



Frances of Rome, wife, mother, mystic, organizer of charitable services and a Benedictine oblate who founded a religious community of oblates, who share a common life without religious vows **she lived 1384 to 1440**

Frances was born in the city of Rome in 1384 to a wealthy, noble family. From her mother she inherited a quiet manner and a pious devotion to God. From her father, however, she inherited a strong will. She decided at eleven that she knew what God wanted for her -- she was going to be a nun.

And that's where her will ran right up against her father's. He told Frances she was far too young to know her mind -- but not too young to be married. He had already promised her in marriage to the son of another wealthy family. In Rome at that time a father's word was law; a father could even sell his children into slavery or order them killed.

Frances probably felt that's what he was doing by forcing her to marry. But just as he wouldn't listen to her, Frances wouldn't listen to him. She stubbornly prayed to God to prevent the marriage until her confessor pointed out, "Are you crying because you want to do God's will or because you want God to do your will?"

She gave in to the marriage -- reluctantly. It was difficult for people to understand her objection. Her future husband Lorenzo Ponziani was noble, wealthy, a good person and he really cared for her. An ideal match -- except for someone who was determined to be a bride of Christ.

Then her nightmare began. This quiet, shy thirteen year old was thrust into the whirl of parties and banquets that accompanied a wedding. Her mother-in-law Cecilia loved to entertain and expected her new daughter-in-law to enjoy the revelry of her social life too. Fasting and scourging were far easier than this torture God now asked her to face.

Frances collapsed from the strain. For months she lay close to death, unable to eat or move or speak.

At her worst, she had a vision of St. Alexis. The son of a noble family, Alexis had run away to beg rather than marry. After years of begging he was so unrecognizable that when he returned home his own father thought he was just another beggar and made him sleep under the stairs. In her own way, Frances must have felt unrecognized by her family -- they couldn't see how she wanted to give up everything for Jesus. St. Alexis told her God was giving her an important choice: Did she want to recover or not?

It's hard for us to understand why a thirteen-year-old would want to die but Frances was miserable. Finally, she whispered, "God's will is mine." The hardest words she could have said -- but the right words to set her on the road to sanctity.

St. Alexis replied, "Then you will live to glorify His Name." Her recovery was immediate and complete. Lorenzo became even more devoted to her after this -- he was even a little in awe of her because of what she'd been through.

But her problems did not disappear. Her mother-in-law still expected her to entertain and go on visits with her. Look at Frances' sister-in-law Vannozza --happily going through the rounds of parties,

dressing up, playing cards. Why couldn't Frances be more like Vannoza?

In a house where she lived with her husband, his parents, his brother and his brother's family, she felt all alone. And that's why Vannoza found her crying bitterly in the garden one day. When Frances poured out her heart to Vannoza and it turned out that this sister-in-law had wanted to live a life devoted to the Lord too. What Frances had written off as frivolity was just Vannoza's natural easy-going and joyful manner. They became close friends and worked out a program of devout practices and services to work together.

They decided their obligations to their family came first. For Frances that meant dressing up to her rank, making visits and receiving visits -- and most importantly doing it gladly. But the two spiritual friends went to mass together, visited prisons, served in hospitals and set up a secret chapel in an abandoned tower of their palace where they prayed together.

But it wasn't fashionable for noblewomen to help the poor and people gossiped about two girls out alone on the streets. Cecilia suffered under the laughter of her friends and yelled at her daughters-in-law to stop their spiritual practices. When that didn't work Cecilia then appealed to her sons, but Lorenzo refused to interfere with Frances' charity.

The beginning of the fifteenth century brought the birth of her first son, Battista, after John the Baptist. We might expect that the grief of losing her mother-in-law soon after might have been mixed with relief -- no more pressure to live in society. But a household as large as the Ponziani's needed someone to run it. Everyone thought that sixteen-year-old Frances was best qualified to take her mother-in-law's place. She was thrust even more deeply into society and worldly duties. Her family was right, though -- she was an excellent administrator and a fair and pleasant employer.

After two more children were born to her -- a boy, Giovanni Evangelista, and a girl, Agnes -- a flood brought disease and famine to Rome. Frances gave orders that no one asking for alms would be turned away and she and Vannoza went out to the poor with corn, wine, oil and clothing. Her father-in-law, furious that she was giving away their supplies during a famine, took the keys of the granary and wine cellar away from her.

Then just to make sure she wouldn't have a chance to give away more, he sold off their extra corn, leaving just enough for the family, and all but one cask of one. The two noblewomen went out to the streets to beg instead.

Finally Frances was so desperate for food to give to the poor she went to the now empty corn loft and sifted through the straw searching for a few leftover kernels of corn. After she left Lorenzo came in and was stunned to find the previously empty granary filled with yellow corn. Frances drew wine out of their one cask until one day her father in law went down and found it empty. Everyone screamed at Frances. After saying a prayer, she led them to cellar, turned the spigot on the empty cask, and out flowed the most wonderful wine. These incidents completely converted Lorenzo and her father-in-law.

Having her husband and father-in-law completely on her side meant she could do what she always wanted. She immediately sold her jewels and clothes and distributed money to needy. She started wearing a dress of coarse green cloth.

Civil war came to Rome -- this was a time of popes and antipopes and Rome became a battleground. At one point there were three men claiming to be pope. One of them sent a cruel governor, Count Troja, to conquer Rome. Lorenzo was seriously wounded and his brother was arrested. Troja sent word that Lorenzo's brother would be executed unless he had Battista, Frances's son and heir of the family, as a hostage. As long as Troja had Battista he knew the Ponzianis would stop fighting.

When Frances heard this she grabbed Battista by the hand and fled. On the street, she ran into her spiritual adviser Don Andrew who told her she was choosing the wrong way and ordered her to trust God. Slowly she turned around and made her way to Capitol Hill where Count Troja was waiting. As she and Battista walked the streets, crowds of people tried to block her way or grab Battista from her to save him. After giving him up, Frances ran to a church to weep and pray.

As soon as she left, Troja had put Battista on a soldier's horse -- but every horse they tried refused to move. Finally the governor gave in to God's wishes. Frances was still kneeling before the altar when she felt Battista's little arms around her.

But the troubles were not over. Frances was left alone against the attackers when she sent Lorenzo out of Rome to avoid capture. Drunken invaders broke into her house, tortured and killed the servants, demolished the palace, literally tore it apart and smashed everything. And this time God did not intervene -- Battista was taken to Naples. Yet this kidnapping probably saved Battista's life because soon a plague hit -- a plague that took the lives of many including Frances' nine-year-old son Evangelista.

At this point, her house in ruins, her husband gone, one son dead, one son a hostage, she could have given up. She looked around, cleared out the wreckage of the house and turned it into a makeshift hospital and a shelter for the homeless.

One year after his death Evangelista came to her in a vision and told her that Agnes was going to die too. In return God was granting her a special grace by sending an archangel to be her guardian angel for the rest of her life. She would always be able to see him. A constant companion and spiritual adviser, he once commanded her to stop her severe penances (eating only bread and water and wearing a hair shirt). "You should understand by now," the angel told her, "that the God who made your body and gave it to your soul as a servant never intended that the spirit should ruin the flesh and return it to him despoiled."

Finally the wars were over and Battista and her husband returned home. But though her son came back a charming young man her husband returned broken in mind and body. Probably the hardest work of healing Frances had to do in her life was to restore Lorenzo back to his old self.

When Battista married a pretty young woman named Mabilia Frances expected to find someone to share in the management of the household. But Mabilia wanted none of it. She was as opposite of Frances and Frances had been of her mother-in-law. Mabilia wanted to party and ridiculed Frances in public for her shabby green dress, her habits, and her standards. One day in the middle of yelling at her, Mabilia suddenly turned pale and fainted, crying, "Oh my pride, my dreadful pride." Frances nursed her back to health and healed their differences as well. A converted Mabilia did her best to imitate Frances after that.

With Lorenzo's support and respect, Frances started a lay order of women attached to the Benedictines called the Oblates of Mary. The women lived in the world but pledged to offer themselves to God and serve the poor. Eventually they bought a house where the widowed members could live in community.

Frances nursed Lorenzo until he died. His last words to her were, "I feel as if my whole life has been one beautiful dream of purest happiness. God has given me so much in your love." After his death, Frances moved into the house with the other Oblates and was made superior. At 52 she had the life she dreamed of when she was eleven. She had been right in discerning her original vocation -- she just had the timing wrong. God had had other plans for her in between.

Frances died four years later. Her last words were "The angel has finished his task -- he beckons me to

follow him."

In Her Footsteps:

Do you have a spiritual friend who helps you on your journey, someone to pray with and serve with? If you don't have one now, ask God to send you such a companion. Then look around you. This friend, like Frances' Vannoza, may be near you already. Try sharing some of your spiritual hopes and desires with those closest to you. You may be surprised at their reaction. (But don't force your opinions on others or get discouraged by lack of interest. Just keep asking God to lead you.)

Prayer:

Saint Frances of Rome, help us to see the difference between what we want to do and what God wants us to do. Help us to discern what comes from our will and what comes from God's desire.

Amen

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Prayer to St. Frances of Rome

Bright jewel of the Order of Saint Benedict, illustrious Saint Frances of Rome, thou who wast led by divine Providence through various stations in life, that thou mightiest be a pattern of every virtue, to maidens, to matrons and to widows, pray for us to our divine Savior that we may be detached from the vanities of the world and may be able, under the guiding hand of our Guardian Angel, to grow daily in the love of God, of His Church and of our neighbor, and finally to be made partakers in heaven of the Felicity. Amen.

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