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"Francis and His Brothers Plan Their New Life," detail of artwork by José Benlliure y Gil (Wikimedia Commons)



by Karen E. Park

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Before Francis became a saint, he was Francesco di Pietro di Bernadone — a spoiled and rich cloth merchant's son, aspiring knight, conspicuous dresser and the charismatic leader of a group of raucous young men in Assisi, Italy. Thomas of Celano, whose [biography](#) of Francis was written just a few years after Francis' death, tells us Francis was "brought up by his parents to be self-willed and to pursue the vain pleasures of the world."

We learn that until he was almost 25, he "wasted and squandered his time miserably" and that he "surpassed all his friends in the worthlessness of his pursuits: he was their ringleader ... a zealot in the cause of folly." Francis "outdid all the others in practical jokes, in pranks, in tomfoolery, in idle talk and gossip."

Celano assures us that deep down Francis was kind, but that still his behavior was bad because he was "surrounded by an army of miscreants" who "egged him on to commit crimes."

Other early works mention the same kind of careless and privileged behavior. In *The Legend of the Three Companions* (1241-47), we learn again that "Francis was ... given over to revelry and song with his friends, roaming day and night throughout the city of Assisi. He was most lavish in spending, so much so that all he could possess and earn was squandered on feasting and other pursuits."

Of course, these accounts are emphasizing his former dissolute life in order to highlight his dramatic conversion and saintliness. Still, there is no reason to doubt that the young Francis was at the very least intimately familiar with the intoxicating world that young men sometimes create for themselves in order to show off for each other and their communities. The young Francis was part of a certain type of all male social club — a certain type of fraternity.

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But as we all know, something changed for him. It's the leper, it's the [voice in San Damiano](#), it's the abandoned pursuit of military glory. It's a dawning realization that

this isn't the way: this vanity and carelessness, this self regard, this lack of humility.

One evening, not long after his return to Assisi after being imprisoned for a year in Perugia, Francis's friends chose him to be in charge of the elaborate banquet they had planned. After the party, they took to the streets singing loudly, and handed Francis a scepter to signify his position as leader of the group. But we learn from *The Legend of the Three Companions* that his heart was no longer in it. He stopped singing and fell behind the group — suddenly "visited by the Lord who filled his heart with so much tenderness that he was unable to speak or move."

As I reread this account, it occurs to me that it is tenderness that had been lacking from Francis' group of rowdy brothers. They had food and drink, songs, and pranks, they no doubt laughed and messed around until the sun came up and they stumbled home to bed. But what they didn't have was tenderness.

Francis soon withdrew from these friends, and rejected his family and their status, too. All of these people "thought he was insane and out of his mind" (*The Legend of the Three Companions*). After his furious father brought him in front of the bishop on charges of theft, Francis famously stripped off all his clothes and renounced the things of the world. He then made a hermit's habit for himself and "gave himself over to divine service in every way he could."

Francis lived alone at first — begging for alms from some of the same people he had once invited to his lavish parties, an outcast. But before long, some of the young men from town felt called to join him, and a new brotherhood formed — one organized around a very different kind of fraternity than the one he had formerly belonged to.

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The Legend of Three Companions tells us, "As both the truth of blessed Francis' simple teachings as well as that of his life became known to many, two years after his conversion, some men began to be moved to do penance by his example, and leaving all things, they joined him in life and habit. The first of these was Brother Bernard of holy memory."

More joined them — Philip and Giles, Peter and Leo — and soon they were the *fratres minores*, the lesser brothers. Francis instructed them in his [early rule](#) (1221), "Let no one be called 'prior,' but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother."

Let one wash the feet of the other."

Francis had not given up fraternity or brotherhood, but he did radically change what it looked like, and what it meant.

Eight hundred years after Francis's death, fraternities have become the subject of national scrutiny. At Cornell University, a [lawsuit](#) alleges that an incapacitated woman was sexually assaulted by seven fraternity members while information about what was happening circulated among others in a group chat.

The Cornell allegations have renewed [calls](#) to abolish fraternities altogether. College fraternities have long been problematic, and university administrators have spent decades trying to reform Greek life in response to frequent sexual assault, alcohol abuse, and violent hazing that has led in some cases to permanent injury or [death](#).

But Francis' approach to brotherhood makes me wonder whether, alongside the question of abolishing fraternities, there is another question worth asking. Maybe we need to ask not just whether young men need fraternity, but what kind of fraternity, what kind of brotherhood?

One of my sons is named Leo Francis, not for the popes (he was born before the papacies of either Francis or Leo), but for St. Francis and one of his dearest friends, Brother Leo. In 1224, Francis wrote a [blessing](#) for Brother Leo on a small piece of parchment. Leo himself annotated the parchment to identify it as Francis' handwriting and kept it with him for the rest of his life. This gentle and personal prayer is preserved in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi and is identified as one of very few surviving documents written by Francis in his own hand.

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The other document surviving in Francis' own hand is a [letter](#) to Brother Leo, now preserved in Spoleto. This letter also contains striking tenderness. It begins "Brother Leo, your brother Francis sends you greetings and peace," and it goes on, "Thus I say to you, son, as a mother would."

Here, the founder of an all-male religious brotherhood speaks with tenderness, gentleness, even maternal love to another man. That kind of tenderness is not weakness, it is the basis of authentic fraternity. Francis's brothers were not

supposed to mindlessly protect each other, or increase each other's entitlement or status. They were called to make themselves *minores*, smaller and lesser, and to wash one another's feet.

If fraternity means anything worth preserving, it cannot simply demand blind loyalty to the group. True brothers must take responsibility for what they are helping each other become. This means a brother can never stand by while another man humiliates or harms someone.

Perhaps Greek fraternities should be abolished. I for one think that they should. But eliminating frat houses from American college campuses will not abolish the desire of young men to find camaraderie and friendship, to form lifelong bonds, to seek one another's approval, or to offer each other loyalty. Francis understood that pull, because he had lived it.

Eight hundred years after his death, I find myself thinking not just of the saintly Francis but also of that earlier, more careless and self-willed young man who once stayed up all night laughing, drinking and carousing with others like himself. Francis never lost his desire for male friendship, but he took that desire and turned it into a tender and loving humility.

Young men need brotherhood, but they also need tenderness. And they need to care not just about their group status and personal prestige, but rather about what kind of men they are helping one another become.