

# HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers the legacy of monks and nuns

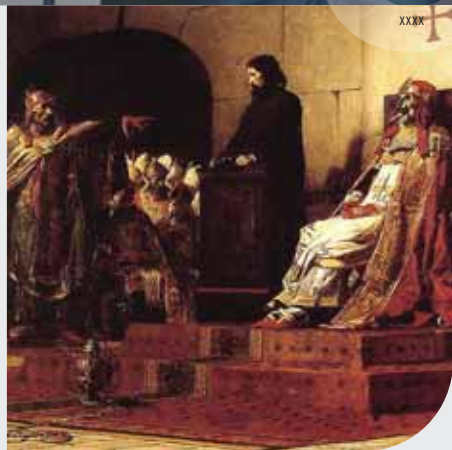
## HERO 6: FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1181 - 1226)

### the dangers of establishment and corruption

How did an obscure Jewish sect transform into medieval monasticism in Europe and beyond? We have traced the rise of Christianity in the West, especially following Constantine's conversion, which was in some ways a disaster for the church. While Constantine allowed the church liberty, he also showered her with Rome's resources and favour. This church became institutionalised and attractive for worldly advancement. 75% of the clergy were nobles with mixed motives for taking orders. Church politics became ludicrous, and the behaviour of clergy scandalous:

'In 897, Pope Formosus stood trial for perjury, covetousness and unlawful promotion. The unusual aspect of the proceedings was not so much his innocence as the fact that he was nine months dead. Taking to uncommon lengths the idea that revenge is best served cold, his successor and bitter enemy Stephen VI had him dug up and enthroned in full regalia, then screamed at him to answer the charges. When Formosus exercised his right to silence, he was condemned, stripped, deprived of his fingers of blessing, and thrown into the River Tiber... Stephen was strangled later that year, after Formosus' corpse resurfaced and started performing miracles.'<sup>1</sup>

Another infamous pope, Benedict IX, hadn't bothered to take ordination, and later sold his office to his godfather, receiving a massive



payment which was a welcome bribe to dislodge an embarrassing pontiff. Even then he returned to take back his job with an army. He was famous for orgies in the Lateran Palace, and accused of rape and murder.<sup>2</sup>

Protestants have had fewer centuries to rack up such stories, but we would do well to remember characters like 'faith healer' Peter Popoff, who claimed to receive divine revelation about people at his rallies. He was exposed as a fake when radio messages from his wife to a hidden earpiece were intercepted. It was a professional illusionist who exposed him: it takes one to know one! Devotees had filled in personal details on registration forms before the rally, and the Popoffs were pretending that these were divinely revealed. He was reported to receive \$4.3 million each month on the back of his fraudulent ministry. Then there was Jim Bakker, who gave all televangelists a bad name.



Alex Bunn  
is CMF Southern Team Leader  
and a GP in London

His prosperity teaching promised rewards for those who would send them money. But only after accusations of rape and imprisonment for fraud and conspiracy did he get round to reading the Bible all the way through. Then he recognised the distorted faith he had preached and the damage done.

The great monks of the past protested against the corruption of a corrupted and self-serving church:

'I did not know we were supposed to rival consuls, governors and illustrious generals, or that our bellies were supposed to hunger for the food of the poor, spending their necessities on luxuries and belching over the altar...Give me my desert, my country life, my God.'<sup>3</sup>

## two churches: power and piety

Following Constantine, where could Christians now go to be 'not of this world' when the whole world seemed to be in the church? Deserts and wild places. Anthony was one of the first to head into the wilderness. When he had just received a substantial inheritance, he heard a sermon on Matthew 19:21: 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' Rather than reduce Jesus' words to 'hyperbole', a rhetorical trick to grab our attention, Anthony took Jesus' words literally, and at great personal cost. Another sacrifice was family. Monks were impressed by



Paul's personal testimony on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7: 'Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.' So many monks were the radicals of their day, living lives of personal sacrifice and devotion, and shunning the gods of gut and groin, gold and glory that they saw in the institutional church. There were two churches then, the church of power and the church of piety. At their best, monks were early reformers, protesting against corruption and worldliness and leading the faithful by example.

## the dangers of asceticism

You may remember Silas, the deranged albino monk in *The Da Vinci Code*. He practised self-flagellation and 'mortification of the flesh' using a spiked metal cilice around his thigh.<sup>4</sup> An ascetic is someone who practises extreme self-denial for religious reasons, and is often associated with a suspicion (if not unbiblical contempt) for the body and material world. The early church produced quite a few ascetics, some of whom actively sought affliction and even martyrdom, which had become a fast track to paradise. Without persecution from pagan Roman authorities, the religious martyred themselves. Athanasius said of Anthony that he was a daily martyr to his conscience. But many took this to extremes. One monk walked eight miles a day to water a dry stick as an exercise in fruitless obedience.

Macarius, after swatting a gnat instead of accepting its bite, spent six months in a gnat-infested swamp. A superstar of the hermit tradition was Simon Stylites. Constantly besieged in his cave by fans he escaped upwards, living for 36 years on a column which eventually reached 60 feet, and became Syria's first tourist attraction. His fans built an entire building complex around him, making him the first hermit to achieve solitary confinement in public!

So whilst the official church had become worldly, the lone ascetics who rejected it were often extremists trying to escape the world.

## hero: Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone (Francis of Assisi) 1181-1226

Welcome then to our hero St Francis. He tried to live a life that was within the authority of the church, yet lived a mission of example in the world, by embracing poverty, chastity and obedience. The son of a wealthy cloth merchant, he gave away large amounts of his family's cloth in order to support a local church or the poor. His father beat him, locked him up and finally took the clothes off his back and disowned him. When asked who he would marry, he replied typically that he was betrothed to a fairer bride than any other, his Lady Poverty. But rather than retreat to a monastery, he was a missionary. Famously he said 'preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words', meaning that our words need to be backed up by living witness. Like Paul, he endured many hardships including shipwreck off Slavonia, and finally crossed the enemy



lines of a Crusade, and risked his life preaching to the sultan at the siege of Damietta.

Francis was Giovanni's nickname for his love of all things French. He was no world-hating ascetic who despised the material world. He delighted in all of creation. His love of animals is legendary, and he frequently preached to the birds of the field (even if some of the stories do sound fantastic!) He was deeply

impressed by the incarnation, which he reasoned gave the material world a new dignity. He was the first person to re-enact the nativity scene, daringly using real animals. He wanted to bring the relevance of the biblical story home to people who may not have appreciated from formal religion that God is Immanuel, 'with us' in Christ, surprisingly close by. His psalm-like poetry remembers that the creation is a gift to be cherished:

'Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him.

And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!

Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and beautiful.'<sup>5</sup>

As medics, we can appreciate Francis' approach to the body, which he called 'brother ass'. The body is a wonderful gift from a generous God, just as an ass was a serious asset before we had cars. So the body is

incredibly valuable, but anyone who worships an ass needs help! Francis was a pioneer in care for lepers, founding a hospital for them in Assisi. There he demonstrated God's compassion by eating with and even embracing lepers. That was profoundly shocking in an age which feared nothing more than leprosy.

Medical schools like London's St Bartholomew's and St Thomas' were likewise founded as monastic hospitals at this time, deriving their names from the kind of hospitality that Jesus commended in Matthew 25. When you call a senior nurse 'sister' you are recalling the monastic origin of healthcare in medieval Europe.

## the legacy of monks and nuns

The importance of monks in the history of Christianity cannot be overestimated. Whilst Protestants typically criticise monasticism for its tendency to denigrate ordinary life, work, marriage and the material world, Protestantism itself was started by an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther. And for a thousand years it was monks that preserved what was noble and Christ-centred in Christendom. If we read the Bible in our native language, we benefit from a tradition of translation inspired by the monk Jerome. Much of the preaching in the Middle Ages was done by monks in the market places and in the local language, when the churches only offered obscure ritual. If we sing the praises of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we follow Gregory and Bernard of Clairvaux. If we pursue

## The example of St. Francis

- Tried to reform the church from within by his example of godly devotion, and care for the poor and marginalised
- Taught that God is close to his creation, which should not be despised but celebrated
- Did not retreat from the world, but tried to win it for Christ

theology we are indebted to Augustine and Aquinas. If we pray for mission, we thank God for the work of Patrick in Ireland and Raymond Lull amongst Muslims. It is even said that the Devonian monk Boniface was the most influential Englishman ever for European history, when he took the gospel to Germany.<sup>6</sup> If we study Christian history, we defer to the venerable Bede.

Even today, a nun like Mother Theresa can command great moral authority. Ironically, she became the most famous citizen and Nobel Prize winner from the world's first atheist state, Albania. She once berated Bill Clinton on his stance on abortion. When asked why he didn't fight back, he replied 'I cannot argue with a life that had been so well lived'.

So let's remember the best monks and nuns as examples of radical followers of Christ. Would our friends be challenged by our lifestyles? By our genuine devotion to Christ whatever the cost? To the poor, the sick and marginalised? Would they be equally impressed by our delight and joy in a God who gives us all good things? ■

1. Tomkin S. *A short history of Christianity*. Oxford; Lion Hudson, 2005: 90
2. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope\\_Benedict\\_IX](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Benedict_IX)
3. Gregory of Nazianus in Tomkin S. *A short history of Christianity*. Oxford; Lion Hudson, 2005: 54
4. The term 'mortification of the flesh' comes from a misunderstanding of Saint

Paul: 'For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live' (Romans 8:13). Note that it is the Spirit who brings change, not a whip. Or Galatians 5:24: 'Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires'.

5. Note that even metaphorically, the deed was done 2000 years ago!
  6. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle\\_of\\_the\\_Sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle_of_the_Sun)
- Noll MA. *Turning points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Nottingham; IVP, 1998: 85