before a run-down church. With another tip of his hat, he whispered politely, "Good morning, my Lord." Staring at the dusty stone steps, he couldn't help thinking of Jesus all alone inside. He put his hands in his pockets and slowly walked away. The Apennines now appeared in full view, looming over the little town. *How beautiful those mountains are!* he thought to himself. *God has made everything so beautiful—just for us. But what have we done for him?* Francis paused again. He turned and looked back at the shabby old church. "Jesus, the King of kings is living there, present in the Holy Eucharist. And look at the condition of



the place!" he thought out loud. "Things would be so different if we *really* lived what we believe...if *I* really lived what *I* believe...."

Just then a mischievous little field mouse scurried by. In a minute, Francis was trying to catch him. All his deep thoughts were gone.

The times, unfortunately, were not even half as beautiful as the town of Assisi. It was the late twelfth century, a time of daring knights and chivalry, a time of parties and pleasure. Following the crowd was the thing to do. But the crowd wasn't always going in the right direction. The Ten Commandments, God's laws, were considered ten big obstacles that got in the way of having fun. Life's real purpose of knowing, loving, and serving God was often forgotten in all the noise. Francis forgot it too.