

Blessed Frances d'Amboise

Many Carmelite saints have come from colorful backgrounds, but very few from the highest ranks of the nobility. Frances d'Amboise is one of the exceptions.

Frances was born in 1427, daughter of Louis d'Amboise, Prince of Talmont, and his wife Louise-Marie de Rieux. She grew up as a lively, attractive girl, but could not escape the dynastic plans of her noble clan. At age 4, she was engaged to Pierre, the second son of Jean V, Duke of Brittany. In those days, Brittany was not yet an official part of France, but an important, semi-independent state with a mixed French and Celtic population. From the time of her engagement, the little girl was raised by her future mother-in-law, Jean of France, who gave her a remarkable education in spirituality and gracious living. Frances and Pierre were married in 1442, when she was 15.

The unexpected death of Pierre's older brother made him the Duke in 1450. He and Frances were solemnly crowned at Rennes. Unfortunately, Pierre was morose and sometimes abusive person, whom his subjects called Pierre the Simple. But Frances loyally helped him rule his Duchy wisely, with a spirit of justice and enlightened charity toward the poor and sick. The people of Brittany remember his reign as "the time of the Blessed Duchess." When Frances was widowed in 1457, there were many who wanted to marry her, including the future King Louis XI. She refused them all.

As Duchess, Frances had endowed convents for Poor Claires and Dominicans at Nantes. Now her plans to found a Carmelite house matched the hopes of Blessed John Soreth. The Carmelite general had recently established several communities for women in the Netherlands, and he soon formed one of those classic "saintly friendships" with the young duchess. With his encouragement, Frances wrote to Pope Pius II for permission to found a convent at Bondon, near Vannes, where there was already a house of Carmelite friars who could support them. Pius applauded her efforts, and John sent a band of nuns from Liège to begin the foundation in 1463. The new convent took the name of "the Three Marys," which evoked the powerful image of silent women praying at the foot of the Cross.

Under Frances' guidance, the community encouraged women of every class to enter. She worked with John to establish wise legislation, which in many areas anticipated the decrees of the Council of Trent a century later. She insisted on a 4th vow of strict enclosure, with no coming or going from the convent. Since Frances was devoted to the Eucharist, she also encouraged frequent reception of communion, even daily for the sick, which was quite unusual for that time. She also anticipated Teresa of Avila by encouraging intense, loving prayer at all times.

By 1468, Frances was pleased with her convent, and entered it herself as an ordinary sister. She became the infirmarian, using skills she had learned in her care for the sick. She had enjoyed rich clothing, beautifully styled hair, and gracious living, ringed by servants. But now she insisted on no special privileges. It was not easy for a duchess to become a simple nun, since the other sisters were not used to radical equality. She insisted that she was no longer a noble lady, but a simple "handmaid of Christ." In 1473, the nuns elected her prioress for life, even though she asked for release again and again. Her natural leadership served them well.

In 1477, she transferred her community to Nantes, which was not only a bigger city, but a more favorable location. Her personal leadership and the attractive quality of her refined prayer life drew some of the most promising vocations to join her community, from which others were founded. Frances is considered to be the founder of the Carmelite women's communities in France. She died in 1485, revered by her sisters, and much loved by her beloved people of Brittany. In her writings, she had stated "In everything, do whatever will make God most loved." That's not a bad formula of life for the rest of us, is it?