

St. Frances of Rome

BORN 1384; DIED 1440

WIDOW

FEAST DAY: MARCH 9

SOMETIMES IT APPEARS that sanctity is not achievable in the ordinary dailyness of life. Families, responsibilities, upheavals, griefs all seem to be obstacles to drawing closer to God. St. Frances of Rome, however, shows that holiness is not a matter of running away from life, but of embracing it with the passionate desire to love God and neighbor.

The older of two daughters, Frances was born to wealthy parents, Paolo di Bussi and Giacobella di Broffedeschi. Although her father was stern, her mother was a devoted parent, unusually so by the standards of her class and time. From an early age, Frances was devout and so desired to imitate the Roman martyr St. Agnes in her self-denial that her pastor had to moderate her. Nevertheless, from childhood she ate only bread and vegetables, and drank nothing but water. At eleven, she sought to be a nun. Her father did not consent but, instead, arranged a marriage to Lorenzo di Ponziani. She consented but viewed married life as a sacrifice. Following her marriage at age twelve (then a normal age for a girl to marry), she fell ill and remained bedbound, unable to speak and in great pain, for a year. Her recovery occurred only when she accepted that it was God's will for her to glorify him in marriage.

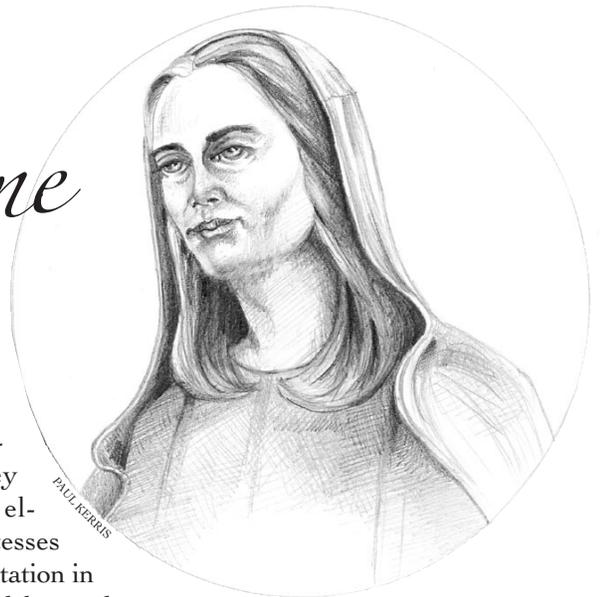
Lorenzo loved Frances unreservedly. She also responded to the buoyant personality of her sister-in-law Vannoza, who had nursed Frances during her illness and became her closest friend. Vannoza had also desired to become a nun, and their shared desire to give their lives to God led them to collaborate on the means to do this as wives and mothers. Both women put their duty to their families first. Frances saw her priorities thus: "A married woman, even when praising God at the altar, must when needed by her husband or the smallest member of her family, quit God at the altar and find him again in her household affairs." She and Vannoza attended daily Mass whenever possible, prayed together, and began a life of

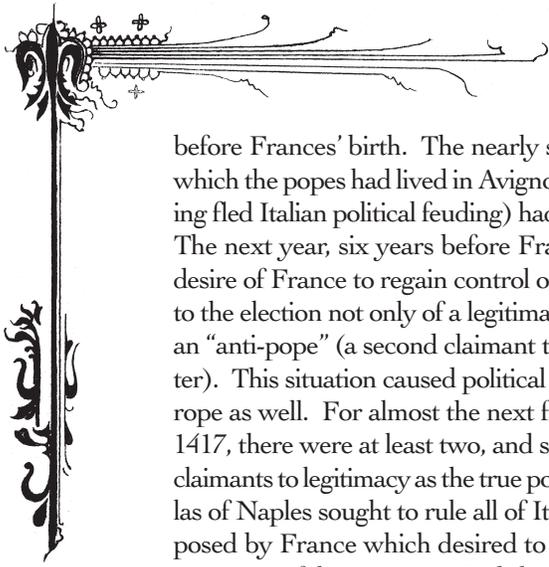
charity through nursing the sick and visiting prisons. They were the elegant hostesses that their station in life required, but under their beautiful gowns they wore haircloth.

Frances had two sons and a daughter. Battista was born when she was sixteen, Evangelista — a precociously holy and gifted boy — when she was twenty, and Agnes when she was twenty-three. Frances followed her mother's example and cared for and taught the children herself. Shortly after Battista's birth, Frances' mother-in-law died, and she took over the management of the Ponziani palace. She proved to be an efficient manager and excellent employer. Not only did she treat the family's servants fairly but she ensured that they had time to attend Mass, pray with their families, and receive religious instruction.

These changes in the Ponziani household were swiftly followed by plague and famine in Rome, a consequence of the civil wars that were wracking fifteenth-century Italy. Frances, as mistress of the palace, gave as much as possible to the poor. Her father-in-law then took from her the keys to the palace stores and sold all the food and wine except what was needed for the family's immediate use. Frances and Vannoza then began begging for alms, although with little success. Miraculously, the straw in the family's granary turned into corn and the empty wine-cask refilled. Frances' trust in God's providence convinced the male members of the family that she should be encouraged in her works of charity. Her father-in-law allowed her to sell the Ponziani jewelry and her elegant clothing and give the proceeds to the poor. From then on Frances wore only plain dresses made of inexpensive fabric.

The civil wars in Italy had been fueled by a spiritual war within the Church, which had begun long





before Frances' birth. The nearly seventy years in which the popes had lived in Avignon, France (having fled Italian political feuding) had ended in 1377. The next year, six years before Frances' birth, the desire of France to regain control of the papacy led to the election not only of a legitimate pope but also an "anti-pope" (a second claimant to the See of Peter). This situation caused political divisions in Europe as well. For almost the next forty years, until 1417, there were at least two, and sometimes three, claimants to legitimacy as the true pope. King Ladislas of Naples sought to rule all of Italy, but was opposed by France which desired to rule Naples. A supporter of the true pope, Ladislas occupied Rome in 1407, the year Frances' daughter Agnes was born, since the Pope was unable militarily to hold the city. Ladislas held the city for four years, was driven out, and recaptured it shortly afterward.

Frances' family became embroiled in the political maneuvering as a consequence of Ponziani support for one of the anti-popes. In 1408, Frances' husband Lorenzo was stabbed in a street fight between factions. Frances nursed him back to health, but Battista, age nine, was made a hostage and Vannoza's husband was arrested. Battista was soon released but, when Ladislas re-occupied Rome, Lorenzo was forced to flee and leave his family behind. Battista was again captured by Ladislas' forces and taken to Naples. The Ponziani castle and lands were plundered and burned, and many of their servants and peasants murdered. Frances, Vannoza, Evangelista, and Agnes lived in a corner of the wrecked castle. Even in their distress, the two women cared for their destitute neighbors. In 1411, seven-year-old Evangelista died of the plague. Frances was consoled by a vision of him and the visible companionship, for the next twenty-five years, of her guardian angel (visible to her alone).

After Evangelista's death, Frances turned part of the castle into a hospital for the homeless. She received the gift of healing others miraculously. Two years later, six-year-old Agnes died and Frances collapsed in grief for months. Not yet thirty, only Battista of her children still lived. He was allowed to return home the year after Agnes' death. Lorenzo also returned home, his health broken. With the greatest tenderness, Frances brought Lorenzo out of his sorrow and anger at the deaths of Evangelista and Agnes, which he initially blamed on Frances. At the conclusion of the schism in 1417, the Pon-

ziani properties were restored to the family. When Battista married, Frances gained a daughter-in-law Mobilia, who exhibited all the worst qualities of her social class, had a violent temper, and was contemptuous of Frances. When Mobilia fell ill, Frances nursed her. This changed her attitude to love and imitation of Frances.

In her early forties, Frances turned to a new project. With Vannoza and some Roman ladies whom she persuaded to leave a life of frivolity, she founded the Oblates of the Tor di Specchi, women who followed the Benedictine rule but took no vows, to provide better care in Roman almshouses. Some time in the next several years, Vannoza, closely attended by Frances, died. Lorenzo slowly declined and died when Frances was fifty-two, telling her of his lifelong happiness in her love. She immediately joined the Oblates and, against her own desires, was elected Superior. At the same time, her angelic companion was replaced by a higher-ranking angel, who remained with her for the remaining four years of her life.

Frances was known for her charm, gentleness, and patience, and attracted esteem and respect everywhere. People came to her for consolation, and she was instrumental in ending family feuds, settling disputes, and bringing peace. One of her many gifts was a lovable personality, and others willingly helped her to do anything she wanted. She was also a healer of souls. She prayed with people and offered to them more than anything else the healing love of Jesus Christ. Her care for the poor and sick began with bringing them to atonement for their sins. She urged people to accept and endure suffering for love of Jesus, and brought priests to the dying. Although very much living in the world, her prayer life was that of a contemplative and mystic. She was given numerous visions, including dramas enacted for her by those in Heaven and visions of Purgatory and Hell.

Frances did not attain holiness by fleeing from the world; instead, she sanctified every part of the world she inhabited. She never neglected her responsibilities, but her responsibilities did not end at her front door but embraced the misery of others. Rome had been devastated by plagues and by civil and religious strife, but she became a shining light and heroine of the Roman people through all their trials.

