

## **Secular Franciscans Bring the Gospel to Life at Aiken's Makin**

Members of the Emerging Secular Franciscan Fraternity of St. Clare at St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church will be offering to passersby the fuller version of the life of that popular saint, Francis of Assisi, at Aiken's Makin'. The group will be assisting the Church's Evangel Volunteers witness to the faith to festivalgoers this year. Who was St. Francis?

St. Francis removed a thorn from an injured wolf's paw, preached to the birds and was the essence of mildness to all.

But, just as accurately, Francis (Bernardone) was born wealthy, sought glory in battle, and was deeply troubled by his father's repeated attempts to dominate the young man's life. After a dramatic break from his father's control yet still directionless, Francis converted to the Gospel way of life as he listened on the feast of St. Mathias, February 24, 1208, to Jesus' words "and as you go, proclaim the kingdom of heaven is close at hand". Miraculously and immediately, he found his calling; he abandoned wealth, position and privilege; and he began preaching the gospel message to all who would listen. And thousands did!

Other men joined him on his journey, becoming his "friars" or brothers. Soon after he formed his little band yet before they were formally established as the First Order, many women responded to Francis' preaching, renouncing earthly fortune, and formed the Second Order, headed by Chiara (**Clare**) Offreduccio, a prominent noblewoman who would later be canonized and for whom the beautiful chapel next door to St. Mary's in Aiken is named.

Francis' preaching was so powerful that many lay people appealed to him to form yet a third order for those men and women --businessmen, professionals, laborers, married and single--whose immersion in the work-a-day would provide an opportunity to live the gospel in an ordinary environment. This Third Order was first established as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in 1221 and many centuries later re-named the Secular Franciscans Order by Pope Paul in 1978 as a sign of its relationship with the modern world. According to the 1996 census, over 431,000 Secular Franciscans follow Francis' mandate to preach the gospel everywhere--if necessary, by using words. Twelve St. Mary's parishioners are included in their number, who, with head and heart, apply Scripture in new ways as they carry out its message in their daily life.

These present-day Secular Franciscans live in a vastly different place than Francis lived, so servile imitation to the austere dictates of Francis's asceticism is not their goal. Francis himself said, "I have done what was mine to do; may Christ teach you what you are to do."

Modern-day Franciscans endeavor to implement the gospel through personal reflection and by working together in community in order to keep Francis' message and influence on track eight centuries after his death.

While today's escapism and growing addiction to alcohol, drugs and pornography points to a society following false avenues that lead to despair and misery, the Franciscan message, on the other hand, brings hope, not condemnation, to people suffering from addictions and other afflictions. This living out the gospel is the Franciscans' gift to the world. Instead of moping about how bad many things are, Franciscans acknowledge human frailty without being dominated by it and thereby act to overcome it.

At St. Mary's, members meet regularly in the Emerging Community of St. Clare to find ways to help each other, effectively witnessing to the world and offering compassion in place of judgment. They believe that Scripture must be put into practice to make it their own--that the gospel "puts on skin" by the way they live.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Secular Franciscans is invited to contact the St. Mary's Parish office, 649-4777, weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or to visit <http://www.stmarys-aiken.org/pages/parish%20organizations/sfo.html>