

**St. Frances of Rome
(Italy) 1384-1440**

Mystic

Third Order Franciscan, Benedictine Oblate

Dedicated to the care of the sick, dying and starving in Rome⁵

Grain and wine miraculously replenished after all given away

Founded Oblates of Mary (Collatines) dedicated to pray for the

Holy Father and care for the sick and poor in Rome



Saint Frances of Rome (mother, widow, mystic, Third Order Franciscan, Benedictine Oblate) was born in 1384 to Paul de Buxo and Jacobella Rofredeschi. Both parents were from wealthy families of noble Roman descent. She desired to become a nun; however, her parents had other ideas and reportedly forced her into an arranged marriage at the age of twelve with Lorenzo Ponziani, a young nobleman. They had a good marriage and with him she bore three children.

Lorenzo and Frances lived in the Ponziani palace in the Trastevere section of Rome around the corner from the little church of San Francesco a Ripa. This church had been given by Brother Jacoba (the Roman lady Giacoma di Settesoli) to St. Francis in 1212. At this time there was an adjoining friary. Here Frances Ponziani was received as a Third Order Franciscan. Father Bartholomew Bondi, OFM, became her spiritual director.

Frances became seriously ill and Lorenzo, desiring for her cure, called to their home a man who practiced magic, whom Frances drove from their house. Reportedly St. Alexis appeared to her and cured her.

Frances was conscious of the presence and inspiration of her guardian angel. If she fell into any fault, he would give her a little nudge.

In 1401, at the age of 17, Frances gave birth of their first child, a son whom she named John Baptist. Soon thereafter, her mother-in-law died, leaving Frances to run the household which she did in a competent and Christian manner.

Frances found great companionship in the wife of her husband's brother, who also wished to live a life of service and prayer. Together, Frances and Vannozza, with their husbands' permission, would care for the poor, especially in hospitals.

As Frances family size increased to three, giving birth first to two sons and then a daughter, she focused her energies and attentions on caring for her family and household.

During a famine that swept Rome, Frances used all her money and then sold her possessions to buy whatever the sick needed. Her husband initially objected. However when he went to look at the empty granary and found it miraculously filled with forty measures of wheat, he allowed her to continue her charity work.

A similar event occurred after Frances gave away all the wine held in the cask in their cellar. Her father-in-law found this empty and chastised her. Together she went with him to the cellar, turned open the spigot and the best wine any of them had ever tasted flowed. Her father-in-law reportedly stated, "Oh, my dear child, dispose henceforward of everything I possess, and multiply without end those alms that have gained you such favor in God's sight!"²

In 1410, when Frances was 26 years old, Rome was invaded. Lorenzo was wounded fighting with the papal troops. Frances nursed him back to health and he returned to the war. Their eldest son, John Baptist, was taken hostage and was only returned after peace was restored. Quickly following this civil war, the Black Plague devastated Rome taking the lives of her second son and daughter.

The peasants, who worked on the now war torn and wasted Ponziani farm, went to Frances asking for food. Frances dedicated herself to the care of the sick, starving and dying.⁵ She reportedly opened a section of her home as a hospital. She organized a group of Roman women to assist her work. She also was stricken by the plague but suddenly recovered and resumed her charity work.

Another mystical experience was the encounter of her second son following his death. He brought her an archangel to take the place of her guardian angel. "The archangel's light was visible to her so that she could read by it. When she committed a slight fault, the archangel would hide himself and his light would not shine until she had made an act of contrition."²

In 1425, the group of Roman women, about a half dozen were clothed as oblates of St. Benedict which apparently did not cancel Frances' membership in the Franciscan Third Order. They called themselves the Oblates of Mary and were dedicated to God and the service of the poor.

Frances turned over the household care to her remaining son's wife and dedicated her energies to charity work in the city. Frances and Vanozza walked on pilgrimage over 100 miles from Rome to Assisi, the town of St. Francis and St. Clare. "Near Assisi St. Francis himself appeared to them, and provided the hungry and thirsty pilgrims with fresh juicy pears by striking a wild pear tree with his stick."²

In 1433, when Frances was 49 years old, Lorenzo died. After his death, Frances lived in community with the Oblates of Mary. They served the poorest of the poor in Rome. They prayed for the Holy Father and peace in Rome which was again in turmoil.

In 1440, at the age of 56, after returning to the convent from caring for her sick son, Frances became ill. She died seven days later on March 9, 1440. A few months after her burial, her tomb was open and her body was found incorrupt and emanating a pleasant fragrance. When it was again opened in 1638, only Frances' bones remained. Her tomb is located in Rome beneath the high altar in the crypt of the church now named in her honor: Santa Francesca Romana.

St. Frances of Rome was canonized by Pope Paul V in 1608. Patroness of the Benedictine Oblates. (Memorial - March 9)

*"A married woman must, when called upon,
quit her devotions to God at the altar,
to find Him in her household affairs."*

*"God hath given, and God hath taken away. I rejoice
in those losses, because they are God's Will. Whatever He sends
I shall continually bless and praise His Name for."*

The following is from *the original* Reverend Alban Butler's *Lives of Saints* (1883) republished in 2020 by Loreto Publications:³

Title: St. Frances, Widow, Foundress of the Collatines.

St. Frances was born at Rome in 1384. Her parents, Paul de Buxo and Jacobella Rofredeschi, were both of illustrious families. She imbibed early sentiments of piety, and such was her love of purity from her tender age, that she would not suffer her own father to touch even her hands, unless covered. She had always an aversion to the amusements of children, and loved solitude and prayer. At eleven years of age she desired to enter a monastery, but, in obedience to her parents, was married to a rich young Roman nobleman, name Laurence Ponziani, in 1396. A

grievous sickness showed how disagreeable this kind of life was to her inclination. She joined with it her former spirit; kept herself as retired as she could, shunning feasting and public meetings. All her delight was in prayer, meditation, and visiting churches. Above all, her obedience and condescension to her husband was inimitable, which engaged such a return of affection, that for forty years which they lived together there never happened the least disagreement, and their whole life was a constant strife and emulation to prevent each other in mutual complaisance and respect. While she was at her prayers or other exercises, if called away by her husband, or the meanest person of her family, she laid all aside to obey without delay, saying: "A married woman must, when called upon, quit her devotions to God at the altar, to find Him in her household affairs." God was pleased to show her the merit of this her obedience; for the authors of her life relate, that being called away four times in beginning the same verse of a psalm in our Lady's office, returning the fifth time, she found that verse written in golden letters. She treated her domestics not as servants, but as brothers and sisters, and future heirs in heaven; and studied by all means in her power to induce them seriously to labor for their salvation. Her mortifications were extraordinary, especially when, some years before her husband's death, she was permitted by him to inflict on her body what hardships she pleased. She from that time abstained from wine, fish, and dainty meats, with a total abstinence from flesh, unless in her greatest sicknesses. Her ordinary diet was hard and moldy bread. She would procure secretly, out of the pouches of the beggars, their dry crusts in exchange for better bread. When she fared the best, she only added to bread a few unsavory herbs without oil, and drank nothing but water, making use of a human skull for her cup. She ate but once a day and by long abstinence had lost all relish of what she took. Her garments were of coarse serge, and she never wore linen, not even in sickness. Her discipline was armed with rowels and sharp points. She wore continually a hair shirt, and a girdle of horse-hair. An iron girdle had so galled her flesh that her confessor obliged her to lay it aside. If she inadvertently chanced to offend God in the least, she severely that instant punished the part that had offended; as the tongue, by sharply biting it, etc. Her example was of such edification that many Roman ladies, having renounced a life of idleness, pomp, and softness, joined her in pious exercises, and put themselves under the direction of the Benedictine monks of the congregation of Monte Oliveto, without leaving the world, making vows, or wearing any particular habit. St. Frances prayed only for children that they might be citizens of heaven, and when she was blessed with them it was her whole care to make them saints.

It pleased God, for her sanctification, to make trial of her virtue by many afflictions. During the troubles which ensued upon the invasion of Rome by Ladislas, king of Naples, and the great schism under Pope John XXIII at the time of opening the council of Constance, in 1413, her husband, with his brother-in-law Paulucci, was banished Rome, his estates confiscated, his house pulled down, and his eldest son, John Baptist, detained a hostage. Her soul remained calm amidst all those storms, she said with Job: "God hath given, and God hath taken away. I rejoice in those losses, because they are God's will. Whatever he sends I shall continually bless and praise his name for." The schism being extinguished by the council of Constance, and tranquility restored at Rome, her husband recovered his dignity and estate. Some time after, moved by the great favors St. Frances received from heaven, and by her eminent virtue, he gave her full leave to live as she pleased, and he himself chose to serve God in a state of continency. He permitted her in his own lifetime to found a monastery of nuns, called Oblates, for the reception of such of her own sex as were disposed to embrace a religious life. The foundation of this house was in 1425. She gave them the rule of St. Benedict, adding some particular constitutions of her own, and put them under the direction of the congregation of the Olivetans. The house being too small for the numbers that fled to this sanctuary from the corruption of the world, she would gladly have removed her community to a larger house; but not finding one suitable, she enlarged it in 1433 from which year the founding of the order is dated. It was approved by Pope Eugenius IV in 1437. They are called Collatines, perhaps from the quarter of Rome in which they are situated, and Oblates, because they call their profession oblation, and use in it the word offero, not profiteor. St. Frances could not yet join her new family; but as soon as she had settled her domestic affairs after the death of her husband, she went barefoot with a cord about her neck to the monastery which she had founded, and there, prostrate on the ground, before the religious, her spiritual children, begged to be admitted. She accordingly took the habit on St. Benedict's day, [July 11], in 1437. She always sought the meanest employments in the house, being fully

persuaded she was of all the most contemptible before God; and she labored to appear as mean in the eyes of the world as she was in her own. She continued the same humiliations, and the same universal poverty though soon after chosen superioress of her congregation. Almighty God bestowed on her humility, extraordinary graces, and supernatural favors, as frequent visions, raptures, and the gift of prophesy. She enjoyed the familiar conversation of her angel guardian as her life and the process of her canonization attest. She was extremely affected by meditating on our Savior's passion which she had always present to her mind. At mass she was so absorbed in God as to seem immovable, especially after holy communion; she often fell into ecstasies of love and devotion. She was particularly devout to St. John the Evangelist, and above all to our Lady, under whose singular protection she put her order. Going out to see her son John Baptist, who was dangerously sick, she fell so ill herself that she could not return to her monastery at night. After having foretold her death, and received the sacraments, she expired on the 9th of March, in the year 1440, and of her age the fifty-sixth. God attested her sanctity by miracles: she was honored among the saints immediately after her death, and solemnly canonized by Paul V in 1608. Her shrine in Rome is most magnificent and rich, and her festival is kept as a holy day in the city with great solemnity. The Oblates make no solemn vows, only a promise of obedience to the mother-president, enjoy pensions, inherit estates, and go abroad with leave. Their abbey in Rome is filled with ladies of the first rank.

In a religious life, in which a regular distribution of holy employments and duties takes up the whole day and leaves no interstices of time for idleness, sloth, or the world, hours pass in these exercises with the rapidity of moments, and moments by fervor of the desires bear the value of years. There is not an instant in which a soul is not employed for God, and studies not with her whole heart to please Him. Every step, every thought and desire, is a sacrifice of fidelity, obedience, and love offered to Him. Even meals, recreation, and rest are sanctified by this intention; and from the religious vows and habitual purpose of the soul of consecrating herself entirely to God in time and eternity, every action, as St. Thomas teaches, renews and contains the fervor and merits of this entire consecration, of which it is a part. In a secular life, a person by regularity in the employment of his time and fervor in devoting himself to God in all his actions and designs, may in some degree enjoy the same happiness and advantage. This St. Frances perfectly practised, even before she renounced the world. She lived forty years with her husband without ever giving him the least occasion of offence, and by the fervor with which she conversed of heaven, she seemed already to have quitted the earth, and to have made paradise her ordinary dwelling. (*Abridged from her life by her confessor Canon. Mattiotti; and that by Magdalen Dell'Anguillara, superioress of the Oblates, or Collatines. Helyot, Hist, des Ordr. Mon. T. 6, p. 208. A.D. 1440.*)

References:

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- 3) Hagiography Circle. 9 March. Saint Frances [Francesca] of Rome. Accessed 14 May 2022. <http://newsaints.faithweb.com/martyrology/March/09.htm>
- 4) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). *The Lives of the Saints* as republished by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. Book Two, Vol. II & III - February and March, 344-348. (*Reprinted with permission*)
- 5) Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. (1979). *The Franciscan Book of Saints*. Franciscan Herald Press: Chicago, 174-177.

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls.* May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka