

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Robe

To appreciate one of the most beloved of Catholic saints, it helps to look at his robe.

In the basement of a basilica in a small Italian village, you will find it: a patchwork of brown cloth and thread, stretched on a board, preserved under glass. This is the original Franciscan habit: the brown tunic that Francis of Assisi wore—and wore and wore and wore.

In the age of disposable juice boxes, fast food and seasonal shifts in fashion and taste, it's helpful to see what one simple man had in his wardrobe. Francis's tunic was clearly ripped and repaired, many times over, its stitches and seams repeatedly re-sewn. It's a rough, inelegant, hodgepodge of dark fabrics—an ironic and defiant testament from a man whose father was a wealthy fabric trader.

“Preach the Gospel,” Francis said. “Use words if necessary.” The words of his particular gospel can be seen, and heard, in that simple robe. They speak volumes. They speak of sacrifice, poverty and thrift. They speak of a man who followed the advice of Christ, taking nothing for the journey but only what he needed. (It's not unrealistic to think that Jesus Himself may have lived His days with just one piece of clothing to His name.)

How often did Francis spend his nights, wrapped in that robe, shivering against the cold? How many days did he walk the Umbrian hills in the hot sun, in that brown tunic? How many mornings did he awaken in that scrap of clothing, and re-bandage the wounds from his bleeding hands? Was he wearing this robe when he received the stigmata?

This Tuesday, October 4, we celebrate the memorial of St. Francis of Assisi. We will remember a simple man who preached to birds, praised the sun as his “brother” and lived a life of joyous poverty. He lived just forty-four years, yet managed to leave an indelible mark on our faith and on our planet with, almost literally, nothing.

If any life proves that “less is more,” it is the life of this holy man from Assisi. And if anything proves that adage, it is the simple habit that Francis wore, a plain tunic that continues to remind us how much we have, and how much we can surrender—for God, and for others.

That robe of St. Francis may not be the most fashionable garment. But as Francis reminded us, some things—charity, love, compassion, joy—never go out of fashion.

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