

St. Louis of France-Patron of Secular Franciscans

King Louis IX of France was the child of a political marriage between Louis VIII and Blanche of Castile. Following his father's early death, the young Louis (12 years old) was thrust into the world of statecraft, although under the tutelage of his powerful mother. Eight years later he married Margaret of Provence. It was a politically strategic marriage, but Louis and Margaret shared a love that was both tender, mutually respectful, and the foundation of a strong family. As a father he made sure that his eleven children had an education that was both practical and anchored in the teachings of Jesus.

As a King, Louis's rule was a model of good governance. Throughout his time as King of France, Louis fostered justice and peace. He rejected favoritism in making decisions and was relentless in rooting out corruption in any of his officials. He was respectful of the Pope and had a deep commitment to the Church but was not afraid to expose abuses in the Church or defend the rights of the state against arbitrary claims of the Church. Louis built on these qualities, along with an uncompromising impartiality, to settle the disputes that arose between papacy and princes and emperors common in those days. Under Louis, France was recognized as a trusted negotiating partner.

St. Louis de France, like St. Francis, had an ardent attachment to the crucified Saviour. In his daily actions he expressed both a sense of unworthiness and gratitude for Jesus, who gave his life to reconcile the world to God. He was transformed by St. Francis' life of poverty and his sense that the poor were not less than everyone else, but their equals in worth and dignity. Louis' castle was a prototype "soup kitchen." The poor, hungry, homeless and ill came freely to a dining hall reserved especially for the people of the streets. Louis would often join them, sitting beside them as their equal. He saw to it as well that their medical needs were taken care of and that they could find relief from the elements.

Louis' devotion to the passion of Christ not only accounts for his attachment to the Poor man of Assisi, but also for his desire to "belong to" the Friars, wherever he met them in France. Louis may not have been a Secular Franciscan by investiture and profession, but he was a "secular" who lived the Franciscan life as fully as he could. His commitment to the poor was matched by his own simple life style. His financial support of the Friars was accompanied by time spent with them in prayer and reflection. On his travels throughout the Kingdom, as well as on his Crusading journeys, Louis wanted the Friars to travel with him, joining them for Mass, for the Divine Office, and choosing them as his weekly confessors.

But was it the Franciscan way to lead a military Crusade against the Muslim conquerors of the Christian East? We know the story of Francis and the Sultan, which in no way could justify warfare. An explanation may be found in St. Louis' sense of responsibility for the Crown of Thorns that was placed on Christ's head during His passion and which had subsequently been brought to France. The Crown, like the Holy Land itself, was sacred to the memory of our Saviour. Unlike other Crusaders, Louis was not motivated by power or territory, by wealth or vengeance. His motives lay more in his resolve to preserve for the world all that is sacred to the memory of Jesus Christ. And while warfare was not seen through the same moral lens we use today, Louis turned more often to diplomacy than the sword.

Overall St. Louis of France was an instrument of the Lord's peace and a royal knight dedicated to his Lady Poverty. He lived a wholly secular life, while keeping, often with great effort, the promises made on his behalf at his Baptism. Because he lived so true to the Gospel in the day to day duties of government, he is a worthy model for Secular Franciscans and a patron saint whose honour has been earned!

Spiritual Takeaways and prayerful reflections

Attachment to the Church

Astute in the practice of governance Louis understood the human complexity of the Church. He recognized that that greed and ambition in the Papacy jeopardized constructive relationships with secular rulers. He did not believe that the Church should dictate how nations were to be governed. At the same time he defended the Church's freedom against politically motivated interference. King Louis was aware of the failings of many in the clergy and the risks that that posed to the loyalty of the laity. He knew, like St. Francis, that the Church was a bridge between God and us. That is why Louis cared. As Pope Francis pointed out in *The Joy of the Gospel*, the Church has a mission, a vocation, and must be continuously ready to see its failures, so that the voice of God can be heard in its actions. A hallmark of Franciscanism from its beginnings has been to reform the Church by embracing the Church.

Focus on the Cross

For St. Louis Christianity was not a philosophy or an ideal. It is a way of living, an intentional and conscious encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. What motivated Louis' integrity and gave him the strength to stand up for justice was his acceptance of the Gospel, without scholarly interpretation, without compromising the hard sayings. What God did for us in our Lord Jesus really happened, that is why St. Louis held the Holy Land so dear to his heart. Meditation on the mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection gave Louis his moral direction. You might find the sermons of St. Peter in the early chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles* helpful in capturing the core of the Gospel. God's presence in history—our history—is real and, like St. Francis, Louis experienced that in meditating on the passion of Jesus.

Love of the Poor

Louis did indeed care for the poor of France. But he also found truth and peace in shunning the privileges of his rank, in living with less rather than more, and learning from those whose lives are a constant struggle. Many of us are, if not impoverished, live on modest pensions. We do without more often than we might like, and still reach out to help charitable and humanitarian causes. In this case, love of the poor means recognizing your own dignity. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God (Luke 6: 20)." Our Franciscan way of living and our trust in God's providence—when consciously accepted-- can be a model for authentic humanity, authentic dignity in a world that is consumed by materialistic values and driven by the pursuit of wealth. Love of the poor includes love of yourself, not in any egotistical way, but in the deep awareness that we are God's children, worth more than "a whole flock of sparrows (Matthew 10: 31)."