ST. BERNARDINE OF SIENA

PATRON OF THE BERNARDINE
FRANCISCAN SISTERS
St. Bernardine of Siena

1380 was an auspicious year in the fourteenth century Republic of Siena. In April of that year, one of its most famous daughters, Catherine, died and the following September was born one of its most famous sons, Bernardino degli Albizzeschi.

Bernardino, born on September 8 into an affluent family, was orphaned by the age of six and subsequently reared by pious aunts and cousins until the age of eleven when two of his uncles took over the formal education of the young boy. Bernardino, a very capable and intelligent student, mastered both civil and canon law along with other traditional studies incorporated into a classical education.

Not only proficient in academia, Bernardino had grown spiritually. From his earliest days, he manifested a thoughtful, kind and compassionate heart especially towards those less fortunate. As a youth he had enrolled in a religious organization and during an outbreak of the plague, he and some of his companions served the sick and the dying at the local hospital. Although not contracting the dreaded disease, Bernardino suffered fever and complete exhaustion from which he recovered within several months although he was still a bit weak.
He lived for a while with his father’s oldest sister, his aunt Bartolomea, a very holy woman and a member of the Third Order of St. Augustine. One day this pious woman asked Bernardine if he ever thought about becoming an Augustinian priest. This prompted him to think about his future. He purchased a small house on the outskirts of the city and spent his days in prayer and fasting. He learned from this experience that the life of a hermit was not God’s will for him. In response to a dream, Bernardino decided to join the Franciscans of Strict Observance where he would live in poverty and humility. He met with the Guardian of Capriola and asked to be received into the Order. He received the habit on September 8, 1402, was professed on September 8, 1403 and was ordained on September 8, 1404. His superiors commissioned him to preaching. His first attempt at preaching was a failure because his voice was so very weak.

It happened that in 1406, St. Vincent Ferrer was preaching in Piedmont and made a startling prediction concerning one who was in his audience. The preacher foretold that “his mantle should descend upon one who was listening to him and that he [Vincent] would return to France and Spain leaving to [Bernardino] the task of evangelizing the remaining people of Italy.” (Catholic Encyclopedia: St. Bernardine of Siena)
However, it would be twelve years before his preaching missionary journey would begin. Bernardino spent this time studying the Scriptures and praying in the Friary at Capriola. He would go out into the woods and “preach his sermons” in an attempt to develop his feeble voice. He prayed and begged God to relieve him of this impediment if it were God’s will that he should preach.

Shortly after this, as Bernardino was absorbed in prayer, he saw a ball of fire descend toward him. Although frightened, he felt the fire seemingly burn his lips and the impediment to his voice fell from his mouth. When he attempted to tell the friars what had happened, his voice was full of vigor and richness and he realized that God has heard his prayer. Thus began the intense journey of preaching throughout all of northern Italy. The first city to hear from Bernardino was Milan in Lombardy.

Bernardino based his sermons on the Gospel in true Franciscan style. He also used Biblical stories that related to the lives of his audiences. He spoke simply and clearly and his sermons in the “lingua franca” give a true picture of the speaker. He had to preach in city squares because churches were too small to hold the crowds that came. Many churches built “little nests” against the walls of the buildings so that he could be seen and heard by all. Some of these are still visible at this
time…those in Viterbo and Perugia being the most notable.

Like Francis, Bernardino preached peace. There were two major factions in Italy at this time: those who supported the Pope and those who supported the Emperor. Each city, indeed each family, had its own insignia posted on their buildings. This situation was difficult to overcome and it would take some time before it was resolved but Bernardino tried his best to bring it to some peaceful conclusion.

Bernardino also attacked the three most serious sins of his time: witchcraft, sodomy and usury. While preaching against these evils, he did so as did all medieval preachers – with a “fire and brimstone” approach. The language used would likely be frowned upon today but not in his time. Thousands went to confession and made serious efforts to reform their lives which proved to Bernardino that they followed what he advised but there were still thousands who remained in sin.

Bernardino’s fame preceded him into Bologna, Florence, Venice, Verona, and Rome itself, yet he realized how much work remained to be done. He had to find a way to reach these people and turn them away from sin. After a period of intense prayer, Bernardino became convinced that God wanted him to revive
devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus. He needed something that would recall people to that Name and he designed a monogram that would attract the attention of the people and would be a constant reminder of the great love Jesus had for them. He devised a monogram with the Greek abbreviation for the Name of Jesus - IHS – within rays indicating the love of God and on a background of blue. At Bologna, Bernardino convinced a card painter who had been ruined by his sermons against gambling, to make his living by designing these tablets. There was such a demand for the monogram that the painter became a wealthy man.

This beautifully designed monogram became the hallmark of Bernardino’s preaching. He would place it on the gate of a city to let the people know he was going to preach there. However, it also caused some problems for him. There were two priests, an Augustinian and a Dominican, who accused Bernardino of preaching heresy because he was urging the people to “reverence” a monogram which, according to them, replaced the crucifix in importance. Bernardino was summoned to Rome by Pope Martin V and was told to remain silent in his travels. Bernardino complied, humbly.

Upon hearing about the accusation brought against his brother Franciscan and his dearest mentor, John Capistrano went to Rome and met with the Pope. He
explained what and how Bernardino taught. At the trial, attended by the Pope, cardinals, theologians, and priests, Bernardino stood alone in his own defense. In his hand he held the tablet and explained the meaning and use in very clear terms. But, to appease his critics, he added a crossbar over the “H” to represent the cross.

So successful was this defense that not only was Bernardino exonerated but Pope Martin offered him the Bishopric of Siena, a post which had been vacated for a long time. Bernardino declined respectfully by saying “Most Holy Father, I am but a humble follower of St. Francis. Please do not oblige me to accept such a great honor. Rather, let me continue my humble labors among God’s poor. In that way, all of Italy will be my diocese.” (The Monogram Saint - Bernardine) The Pope acceded to Bernardino’s request and urged him to continue preaching the devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus.

Gradually, this monogram replaced those other political insignias on public and private buildings. Wherever you go throughout Italy, especially in Rome and other large cities, there are the stone insignias of **IHS** to this very day.

There were two other occasions when Bernardino was accused of heresy but both times ended in his being blessed by Pope Eugene IV. And each of these times he was offered a bishopric – Ferrara (1431) and Urbino
which he also declined humbly. Thus, he was free to continue his preaching ministry.

Bernardino often began preaching in the early hours of the morning, before the heat of summer became oppressive. On one occasion, in the town of Carnet, a crowd had gathered but a rainstorm hit with loud thunder and lightning. The people had no place to go for cover and they started to leave. Bernardino called to them to join him in prayer, the Our Father and the Hail Mary, and said that God “would shed His sun upon us.” They began to pray, the rain stopped and before they had completed the Hail Mary, a brilliant sun burst through the clouds.

Not far away was a small chicken farm. When the sun came up the roosters began to crow so loudly that they drowned out Bernardino’s voice. Normally, the audience would have laughed at the commotion but they wanted to hear what the missionary had to say. So, Bernardino addressed the noisemakers saying, “Creatures of God, cease your noise so I may preach about your Creator to those who have come this morning.” Not only did the chickens become silent but they also remained standing just where they were until the great missionary completed his sermon. (The Monogram Saint-Bernardine)
News reached Bernardino about an impending war between his beloved Siena and Florence so he hastened to his home city and found the city council in session. He tried to convince them to abandon all thoughts of war but, although they loved and respected him, they paid him no heed. The next day he preached in the piazza and while speaking, Bernardino seemed to have a vision of the death and destruction that would come with this war and he told the people about this coming catastrophe. They listened and took to heart what Bernardino said. They went back to their homes and to their workplaces and peace was restored between the two cities.

Now that war was averted, Bernardino retired for a time to the Friary at Capriola where he prayed fervently and began to work on volumes of dogmatic and moral theology, which were much needed by the priests of his time. He also prepared sermons on Our Lady and St. Joseph, two of his favorite topics.

After the sojourn in Capriola, Bernardino resumed his preaching ministry, always taking with him the monogram of the Holy Name of Jesus. At his departure from the town or city, smaller replicas of the monogram could be seen on buildings and as badges on peoples’ clothing. This caused the missionary great joy and he has been recorded as saying, “I can never thank God enough for having inspired me with the idea of making the Holy
Name monogram and I know that He has invested it with the power to draw hearts to Himself.” (The Monogram Saint - Bernardine)

Sometime later, Bernardino received word from his Superior General that he was to discontinue preaching and take on the responsibility as Vicar General of the Observant Friars in Italy, a job that would be very time-consuming and entail a vast amount of work. He would have to visit all the Observant houses in the country, watch over the observance of the common life and supervise the erection of new monasteries.

With the spread of Franciscanism throughout the world, there were innovations that were bound to creep in. Bernardino was very aware of Francis’ idea for the Order and he strove to seek out any laxity and return the Observants to the ideals of their founder. His zeal was unbounded but his firm yet charitable handling of the friars made his efforts successful. In the six years that he was Vicar General, the Order grew from a few hundred to more than four thousand.

In 1442, Bernardino wrote to the Pope asking to be relieved of this position. The Holy Father encouraged the missionary to continue as leader because he possessed the qualifications for this responsibility. While Bernardino could not deny what the Pope had said, he indicated that there were others in the Order who could
also handle the work. Humbly, he begged the Holy Father to allow him to resume his preaching so as to reach as many souls as possible and to convert them from sin.

The Holy Father relented and at age sixty-two, Bernardino once again took up the preaching ministry. By this age, however, he found the going more difficult due to his suffering from gout and rheumatism. As there were no other means of transportation, he moved from place to place by walking. Sometimes, he was able to ride a donkey led by his companions. He also found it painful to stand and yet he stood for hours preaching.

He had received word that heresy had arisen in Milan and he made his way there to do what he could to crush it. When he was satisfied that he had done what he could, he agreed to go to Padua, the city made famous by St. Anthony. He remained there during Lent of 1443 and preached a series of sermons. So successful was he that the people wanted him to remain there but Bernardino had to move on, sensing that there was much to do and that his end was near.

During the early part of 1444, Bernardino went back to his birthplace, Massa, a suburb of Siena. There it is recorded that he performed a miracle for a leper who had very sore feet and asked Bernardino for something to alleviate this pain. The missionary told him that he had
no shoes but he gave the leper his stockings hoping that they would fit and help the poor man.

The leper went aside, put them on and walked some distance looking for food. He felt what he thought were pebbles in his shoe and when he removed the stockings, found that scales fell from them and his skin was clear up to his knees. He put them back on and walked another distance and had the same sensation. On removing the stockings once again, he found his skin cleared up to his hips. The third time, he realized that his entire body was cured of the disease.

Shortly after that miraculous event, Bernardino preached his last series of sermons in Siena. His many followers could tell by his appearance that the end was near. Yet, he felt that he had more to do and made his way to Perugia where he was too weak to speak. He looked at the people but said nothing and they understood. He then went on to Foligno, Spoleto, Rieti and Cattaducale where he preached his last sermon. His parting words to the people, “Please pray that my sins may be pardoned and that I may die the death of the just.” (The Monogram Saint - Bernardine)

His companions put him on a donkey and they began the last journey with their beloved missionary. During the trip, Bernardino became so weak that they removed him from the donkey and placed him on the
ground. He asked them for water but his companions said that there was no stream in sight. Bernardino told them that someone would soon come who would tell them where to go to get water.

Bernardino lay on the ground waiting the return of his companions when he sensed that he was not alone. On opening his eyes, he saw St. Celestine, the Pope of one hundred and fifty years prior. Celestine told Bernardino to have courage, that he would soon die in L’Aquila and that both he and Bernardino would be patron saints of that city. Celestine embraced Bernardino and disappeared. The missionary was delighted that he would soon be in the company of his Master whom he loved above all things and also of Our Lady who was his dearest lady-love.

When his companions returned, they made a litter and carried Bernardino to the next friary and placed him in bed. They summoned a doctor who told them that nothing could be done for the missionary. He was so very weak by this time. The Brothers were in chapel for Vespers and Bernardino asked to be placed on the ground. As the Brothers chanted the words, “Father, I have manifested [Your] Name to the men whom [You] gave me,” Bernardino breathed his last breath and gave his soul to God. (The Monogram Saint - Bernardine)

It was Ascension Thursday, 1444.
REFLECTIONS

ON SOME WORDS OF ST. BERNARDINE
“In all your actions, seek in the first place the kingdom of God and His glory. Direct all you do purely to His honor. Persevere in [brotherly] charity, and practice first all that you desire to teach others. “By this means,” he said, “the Holy Spirit will be your master and will give you such wisdom and such a tongue that no adversary will be able to stand against you.”

What attracts me to Bernardine is the coherence of his life; that is, his witness. He was truly a witness to Christ – decided, daring and prophetic. I must learn from him to be a courageous witness to Jesus, knowing how to act in His Name. I must transform this witness into availability – to always be ready to love, to rescue, to help in all situations. Bernardine lived what he preached and I too must imitate that virtue. As a Bernardine Franciscan, I am blessed with this rich heritage to not only speak in the name of Jesus but also to be the face of Jesus for God’s people and live out Jesus’ mission in fraternity and ministry.

Sister Lori Braun, OSF

Come Holy Spirit! St. Bernardine presses us to call upon the Holy Spirit Who makes us wise in the ways of God. As followers of Francis, a great image for us is to be like earthly clay in the caressing hands of the Master Potter. We are swirled and twirled into the gift that God has made us to be – without pretense, without
ambition, without holding on, without grabbing, without pushing, without anxiety. Over and over again, we are recreated and reshaped into something unique and magnificent so that we may be filled to hold all that God can pour into us by the grace of His Spirit Who will melt us and mold us into the Christ-image.

St. Bernardine urges us to “Seek first the kingdom of God.” It is not easy for us to say that God alone is enough for us or that God has filled us to the brim because we always want more. We are not expected to do great things but we are called to do everything in the Name of Jesus. We have been fashioned, set apart to glorify God’s Name and to make His love known to the hearts of all.

Sister Mary Elena Sabalausky, OSF

As a counselor, I sometimes ask the students whom I counsel to “hyper-focus” on a particular subject, to dig deeper into a subject or issue in order to find greater meaning or success.

St. Bernardine challenges us to set clear priorities – God is #1, to “hyper-focus” on our Baptismal promises and on our commitment to Gospel living. He admonishes us to be beyond kind, beyond prayerful, beyond generous, beyond joyful – not for our own growth but “purely to His honor.” Among the resulting fruits of our actions is the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom –
WOW! When this happens, all that we think and say and do will flow from the life of the Spirit within us. Then our presence, our being in the convent, the school, the mall, and the world will bring the Gospel to life without our having to say a word.

A Bernardine Sister, OSF

Each morning when you arise, ask God to guide you through the day. Ask the Holy Spirit to be in your thoughts, words and actions so that all that you think, say or do may be pleasing to Him. As Bernardine says, “The Holy Spirit will be your master and will give you such wisdom that your adversary will not be able to stand against you.”

Sister Veronice Plewinski, OSF
“Follow the example of the ox; on leaving the pasture it goes on chewing and chewing the cud and even prefers this ruminating to grazing. Do likewise when you hear the word of God, and chew the same so thoroughly that it will seem better than to hear it.”

Trudging regularly through the farm fields on sunny or rainy days, the strong ox carries on its daily routines. It sniffs the flowers as it plows the fields and enjoys the surrounding beauty. All the while the ox takes delight in slowly chewing its cud.

So now I ask myself, Lord, do I enjoy walks in the fields of parks and delight in the beauty that surrounds me? Do I sit on grassy hillsides and meditate on the Scripture readings of the day? Like St. Bernardine, am I willing to share the Good News with others, especially those who hunger for your love? Guide me, Lord as I journey each day to be of service to others and to share the Word of God.

**Sister Marie Gayda, OSF**

Bernardine advises us to *ruminate* on the word of God. I never grow tired of pondering the Word, JESUS… ever new, ever challenging and ever consoling. Jesus, You are a PRESENCE within my heart. Confirming Jesus, You are a faithful PRESENCE within me. Tender Jesus, You are a comforting PRESENCE within my heart. Jesus, Son of God, You are a divine PRESENCE within me.
Of course, each day is not marked by such lofty thoughts and even the best saints endured their less than holy moments. It is in these humbling human experiences where Jesus reminds us that we need divine grace to grow in love of God and neighbor, to grow in holiness. In my frustration and in my annoyances I pray, Jesus. In pains and aches and when I am overworked and tired, I pray, Jesus. He knows what to do and when to do it so we must give Jesus time to do things GOD’S WAY.

I believe that Bernardine’s powerful trust in the holy Name of Jesus is a gift to be received joyfully and shared generously with others. When we reverently say “Jesus” in the silence of our hearts, He blesses us beyond what we deserve simply because He loves us so much. May we never forget to say, “Thank You.”

Sister Claude Marie Jablonski, OSF
“I am thoroughly convinced that religious are never truly happy unless they follow their rule perfectly. No true religious shuns the inconveniences imposed upon him by the Rule. The happier we are through the common observance, the more people will want to join and share our happiness.”

I was reminded of the words I often heard when I entered our Congregation; namely, “Keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you.” I understood that I would be happy in following Jesus as I had promised when I made my vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Many times I was asked by those I met or taught why I was so happy? I love being a Sister, belonging totally to Jesus.

Sister Florence Kruczek, OSF

Once, in a cartoon, Charlie Brown asked Linus what he would like to be when he grew up. Linus thought a bit and then replied, “Outrageously happy!” Do I want to be outrageously happy and if so, what must I do?

As a woman religious and follower of St. Francis, how do I continually gift the church with what I am and what I do to build the Kingdom of God? Our call to conversion is not a once and done deal but a life-long journey. I ask myself, “How am I with God each day?” Reflecting on what Bernardine said, I can be happy if I am committed to live the Rule. In his Letter to the Faithful Francis wrote, “How happy and blessed are
those men and women when they do these things: love God, love neighbor, despise sin, receive Eucharist, and bring forth fruit worthy of penance because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them.” And when we reach our final blessed destination, we just may find ourselves “outrageously happy!”

Sister Mary Sninsky, OSF

St. Bernardine’s words continue to resonate with me and challenge me. They invite me to a change of life, in particular, to give more time to prayer and contemplation and not to allow the many daily occupations to suffocate the flame of God’s love in my heart. It may happen that the tedium, resentment or depression takes over the life of religious making them insensible to the mission and to the needs of God’s people.

The consecrated life lived according to the Rule should flourish, bear much fruit and through the joy of the Gospel attract many vocations to the consecrated and priestly life. All for the greater glory of God.

Sister Miriam de Montenegro, OSF
“…the biggest trial for religious is to know how to get along with one another because there are so many different characters, some gloomy, some jolly, some old, some young. You have to adapt yourself to all natures which is difficult unless one is prudent.”

I can honestly say that I have never thought of an attempt to get along with others from the standpoint of prudence. When you live in community, you rub shoulders with many different characters. Mother Teresa says, “Some people come into our life as a blessing and others come into it as a lesson to be learned.” Bernardine seems to suggest that you have a choice and that is where prudence comes in.

Prudence is the one virtue that would influence one’s response to the blessing and lessons one encounters in one’s living environment. By exercising prudence, one can possibly change the tenor of the environment. At times I do not know how to do “X” until I have lived with Sister “N” wherein the lesson taught becomes the blessing learned. The challenge to those living the religious life is learning to see the lesson to be learned as blessings to be celebrated. And, that takes prudence.

Sister Jean Therese Baumann, OSF

Fraternal relationship is the fruit of a divine relationship in listening, reflecting, praying, and contemplating the truths of the Gospel. It is a healthy
relationship which brings with it the brilliance of truth, love and the witness of Jesus of Nazareth.

God is the “Word.” We are His “voice.” Many times we lose sight of this prophetic dimension of our mission, allowing ourselves to be led not by fraternal actions but by unhealthy reactions. A joyless fraternity is a fraternity that is being extinguished. We are called to take to all people the embrace of God Who leans over us with a mother’s tenderness.

With Bernardine, we want to echo everywhere possible the Good News of new relationships. We ourselves, with courage and humility and prudence need to lift up the flag of FAITH, LOVE and WITNESS in our hearts, lives and mission.

Sister Giovanna da Silva, OSF

During my years as an elementary teacher, I chose for a read-aloud book, *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech. The title comes from an aphorism, “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked two moons in his moccasins.” On addition, during a workshop in the 1990’s given by a Maryknoll Sister we attempted to scratch the surface of fraternal life; the presenter said that we know only the tip of the iceberg about the others with whom we live. Therefore, we know about $1/14^{th}$ of the others’
background, situation, cares, worries, likes, and dislikes. That is a lot of unknown territory.

Our relationship commitment begins with Jesus and by the power of the Spirit extends to loving service to others. Especially to those with whom we live and work. How do we build relationships? The foundation begins with prayer, petition the graces of peace and patience, then add to that a good portion of positive thinking, kindness and compromise. Take the lead, ask the questions, affirm and support and do not forget to engage in active listening.

“Gently, through relationships, God aligns our hearts.”

**Sister Danielle Marie Kubelsky, OSF**

It is always a great challenge, even an art, to know how to relate to others: to that person who is different from me; the one who has her own personality, culture and ways of being. Each of us is unique since we come from diverse cultural environments, each with a family that transmitted values, customs and a way of being through the education we received. And, this is the challenge in the midst of all this diversity: adaptation to the other members.

Adaptation does not mean a mere acceptance but that we need to enter into the personal mystery of each
person and recognize her as an equal, as a companion on
the journey, as someone who makes me see myself for
who I am. It is in this daily contact that we learn to live
together according to God’s will. God gives us His Spirit
so that we might be able to work on our impatience and
our limitations to achieve that which we most desire: to
love and be loved, to welcome and to be welcomed, to
accept and be accepted in the environments where we
live and where we work.

Bernardine, inspired by Francis, knew that
prudence is fundamental to the formation of good
relationships. Following the path of prudence, let us
adopt an attitude of deep listening to ourselves and to
others with whom we live. In the measure to which we
assume the practice of empathy, caring, effective, and
supportive listening, we will make surprising discoveries
in fraternal living. And, we keep in mind what
Bernardine has also said, “One lesson learned from my
experience of community life…is this: do what you can,
but do not demand the extreme from others, encourage
them to do, to give or to share something that they have
or are. Thus, we all contribute to the life of one
another.”

Sister Zioldé Caldas, OSF
“Do not be surprised if I do not always speak the letter of the Gospel which is life, the rind outside the fruit; it is sufficient for you to have the marrow and whatever is inside.”

As I reflect on what Bernardine has told the people about preaching the Gospel itself, I realize that it is more about what message the Gospel is conveying that is important to his listeners. I do think that because he is preaching to the general public who are not trained in theology that he believes giving them what Jesus intended for His listeners. While Jesus always spoke in parables, He did so because story telling made an impact. Sometimes people understood and sometimes not but that did not affect the way Jesus preached. Bernardine was preaching to his people in the vernacular of his day – the Italian dialect that they spoke daily. Like Jesus, he used stories with humor but always with a lesson in mind. He gave the people the “marrow” of the Good News.

There is always a lesson to be learned from Scripture passages and if the listeners cannot grasp that on their own, Bernardine explained it for them. He followed the admonition of Francis that preachers need to speak of things that will lead others to a good life and to penance. Bernardine gave his audiences the virtue or specific lesson that they needed to hear. Thus, he said, the “marrow” and whatever is inside the topic is sufficient for them.  

Sister Charlene Dalrymple, OSF
“A sinner who repents, learns to be prudent. He is like a donkey that once he has fallen in a spot, then afterwards looks more carefully where he sets his foot. For fear of punishment he takes care not to fall into those sins again or into any others. Now, I want to ask old people about this. Old man and old woman, are you there? “Yes.” Tell me, have you fallen into sin over and over again? “Yes.” Well, have you returned to God? “Yes.” They have fallen often so they think about how they had better set their feet. As they see death approaching, they thank God that they have had time to turn to Him. And, they do not trust themselves not to fall, but always ask God to help them not to fall again.”

Lord, God, I am not always as prudent as that donkey! I fall many, many times before I learn to avoid those “holes” that lead me into sin. Over and over I find that the same sin creeps up on me. Yes, I seek forgiveness and do penance and yet my conversion is slow. I praise and thank God for each new day that I may change and turn away from sin as I realize that I must choose a graced path to You. The older I get, the more I realize how dependent I am on Your mercy and grace. Guide my steps, O Lord. Make me prudent in my choices.

Sister Cecilia Bondy, OSF
“A fox sees a hen in a booby trap which the villagers have set up next to a well. Greedily, he tries to snatch the hen but falls into the water where he jumps into a pail to keep from drowning. Along comes a wolf that peers into the well and sees the trapped fox. The cunning fellow tells the wolf that there is a hen in the well whereupon the wolf jumps into the other pail which immediately goes to the bottom enabling the lighter fox to rise to the top and escape. The wolf in dismay questions the fox about this turn of events and the wise animal replies: “O, this world is made like steps: this one rises and that one goes down.”

On reflecting on the words of St. Bernardine, it seems to me that he had learned to speak to all manner of persons, little and great. An accomplished preacher and theologian, who had defended his teachings before a Pope, he also had the gift of communicating a message to which everyday people could relate, often delivered with an earthy sense of humor. His animal examples contain a pithy message and his political allusions would not have escaped those in charge.

People today are crying out for a vision, for a meaning to life and for ways of responding to the world in which we live. Bernardine speaks to these ideas to the people of his time. We now need preachers who will respond to the people of our time, not really so different from the fourteenth century. Jesus had once said to His
apostles before they went to preach, “Be wise as foxes but meek as lambs.” Bernardine exemplified this as he went out to where the people were and “told it as it was.”! Our preachers need to do the same thing, go where they are needed most and “tell it like it is.”

Sister Brigid Scott, OSF
Epilogue

There were four “Pillars of the Observants”: Bernardino, the leader, John Capistran, James of the Marches, and Albert of Sarteano. The first one to become aware of the saint’s death at the exact time that it occurred was James who was preaching and stopped in mid-sentence for the time it would take to say the Miserere and when he began again stated, “A great pillar has just fallen.” He went back to his room and wept for the loss of his mentor.

Observant Friars attempted to take the body of Bernardino back to Siena secretly but they were prevented from doing so. The bishop of L’Aquila ordered the body to be lain in the cathedral where the people could come and pay their respects. It was returned to the Friary where it remained open for viewing for twenty-six days.

One of his last acts to preserve peace among the people occurred in L’Aquila. When two men were condemned to die, a child ran among the people shouting, “If you want to see blood, go to the Friary where Bernardino is covered with blood and it is running down on the ground!” The people hurried to the place and saw it was just as the child had said. They changed their behavior, two men’s lives were saved and peace reigned once again in that city.
All the cities in which Bernardino had preached wanted some memento of him and the most desirous were Siena, Perugia and L’Aquila. Emissaries went to the Pope to make their requests for the return of his body, especially to Siena to whom he truly belonged. However, the Pope refused all requests and the body remained in L’Aquila at the Friary of the Conventuals where he died. It remains there today but in the Basilica of San Bernardino in a very ornate sarcophagus donated by the King of France.

Bernardino’s body has remained incorrupt to this day. However, time has taken its toll so that his skin now has a gray tint that would remind one of plaster. Yes, his features are clearly observed. At the time of his death, Bernardino was very thin and quite small, standing somewhat over four feet with only a single tooth in his mouth.

Bernardine’s path to canonization began immediately after his death and Pope Eugene IV who had exonerated him twice from heresy was still the reigning Pontiff although ill. He was happy to be alive so that he could canonize his great friend. But that was not to be.

There were still some enemies who desired to bring down Bernardino and accused him of a guilt that would block an immediate canonization. While preaching, Bernardino accused some mathematician of
heresy and when his case was brought to Rome for study, the man was exonerated. Bernardino had not recanted his accusation and thus this group considered him unworthy of sainthood.

John Capistran worked tirelessly to gather the documents needed to prove his mentor’s sanctity even to the point of ordering another Friar, who had died recently and performed miracles, to refrain from performing any additional miracles until Bernardino was canonized. The Friar obeyed this directive and in 1450, amid much fanfare and celebration, Pope Nicholas V canonized Bernardino on Sunday, May 26.

What was it about Bernardino that made him so beloved by the people of his day? By his own admission, he was not a brilliant theologian. He relied on Scripture and the writers of early Christianity, notably St. Paul. He was not an erudite preacher but he knew and loved his people and spoke to them in a language that they understood very well. Indeed, he was known as the “St. Paul of Italy.”

His greatest gift was his big heart – he loved his people and they knew it! He was able to reach their hearts and then their minds. He was a simple Friar and a very humble one. He reminded the people that God’s grace was theirs for the asking. And he said that if you ask for much, much will be given and if you ask for little,
little will be given. But you **will** receive. When he corrected sins he often used strict words but there was always an underlying love, like the love of a mother. He said, “If you speak to God, speak with charity; if you speak to yourself, speak with charity. See to it that within you, there is nothing but love, love, love.”  (The World of St. Bernardine by Iris Orwiga)

What a beautiful mentor and patron we have as Bernardine Franciscan Sisters!
This is a picture of the incorrupt body of Bernardino taken from the rear of the sarcophagus in the Basilica of St. Bernardine in L’Aquila, Italy.

Prior to the earthquake in the early 2000’s, on May 20th of each year, his feast day, the body was removed and carried in procession throughout the city and then taken back to the Basilica and returned to the sarcophagus. A Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated at the main altar of this beautiful church.