

Jubilee Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi – October 4, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15 & 8:30am Sunday Masses – 955 words

One of the challenges that a saint like Francis of Assisi presents to us, is that he so broke the mold, as it were, that we may well find ourselves at a loss for how to explain him. Thus we see different groups trying to co-opt him, so to speak – to fit him into their neat and “clean” categories, or to curate him for their particular purposes: for some, he was a “prophet”; he was an “environmentalist”; he was a “free spirit”; he was an “innovator”. If we are honest, however, we step back from simple classifications and must say: he was radically and profoundly transformed by Christ, such that he became “another Christ” – even bearing on his body Christ’s wounds.

Yes, those who want to cast him as a “prophet” sometimes are eager to pit him against the Church herself, as if to tear her down. He no doubt was a prophet – and a true one. A true prophet pronounces the judgment of God, whether “in season or out of season”, to borrow a phrase from Saint Paul. But Francis’ goal was to rebuild; to restore; to renew. He was profoundly convinced that the truth of Jesus Christ was the Church’s special treasure, meant to be shared with all. Thus he boldly preached to all – whether to the people of Assisi, or even at one point, to a Muslim Sultan, whom he traveled to encounter. He believed that the Church was the true home for all.

Well, perhaps he was an “environmentalist”, then – with whatever ideological nuance some attach to that. No doubt, Francis saw God in all things, especially in the beauty of creation. If you’ve ever been to Umbria, his native region or homeland, long known as the “green heart of Italy”, you have little difficulty grasping this: its lush forests, verdant valleys, hilltop towns, and abundant wildlife bear unique witness to God’s glory. Francis even preached to a flock of birds on one occasion! But birds are prized as food in Umbria, and Francis, even if generally restrained in his appetites, cherished eating meat on major feast days – especially on Christmas!

But look – some say –, this man preached to a flock of birds! Obviously, he was a “free spirit”! We must ask, however, what makes a man free. Jesus stated it clearly in the gospel: “You will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free”. In Francis, we see a progression of freedom. He started out as a worldly young man from a wealthy and comfortable family. The more he drew near to Christ; the more he prophetically set aside his worldliness; the more he embraced God’s gifts rather than man’s fabrications... the freer he became. His freedom was based not on attention-getting or some other personality disorder, but in having grown in union with Christ.

Well, if Francis was so free, some conclude, then he was a true “innovator” – he was not bound by laws; much less did he care about law. But this, too, is a facile reduction, as law is a dictate of God himself, connected intrinsically with justice – with the giving to each his due, and the consequent well-ordering of society. Francis may well have had new ideas and stretched some minds in the early 13th century; his order, like another of the time, founded by his friend, a saint named Dominic, may well have introduced some new categories into the life of the Church. But it all responded to contemporary needs, done in total union with ecclesiastical authority.

This last point calls for additional reflection. If you attentively study Francis’ life, you see how he instructed the friars he sent on mission to insist on beauty in worship, fidelity to rubrics, cleanliness and order in churches, and the preaching of perennial morality. He had a great reverence not only for the various popes and bishops of his lifetime – even if the Church was simultaneously in need of reform and purification – but also, and especially, for the priests who daily celebrated the sacred mysteries. He may have had a spontaneity that surprised or a freedom that challenged, but he did everything to build up – not question – what Christ had established.

Yes, “rebuild my Church” were the words that Jesus spoke to Francis, at the dawn of his particular vocation from the San Damiano Crucifix – which today is displayed in the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi (a copy of which hangs in the Cathedral Life Center). This humble friar named

Francis came to understand that any rebuilding would only be in union with Christ and his Church – not apart from it. This meant, first of all, “rebuilding his soul”, as it were: being transformed by the Christ’s grace and more fully identifying with him. Jesus accomplished this in St. Francis of Assisi in a singular way, such that 800 years later, we still celebrate it with joy.

Stepping aside, then, from caricatures, ideologies, and other distortions – and also surveying the state of the world we are in today –, we might conclude that 2026 and 1226 are not so totally different. The Church is still the true home for all. Jesus Christ remains the one savior of the human race. His way is rooted in the truth that makes us free and leads to eternal life. The gates of hell have not prevailed against his Church, even as she remains ever in need of reform – in the sense of “rebuilding” what Christ ordained, not making something new apart from him. Who are the Francis of Assisi of today – those who are so completely conformed to God, that they, like Christ, remain ever new and relevant? Only time will tell – and God surely will provide.