

*To Set
Themselves
Free*

*A Continuous Guide to the Life
and
Rule of the Secular Franciscans*

Teresa V. Baker, sfo

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*To my parents,
Mary and Vincent Vassallo,
who first nurtured
my gift of faith.*

*To my brothers and sisters
in the Secular Franciscan Order
who continue to walk
this journey of faith with me.*

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Published in the United States of America by Barbo-Carlson Enterprises – P.O. Box 189 – Lindsborg, KS 67456-0189 – Phone (785) 227-2364 – Fax (785) 227-3360

ISBN – 0-944996-33-7

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Acknowledgments

*Be Praised my Lord for love of You without whom this work
would never have been accomplished.*

It was a cold blustery winter morning when I first heard the name, St. Francis of Assisi. One of the Sisters of Charity in Sacred Heart School in Riverton, New Jersey, was reminding me that I should be more helpful to my sister, Mary, without counting the cost to myself. She was quoting Francis to me. I wasn't sure I liked him so much at this point - Mary was getting the upper hand. But, I never forgot the episode.

Decades later, due to the shortage of diocesan priests, Bishop Odore Gendron of the Diocese of Manchester, NH, invited the friars of the Immaculate Conception Province to our parish. Again, I was not eager to lose our diocesan priests. Later that year, I received a call from one of these men in brown robes and sandals asking me to consider a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order. And my Franciscan Journey began.

Like my own journey, there are many people who are responsible for the journey of this manuscript to press: Drs. Deacon David and Therese Ream, former Co-chairs of the National Formation commission, who first encouraged it; Fr. André Cirino, O.F.M., Immaculate Conception Province, who suggested using original Source material for the Franciscan Focuses; Dr. Thomas H. Groome, Ph.D., my mentor from Boston College, who suggested there be more informational material in each selection; Sister Ilia Delio, O.S.F., for the many insights gleaned from her course on Franciscan Spirituality at St. Bonaventure; the Executive Council of the National Fraternity of the SFO here in the United States.

There are my sisters and brother Secular Franciscans who critiqued the manuscript and offered helpful insights: Elizabeth Allen, Pat Brandwein-Ball, Georgeann Campbell, Anne Mulqueen, Deacon Oscar Perez. Fr. Richard Trezza, O.F.M., Holy Name Province, and Fr. Thomas S. Washburn, O.F.M., Immaculate Conception Province, read the manuscript for its spiritual and theological insights. Thanks also to Carolyn Colburn, Jim Flickinger, and Alan Ouimet for their invaluable input.

Without prayer, none of this would have been accomplished. I am grateful to the members of Greccio Fraternity, my local Franciscan family, and the members of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish who have been a prayerful support to me. Without the love and support of my husband, Ray, this book would have never seen completion – a deep sense of love and gratitude to him who stood by me through the writing of this missive and life.

Thank you all.

INTRODUCTION

To Set Themselves Free

This was Francis' original intent for the persons who would gather to hear him preach. In his own conversion, Francis had discovered the goodness of God in the gospels. Within their pages, Francis came to recognize God, in the person of Jesus Christ, as becoming truly present to us in our humanity. The Incarnation was God's love pouring forth onto the human stage. God entered into our human history in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ's intent was to exemplify the goodness of God, to endow us with the love of God, and to show us the way of uniting ourselves to God and returning to him. Francis discovered something else in the pages of the gospels: Jesus was truly present to Francis in his time and in his locale. Jesus was not just a person of past history. Within the pages of the gospel, Jesus came alive for Francis, and Francis was quite willing to take up Jesus' call to follow him. Francis was quick to sit at his Lord's feet and absorb all that Jesus had to share with him. Francis took the message of Jesus and made it his own. He was more than willing to do as Jesus commanded, to obediently follow wherever Jesus led him. Francis was eager to share this message with anyone who cared to listen; he was impatient to make disciples of all peoples. This is the evangelical life Francis discovered for himself and shared with his brothers. This is the evangelical life they passed on to all who listened to these itinerant preachers. In the pages of the gospel, Francis discovered the great joy of knowing how much God truly loved him. In return, Francis chose to emulate Jesus as perfectly as he was able.

Francis discovered that he was surrounded by the goodness of God. He came to recognize all of creation as showing forth this goodness. Wherever he wandered, in whatever caught his glance, Francis saw goodness, and he knew that this goodness came from God. Francis desired to have the people see the goodness of God in their lives as well. The age in which Francis lived showed forth anything but goodness. The city-states were constantly at war, trying to take land and prestige from one another. The ordinary persons were the ones who were imposed upon to go into battle. The feudal system easily set up the have's and the have-not's: the nobles who owned the lands, and the serfs who worked them. The thirteenth century was not immune from the scourge of leprosy; everyone knew full well the "nonentity" of these poor creatures. The Church was in an uproar, with some of its clergy forsaking their

lifestyle. The itinerant, heretical preachers were calling for their followers to boycott the sacraments and dishonor the clergy. It was in this world that Francis believed the people could discover the goodness of God.

How was he going to accomplish this feat? He began in the same way Jesus did. Into every town he entered, he preached “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News.” Had they not heard this before? Of course they had. The difference in Francis’ preaching, however, is that he did not preach with fire and brimstone. Rather, he preached repentance as the only proper response of a creature to an all loving, all good Creator. God was willing to give them whatever they needed for their eternal inheritance. Theirs was only to turn their minds and hearts to God daily, to seek out his will for their lives. They, too, were asked to make the gospel principles part of their daily lives. Francis chose to greet everyone with “May God give you peace.” This was not just some fuzzy greeting. No, it carried with it the sincere prayer that God would bountifully bless everyone whom Francis greeted with the peace that only God can give.

Imagine the combination of persons daily turning their minds and hearts to God, of their accepting the message of the gospel, of Francis’ sincere prayer of peace for them. History records for us that peace began to exist for them on an external level. Neighbors accepted neighbors as children of God; there was peace in their attitudes toward the outcasts of the city; there was eventual peace between the city-states, as neighbors would not fight against each other. Most importantly, there was peace within their own hearts. They had been able *to set themselves free* of all the hostile forces that combatted them from without, and all the prejudices and grudges and self doubts they harbored within. They had turned their minds and hearts from the cares of the world and set them on the principles of love and goodness that Francis had discovered in the gospels. The people, who listened and took to heart the message of Francis, were able to see God’s goodness in the world that surrounded them – just as Francis had discovered. The goodness of God overshadowed the negativeness and pettiness of the world around them. They were able to effect a change in their world by effecting a change within themselves. They had set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters.

Is Francis’ message any different for us today? I believe the principles he shared with the people of Assisi and medieval Italy are the same today as they were then. A careful

scanning of the Rule of 1978, reiterates all that Francis shared with those first followers. Article 12 contains the core desire of Francis for all his followers. Francis wanted anyone who heard his message to recognize and accept, as gift, the goodness of God around us; to give witness to the world of the goodness that is yet to come; all listeners are to acquire purity of heart, the peace Francis wished for all persons, a purity that has nothing as its goal but the will of God for all of us. In the words of the Rule, all Secular Franciscans are called to *set themselves free* to love God and our brothers and sisters.

How this is to be accomplished is spelled out in each article of the Rule:

- Article 4 of the Rule of 1978 bids us to go from gospel to life and life to gospel in the same manner Francis did. Walk into the pages of Scripture; sit at the feet of the Lord and listen; take his message to heart as if he were speaking only to us; make the message our own. Then, and only then, are we to take it into the world and share it by our actions and our words.
- Article 5 calls us to make Jesus the center of all our activities.
- Article 8 dictates that prayer and contemplation be the soul of all we are and do.
- Article 7 demands daily conversion be the bedrock of our life with God,
- Articles 17 and 24 within our own families and with the youth of the world,
- Article 9 with Mary as our model and support,
- Article 10 in correlation with the redemptive obedience of Christ,
- Article 11 with a spirit of detachment.
- Article 13 challenges us to accept all persons as children of God,
- Article 14 in a spirit of service,
- Articles 15 and 19 with a spirit of peace and justice,
- Article 16 reverencing work,
- Article 18 caring for all creation as a footprint of God.
- Article 6 bids us to do so within the perimeters of the Church,
- Article 20 as community.

As Francis wrote in the Letter to the Entire Order, we are to hold back nothing of ourselves for ourselves, so that he who gave himself totally to us may receive us totally.

GUIDE FOR FORMATION DIRECTORS

Article 4 of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order states, “Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.” This guide is set forth in a manner that will promote conversation among those persons engaging the Rule. It is based on the Shared Christian Praxis Approach to Religious Education.¹ It is an experience-based approach. By asking persons to draw on their own experiences and to look deeply into the motives behind their actions, this approach affords everyone the challenge and opportunity to make the Rule a living part of their lives.

1. Study of each Article of the Rule will begin with a focusing activity. Its purpose is to present a basis from which the study will continue. For these activities, I have chosen episodes from Francis’ or Clare’s life that were recorded in the early sources. One reason for choosing these is the mandate of Vatican II for the various Orders within the Church to go back and discover the charism of their founders. For this reason, original source material will be found throughout the sessions. The focusing activity will provide the springboard for the reflection questions.
2. From the focusing activity, two sets of reflection questions are drawn: one set is intended for those in initial formation and one set for those in ongoing formation. For initial formation, the questions delve into how one might live out a life in the Secular Franciscan Order. For ongoing formation, the reflection questions serve as a standard. They cause professed members to ask, “How alive is the Rule in my life?” In either case, the reflection questions ask each person to recognize his or her own stance in relation to the focusing activity. Everyone should be given a chance to jot down his or her personal response. Afterwards, a time for “one-on-one” sharing of these reflections with a person sitting close by is encouraged. However, I would caution formation directors to take a careful look as to whether or not initial and ongoing formation should occur at the same table. I would recommend against it, but I leave this to your

¹ Detailed information on the tenets of the Shared Christian Praxis Approach to Religious Education can be found in the following works: Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), Part II, and Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), Part IV.

discretion. If you do choose to keep the two groups together, I would strongly suggest that those in initial formation share with those in initial formation. The professed members should share among themselves. Remember that they will be coming from two different points of view. When everyone has had a chance to share (five or ten minutes at the beginning), discussion within the larger group setting is encouraged. Once everyone has a firm stance, the process can continue. *It is important to establish personal ownership at this stage.* Ensure that everyone has a good grasp of the reasons *underlying* their opinions or actions. If this is not established, a person could go through this entire process as if it were a fantasy or an intellectual abstraction. Rootedness and self-knowledge is encouraged at this juncture.

3. From sharing of personal reflections, this guide will introduce each article of the Rule, relate it to the experiences of Francis or Clare or both, and give an explanation of how it applies to the life of a Secular Franciscan. This is the core of the study. This is our Rule. From here, the application will hopefully call the Secular Franciscan into a frank, candid relationship with St. Francis, with St. Clare, with self, with family, with Church, with fraternity, with society, with the world. The applications are given as a guide. Build on them as the needs of your fraternity members require.
4. Moving forward, the integration questions ask how each person might change his or her life in response to the application of each article of the Rule. It is a time for brainstorming, for uncovering as many implementations as possible to make the Rule viable in one's daily life. Please note that there are two sets of integration questions, one for those in initial formation and another for those in ongoing formation. I would caution formation directors in the same manner as I did with the reflection questions.
5. Finally, the decision question asks each participant to take a stance to change his or her life, to be more in tune with the values of the gospel as challenged in the Rule. This is the opportunity for conversion; this is the occasion when we are faced with a change of heart. This is the point in the process when we move from theory into practice. Again, notice the two questions. For initial formation, the decision question may pose a point of discernment of vocation rather than a radical call to change one's life as in ongoing formation. Please be aware of this

difference. The integration and decision questions are to be processed and written down, if necessary. They may then be shared “one- on -one” for five to ten minutes and then with the group at large.

This approach is experience-based and is meant to call forth a radical, back to basics change for those who are open to it. This approach will allow Secular Franciscans to look at the past, encourage a truthful encounter with the present, and explore the dialogue between the two which leads to a positive change in themselves and our society. Francis’ original intent and design was not much different. He took a long, hard look at his present, examined what Christ had called for in the past, and set out to make changes in himself accordingly. These changes led to changes within the entire society in which he lived.

This guide is intended to be an aid in the process of initial and ongoing formation. By looking at the history of the Order and the lives of Sts. Francis and Clare, Secular Franciscans will have a better grasp of their roots, and a better gauge by which to examine their present lives. Contemplating the actual articles of the Rule, so as to make them vibrant in their lives, will animate Secular Franciscans to change themselves and society in the process.

Francis’ call to live a gospel life in the secular world finds a parallel in today’s world. To make Christ present in the secular world through our lives is the main thrust of the Rule of 1978. It is a call for Secular Franciscans to return to their roots. It is a call to accept the challenge heard in the gospel, as did St. Francis, and put it into practice once again.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Who Are We? What Are Our Roots?

As with any living organism, change is necessary if growth is to continue. This is true of the Secular Franciscan Order. Throughout its lifetime, change in its Rule has been necessary as its history has evolved. At the time, all change seems good; however, history will show us the shortsightedness of some of the changes.

In the thirteenth century, when St. Francis preached and founded the Order, the world around him was replete with wanton living and disregard for Church teaching. Many of the other groups of itinerant preachers, that sprang up at the same time as Francis, held teachings that were based on heresy.² St. Francis offered the world and the people of his time a new way of life, a way of life that had the morality and virtues of the gospel as its root, and authentic Church teaching as its staple. Young men were flocking to join St. Francis and the Order of Friars Minor. Young women and old were flocking to join St. Clare and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, or the Poor Clares as we know them today.

But what of those people who were already bound by the vows of marriage? They could not leave spouses and family and home to follow this itinerant preacher. What were they to do? They asked Francis. He told them he would pray for an answer. His first answer came in the form of the shorter version of the Exhortation to all the Faithful.³ In 1221 and 1228, a set of guidelines or a Rule known as the *Memoriale Propositi* came into existence. Some of its tenets are as follows:

1. Members were not allowed to attend or hold banquets, dances, or other outlandish shows.
2. Members were to fast every Friday. Fasting was also required on Wednesdays from All Saints Day to Easter.
3. Members were allowed to eat meat three days a week, Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.
4. Members were to tithe to the Church.

² Robert M. Stewart, O.F.M., "De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentium" *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Rome: Istituto Storico Dei Cappuccini, 1991), 112-17.

³ *Ibid.*, 85.

5. All members were to receive Eucharist three times a year: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.
6. Clerics were to pray the Divine Office, while others were required to pray twelve Paters in the morning and seven at the other liturgical hours of the day. During Lent, all members were required to attend Morning Prayer in the church.
7. Members were not to take solemn oaths with these exceptions: if it would keep the peace, uphold the faith, refute slander, or support evidence in court. No private oaths were to be taken to a king or a lord.
8. Members were forbidden to bear arms.
9. Once a month, all members living within the same town were to attend liturgy together and have a religious preach a homily to them.
10. At the monthly meeting, all were to make a contribution to the common fund.
11. The Minister was to see that the sick were visited once a week.
12. All members were obliged to attend the funerals of the deceased members, and to pray intercessory prayers for them.
13. All members were to make out their wills shortly after profession.
14. All legal disputes were to be settled in the fraternity.
15. The Sacrament of Penance was to be received once a month.

This first Rule had with it a particular set of prerequisites for admission to the Order:

1. Candidates had to pay all debts and tithes that were due before profession could be made.
2. Candidates were to mend all quarrels with their neighbors.
3. Candidates had to be free of suspicion of heresy.
4. A married woman needed her husband's consent to enter the Order.
5. After a year of trial, if the candidate was thought suitable, profession took place.⁴

The first change in the Rule came with the Rule of 1289. Promulgated by Nicholas IV, it adapted the original Rule by organizing the tenets more clearly. It did have three additions: the first, that St. Francis was officially recognized as the founder of the Order; the second, that all visitations were to be made by the Friars Minor so as to keep the Franciscan family intact; the third, that members could take up arms in the name of the Church.⁵

⁴ Fr. Lazaro Iriarte de Aspurz, O.F.M. Cap., *Franciscan History: The Three Orders of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Patricia Ross (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979), 480-81.

⁵ Stewart, 210, 212-16.

The Rule did not change again until 1883, but the society it served certainly did. In the fourteenth century, the world was faced with three calamities. The first was the Black Death; more than one fourth of all Europe's population died of this form of bubonic plague. Second, during the fourteenth century, the Penitents suffered under the suspicion of heresy that was later disproved. The third was the great Western Schism, the division in the Church that resulted from rival claimants to the papal throne. All these incidents led to a decline in membership of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in the fourteenth century.⁶

The fifteenth century saw a resurgence of morality. This century was filled with lives of saintly men and women who again had the fervor of the original Brothers and Sisters of Penance (the first name given the Secular Franciscan Order). These saintly people came from all walks of life: nobility, commoner, artists, and sinners. All looked out for the good of those who were part of the fraternity and those who were not. The name of the Order was changed at this time to the Third Order of St. Francis.⁷ The Order was flourishing once again.

However, this revival was short-lived. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became the posh thing, the in thing, to belong to the Third Order of St. Francis. These centuries saw many new members, but in contrast to the centuries that preceded them, there were very few canonized saints.⁸ The Renaissance played an important role in this change. It turned people's focus away from religion and toward "humanism," an understanding of man and his world. The Renaissance was closely followed by the Age of Reason, another period that had human nature looking in upon itself.

These centuries also witnessed the Third Order losing its sense of autonomy. The friars were placed in charge. They became responsible for the correction within the fraternity, admitting new members to the Order, and reception of the Third Order members' professions. A friar was also delegated as Confessor for the group.⁹ The Rule of the Order changed, but this change only affected those members who were living in religious communities.

⁶ Iriarte, 489.

⁷ Stewart, 218.

⁸ Iriarte, 493-95.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 496.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Order again began to flourish, yet just as quickly, the end of the century witnessed its decline. This rapid change can be attributed to the steady rise of democracy and nationalism in Europe. In France and Austria, for example, all property was taken from Third Order members. New professions were prohibited. Any printed material that contained their Rule was burned. Members who were found congregating were put to death. The fraternities that survived, survived underground, a true witness to their faith.¹⁰

The nineteenth century saw a resurgence in the Third Order. Again, persons of prominence were entering the Order, but they were also persons of faith. Pope Leo XIII was the greatest leader of this resurgence, as he saw in the Order a way to renew the Church, as St. Francis had so many centuries before. Here we have the first change in the Rule of the Order for its lay members since 1289. Some of the tenets of the Rule of 1883 are as follows:

1. The habit was the small scapular and cord.
2. Candidates seeking admission to the Order must go through a year's study before profession.
3. Their dress was to be modest.
4. Members were to observe moderation in eating and to avoid profane shows.
5. Members were to receive the Sacraments of Eucharist and Penance once a month.
6. The Divine Office or the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary was to be recited each day. Those who were unable to do so were encouraged to say twelve Paters, Aves and Glorias.
7. Members were to draw up their wills in a reasonable amount of time.
8. Members were to examine their consciences daily, and whenever possible, attend daily Mass and the monthly fraternity meeting.
9. Members were to make a contribution toward the fraternity's expenses and give aid to the poor.
10. Offices were to be redistributed every three years, and an annual visitation by a member of one of the four Franciscan families was encouraged.¹¹

However, Pope Leo, in trying to make the Rule more enticing to people, managed to water down the Rule and, in turn, the commitment of the membership. He turned the

¹⁰ Ibid., 497-98.

¹¹ Ibid., 504.

Third Order from an Order of Penance into a Catholic quasi-social club. Compare these tenets to the tenets of the first Rule.¹²

In the twentieth century, we come up against another obstacle. Pope Pius XI founded the Catholic Action Movement and placed it under the patronage of St. Francis of Assisi. Its basic principles were social justice and reform, two primary tenets of our original Rule. As the number of members of the Catholic Action Movement increased, the number of members of the Third Order declined.

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI called for a renewal of the Rule. It was promulgated in 1978. The name of the Order was changed at the same time; it is now known as the Secular Franciscan Order. Autonomy was also returned to the members of the Order. The tenets of this Rule follow:

1. Members are to live the gospel, not only by their words but also through their actions.
2. Members must take to heart the gospel call of daily conversion, of daily turning one's mind and heart to God.
3. The Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation are to be frequented.
4. In imitation of Christ, the members are called to his poverty of spirit and detachment from their own will, relying instead what God wills for their lives.
5. Members are to pledge love and obedience to the Holy Father.
6. Members are called to take an active role in the Church's mission in whatever capacity they are able.
7. Prayer should be personal, communal, and liturgical.
8. Members are to be instruments of God's peace in their homes, in their relationships, in their world.
9. Members are to live in brotherhood/sisterhood with all men and women and with all of creation.
10. Members are to participate in an apostolate, especially one that deals with the needs of the poor.
11. Members should possess a spirituality that is unique to their secular state. While remaining in the world, they are to realize the sacredness of all human activity, in all things and in creation.

¹² Stewart, 223.

It is this Rule and its tenets that carry the Secular Franciscan Order into the twenty-first century. With its return to the basic ideals of St. Francis, it will serve us well. Francis was called to live the gospel message. So are we. Hopefully, we can do it with the same intensity. As we do, our history continues . . .

List of Abbreviations

Writings of Saint Francis

Adm	Admonitions	LtR	Letter to the Rulers
Cant	Canticle of Brother Sun	ER	Earlier Rule
1LtCl	First Letter to the Clergy	LR	Later Rule
1LtCus	First Letter to the Custodians	RH	Rule for Hermitages
1LtF	First Letter to the Faithful	SalBV	Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
2 LtF	Second Letter to the Faithful		
LtMin	Letter to a Minister	Test	Testament
LtOrd	Letter to the Entire Order		

Writings of Saint Clare

4LA	Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague	RC I	Rule of Clare
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Early Franciscan Sources

1C	<i>First Life of St. Francis</i> by Thomas of Celano	LJS	<i>The Life of St. Francis</i> by Julian of Speyer
2C	<i>Second Life of St. Francis</i> by Thomas of Celano	LMj	<i>The Major Legend</i> by Bonaventure
2MP	<i>The Mirror of Perfection,</i> <i>Larger Version</i>	VL	<i>Versified Life of St. Francis</i> by Henri d' Avranches
AC	<i>Assisi Compilation</i>		
AP	<i>Anonymous of Perugia</i>		
BPr	<i>The Book of Praises</i> by Bernard of Besse	LC	<i>Legend of Clare</i>
		Proc	Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare
L3C	<i>The Legend of the Three Companions</i>		

PROLOGUE

FOLLOWING FRANCIS

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Then, comforted in the Lord, Saint Francis began to speak out more boldly owing to the apostolic authority that had he had been granted, and going around through cities, towns and villages, he steadfastly preached penance. He was particularly careful to show himself blameless in all things, lest he be thought to gloss over the truth with flattering words. Educated men marveled at the power of the words of him who had not been taught by man, and seeing the noble and lowborn, rich and poor crowd around him in bands, they astutely made their way to him as though to a new rising star in the darkness. In fact, he provided a plan of salvation to persons of every state and condition, age and sex, giving them all a rule of life. . . .

. . . The Third [Order], also an order of considerable perfection, is called the Order of Penitents, which profitably brings together clerics and laity, virgins, unmarried, and married persons of both sexes.

LJS 23

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. It was Francis' bold preaching and blameless conduct that first attracted persons to this way of life. What has attracted you to the Secular Franciscan Order?
2. Why is this reason so important to you?

Ongoing Formation:

1. What first attracted you to the Secular Franciscan way of life? Is this still true for your life? What continuing reasons have you identified for answering this calling?
2. How have these sustained your vocation?

THE PROLOGUE TO THE RULE

Exhortation of Saint Francis to the Brothers and Sisters in Penance

In the name of the Lord!

Concerning Those Who Do Penance

All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength, and love their neighbors as themselves and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them and he will make his home and dwelling among them, and they are the sons of the heavenly Father, whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are spouses, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord Jesus Christ, we are brothers to him when we fulfill the will of the Father who is in heaven.

We are mothers, when we carry him in our heart and body through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through a holy life which must give light to others by example.

Oh, how glorious it is to have a great and holy Father in heaven! Oh how glorious it is to have such a beautiful and admirable Spouse, the Holy Paraclete.

Oh, how glorious it is to have such a Brother and such a Son, loved, beloved, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up his life for his sheep and prayed to the Father saying:

"Oh holy Father, protect them with your name whom you gave me out of the world. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me and they received it. They have known that in truth I came from you, they have believed that it was you who sent me. For these I pray, not for the world. Bless and consecrate them, and I consecrate myself for their sakes. I do not pray for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word that they may be holy by being one as we are. And I desire, Father, to have them in my company where I am to see this glory of mine in your kingdom."

Concerning Those Who Do Not Do Penance

But all those men and women who are not doing penance and do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and live in vices and sin and yield to evil concupiscence and to the wicked desires of the flesh, and do not observe what they have promised to the Lord, and are slaves to the world, in their bodies, by carnal desires and the anxieties and cares of this life.

These are blind, because they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ; they do not have spiritual wisdom because they do not have the Son of God who is the true wisdom of the Father. Concerning them, it is said, "Their skill was swallowed up" and "cursed are those who turn away from your commands." They see and acknowledge, they know and do bad things and knowingly destroy their own souls.

See, you who are blind, deceived by your enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil, for it is pleasant to the body to commit sin and it is bitter to make it serve God because all vices and sins come out and "proceed from the heart of man" as the Lord says in the Gospel. And you have nothing in this world and in the next, and you thought you would possess the vanities of this world for a long time.

But you have been deceived, for the day and the hour will come to which you give no thought and which you do not know and of which you are ignorant. The body grows infirm, death approaches, and so it dies a bitter death, and no matter where or when or how man dies, in the guilt of sin, without penance or satisfaction, though he can make satisfaction but does not do it.

The devil snatches the soul from his body with such anguish and tribulation that no one can know it except he who endures it, and all the talents and power and knowledge and wisdom which they thought they had will be taken away from them, and they leave their goods to relatives and friends who take and divide them and say afterwards, "Cursed be his soul because he could have given us more, he could have acquired more than he did." The worms eat up the body and so they have lost body and soul during this short earthly life and will go into the inferno where they will suffer torture without end.

All those into whose hands this letter shall have come we ask in the charity that is God to accept kindly and with divine love the fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ quoted above. And let those who do not know how to read have them read to them.

*And may they keep them in their mind and carry them out, in a holy manner to the end, because they are spirit and life.
And those who will not do this will have to render an account on the day of judgment before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Attentione! Attentione! Brother Francis has sent a way of life so that we can live a gospel life as he is living. He sent it to us, lay persons and clerics, married and single, widows and virgins. We, too, are going to follow this way of life the Lord pointed out to Brother Francis!

How magnificent are these words of Francis! How noble in their calling! How challenging in their admonitions and rewarding in their promises! It is believed that this Exhortation was given to the Penitents who first asked Francis for a way of life. He praises them for the lives they are already living and exhorts them to a deeper life of penance. It is given to us as the overture of our Rule. How blessed were those who received it and acted upon it then; how blessed are we who receive it and act upon it now!

In the opening lines, Francis welcomed those who wished to follow this way of life into a familial relationship, but not into a relationship with him alone. Rather he also called them into a relationship with the Trinity. They were to be the home and dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, the binding force of these relationships; they were to be the children of the Father, and the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. By its particular placement as the Prologue to our Rule, this writing of Francis invites us into these same relationships with the Persons of the Trinity.

We are invited to be children of God. As such, we are to care for all that our Father cares for; we are to love with the concern and intensity of our Father. We are to share his goodness with all whom we meet. We are to recognize this same goodness in all persons we meet and in the creation that surrounds us. As children of the Father, we are to be ever aware of the relationship that we have with all other creatures. As Francis so readily realized, all of creation is Brother and Sister to us. All other persons have the same eternal Father. We are siblings together, thus, we treat all persons with the respect due the children of God. With this insight, Francis challenged the people who knew him to take a different stance toward the outcasts of his day. We are to take up this same banner. We are called to raise the dignity of all persons to that deserved by the sons and daughters of God. We are not to exploit the goods of creation, but use them wisely and conservatively.

We are also invited into relationship with Jesus. In the Prologue, there are several relationships with Jesus that are mentioned. We are invited to be the spouses of Christ. First and foremost, we are invited into a love relationship with God. Imagine. Christ desires to love us as his own, to share his life with us as if there were no one else in the world, to become one with us. This relationship carries with it responsibilities. As spouses, we are asked to put aside our selfish desires to work in union with Jesus, to accomplish the designs God has for this world. We are to look beyond ourselves to help make present the kingdom of God in our midst.

We can be brothers or sisters to him if we carry out the will of the Father. This is not an easy task for any of us, yet it is the task of life. From the beginning of time, human beings were created to live in the will of God. With the onset of sin, human beings chose their own wills over what God had set out for them. Since then, we are called to strive for this condition that was in the mind of God from all eternity. We can look to Jesus as an older brother, able to show us how to conform our wills to God's.

We are offered the opportunity to be his mothers. We are to have a divine love of others and a pure and sincere conscience as evidence that we carry him in our heart and body as his mother. This requires that we abide in divine love and act with the heart of God when we deal with other people. If we are to be the mother of Jesus, then we must act as such and treat all of his siblings with the respect and dignity due the sons and daughters of God. We are told that the manner in which we give birth to him occurs when we engage in holy activity which shines forth as an example to all we meet. Imagine our world if every person we met were set on bringing forth Christ into our world!

We are not left to our own devices to accomplish all of this. We are told that the Holy Spirit will overshadow us and make his dwelling within us. Contemplate for a moment what this means to us. We are never alone. In everything we do, we have an indwelling partner, there to comfort and console, there to direct and guide. Ours is only to take time to discern.

Notice that our relationship with the Trinity is to bear fruit in the ways that we interact with other people, with how we take our stance in the world. The love that ensues from our relationship with God must overflow into the world in which we live. We are loved and are called to share that love in return. Christ came to share with us the love

he shares with the Father. We in return are told to love others. This is our responsibility. This is how we are to live our life in the world, as mirrors of the love God has shared with us.

Francis goes on to warn what will happen to those who do not choose to take up this life of penance, those who choose their own wills and the ways of the world over the ways God desires for our lives. Unlike those who choose relationship with God and with each other, those who choose the ways of the world will be left on their own to defy the works of the evil one. Instead of being enriched by the relationship with the Trinity, those persons will find themselves battling on their own. They will try to succeed at the expense of others, not realizing that the gains made in this world carry no weight in the next.

The choice is before us, as it was before the people of Francis' time: to live a life of penance that invites us into relationship with God and others – or to take up the ways of the world and live a life of self absorption. As we delve into our Rule, might we each find new ways of bringing forth the presence of God to our world.

What an apropos way to begin. What a gift to us to have this Letter of Francis as the Prologue of our Rule. May the promise of Francis, found at the end of the Letter, be ours as we begin a journey through the words, concepts, and spirit of our Rule:

All those into whose hands this letter shall have come we ask in the charity that is God to accept kindly and with divine love the fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ quoted above. . . .

And may they keep them in their mind and carry them out, in a holy manner to the end, because they are spirit and life.

INTEGRATION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. List activities that being a son or daughter of the Father require of you.
2. Which ones are you currently involved in?
3. Choose one that is not presently part of your life and act on it this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. How do you understand being a mother to Jesus and giving birth to him?
2. List concrete examples of how this can be applied to your daily life.
3. Choose one activity and give flesh to it this month.

ARTICLE 1
DISCOVERING THE CHARISM OF FRANCIS

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

When blessed Francis saw that the Lord was daily increasing their numbers, he wrote for himself and his brothers present and future, simply and in a few words, a form of life and a rule. He used primarily words of the holy gospel, longing only for its perfection. He inserted a few other things necessary for the practice of a holy way of life. Then he went to Rome with all his brothers, since he greatly desired that the Lord Pope Innocent the Third confirm for him what he had written. There was in Rome at this time the venerable bishop of Assisi, Guido by name, who honored Saint Francis and all the brothers in everything and revered them with special love. . . . Saint Francis also approached the reverend lord bishop of Sabina, named John of Saint Paul, who, among the other princes and great men of the Roman Curia, seemed to look down on the things of earth and love the things of heaven. The bishop received them kindly and charitably and praised highly his wish and plan.

The bishop of Sabina, a far sighted and discerning man, questioned him about many things, urging him to turn to the monastic or the eremitical life. But Saint Francis, as much as he could, humbly refused his urging. He did not despise what was urged on him, but he was intently seeking to hear things, moved by a loftier desire. That lord marveled at his enthusiasm and, fearful that the holy man might fail in such a lofty appeal, he pointed out smoother paths. Finally, won over by his perseverance, the bishop agreed to his pleas and from then on strove to promote his interests before the lord pope.

IC 32, 33

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis was offered two other forms of life by Bishop John of St. Paul. What other paths did you explore in your coming to the Secular Franciscan Order?
2. What was so compelling to you about this unique Franciscan call?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Francis respectfully refused to take up the life style of monk or hermit suggested by Bishop John of St. Paul based on his belief that he was meant to follow the gospel unreservedly as the Lord pointed out to him. He was to do so in a new way and without possessions. What principle is strong enough in your life that you would remain adamant to protect it?
2. Why is this position so strong in you?

THE RULE

The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church, unites all members of the people of God—laity, religious, and priests—who recognize that they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi.

In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.

We cannot believe that Francis was born into a socio-political or religious vacuum, or that his conversion and subsequent way of life grew up ignorant of the many different genres of religious reform that abounded in Italy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Let's try to place ourselves in Francis' time and surroundings. Assisi is a very small city, set on the side of Mount Subasio. Assisi was not immune from the rigors of city wars that were common to this era of Italy's history. Who were the combatants? Why the wars? The fight for land and power was taking place between the imperial forces of the Emperor and the papal forces of the Pope. The towns sided with the authority that provided them protection down through the ages. It is well to take note and remember for our discussion and our understanding of Francis that Assisi was bound to the Emperor. It looked to the imperial power for its protection and support. The Emperor, in like manner, looked to Assisi to take up arms in his name and protect his rights against the rise of papal forces. Its neighboring city, Perugia, took the side of the Pope and fought for the solidarity of the Papal States. It was this ongoing animosity between these warring factions, between these committed rivals of imperial and papal

allegiance, that gave rise to Francis' going off to war against Perugia in 1202, when he was but 20 years of age. As a result of this war, he was imprisoned for over a year; his illness, a result of this imprisonment, kept him in bed for another year or so. It was during this time that he began to realize that there must be more to his life than this constant battle for land and power.

His conversion unfolds. Slowly he begins to hear the tune of a different drummer. After taking up arms once again, and being asked by the Lord in a dream, whom he chose to serve, the Master or the servant, Francis again returned to Assisi. This time he took to obeying the voice of the Lord which was to become his standard for life.

It is the Lord who pointed out for Francis the way he should walk the rest of his life. Francis recounts in his Testament: "And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel"(14).¹ It is with this intent that Francis, with his eleven followers, headed to Rome to receive papal approval for this life he felt compelled to lead. It is this manner of life that he fought to uphold even when Bishop John of St. Paul suggested he take up the life of a monk or a hermit.

Each of these ways of life held certain characteristics that did not bode well for Francis and what he felt the Lord had chosen for him. The monks and their monasteries were very wealthy, in some cases wealthier than the nobility. The monasteries were sizable buildings and were surrounded by mountain slopes and cultivated lands that supported the growth of olive trees, grape vines, and fields of wheat. As landowners and in order to maintain these crops, the monasteries were actively involved in the feudal system of the day as they enlisted serfs to work the groves, vineyards and fields. As the crops came to fruition, the monasteries became involved in the production, the milling, the pressing and the sale of the various products: olive oil, wine, flour and bread; in this sense they were grouped as part of the nobility. The monasteries were located on the slopes of the mountains; they were not contained within the city walls. In order to protect their endeavors and their monastery holdings, the monks, as did the cities, sought the protection of either the Emperor or the Pope. The Benedictine monasteries surrounding Assisi were under the same safeguard of the Emperor. As such, they, like many of the cities, owed the Emperor allegiance and manpower in time of war.

¹ All quotations of the original sources, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from the three volume set *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents – The Saint, The Founder, The Prophet*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellman, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999, 2000, 2001).

Consequently, the monks spent their day juggling their time between working the crops, preparing for war, and praying the Liturgy of the Hours and other forms of communal prayer. Francis was no longer seeking to be a noble. Knighthood was a dream that he had chased earlier in his life, but he left it behind when he returned to Assisi to follow the Master instead of the servant. He had learned firsthand the atrocities of war and did not desire to return there either. As for owning property and taking on the trappings of nobility, Francis had said no to all of that as he left his clothes behind in the arms of his father and proceeded naked through the city gates. Francis knew that the life of a monk, as lived in his day in the Umbrian valley, was not the call he was receiving from God.²

As Francis was aware of the life of the monks, he was also aware of the varied groups of hermits that lived in the surrounding caves of Assisi. The hermits of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were taking on a new role in contrast to the centuries of hermits who preceded them. After the early desert fathers, the call to the eremitical life was seen as a step to be taken only after one had spent considerable time in the training ground of the spiritual life in the monastery. Only after being tried by the rigors of this formidable life was one thought properly equipped to take on the trials of the “desert” experience. The life of the hermit had become associated with a monastery, though often segregated from the normal activity and relationships of the monastery proper.³ As the eleventh and twelfth centuries dawned, persons again felt called to the eremitical life without the trappings in which the monasteries seemed to have found themselves wrapped. These persons again wanted to answer a call to contemplation and solitude; however, they desired a different form of life from the one they saw exemplified by the life of the monks. They sought to live a life of poverty and did not want to become burdened by the chores or the worries of agriculture, trade and war.

While attracted to a life of prayer, contemplation and solitude, this new era of hermits also sought the communal expression of life that had been the call of the first monasteries. They sought to go back to the ideals adopted by the early Church as is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles:

² Michael Joseph Higgins, T.O.R. “*Saint Francis and the Eremitical Movement*”: *The Effect of the Eremitical Movement on the Development and Spirituality of the Third Order Regular*. (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Romae: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 1999), 39.

³ Ibid. 30.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

They sought time for individual prayer and seclusion, they also sought time for communal prayer and meals. Reading and meditating on the Scriptures was the formidable school they were seeking. As with any of us, this time brought about a change of heart, a conversion. Working from the strength of the graces provided by this change, they sought out and cared for the sick and the poor around them. They took up the "apostolic life," that life that they perceived as lived in the early Church community. However, some groups which had started on this road to the apostolic life found themselves embroiled in heresy. In order to avoid being confused with one or another of these groups, the hermits who were in union with Rome were forced to take upon themselves one of the established Rules of the Church, the Rule of Benedict or the Rule of Augustine, to name two. Again, Francis did not choose to live his life according to a form given to another. He wanted to live according to the form God had given him. He sought to pattern his life after that of his poor Crucified Lord, to conform his life as nearly as possible to that of Christ. He did not choose to model his life after that of the Apostles and members of the early Church. He felt called to live a Christ-centered life – one focused on following the example of Christ, not the example of the members of the early Church. He chose to follow the self-emptying poverty of Christ.

For these visible reasons and others that we may never know, Francis humbly and respectfully turned down Bishop John of St. Paul's suggestion that he take up one of these two forms of life that were well known to his Holiness and the Curia of the time. However, after conversing with Francis, the bishop was convinced that he truly had a unique call from the Lord and he agreed to take his case to the Pope. He remained adamant about the uniqueness of his call throughout his life. At the Chapter of Mats,⁴ in 1219, when the friars were arguing with Francis that his way of life continued to be

⁴ A chapter is a gathering of religious for instruction, fellowship and elections. The name Chapter was originally given to the room and gathering of monks in a monastery who came together once a day to have a chapter of a spiritual book read to them. Thereafter, any gathering of religious was known as a chapter.

too strict for them, Francis replied:

My brothers! My brothers! God has called me by the way of simplicity and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want you to mention to me any Rule, whether of Saint Augustine, or of Saint Bernard, or of Saint Benedict. And the Lord told me what He wanted: He wanted me to be a new fool in the world. God did not wish to lead us by any way other than this knowledge . . .

AC 18

Francis recognized his vocation as being another unique call among the many urgings of the Holy Spirit to enliven the Church down through the ages. Each of these calls is defined as a gift of the Holy Spirit known as a charism. Over the decades since Vatican II, this term has been given different connotations. For the purpose of this undertaking, I have chosen the definition put forth by Bishop Joseph Galante, formerly Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life:

A religious charism is an intensely personal reading of the Gospel resulting in an inner enlightenment that changes the way a person relates to God, to self and to others. This new way of relationship is so powerful that it has the potential to attract others who sense in themselves the same desire and capacity to read the Gospel in this “new key.”⁵

What was the basis of this “new key?” Celano notes that Francis “. . . used primarily words of the holy gospel, longing only for its perfection. He inserted a few other things necessary for the practice of a holy way of life” (1C 32). He chose the words of the gospel and nothing else. Article One of the SFO Rule states that all persons called to follow Francis are to take up this charism, and so we see the gospel in a pivotal place in each of the four Rules that follow this holy man’s call and way of life.

Rule of 1223:

The Rule and the Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity (1).

Rule of Clare:

The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that Blessed Francis established is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity (1).

⁵ “Renewing Religious Life,” unpublished lecture, as quoted in *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life*, Margaret Carney, O.S.F. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 226.

Rule of the Third Order Regular:

The Rule and the Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, in poverty and in chastity (1.1).

Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order:

The Rule and the life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people (4.1).

What was it in the gospel that attracted Francis to cleave to it so literally? It was the self-giving presence of Christ; Francis chose to live his life as close to the example Christ left behind as was humanly possible. It is this charism that we, the members of the Secular Franciscan Order, along with our brothers and sisters in the other Orders of the Franciscan family, are called to make present in the life and mission of our Church, a mission to be lived out in our world! What a privileged place we hold in this call, we who are so intricately connected to our world. Every conversation we have, every action we perform, in one way or another affects our world. Our conversations for good or ill leave some impression on those who hear us. This impression is carried on to widening circles of influence, circles that we are hardly ever aware of. Our actions are witnessed by persons whom we may never know, but, like our conversation, may leave lasting impressions that will carry further than we ever imagine. A question we must ask ourselves: Do our conversations and actions validly reflect the words and actions as found in the texts of the holy gospel? Do our words and actions carry out the example of Francis in the life and mission of the Church? Are we as committed to making Christ's presence real to the persons around us as Francis was? Do we portray Christ in our words and deeds? To paraphrase an old adage, "If you were arrested for being a Franciscan, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" This is the task that is placed before us. This is the truth we are asked to discover. This is the call we have chosen to live.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis chose to follow the example of Christ as literally as possible. What does “to follow the example of Christ” mean to you?
2. In which ways do you see yourself called to follow Christ?
3. Which of these ways will you take time to embody this month?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Francis was willing to sacrifice all to follow the gospel. What hinders you from following the gospel to the full?
2. Which areas of your life need to be adjusted in order to live the gospel to the full?
3. What one aspect will you try to change this month so as to follow more closely the example of Christ as set forth in the gospel? How will you accomplish this?

ARTICLE 2
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF FRANCIS

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*Francis, Christ's bravest soldier,
went around the cities and villages,
proclaiming the kingdom of God
and preaching peace
and penance for the forgiveness of sins,
not in the persuasive words of human wisdom
but in the learning and power of the Spirit.*

.....
Not fearing anyone's rebuke, he spoke the truth boldly, so that even well-educated men, distinguished by fame and dignity, were amazed at his words and were shaken by a healthy fear in his presence.

*Men ran, women also ran,
clerics hurried,
and religious rushed to see and hear the holy one of God,
who seemed to everyone a person of another age.
People of all ages and both sexes hurried to behold the wonders
which the Lord worked anew in the world through his servant.*

*At that time,
through the presence of Saint Francis and through his reputation,
it surely seemed a new light had been sent from heaven to earth,
driving away all the darkness
that had so nearly covered the whole region
that hardly anyone knew where to turn.*

.....
*He gleamed
like a shining star in the darkness of night
and like the morning spread over the darkness.
Thus, in a short time,
the appearance of the entire region was changed
and, once rid of its earlier ugliness,
it revealed a happier expression everywhere.*

.....
*Thanks and the voice of praise resounded everywhere,
as many,
casting aside earthly concerns,
gained knowledge of themselves
in the life and teaching of the most blessed father Francis
and aspired to love and reverence for their Creator.
Many people,
well-born and lowly, cleric and lay,*

*driven by divine inspiration,
began to come to Saint Francis,
for they desired to serve
under his constant training and leadership.*

.....
*He is without question an outstanding craftsman,
for through his spreading message,
the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes
according to his form, rule and teaching,
and there is victory for the triple army of those being saved.*

*Furthermore,
to all he gave a form of life
and to those of every rank
he sincerely pointed out the way of salvation.*

1C 36

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. As you enter Franciscan formation, what is it about Francis and his teachings that attracts you?
2. How will integrating these principles into your life make you a better Christian, a gospel-based person, a good Secular Franciscan?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Persons following Francis cast “. . . aside earthly concerns and gained knowledge of themselves.” What worldly concerns have you cast aside, and what insights of self-knowledge have you attained since your profession?
2. How have the changes you’ve made in your lifestyle changed the world in which you live? How have the insights of self-knowledge formed you into a better Secular Franciscan?

THE RULE

The Secular Franciscan Order holds a special place in this family circle. It is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of Saint Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church.

When Francis set out to follow the gospel way of life, he in no way ever dreamed that someday there would be a three-fold army to follow him. No, he set out from Assisi on a solitary walk with God. He set out with nothing to his name. He sought refuge in a nearby Benedictine monastery, but was treated like a slave. He was given a morsel of bread to eat; he was given all the menial chores to do; he was left to sleep in the ash bin without blankets for warmth; he was given an old garment from one of the scullery hands to wear. He was treated in a most insulting and degrading manner. Yet, he remained joyful in his call from the Lord. He knew that he would not stay in this monastery, so he headed to Gubbio to visit with a friend, John. It was John who gave him his first habit, that of a hermit, a long tunic, with a belt around his waist and sandals for his feet. After a brief stay, he returned to the environs of Assisi to complete the work he had begun, repairing the chapel at San Damiano. This was not a task he performed alone; it was much too grand an undertaking. It was at this point in his life that the time he spent tearing down the Rocca and using those stones to build up the walls of Assisi came to fruition. He had the skills; he begged stones from the townspeople and he set out to complete the task he felt God called him to, "Francis, go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling completely into ruin." Francis was very literal in his answering God's call and in his living the gospel message. He predicted that this building would become a home for ladies of religion. Later in his life, when he came across the Scripture passage that they were to take no travel bag, no shoes, no walking stick, he changed his garb, and donned the garb of a beggar. For this is what he had truly become. Having renounced all, he had to beg for absolutely everything he needed. Imagine the humility of this young man, the pride of Assisi's youth, who had the best of everything, and anything he wanted was always at his fingertips, to return to this tiny town and beg food for his daily sustenance. He did this without concern for what the townspeople thought of him; he did this because he felt it was what the Lord was asking of him; he did this every day. It must have been this

humility and this adherence to his call that drew others to take notice that this was not a passing fancy on the part of Francis. No, this definitely was a call of God, for the joy Francis exuded portrayed to others that he was truly sustained by God. It is this joy and peace that must have had a heralding effect on some of the young men with whom Francis partied. One by one they came in search of him, to discover the secret of his contentment, to ask if they might join him. Bernard of Quintavalle, his old time friend who had returned from war, devastated, was seeking a new meaning in life. Peter, about whom we know very little, joined from Assisi. Giles, from the farmlands outside Assisi, was an unlearned man yet destined for the graced life of contemplation. Sylvester was a canon from the Cathedral of San Rufino who had chided Francis early on. Others from all walks of life came to inquire what drove and sustained Francis in this new way of life. He was quite shocked to think that the example of his way of life would cause others to follow it also. He chose for them the name Friars Minor, the Lesser Brothers, subjecting themselves to the needs and cares of all, taking upon themselves, first and foremost, that stance of the poverty of Christ.

We are told in the *Legend Major* of St. Bonaventure that at this same time unmarried women were also led to live a life of perpetual virginity (4.6). Clare, of the noble family of Offreduccio in Assisi, was one such maiden. It is testified by the third witness in the Process of Canonization, Sister Filippa, who had known her since childhood, that Clare “. . . was considered a saint by all those who knew her. And this was due to the righteousness of her life, the many virtues and graces which the Lord had placed in her”(Proc 3.2).⁶ Francis was well aware of this reputation of Clare. Clare was aware of Francis as well. Her home faced the courtyard of the Cathedral of San Rufino. She often heard him preach there. Through the timing and plan of God, these two future saints, these two young people of Assisi, were brought together. The fourth witness, Sr. Amata, a niece of Clare, confirmed this testimony:

She knew [Clare's] way of life and had heard how she had been converted: through the exhortation and preaching of Saint Francis, she had assumed religious life, even though before she entered it she was considered holy by all who knew her, as it was known about her through her reputation. Proc 4. 2

Clare thus became the foundation for the second branch of the Order, the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, as they were called then, the Poor Clares as we know them today.

⁶ Quotes concerning St. Clare, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, Revised and Expanded*, ed. Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993).

Within the confines of the monastery walls, these women chose a life of poverty and contemplation, following the example Christ chose for himself and for his Mother. The privilege of absolute poverty, reliance on the providence of God and the good will of the people for all their needs, is a point over which Clare fought with three popes. They thought the Poor Ladies to be too fragile not to be cared for. They insisted that they have lands to cultivate and dowries to sustain themselves, as did the other monasteries of women religious which dotted the hillside of Mount Subasio. Though the battle waged on for years, first with Pope Innocent III conceding, then Pope Honorius remitting, Clare was adamant and two days before she died, Pope Gregory IX approved the Rule of Life she herself had written, which had as its basis the privilege of poverty. This Rule of Life holds another distinction; it is the first Rule for a religious community of women written by a woman. It is said that Clare died with it clutched in her hands.

In time, Francis came to realize that the Church he was called to rebuild was more than the physical structures he had been repairing; rather it was the inner structures in the hearts of people. The practice of religion had become very lax in Francis' time. He came to understand that the message that he heard, to live the gospel, would be the cornerstone of this new Church edifice. It was this message that he took to the people. With the blessing of the Holy Father, he took to the highways and byways and preached penance to the people, challenging them to reform their lives. People believed in him, not so much by his words, but more so by his actions. They hungered for spirituality, they were searching for a way to fill the void they felt within themselves. They saw in Francis' way of life a means to satisfy their longing. It was the first time in centuries that the concept of a personal spirituality and a call of holiness had been offered to lay people.

As the opening selection from Celano tells us, Francis wandered from hamlet to village, everywhere inciting a change of heart among the people. The people turned out to hear and heed him. As he left, places were changed, attitudes were changed, godless places were filled with the joy of the Spirit. People wanted this new way of life and Francis offered it to them freely. In his wisdom, Francis saw the need to provide for various groups of people who followed after him in search of a way of reforming their lives and thus transforming society. Francis realized that not all were called to be itinerant preachers like himself and his early male followers. Not all were called to live the secluded life of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. Who were these others? They

were the workers of the newly forming merchant class, the nobles of the upper part of Assisi, the serfs who still worked in the fields outside the walls, and those of similar classes in the other environs in which Francis preached. He saw in their desire the need to provide for each group a rule that was suited for their particular circumstances in life. We are well aware of the Rule Francis posed for the friars; we have recourse to the Rule he provided for the Poor Ladies that preceded the Rule Clare wrote in her own hand; for the lay persons, we have the First Letter to all the Faithful, beginning with the words:

All those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, and with their whole strength and love their neighbors as themselves, who hate their bodies with their vices and sins, who receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who produce worthy fruits of penance. 1LtF 1-4

In this opening, Francis acknowledged the good in people's lives and their desire to please God above all else, as witnessed by their priorities, their reception of Eucharist and their worthy fruits of penance. Further on, he also acknowledged the presence in the world of those persons who chose not to produce worthy fruits of penance, and encouraged them to take up this exhortation, as the words therein are spirit and life (1LtF 21).

In *A Book of Praises of Saint Francis*, written by Bernard of Besse in the latter half of the thirteenth century, is found this early description of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance:

The Third Order is of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, shared by clerics, laity, virgins, widows and married couples. Their purpose is to live uprightly in their own homes, to devote their attention to works of piety, and to flee the world's allurements. Therefore, you might see among them nobles, and even knights, and other people great in the world's estimation, dressed in proper cloaks of black fur, humble in both their clothing and their mounts, so modestly associating with the indigent, that you would not doubt that they are truly God-fearing. BPr 144

In his desire to see all persons attain eternal salvation, Francis saw fit to provide for each group a way of life that would suit their individual life styles.

The Church in her wisdom, sees fit to continue to approve the Rules of the Franciscan Orders within the Church. We, the members of the Secular Franciscan Order, hold a special place within this family. We bear the Franciscan charism into the world at large, We, more than any other branch of the Franciscan family, have this unique opportunity

and obligation to make our charism known in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in the groups we encounter, in the conversations we engender. We, like our ancestors in the Order before us, by our diligence to the Rule and our gospel centered life-style, can transform the society in which we live.

We begin as members of the Catholic Church called to share this vocation of gospel living following the example of our holy father Francis. We respond to this call of the Lord by joining a particular local fraternity. Secular Franciscans are united into fraternities that extend throughout the world. Our belonging to the local fraternity is our initiation into the entire Secular Franciscan family. As members of the local fraternity, we are also members of the regional fraternity, the national fraternity and the international fraternity. The basic unit of the Order is the local fraternity, not the individual members. At the All Commissions Conference at St. Bonaventure University in July of 1999, Fr. Matthew Gaskin, O.F.M., and Fr. Anthony Corrozzo, O.F.M., both stated, although at different times, that the only things needed to be a Franciscan are the gospel and community.

We are to live the gospel in the manner of St. Francis. In his Testament, Francis remarks that “. . . after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I was to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel”(Test 14). Gospel life was given to Francis after he was joined by a community. So too, we live our Franciscan calling within the communal sharing of the fraternity. Here our Franciscan vocation is shared and nourished; here we come to share and intensify our love of the gospel; here we come to be fed and challenged to go into the world again, alive and on fire with the love of Jesus. Like Francis, we are called to share the good news of Jesus with all whom we meet. By our words and our example, we are challenged to change the world in which we live.

As stated in the Rule, the members of the Secular Franciscan Order come from all walks of life. We are husbands and wives, single persons and widowed, young and old, lay and ordained. We come in answer to the particular call that the Lord has placed in each of our hearts. We come together to strengthen each other and be strengthened to live our faith, our call, the gospel in the world surroundings in which we find ourselves. The most effective way that we share our life with others is by example. As for Francis, the world is our cloister. In the world we pray, we live, we share, we grow, we care. In the world, our presence is meant to make a difference.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

- 1) Do you see your life changing the world in which you live? In what ways?
- 2) List ways that you see a vocation to the Secular Franciscan Order causing a difference in how you might interact in the world?
- 3) Choose one way and be willing to try it this month.

Ongoing Formation:

- 1) How do the fraternal gatherings better enable you to be a lively Franciscan presence in the world?
- 2) What are some changes you can propose to the fraternity members that would better challenge all of you to live a Franciscan life?
- 3) Which challenge will you recommend for the fraternity and adopt for yourself this month?

ARTICLE 3
BELONGING TO THE CHURCH

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Francis could foresee that even his sons might do things that were opposed to holy peace and unity. He feared that some might turn into rebels, as so often happens among the chosen, puffed up by their self-importance, ready for battle and prone to scandals. . . .

The strength of Francis is not enough to defend them from human plotting and contradicting tongues. . . .

“Therefore, I will go and entrust them to the holy Roman Church. The evil-minded will be struck down by the rod of her power. The sons of God will enjoy complete freedom, which will help to increase eternal salvation everywhere. From now on, let the children acknowledge their mother’s sweet favor, and always follow her holy footsteps with special devotion. With her protection, nothing evil will happen to the Order, and no son of Belial will trample the vineyard of the Lord unpunished. She, the holy one, will emulate the glory of our poverty and will prevent the praises of humility from being obscured by clouds of pride. She will preserve among us the bonds of charity and peace, striking dissidents with harsh punishments. In her sight the sacred observance of purity of the Gospel will constantly flourish and she will not allow the sweet fragrance of their life to vanish even for an hour.

This was the saint’s full intent in embracing this submission; this is a precious proof of the man of God’s foreknowledge of the need for this protection in the future.

2C 24

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1) Francis sought Rome’s protection for his Rule and for his Order. Is association with the Church of Rome an important part of your Franciscan calling?

2) Why have you chosen this stance?

Ongoing Formation:

1) Francis felt that the Orders he founded were of God. He sought out Church approval and protection. Are you strong enough in your convictions to have a person of the Church discern God's will with you?

2) Why or why not?

THE RULE

The present rule, succeeding "Memoriale Propositi" (1221) and the rules approved by the Supreme Pontiffs Nicholas IV and Leo XIII, adapts the Secular Franciscan Order to the needs and expectations of the Holy Church in the conditions of changing times. Its interpretation belongs to the Holy See and its application will be made by the General Constitutions and particular statutes.

Francis had good reason for desiring to place the Order and its Rule under the protection of the Roman Catholic Church. He did so for a specific reason that was fueled by the religious climate that surrounded him. Francis and the Order did not develop in a vacuum. Surrounding him, and throughout Italy in his time, were various heretical sects that started out in much the same vein as he did. There was a definite religious fervor at the time that penetrated the hearts of men and women and called them to search for a more intense spiritual life, not much different from what we find in our own world today. Different groups, the Cathari, the Waldensians, the Arnoldists, the Humiliati, all began as gatherings of honest men and women who desired to live the call of the gospel with a deeper conviction. They began with the gospel message as primary, as did Francis. They strove to live out its evangelical councils (poverty, chastity, and obedience) as did Francis. They drew together a way of life, as did Francis. However, they strove beyond the limits of Catholic Church doctrine and would not be submissive to her teaching, unlike Francis. Each group began with good intentions; each swerved along the way taking upon themselves an air of heresy.

The Cathari, whose name means the "pure ones" in Greek, took offense with the corrupt actions of some of the clergy of the time. The role of the clergy left much to be desired in this medieval time. Many of the clergy were more concerned with material wealth, political gain, and sensual pleasures than they were with the care of the souls

placed in their protection. Their lack of reverence for the Sacred Species of the Eucharist was a topic to be taken up at the Fourth Lateran Council. The Cathari rejected the ministers of the Roman Catholic Church for being very lax in their vocation. These abuses, and the Cathari belief in dualism, became the focus for this movement. The Cathari, also known as Albigensians in some places, established their own clergy and sacramental system.

The Cathari were a Gnostic (having special knowledge) group that was influenced by the dualism of the East, which professed that all material things were in the power of the devil, and all spiritual things were in the realm of God. This belief led to a disdain of all things physical, especially the flesh and all activities that derived physical pleasure and produced additional physical beings. Celibacy amongst its members was encouraged at all times. They held a unique view of the created universe in that all things that were material were created by an evil god, while all things that were spiritual were created by a good god. They rejected the sacraments of the Church because they all contain some matter that is of the physical universe and thus thought to be evil, for example, water for Baptism, bread and wine for Eucharist, oil for anointing in the sacraments of Confirmation, Holy Orders and Extreme Unction (the name of the sacrament at that time). They believed that humans were created by imprisoning a spirit in a material body. The only way to be redeemed from this state of bondage was to receive the Cathari's unique sacrament, *consolamentum*, which was administered by the imposition of hands by the leaders of the group, the *perfecti*. "To the 'perfect,' the leading minority, the *consolamentum* granted impeccability; the ordinary faithful could be freed from their sins by means of the *apparellamentum*, a type of penance."⁷ In order to live the life the *consolamentum* required, those who received this special sacrament renounced all personal property; they did not marry and refrained from sexual intercourse; they adhered to a strict fast and, by our standards, were vegetarians, abstaining from all foods of animal origin.⁸

Because they sought nothing of this world, the Cathari considered themselves the true followers of Christ. They left behind all material possessions and they chose to live the life of the Apostles, giving up everything to proclaim the message of the gospel. They were said to have based their lifestyle on that of the early Christians as described in the Acts of the Apostles. The New Testament writings were the only Scriptures the Cathari

⁷ Raffaele Pazzelli, T.O.R., *St. Francis and the Third Order: The Franciscan and pre-Franciscan Penitential Movement*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989), 57.

⁸ Higgins, 54.

accepted. Because of their repulsion of the material world, they denied the Incarnation; Christ, for them, only appeared to be human. Following the ancient heresy of Docetism, Christ was considered to be an angel who took on the appearance of man; he merely appeared to have suffered and died. Because their way of life was so austere and their moral demands so rigid, the Cathari movement gained many adherents from the lower classes of Roman Catholicism.⁹

The Arnoldists were another group who found it hard to live within a Church whose clergy did not live up to the moral standards of their ordination. They opposed the hierarchy of the Church and refused to partake of the sacraments presided over by priests whom they considered neither holy nor pure. They contended that priests should live fully the evangelical counsels of the gospel: poverty, chastity and obedience. Following the thought of their founder, Arnold of Brescia, that "the clergy who did not live a poor life were liars and deprived of authority,"¹⁰ they denied the Church authority to grant them the right to preach. They believed that living an austere life gave the laity the right to preach without the permission of the Church. They were excommunicated from the Church in 1184.

The Waldensians, so named after their founder Peter Waldo, originally set out with the same purpose as the Cathari, to be true followers of Christ, to be persons of the gospel, to live a life of total poverty. This call began with the conversion of Peter Waldo himself, a rich merchant in Lyons, France, who sought to change his lifestyle. On the advice of a local theologian he took this Scripture passage literally, "If you wish to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor"(Mt. 19:21). He sold his goods, made provisions for his wife and family, gave the rest to the poor. He took upon himself the life of the early apostles and went off to live as an itinerant preacher. Others who saw his barefoot example and listened to his words were enticed to follow him. They sold their possessions as well and began preaching a life of penance. They lived without fixed lodgings or property and they begged for food in the towns in which they preached. They lived a life based on the example of the early apostles and the poor Christ.¹¹

⁹ Pazzelli, 55-59.

¹⁰ Ibid. 55.

¹¹ Robert M. Stewart, O.F.M. "De illis qui faciunt penitentiam" *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Roma: Instituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991), 114.

The Waldensians were divided into two groups, the *perfecti* and the *credents*. The first group was comprised of those persons who were ordained as deacons and took vows of the evangelical counsels: poverty, chastity and obedience to their leaders. These *perfecti* were itinerant preachers who lived on alms. The second group, the “believers,” lived a life of penance at home while supporting the preachers.¹²

It was the preaching of the Waldensians that caused problems. The Bishop of Lyons did not want them preaching in his diocese. Seeking papal approval, they traveled to Rome and were granted approval to live their penitential lifestyle; however, they were to seek permission to preach from their bishop, which was denied. Either misunderstanding the permission granted them or choosing to ignore it, they did not seek the bishop’s approval each time they preached. After the death of the bishop who had opposed them for so long, the new archbishop refused them permission because he objected to laymen preaching. The group was excommunicated and expelled from the diocese. They took up their preaching in other parts of the world.¹³ In the beginning, the Waldensians set out to defend the orthodoxy of the Church against the attacks by the Cathari, the Humiliati and the Arnoldists. In the end, they became identified with the very groups they set out to condemn. The Waldensians were officially excommunicated in 1184, along with the Arnoldists, because neither group sought ecclesial permission to preach.

The Humiliati were yet another group of lay penitents which evolved at this time. They developed in tune with the new economic and urban class, yet in contrast to it in many regards. They “humiliated themselves for God” and chose a simple lifestyle, devoid of the fine, colored cloth that was available at the time. They led an austere life; they refrained from the corrupt moral practices that imbued the trades at the time. They preached against the heretical attacks of other groups during the last half of the twelfth century. They suffered excommunication along with the other groups at the Council of Verona in 1184 for not adhering to the Pope’s prescription that they obtain permission of the local ordinary to preach. However, unlike the other groups, they were received into the Church again in 1201.

The Humiliati were organized into three groups. The first consisted of clerics, men and women religious, whose lives were devoted to ministry and contemplation. The

¹² Ibid., 115.

¹³ Pazzelli, 59.

second group was comprised of celibate lay men and women who concentrated their lives in the wool making trade. The last group was made up of committed lay men and women who lived in their own homes and remained free to marry. They devoted themselves to work, poverty and prayer as the mainstays of their call to be humble before the Lord. They continued to preach against the heretical movements. Because they were known to be of good moral character, they were often chosen as treasurers to the communes or other duties that required honesty.¹⁴

At first glance, it is easy to note that Francis had much in common with these other groups searching to live a life based on gospel principles. Like them, he chose a style of life that was based on a literal reading of the Scriptures. Poverty became his hallmark; he gave up all because Christ chose poverty for himself and for his mother. He chose to share the spirituality of this lifestyle with others. Unlike these other groups, however, he chose to do so with the permission of the Holy Father. The brothers were to seek permission of the pastors whenever they entered a town to preach. Francis chose not to judge those persons who held office in the Roman Catholic Church. He chose not to criticize and restructure the Church from without, but to remain a loyal son and effect changes from within the parameters of the Church. He chose to place the Order he founded under the guidance of a Cardinal Protector; this relationship lasted until the Second Vatican Council. Before he set his understanding of the gospel as a guide for others to follow, he chose to have it sanctioned by the Pope. First and foremost, Francis was a loyal son of the Roman Catholic Church. In following Christ, he saw no other way than through loyalty to the Church Christ founded. Not only for himself, but Francis established Rules of life for all members of society: those men who wished to abandon all, and live the radical poverty and simplicity of life in conjunction with the Church as he did; a Rule for ladies who also wished to take up the radical dependency on Divine Providence alone and were bound to a cloistered, contemplative life; a Rule for those persons who had commitments to marriage and family, those who were single or widowed, or those with clerical obligations who were unable to follow Francis in his style of living. Lacking a call from God to abandon everything, nevertheless, they felt challenged to live the gospel where they found themselves. The Letter to the Faithful is believed to be the first answer for those other persons who wished to follow Francis' radical call of gospel simplicity. It is the Prologue to the present Rule of 1978. From this First Letter to its present reading, the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order has changed through the centuries to adapt to the needs of the

¹⁴ Higgins, 59.

culture and the times.¹⁵ One tenet that has remained constant through all these changes is the Order's fidelity to and support of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the history of Christianity, there continue to be persons who disagree with one or more of the Church's teachings. Such was the case with Martin Luther and the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. The Church continues to be a target for persons who wish to disagree with her authority, or authority of any type for that matter. The world looks upon the Church as an easy target, especially when the Church calls the world to principles of morality, peace and justice that would otherwise upset the comfort zone of the world's living, the modern day heresies of "materialism" and "secular humanism." Our own nation's concept of capitalism rises up against some of the teachings of the Church. However, it is this same Church that holds the Secular Franciscan Order in the palm of her hand, that protects our history, that safeguards our Rule, that challenges us to live our vocation in the midst of these "isms" of our day. We have the same opportunity that was afforded Francis. We can step outside her teachings and traditions, or we can remain within, faithful sons and daughters of Holy Mother Church. It is the Church who has approved our way of life as set forth in the Rule of 1978 as being faithful to her teachings and to the way of life established by Francis. It is the Church who interprets the Rule and approves our Constitutions. It is the Church who witnesses and sanctions our professions to this way of life as outlined in the Rule.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

- 1) Which three articles of the Rule seem easy for you to live?

- 2) Which three articles of the Rule seem difficult for you to live?

- 3) Which challenging article will you try to put into practice this month? How?

¹⁵ A brief outline of the prior Rules of the Secular Franciscan Order can be found in the Historical Background section of this text. For a detailed understanding of their evolution and composition, please see Fr. Robert Stewart's book, "*De illis qui faciunt penitentiam*" *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation*.

Ongoing Formation:

- 1) What areas of dissension with the Rule do you encounter in your daily life?

- 2) What are some ways in which you can address these challenges in your own life, or in your family, or in your workplace?

- 3) Which one area of your life will you attempt to modify this month?

ARTICLE 4
LIVING THE GOSPEL

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*Therefore
as the truth of the man of God's simple teaching and life
became known to many,
some men began to be moved to penance
and, abandoning all things,
joined him in habit and life.
The first among these was
Bernard, a venerable man,
who was made a sharer in the divine vocation
and merited to be the firstborn son of the blessed Father,
both in priority of time and in the gift of holiness.*

For this man, as he was planning to reject the world perfectly after his example, once he had ascertained for himself the holiness of Christ's servant, sought his advice on how to carry this out. On hearing this, God's servant was filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit over the conception of his first child. "This requires counsel from God," he said.

When morning had broken they went into the church of Saint Nicholas, and, after they had prepared with a prayer, Francis, a worshiper of the Trinity, opened the book of the Gospels three times asking God to confirm Bernard's plan with a threefold testimony. At the first opening of the book this text appeared: "If you will be perfect, go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor." At the second: "Take nothing on your journey." And at the third: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." "This is our life and rule," the holy man said, "and that of all who wish to join our company. Go, then, if you wish to be perfect, and carry out what you have heard."

LMj 3. 3

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

- 1) Francis, in searching out a meaning for his life and the life of those to follow him, chose to look to the gospels. Where do you get direction for your life?

- 2) Why have you chosen this directive?

Ongoing Formation:

1) Francis took these words of the gospel literally and made them the basis for his life. Which Scripture passages have impacted your life and aided your vocation?

2) How have these Scriptures impacted your Franciscan journey?

THE RULE

The Rule and the life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.

Christ, the gift of the Father's love, is the way to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly.

Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.

With these three Scripture verses, Francis and his early followers set up their Rule of life. How literally they took them!

Selling everything and giving to the poor: The town leaders of Assisi were very upset that the "scourge of San Damiano" was overtaking their city. Young men of all classes, lay and clerics, were leaving the city to take on this new form of gospel living. They were leaving the ways of the feudal system behind and living as equals, as the gospel proposes. They were selling their most valued possessions and giving all to the poor. In contrast, those who gave their wealth to their family members were not welcomed in the early fraternity.

Taking nothing for the journey: Francis and the early followers traveled about the countryside in Italy with no provisions. They slept in caves or on the side of the road. They worked in the fields gathering grain to secure something to eat. If there were no fields to be gleaned, they begged for their food relying always on the providence of God.

Denying themselves, taking up their crosses and following Christ: In the beginning it is the very denial of self that gave these men their cross. They were not readily accepted by the townspeople of Assisi. No, rather they became the laughing stock. The city of Assisi is a small hamlet on the side of Mount Subasio. Within hours, everyone knew of Francis' departure, as they were readily informed of the departure of the others who joined Francis. The negative reaction they received was cross enough to bear, not to mention the austerities of the life they had taken upon themselves.

We are also called to follow the example of Francis, but how is this to be accomplished? In our secular state are we called to sell everything and give to the poor? Are we to go without possessions? Are we to beg for our sustenance? Are we to take the gospel that literally? No, we are called to seek an understanding of the underlying motive Francis had for following Christ. How did Francis follow Christ? Truly, what is the example Francis left us to follow? We have seen how other penitential groups of Francis' time sought to follow Christ. They took up the apostolic life, the life of the early Apostles as recounted in Acts 2:42: they sold their property and shared all things in common; they gathered for communal prayer and teaching; they performed works of mercy. In this manner, in the manner of the early Church, they sought to follow Christ and make present his teachings to their time and space. A careful reading of Francis' life shows us that this was not the route Francis chose. He did not choose to follow Christ in the same manner as did these other men; he did not choose to take up the works of Christ; he did not choose to teach and heal and admonish as Christ did. From the onset of his conversion, Francis did not choose to DO anything Christ did. Rather he chose to imitate Christ and Christ's relationship with the Father. He sought to BE in the same intimate relationship Christ was in, an intimate relationship of love with God. Anything and everything that he did grew out of this relational BEing with God!

Think of it for a moment. At the onset of his conversion, Francis did not go about the countryside speaking of God to others. He did not set out on a road of penance. He did not begin his journey by stripping before the bishop's palace. He did not even begin by rebuilding the Chapel of San Damiano. After receiving visions while on the way to Spoleto, Francis returned to Assisi to await the pleasure of the Lord. He sought this pleasure in remote places surrounding Assisi. With an unnamed companion, Francis often went to a cave outside the city. There

. . . [i]nspired by a new and extraordinary spirit he would pray to his Father in secret. . . . He consulted God alone about his holy purpose. He prayed with all his heart that the eternal and true God guide his way and teach him to do His will. He endured great suffering in his soul. . . . He was burning inwardly with a divine fire, and he was unable to conceal outwardly the flame kindled in his soul. He repented that he had sinned so grievously. . . .

One day, when he had invoked the Lord's mercy with his whole heart, the Lord showed him what he must do.

1C 6, 7

Francis' life began in intimate prayer with the Father, following the example of Jesus. Immediately following his Baptism in the River Jordan by John, Jesus departed for the desert, led by the Spirit. Yes, Jesus was tempted there, but was it his sole intent to go to the desert to be tempted? Or was this the scenario: he was led into the desert to enter more deeply into the loving relationship with his Father before he began his earthly ministry, and while there he was tempted? It is this intimacy that Francis yearned for; it is this intimacy that guided his life as it did the life of Jesus. In the gospels we are told of the many times and varied reasons for the Lord's going off to pray:

- Jesus went to the mountain to pray (Lk 6: 46)
- he went to deserted places to pray (Lk 5:16)
- he prayed all night (Lk 6:12)
- rising early in the morning, he prayed (Mk 1:35);
- he prayed in the afternoon, after feeding four thousand people (Mt 14: 23);
- he prayed before choosing the Apostles (Lk 6: 12-13);
- he prayed over the little children (Mt 19:13)
- Jesus was at prayer when he was transfigured (Lk 9: 29)
- Jesus prayed during the Last Supper (Jn 17)
- he went to Gethsemane to pray (Mt 26: 36)
- and he prayed while on the Cross (Mk 15:34).

Francis also spent a great deal of his time in solitary prayer. Fr. Michael Higgins, T.O.R., gathering information from the major Legends of Francis' life, averages Francis' time spent in solitude to be roughly 60%.¹⁶ It was in these graced moments that Francis came to realize all as gift. Beginning with his person, his life, his attributes, his failings, his interactions with others, Francis saw all as gift. Moving beyond himself, all others and all of creation were gifts of God to him and to the world at large. Francis had a whole

¹⁶ Higgins, 112.

new concept of the world, and it came from his relationship with the Father. The greatest gift was the gift of God himself made manifest through the Incarnation in the birth of Jesus Christ into our time and world. Francis believed that out of his great love for us, God came to earth. Jesus came to share with us God's love, and, in turn, to lead us into a loving relationship with God. It is in responding to this invitation to love that Francis lived out the call of the gospel.

Francis saw that in his own life, Jesus did not set out to heal the sick, raise the dead, teach people to pray, gather disciples to himself. No, Jesus interacted with whatever circumstance he found before him, a prime example being the wedding feast of Cana. Jesus even told Mary that his hour had not come. Yet, he responded to the circumstance placed before him. He did not seek out the funeral of the son of the widow of Naim, but he interacted in the situation that was presented to him. Such a nuanced reading of Francis' life reveals to us that Francis acted in much the same way. He did not set out to attract followers, but when the Lord presented him with some, he set out to find a way of life for them. Francis did not set out to preach, but when granted the privilege by the Pope, he accepted. Francis did not set out to heal, but when he saw another suffering, he acted through the grace of God. Francis led an evangelical life, a life rooted in the gospel itself, a life he discovered through an intimate relationship with God and an openness to grace and to situations around him. It is quite different from the apostolic life; it had an entirely different root.

It is in this response that we are able to discern the difference between Francis' living the gospel and that of the other penitential groups of his time. Francis did not lead an apostolic life, performing only the outward signs that Jesus performed, or functioning solely as to care for the needs of others. Francis did not seek to imitate Jesus' actions, but to imitate the response that came from the core of his being. Francis came to realize the gospel as the recounting of the intersection of God into human history in a unique and profound way. Francis led an evangelical life, attempting to take the gospel, the "good news," the intersection of God in history, into his own time. Francis chose to make the "good news" present in his day and in his world setting through the sharing of himself with all persons and all creation. Francis realized the gift of God's goodness in his own person, and he shared the gift of this goodness with all those whom he met. Fr. Joseph Chinnici, O.F.M. sums up this concept:

This attitude of Francis – he does not stand towards the world or make an option for it. He is in it and this stems in large measure from his conversion experience (Test 1-3). Again, he lives in the experience of gift, and his action in the world is not based on the world's needs, but on his gift of being a light and example of God's goodness to all.¹⁷

Scripture continued to play a tremendous role in Francis' life. Could this passage from St. Matthew's Gospel have been a key component to Francis' understanding of God's providential care for him? Of God's call to his life? Might it help us to better understand Francis and his notion of a simple life?

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? . . . For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Mt 6: 25-30, 32-33

Scripture was not only the beginning and the mainstay of Francis' life; it also became his legacy. Scripture was the basis of his Rule, his Admonitions, the letters he sent to the peoples of his time, the message he left for all of us who were to come after him.

How does Scripture intertwine in our own lives? Are we able to step into Scripture and make its reality our own? Are we able to take from its intersection in our lives our own “good news?” Does Scripture speak to us of our own unique giftedness as sons and daughters of God? Have we accepted the fact that we are good? Have we accepted the challenge of BEing good? Do we share this gift of our goodness with the world around us?

BEing Franciscan, engaging in an evangelical life, calls us to accept the challenge of gospel life, the evangelical life, that is placed before us. But how do we enter in? How do we become part of the story? How can these age-old texts impact our lives today?

¹⁷ Chinnici, Joseph P., O.F.M., “Evangelical and Apostolic Tensions”, originally published in *Our Franciscan Charism Today* (New Jersey: Fame, 1987). Used with the author's permission.

In a Papal Exhortation addressed to the Church and peoples of Oceania, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, shares these thoughts on Scripture and how to make them relevant in our daily lives:

The Church forcefully and specially exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn “the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures... Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and the reader. For “we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.” The word of God in the Old and New Testament is fundamental for all who believe in Christ, and it is the inexhaustible wellspring of evangelization. Holiness of life and effective apostolic activity are born of constant listening to God's word. A renewed appreciation of Scripture allows us to return to the sources of our faith and encounter God's truth in Christ. Acquaintance with the Scriptures is required of all the faithful, but particularly of seminarians, priests and religious. They are to be encouraged to engage in *lectio divina*, that quiet and prayerful meditation on the Scripture that allows the word of God to speak to the human heart. This form of prayer, privately or in groups, will deepen their love for the Bible and make it an essential and life-giving element of their daily lives.¹⁸ (Underscore added)

What is *Lectio Divina* that our Holy Father calls us to? It is an ancient monastic prayer form that invites us into the actual scenes of the Scriptures themselves. Sacred Reading, in its English rendition, *Lectio Divina* is easily rendered as the 4 R's:

Reading, Reflecting, Responding, Receiving.

As with any prayer involving Scripture we begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, recognizing that this Holy Spirit who first inspired the sacred authors to write these words is the same Holy Spirit who is now present and guiding us through these words. The inspiration of the Spirit to the sacred authors now comes to us through the action of the same Holy Spirit. We then move on to the passage itself. We first encounter the Scripture passage by *Reading* it, a careful, thoughtful, meditative reading of it, experiencing and savoring the power and the scope each word has to offer us. We read the Scripture as a message of love from our God to us, seeking to uncover what it is that the Lord is trying to say to us this day.

Reflecting upon what we have read is next. We ask ourselves which word, which

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, 22 November 2001, ¶38.

phrase, which passage speaks to us, challenges us, tugs at us this day. Which word or passage got our attention this day? We sit with these words and allow them to seep into our spirit. This may happen in different ways: the passage may be soothing to us; it may bring to mind an error we need to address; it may challenge us to change an attitude or a habit; it may be a response to prayer; it may be admonishment of our lifestyle. This reflection can take many different forms; the one thing that is necessary to remember is that it is the Word of God.

From this reflection, we move on to *Responding* to the Scripture. At this point we personally enter into dialogue with the passage. What is the Scripture passage saying to you in your own time and in your present situation? How does the passage address you? In which realm does the Scripture challenge you as a human being? Physically, can you identify with one of the persons in the Scripture story? Do you find yourself in a similar social situation as is portrayed in the account? Mentally, do you find yourself caught up in the same thinking pattern of the characters set before you? How are you responding emotionally to the drama that is being played out in the passage? How does this portion of Scripture address you psychologically? (Remember that psychology is a fairly new science in terms of the age of Scripture. The Bible is not meant to be a psychology text, although, at times, the responses of our Lord may seem to demonstrate otherwise.) How are you interacting with this section of Scripture on a spiritual level? How is the Lord summoning you to a new level of self-knowledge, a deeper conversion, a closer relationship with him or those around you? Note that not all of these facets need to be addressed with each reading of Scripture. Usually, one will come to the foreground rather quickly. If it does, remain with it; investigate it, respond to it. As you are carefully listening to how the Lord is addressing you, you need to formulate your response to God. What is it you have to share with him? Remember that *Lectio Divina* is a prayer form. It requires a two-way conversation. After discerning what the Lord is trying to say to you, take the time to respond to him.

Although some people may think the process of *Lectio Divina* is complete at this point, there is still the fourth R, *Receiving*. Remember to take the time to sit in the Silence and receive what it is that the Lord wants to share with you in the Silence. Remember that Silence is the language of God. Sit and bask in his goodness toward you. Sit and receive from God the knowledge of your goodness, the giftedness of your person, the challenge of your life together.

From this space of personal encounter with God, from its challenges and blessings, we move again into the mainstream of life. As with Francis and his early companions, we must not remain isolated with the good news of God resonating within us. It is ours to go from this graced encounter to the persons and places that make up our life. We are to take the goodness of God's love for all humankind, the giftedness of our own being and share this wealth with those we meet. We do not go with a set agenda, but with a spirit open to the situations around us. We set out as Jesus did, as Francis did, to interact with the persons with whom we live and work, or with those strangers we meet along the way. We allow the goodness that God has shared with us to resonate with those whom we encounter on our life's journey. This was the evangelical basis on which Francis set his life; this is the basis we choose to follow.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us, "For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it"(Mt 7:14). St. Francis found this road in the words of the gospel and acted upon them. Ours is to follow in his dynamic footsteps "going from gospel to life and life to the gospel."

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

- 1) Which is your favorite gospel narrative? Pray it in the method suggested.
- 2) List the insights you gleaned from this prayer experience.
- 3) Which one will you carry into the world this month? How do you expect it to make a difference?

Ongoing Formation:

- 1) List insights into your giftedness that your time with the individual gospel narratives have given you.
- 2) Enumerate ways you can share this giftedness with others.
- 3) Be open this month to meeting someone new. Share your giftedness with this person.

ARTICLE 5
ENCOUNTERING THE PERSON OF JESUS

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*The brothers who lived with him know
that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips,
sweet and pleasant conversations about Him,
kind words full of love. . . .
So the spring of radiant love
that filled his heart within
gushed forth.
He was always with Jesus:
Jesus in his heart,
Jesus in his mouth,
Jesus in his ears,
Jesus in his eyes,
Jesus in his hands,
he bore Jesus always in his whole body. . .*

1C 115

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. As this passage tells us, Jesus was all in all for Francis. When you hear the name, Jesus, when you contemplate Jesus, what thoughts come to your mind?
2. Why are these thoughts so important to you?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Francis grew into this union with our Lord. How has your relationship with Jesus changed since your profession?
2. What has caused these changes?

THE RULE

Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity. The faith of Saint Francis, who often said "I see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this world except his most holy body and blood," should be the inspiration and pattern of their eucharistic life.

Christocentric is a name often given to Franciscan spirituality. Why? Was Jesus Christ the center of Francis' worship of God? Not really. A close examination of Francis' prayers and writings will quickly point out that out of the 150 times Francis addresses God as Lord, he is mostly speaking of God the Father. Only about 15 times is the address Lord used to speak about Jesus the Son. "My Lord" most often refers to God the Father, while "the Lord" refers to God the Son. So how does Christocentric refer to Francis' life, to his spirituality? It refers to the example Francis followed. Francis saw Jesus as the example of the perfect way to please the Father, the perfect way to live in the Father's will. Francis encountered Jesus as the mediator between God the Father and himself. Francis followed the example of Jesus more closely than anyone up to his time. He put Jesus ahead of him and followed behind him as closely as possible, not swerving from this central focus, trying not to go to the left or right, but straight and narrow, down that center line. St. Bonaventure will later refer to Francis as the *alter Christus*, the other Christ, because he followed Jesus' example so closely.

Francis was in love with three images of Christ: they were the Infant Babe of Bethlehem, the poor Crucified One on Calvary, and the humble Eucharistic Lord. Each holds a prominent place in Francis' life and in forming his spirituality. He came to see each as a personification of Truth in his life. Where did he come upon these truths? In the gospels that he allowed to germinate within his heart. We must remember that there were no textbooks concerning Jesus for the common person in Francis' day. What he knew of Christ, he knew from teachings and preachings of others, but most importantly from pondering the gospels in his heart. Celano records for us:

His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention was
to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things,
to follow the teaching of Our Lord Jesus Christ
and to retrace his footsteps completely

with all vigilance and zeal,
all desire of his soul
and all the fervor of his heart.

Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ
and recollect His deeds with the most attentive perception.
Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation
and the charity of the Passion
occupy his memory
that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else.

1C 84

For Francis, Christmas was the most important feast. For him, it represented God's total gift of love to the human race. Francis realized that God had made himself accessible to us through the Incarnation. God loves us so much that he chose to become one of us. The Son of God took on our human form to share with us the love of God and to teach us how to love God properly in return. This total self-giving of God was overwhelming for Francis. We know that he chose to commemorate the Incarnation in a special way in the hamlet of Greccio. Three years before he died, Francis asked John of Greccio to set up a stable as closely as possible to what the Scriptures tell us of the night of Jesus' birth, complete with animals, a manger, hay, people and candles. After everyone gathered, Francis came to the celebration. As deacon, he proclaimed the gospel and spoke to the people about this wondrous miracle. And according to Celano, as Francis was completing his homily, ". . . a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep "(1C 86). We all know the story, but imagine the miracle!

What lessons did Francis learn from his meditation upon the birth of Christ?

Celano describes the paradox of the scene:

There simplicity is given a place of honor,
poverty is exalted,
humility is commended,
and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.

1C 85

Francis takes these three virtues upon himself, simplicity, poverty and humility. If one were to describe Francis in his youth, none of these virtues would readily come to mind. Looking back on his life, they are paramount. It was the manner in which God

came to earth that most shaped Francis' form of life. Francis saw in the Infant Babe of Bethlehem how God chose to come to earth. He chose to come in simplicity. What is more unpretentiousness than a baby? There was no showiness in the Incarnation; there were no placards proclaiming God's coming; there were no trumpet blasts, except for those with ears to hear and eyes to see, like the shepherds and the Magi. Likewise, Francis chose a simple life for himself and those who followed, without the pretensions of life that surrounded them. Christ also chose to come to earth in utter poverty. He had nothing of his own. He was God, yet he came as an infant, totally dependent upon human beings for his life and sustenance. What did Francis learn from this choice of God's? Francis learned that he must be totally dependent upon God. If God entrusted himself to us, so must we entrust ourselves totally to God. Christ chose to come in utter humility. What is humility? It is always keeping your gaze on another, deferring to another at all cost. Paul recounts for us in Philippians that Christ took the form of a slave. Is there any more humbling position for God to assume? Could Francis assume a position any higher? No. He chose the name "Lesser Brothers" for those who would follow him. If simplicity, poverty, and humility were good enough for the Son of God, then they would be good enough for Francis and all those who wished to follow this way of life.

However, the notion that the Son of God's coming to earth was motivated solely out of love was very foreign to the thought process of the time. If asked the question, "Would Christ have come into the world if Adam had not sinned?" Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas would have answered, "No." A proper Franciscan response would be, "Yes." First and foremost, the Incarnation occurred because of God's love for us. We were created out of love and, in that same love, God chose to share our humanity with us. Did he also extend his mercy and redeem us? Yes, but for Franciscans, love is always the primary reason for the Incarnation. This is a central aspect of our Franciscan spirituality and one we cannot overlook.

Ultimately, Christ's love had its most profound showing in the Crucifixion. It is here that we meet the second image of Christ that held so much meaning for Francis. Christ's ultimate act of love was an act of total self-giving. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Francis' vocation begins and culminates in the Cross. He first heard the call "to rebuild my house" as he was praying before the San Damiano Crucifix; his vocation culminated in his receiving the stigmata on La Verna. The power of the Cross held a unique place in Francis' journey.

He began from it and constantly journeyed toward it, but he never did so alone. He always walked the journey with his Lord, the poor Crucified One. Nowhere is this more apparent than a meditative reading of Francis' Office of the Passion. We are aware from Celano that Francis prayed the Divine Office every day. In addition though, he also prayed the Office of the Passion. What is it? The Office of the Passion consists of fifteen "psalms," prayers of the heart, that Francis wrote to commemorate different events of Jesus' life.

For our discussion here, we will focus on the first seven of these "psalms." In them, Francis tries to accompany Jesus, as best as he is able, from his agonizing hours in the Garden, to Calvary and through his Resurrection. He tries to enter into each of these spaces where Jesus is communicating with his Father. From his knowledge of the Scriptural psalms, Francis gives words to Jesus' prayer, his conversation with his Father. Francis prays what he felt were any and all of the emotions of Jesus as he faced his human betrayal and death: Jesus' anxieties, Jesus' desires, Jesus' fears, Jesus' frustrations, Jesus' ultimate trust in the Father.

Francis' Psalm One deals with Jesus' Agony in the Garden, Francis' understanding of what transpired between Jesus and the Father.

Francis' Psalm Two supposes Jesus' thoughts when he was with the Sanhedrin.

Francis' Psalm Three portrays Jesus' thoughts as they might have been as he entered into the day of his death.

Francis' Psalm Four recounts Francis' conception of Jesus' thoughts during his Trial before Pilate.

Francis' Psalm Five encounters Jesus on the Cross, his thoughts of near hopelessness, his recognition of how he is perceived by others, his plea to the Father for aid.

Francis' Psalm Six speaks of Christ's *Transitus*, his passing from Death to Life.

Francis' Psalm Seven has Francis addressing all peoples and creation, praising God for the wonders that have been accomplished by Jesus' death.¹⁹

By praying this Office, we are given a unique opportunity to enter into Francis' personal relationship with Jesus at this most strenuous period of Jesus' human existence. We are praying with the words Francis actually chose for prayer. We are entering into his prayer.

¹⁹ For a complete listing of these psalms, the order of Praying the Office of the Passion, and an commentary on each psalm, please see *The Geste of the Great King: Office of the Passion of Francis of Assisi*, Laurent Gallant, O.F.M., André Cirino, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute), 2001.

The third image of Christ, in which Francis experienced such a powerful presence of Jesus, was that of his Eucharistic Lord. He knew and believed that contained within the Sacred Species was the Body and Blood of his Lord and Savior, the same Lord and Savior who was born for him in Bethlehem, the same Lord and Savior who suffered and died for him on Calvary. Again, we have Francis' own words to describe his intense belief and devotion. In Admonition 1, Francis questions and exhorts all of us:

Why do you not know the truth and believe in the Son of God? Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of a priest.

As He revealed Himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so He reveals Himself to us now in sacred bread. And as they saw only His flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that He was God as they contemplated Him with their spiritual eyes, let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are His most holy Body and Blood living and true. And in this way the Lord is always with His faithful, as He Himself says: "Behold I am with you until the end of the age."

Adm 1: 15-22

For those who choose not to believe, Francis makes this appeal:

All those who saw the Lord Jesus according to the humanity, therefore, and did not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that He is the True Son of God were condemned. Now in the same way, all those who see the sacrament sanctified by the words of the Lord upon the altar at the hands of the priest in the form of bread and wine, and who do not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that it is truly the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, are condemned. [This] is affirmed by the Most High Himself Who says: "This is my Body and Blood of my new covenant [which shall be shed for many];" and "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." It is the Spirit of the Lord, therefore, That lives in Its faithful, That receives the Body and Blood of the Lord. All others who do not share in this same Spirit and presume to receive Him eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Adm 1: 8-15

Francis' belief was steadfast. He gave reasons why we should believe as he did and gave precautions for any who chose not to do so. He truly believed in the reality of Real Presence in the Eucharist. We can see from his writings how he tied this Eucharistic presence to the presence found in the Infant at Bethlehem, how it was intimately connected to Christ on the Cross. Francis encountered Jesus Christ living

and active within his human condition. This is Jesus who was continually present to Francis – in his mind, his prayer, his work.

Likewise, Jesus, who showed his love by taking on our human nature, is the same Jesus who shed his blood for that love, and the same Jesus who continues this day to be present to each of us in the Eucharist. Following Francis' example, we are called upon *to encounter the living and active person of Christ*. We have seen how Francis did so in three instances. There are also many other ways not mentioned here in which he did so. But what of us? How are we to encounter the living person of Jesus?

Primarily, we can begin as Francis did, with the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit inspired the sacred authors to write the words of the Scriptures, and it is the same Holy Spirit that is present to us as we read and pray the Scriptures. Through the Holy Spirit's intercession, we are able to encounter the living Christ within its pages and passages. How?. Make ourselves present to the situation. Sit with the crowd or sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus. What is he saying to us today? His words are ageless; they are not bound by time. How might we take his suggestions made in the first century and make them applicable to our own? How do we take his parables, that were spoken to a rural population, and make them relevant to our urban or suburban situations? Impossible? No, not with the grace and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Try this exercise:

Enter into a dialogue Jesus is having with any person of Scripture. Place yourself in that person's shoes. As Jesus addresses the person, insert your own name. Sit and ponder what the Lord is saying to you and then discern how to act upon it. Encounter the living and active person of the Lord and allow him to change your life. Allow him to fill you with such awe that you are unable to share in words what the Lord has done for you. Allow Jesus to become such a part of your life that others will notice a marked difference in your demeanor. Allow him to change you to be more like himself, to be more the person you were created to be.

Article 5 reminds us that we may encounter Jesus in liturgical activities. Do we actively participate in these functions? Is the rhythm of the liturgical year part of our spiritual awareness? Ask yourself:

- Are you fasting when Jesus fasts; are you suffering with him when he is suffering?
- Are you caring for others as he is doing?
- Do you allow the cycle of his life to be a guide for your own?

If this approach does not work in your spiritual journey, then identify your current space and invite Jesus to accompany you. Turn the tables:

- If you are suffering, go to the readings of the liturgical cycle in which Jesus suffered.
- If you are in active ministry, then make the ministry of Jesus your example and guide.
- If you feel burdened by some form of illness or oppression, go to Jesus in one of the many stories of healing.

We are called to encounter Jesus in the liturgies of the Church, to participate in her rich devotional offerings. Enter into the various Franciscan forms of prayer: the Office of the Passion, the Stations of the Cross or the Franciscan Crown Rosary. Pray with our Franciscan saints on their feasts. Select a Franciscan saint for a year: read a biography of their life; meditate on their writings; try to emulate the virtues found in their lives.

Our brothers and sisters are another place for us to encounter Christ. Each of us knows someone whom we can name who reminds of us Christ. Being with them is truly being in the presence of someone holy. What is it about them that draws us to them? What is it in their lives or manner that reminds us of Jesus? Do we possess similar qualities? Do persons seek to be with us because of our Christ-like attitudes and values? How do we encounter Jesus in others? How do others encounter Christ when they meet us?

The Church is described as the Mystical Body of Christ. We are made members of the Church by our Baptism. As members of this Body, we are graced to have a specific place to share the gift of ourselves, a gift that can be shared by no one else. Our unique presence is a manifestation of God to those around us. When we come together as Church, we encounter the living and active person of Jesus in all who surround us. When we come together Christ is definitely in our midst. This is his promise, that wherever two or more are gathered, he is present. As a whole we, the Church, invite the world to encounter the living and active person of Christ by our presence and actions in the world arena.

Most importantly, we encounter the living and active person of Christ in the Eucharist. It is the ultimate gift of Christ to us. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist we make present again the happenings of the Last Supper. We become present to that first

institution of the Eucharist. Our participation in the Eucharistic celebration is our participation in the Last Supper. Do we have any conception of the awesomeness that is before us during the Eucharistic sacrifice? Are we aware, truly aware, of the gift God has given us, the gift Jesus has left us, the gift Jesus is to us at that precise moment? Do we properly prepare ourselves? Do we enter the wedding feast with a proper wedding garment of preparation, or do we run in at the last moment? Do we truly comprehend that we are in the same presence of the Lord that Mary and Martha enjoyed, that Lazarus realized, that the penitent woman cried over, that Nicodemus and the Samaritan women were challenged by? Do we?

Opportunities abound for us to encounter Christ; however, they require a few things of us. We must be open to the encounter. We must seek the encounter. We must be willing to give time to the encounter. We are to share the encounter. An encounter with the Lord cannot be contained. It simply spills over into everything else we do; it flows over everyone we meet; it graces us in ways we are still to discover. Ours is to be ready and willing to seek the encounter with Jesus and allow it to take us where it will.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. List some of the ways you have encountered the Lord.
2. What are some of the ways mentioned that might be new to you or are opportunities of encounter with Jesus that you have not sought recently? List them.
3. Arrange your time and circumstances this month to seek out the living and active person of Christ in a new or forgotten way.

Ongoing Formation:

1. We have seen how Francis encountered the living Christ and how these encounters changed both his life and the lives of those around him. How have your encounters with the Lord affected your spiritual journey and the journey of others around you?
2. In which brother or sister do you find it hardest to encounter the person of Jesus? Do you know of a brother or sister who finds it hard to encounter Jesus in you? These persons do not have to be a member of your fraternity. Try to discern the obstacle in this relationship.
3. Choose one of the persons who came to mind above. Set aside time this month to have a conversation with this person either in person or on the phone. If this is not possible, try writing a letter. Seek to encounter Jesus in this conversation. What can you learn from Jesus that only this person and this situation can teach you?

ARTICLE 6
LIVING AS MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

At that time Saint Francis approached the lord Pope Honorius, who was then the head of the Roman Church, humbly asking him to appoint the lord Hugolino, bishop of Ostia, as father and lord for him and his brothers. The lord Pope bowed to the holy man's request, and kindly agreeing, entrusted to the bishop his authority over the Order of the brothers. Like a prudent and faithful servant set over the family of the Lord, the bishop accepted it reverently and devoutly. He strove in every way to administer the food of eternal life in due season to those entrusted to him. The holy father for this reason subjected himself to him in every way and venerated him with wonderful and reverent affection.

1C 100

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis asked to have a person of Church set over him and the brothers in the Order to keep them always loyal to Church. How would you describe your sense of loyalty to the Church?
2. What are the underlying reasons for your loyalty or lack of it?

Ongoing Formation:

1. In our post Vatican II Church, the laity seems to have come of age. Lay people are involved in the ministerial, educational, outreach aspects of parish life. What is your attitude toward lay involvement in the Church? Do you participate in the life of your parish? In what capacity?
2. Do you see lay ministry as a positive or a negative addition to the life of the Church? How do you view lay ministry? Explain your reasoning.

THE RULE

They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.

Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity.

It is interesting to note that like us, Francis lived in a post conciliar Church. We find ourselves living in a Church affected by the Second Vatican Council. Francis found himself living in a Church similarly affected by the Fourth Lateran Council. Like some of us, his life spanned the turmoil of the pre conciliar, conciliar, and post conciliar years. He knew the turmoil of the Church in his age firsthand, as did many of his contemporaries. It was the negligence on the part of some of the clergy in the Church of Francis' time that gave rise to the trend of different groups of lay penitents going off on their own to establish what they believed to be a more true religion, a more "pure" religion, as the name of the Cathari indicates. People of Francis' time, who were truly trying to live the message they heard from the gospel, became fed up with the abuses they witnessed in the manner and lifestyle some of the clergy of their day. It was not unheard of for members of the clergy to have inappropriate relationships with women. It is for this reason that several of the heretical sects refused to receive Eucharist from their hands, citing that their lifestyle was not in accord with the vow they took; therefore, they felt that the Eucharist they consecrated was invalid. The laity was forced to finance the power hungry efforts of the local bishops in their constant city wars to obtain and secure their land holdings. In answer to these and other abuses, the Cathari, Arnoldists, and the Waldensians, among others, set up their own concept of Church. This included establishing their own church hierarchies, selecting and ordaining those men whom they felt lived a lifestyle worthy of emulation. They established their own sacraments of initiation into these new orders of believers. They sought to select and interpret Scripture in light of their own understanding and lived experience. In both word and deed, they confirmed their new lifestyle by preaching their own set of beliefs which they deemed better addressed and answered the commands of our Lord in

Sacred Scripture than those of their Roman Catholic counterparts. They set out in their own unique, albeit misguided, way to correct the abuses with which they could not live within the Church.²⁰

It was in this hotbed of Church dissent that Francis of Assisi found himself also trying to live a gospel centered life. It was this hotbed of Church dissent that gave rise to the Fourth Lateran Council. It was the promulgation of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council that gave Francis the impetus to preach adherence to the Roman Catholic Church. Although the Council dealt with many topics, among them the condemnation of the Albigensian (Cathari) heresy and the promulgation concerning the nature of the Blessed Trinity, the Council also addressed the abuses in clerical and sacramental life. It is to these reforms that we turn; it is these reforms that shaped Francis as a post conciliar man.

It is believed that Francis was present in Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council that took place in 1215. It is there that he heard Pope Innocent III open the Council with a passage from the Prophet Ezekiel (9:3-6). It is there that Pope Innocent called for a new Pasch or Passover, a triple passing,; corporal, spiritual and eternal. Corporal, in the form of a new Crusade; spiritual, in the faithful passing from one state to another, a conversion, a reform of the universal Church; eternal, in passing from this life to another, accomplished through the proper reception of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.²¹ In his opening address, the Pope said, "Mercy will be granted to those who bear the TAU, a mark of a life of penance and renewal in Christ."²² Francis subsequently adopted the TAU as his signature, and the concept of conversion was strengthened as the basis for his entire spirituality. The Cross became the central focus of his life, his preaching, and his prayer.

The opening address of the Fourth Lateran Council was not the only aspect that influenced Francis. The Council encouraged that its decrees and canons be made known to the people. Francis took this call to heart. A careful look at his writings and the remembrances of the early friars show us how diligently Francis worked to bring the mandates of the Council to life, especially in the area of the sacraments. He was

²⁰ See pgs. 26-30 in this work for a detailed explanation of the beliefs of these different sects.

²¹ Damien Vorreaux, O.F.M., *The TAU: A Franciscan Symbol*, translated by Marilyn Archer, OSF and Paul LaChance, O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979), 9-12.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

compelled to work within the structure of the Roman Catholic Church to help bring about the reforms called forth by Innocent III. Francis and the early friars paid no heed to the human failings of priests; rather they looked beyond their faults to see the person ordained to administer the sacraments of the Church. In regard to confessing their sins:

For example, they often used to confess their sins to a certain secular priest, even when his wickedness had been reported to them by many people. He had a bad reputation and was despised by everyone else because of the enormity of his misdeeds. But they did not wish to believe it; so they did not stop confessing their sins to him as usual, nor stop showing him proper respect.

1C 46

Similarly, Francis set out in opposition to various heretical sects. He and his friars would respect all who received the Sacrament of Holy Orders. He would seek permission of the humblest pastor before preaching in his parish. In his own Testament, Francis reiterated the relevance of the grace of the sacrament over and above the faults of the human person:

Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had such wisdom as Solomon and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not preach in their parishes against their will. And I desire to respect, love and honor them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords.

Test. 6-9

Disrespect for the Eucharistic Species and disregard for the church buildings themselves were two other causes of action taken by the Fourth Lateran Council. As a result of the Council, repositories for the Eucharist were to be set up in all churches. This care of the Eucharist is a subject that becomes prevalent in the actions, preaching and writings of Francis.

Francis was in love with three images of Christ: the Infant Babe of Bethlehem, the cause of his love and adherence to poverty; the Poor Crucified Savior which engendered his spirituality of the Cross; the Eucharistic Lord which became the focal point of his deep respect of Christ's abiding Presence. It is this realization, that Christ is truly present in

the Eucharist, that called to Francis and set him on a mission, a mission that would reach the far corners of the world. In the First Admonition, we discover the truth and importance of this Presence as he portrays it to his brothers:

As [Christ] revealed Himself to the holy apostles in the flesh, so He reveals Himself to us in the sacred bread. As they saw only His flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that He was God as they contemplated Him with their spiritual eyes, let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are His most holy Body and Blood living and true. And in this way the Lord is always with his faithful, as He Himself says: "Behold I am with you until the end of the age."

Adm 1:19-21

Francis takes upon himself and the brothers the responsibility for making known the call of the Council to keep the Sacred Species in a fitting place:

Moreover, at one time he wanted to send throughout every region some brothers who would carry many beautiful and decorated pyxes. And wherever they would find the Body of the Lord carelessly lying around, reserved unworthily, they were to place It fittingly in them.

2MP 65

To the places where he could not send friars, Francis sent letters conveying his wishes. To the clergy, he writes:

Let all those who administer such most holy mysteries, however, especially those who administer them illicitly, consider how very dirty are the chalices, corporals and altar linens upon which His Body and Blood are sacrificed. It is placed and left in many dirty places, carried about unbecomingly, received unworthily, and administered to others without discernment. . . .

. . . Wherever the most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ has been illicitly placed and left, let It be moved from there, placed in a precious place and locked up. . . .

All the clergy are forever bound to observe all these things above everything else. . . .

1LtCl 4-5, 11, 13

To ensure that as many members of the clergy as possible were aware of his exhortation, Francis sent similar writings to the Custodians of the Order begging them to humbly share this mandate of the Church Council with clergy. Not only was he concerned with educating his friars and the clergy, but he also entreats that

when [Eucharist] is sacrificed on the altar by a priest and carried anywhere, let all peoples praise, glorify and honor on bended knee the Lord God living and true.

1LtCus 7

St. Clare was also known to have aided in this campaign to make the churches in which the Eucharist was consecrated worthy. In her Process of Canonization, it is noted:

She spun [thread] so from her work she could make corporals and altar linens for most all the churches of the plains and hills around Assisi. . . When the cloth was made and the sisters had sewn it, it was hand-delivered by the brothers to those churches and given to the priests who came there.

Proc 1.11

In these ways, by his own example and by the actions of his brothers and the Poor Ladies, Francis helped in the mission of the Church as proclaimed by the Council of his day. What about our actions, how do they relate to the Council of our day? How has Vatican II challenged us to be spokespersons for the Church? How are we involved in the mission of the Church? How are we living out our baptismal call as active members of the Church? A brief description of several of the documents²³ is given below.

How has the Council affected our lives as Secular Franciscans? For beginners, *Perfectae Caritatis, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life*,²⁴ is the very document that called for all Religious Orders and Secular Institutes to return to the original intent of their founders. As such, it is the basis for the promulgation of the Secular Franciscan Rule of 1978. According to the document, the renewal called for was to be comprised of an adherence to the fundamentals of our Christian life and a return to the original inspiration of the individual founder, while adhering to the conditions of our modern age. The document insisted that the aims of the founder be “faithfully held in honor.” (2b). So we find here the impetus behind this fourth Rule of the Order.

Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, lays the foundation for bringing the teachings concerning the Church into our modern age.

²³ These documents can be purchased separately or as a collection from a Catholic book store or they can be found on the Web at www.vatican.va/archive/history_councils/ii_vatican_council/

²⁴ Quotes from the Documents of Vatican II taken from www.vatican.va/archive/history_councils/ii_vatican_council/

Seeking to explore the Mystery of the Church is its first endeavor. It details for us the many images of Church and sheds light on its many activities in our world. The document continues with the primary importance of the Church as the People of God, how the law of God is first written on the hearts of the believers. Sacraments are presented here, each with an emphasis toward the Church's mission as a whole. The "domestic church" is first mentioned, and parents are heralded as the first persons to share faith with their children. The place of the Church hierarchy and the role of the laity are laid out. The position and function of each within the Church are enumerated. The laity have listed for them the numerous tasks that belong uniquely to them by virtue of their baptism and their place in the world. This document puts forth the "Universal Call to Holiness." All persons are called to be holy, not just the ordained or the consecrated religious, but all persons. Our individual lives denote the particular state of holiness to which we are called; but each of us is called to live the Great Commandments our Lord lays out for us. In so doing, in using our unique gifts and fulfilling our duties, in following the will of God in our lives, we are called to holiness. There is an entire chapter devoted to Religious, those women and men who choose to live a communal life based on the evangelical councils of poverty, chastity and obedience. We are faithfully reminded that we are but a Pilgrim Church on our way home to the Father. The document concludes with the Council's teaching on the Blessed Virgin Mary and her singular place in the life and mission of the Church.

Sacrosanctum Consilium, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was the first Document of the Council and probably the one that has most directly affected the lives of Catholics. The Liturgy before and after Vatican II is the change most visibly and audibly recognized by the Catholic in the pew. From language to rubrics, from the position of the altar to the the absence of altar rails, from the participation of lay ministers to reception of Eucharist, from the passive silence of the congregation to its vocal participation, no changes enacted by the Council more readily affected the lives of parishioners than did the changes that came about as a result of this document. Never had we been given such an exhaustive understanding of the beauty and significance of our liturgical practices.

[L]iturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows (10).

However, this document addresses many more issues than just what our senses take in as we encounter the Sunday liturgy each week. The eucharistic celebration is described

in detail in Chapter II of the document. Its importance cannot be overstated in that it is the re-presentation of the Lord's actions at the Last Supper, actions that culminated in his sacrifice of Good Friday. It is both meal and sacrifice that culminated on the Cross. The Liturgy of the Word is given due respect:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the Liturgy. For it is from Scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspirations and their force, and it is from Scripture that actions and signs derive their meaning (24).

Along with restoring the vernacular as a possible language of worship, this document restored the Catechumenate (the RCIA). It called for the revision of the Rite of Infant Baptism and set as its primary target the role and responsibility the parents and godparents have in passing on the faith to the child. Emphasizing the responsibilities of the spouses became a new focus for the Sacrament of Marriage. Administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, with its renewal of Baptismal promises, was now placed within the context of the Mass. Reconciliation, the new Rite of Penance was established, and Extreme Unction was given its new name, the Sacrament of the Sick; no longer is it to be considered the dreaded sacrament of the dying, but an encounter with the healing presence of the Lord. Religious professions were to be celebrated within the context of the Mass also. These are but a few of the changes that most readily impact the lives of the Catholic faithful, yet the document does not end here. Liturgy of the Hours was reiterated as another public worship of the Church to join that of the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Sacramental Liturgies. The laity is encouraged to join in this rich ancient prayer form of the Church. Adaptations of the Liturgical Year, Sacred Music and Sacred Art are also presented in this document.

Dei Verbum, (the Word of God), *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, concerns the Scriptures and how they impact our lives. It has restated Scripture's rightful place in the life of the Church and the spiritual lives of its people.

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the Body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's Body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred Tradition, as the supreme rule of faith (21).

God's revelation to the human race is the focus of the first chapter of this document,

through the Old and New Testaments, the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures, and through our interaction with these sacred writings. The gospel, the life and words of Christ, is the ultimate revelation of God to the human race. Scripture is the Word of God given to us in written form. Tradition encompasses the Scriptures together with all other teachings handed onto us from the Apostles and early Church Fathers. The authentic interpretation of these truths belongs to the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. The importance of understanding the role of inspiration in the passing on of Sacred Scripture is identified, and the functions of the Old and New Testaments are delineated. The role of the Church in preserving and handing on these truths to the faithful is punctuated with the charge for clergy and catechists to enter into a deeper study of the Scriptures. We are reminded that all reading of Scripture must be accompanied by prayer to the Holy Spirit who first inspired the sacred authors to write and who continues to inspire the faithful to read and make present in their own lives the truths held therein.

Gaudium et Spes, (Joy and Hope), *The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, has the most profound influence on how Catholics are to enter into the global arena. It challenges us to take our religion beyond the doors of the parish church where we gather to worship and move into the global framework of the Universal Church. No longer are Catholics to be satisfied with only the "Sunday observance" of their religion; we are called to move into the global sphere of caring for all of God's creatures. The Council addresses all persons in this document, not only those who are members of the Church. We are admonished to read the "signs of the times" and interpret them in light of the gospel message. We are to be on the lookout for new forms of slavery as they appear on the horizon. How are industrialization and urbanization affecting the lives of persons all over the globe? How are they increasing the gaps between the developed and underdeveloped nations? How are they increasing suffering and evil? The Church calls us to look to the earthly life of Jesus Christ; he is the key and center to all human history. This document first and foremost focuses on the dignity of each human person made in the the image and likeness of God. It acknowledges atheism as the biggest problem of our time. We are admonished to look upon all persons as our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to take our rightful place as distributors of God's gifts to all people. The document warns against the misuse of the monies spent to rob the poor of just living conditions. Catholics are to acknowledge and exercise their rightful duties as citizens of their countries and of the world. Families are looked upon as the basic unit of society and, as such, are the

building blocks upon which all society rests. Marriage and parenting are given high priority as a sharing in the life of God. Marital support and fidelity, support of the children's vocations, family prayer and religious values are the bulwark of the family's place in the world. Culture and its proper development are emphasized, along with the economic principles of equality and justice. We are reminded that above all social, economic and political concerns, we are to seek first the kingdom of God. The political systems are to exist to promote the common good, and the Church should be free at all times to preach its moral values, especially the fundamental rights of each person and the salvation of all souls without hindrance. Peace is the farewell gift of Christ and the primary goal of the Church; it is more than the absence of war. It requires the welfare of all persons. Peoples of good will should work on an international basis for peace in the world. The document, concludes by reminding us that we are to love all persons as sons and daughters of the God who created us.

Apostolicam Actuositatem, the Decree of the Apostolate of the Lay People, is the document of the Council which specifically addresses us as members of the laity within the Church. It acknowledges our role and vocation to be involved in the activity of the Church. It lays out for us how we are to participate in her life and mission. Though the Church has one mission, she has many ministries; our primary call is to bring the knowledge of Christ's salvation to all persons. We are able to recognize our God in the world only through faith and meditation on the Scriptures. We are to acquire only those things that will lead us to the kingdom of God. Our spirituality is based on our relationship with God as we strive to please him in all things rather than to choose to please others. We are to join associations and institutes as befit our state of life. Above all, Mary is to be the model of our spirituality, as she is the wellspring and practitioner of all virtues. We are admonished to be active evangelizers in the world, sharing the Good News of Jesus with all persons we meet. We are to work toward our own sanctification by renewing the temporal order, trying to align it with God's will for humanity. We seek to share our goods and not hoard them. The good of all persons should be our aim, and charity our call to arms. The family is the cornerstone of humanity. It is the basic unit for sharing God's life. It is the wellspring from which God's goodness goes forth to all of creation. Young persons are given special mention in this document, and their enthusiasm is seen as the springboard from which social and cultural change can take place. Individual and group apostolates are promoted within the mission of the entire Church, and the preparations for each are enumerated. The Catholic laity is exhorted to answer the Lord's call and to continue his work of renewing the face of the earth.

This document has been followed up by two other reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Called and Gifted* (1980), and *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995). These exhortations reiterate and update the teachings of this Council decree.

Basic questions face each of us: Are we as prepared, as were Francis and Clare, to put into practice the teachings of the Council that has so changed the Church of our age? Are we informed enough to absorb the teachings of this Council as our own? Are we emboldened to proclaim the Church's teachings by our words and deeds, by our very lives? This is the legacy Francis and Clare have left us. Will generations to come be able to recognize our efforts to make the teachings of the Church part of our legacy? Will we be recognized as true sons and daughters of Holy Mother Church? Can we make her mission our own, as Francis and Clare did?

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Choose one of the Documents of Vatican II mentioned above and read it.
2. List the insights that are new to your way of thinking or your way of life. How do they speak to the mission of the Church?
3. Choose one insight and make a concerted effort to integrate it into your life this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. As Secular Franciscans, we are called to live and adhere to the teachings of the Church. Pope John Paul II has written more prolifically than any pontiff of recent memory. Choose a recent letter of his or of the Catholic Bishops that has a significant import to your life, either positively or negatively, and read it.
2. List the new insights you have gleaned from this writing and how they will affect your life or your opinions. In what ways do they challenge you to take up the mission of the Church?
3. Choose a specific idea and design a way to make it a part of your life this month.

ARTICLE 7
TURNING OUR MINDS AND HEARTS DAILY TO GOD

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

So one day, when [Francis] had given himself over to prayer with greater devotion than usual, giving thanks for the rich favors bestowed on him by God, he recalled, in the bitterness of his soul, the years he had wasted, and stood trembling before the Lord. His mind was flooded throughout with a wonderful sweetness and joy to the extent that he lost himself, until at last, the heavy darkness from his sins was utterly dispelled, and he was made certain that the debt of his offenses had been forgotten down to the last penny.

LJS 18

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Have you ever experienced such a powerful moment of forgiveness in your life?

Recall the circumstances.

2. Why did it affect your life so?

Ongoing Formation:

1. In your professed life, is there a conversion moment that stands out above all others for you? What were the surrounding events? Was it based in a Scripture story?

2. What is the significance of this moment for you? Why was it so monumental for you?

THE RULE

United by their vocation as “brothers and sisters of penance,” and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls “conversion.” Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.

On this road to renewal the sacrament of reconciliation is the privileged sign of the Father’s mercy and the source of grace.

The incident recounted above occurred at Poggio Bustone. There is a sculpture erected at this spot to commemorate this powerful encounter in the process of Francis’ conversion, a moment when he was assured of his forgiveness before God. But it is not the only moment recorded of Francis’ conversions; in fact, this instance might be one that is little known to persons outside the Franciscan family, maybe even inside it. The conversion episode of Francis’ life that would be most familiar is his stripping in front of the bishop’s palace when he renounced his inheritance and his father’s name, claiming instead the providence of God and his sonship in God’s kingdom. Yet this is only one in a series of conversions in Francis’ life of which we are aware.

There is the time of his imprisonment. Although none of the early chroniclers of Francis speak of this period of time as a conversion experience, it was definitely a time when Francis found himself set apart from his daily routine, from his daily surroundings, a time when he might have begun questioning his desire for knighthood and the glory of war. This imprisonment definitely gave him time to reevaluate the “world’s” opinion of war and power.

The illness and convalescent experience that followed his return to Assisi was another time when Francis was set apart from the life that he had known. In a sense, it was a second period of confinement. It was definitely an extended time of reconsidering his goals in life. It was a time of reevaluation, if not in a sense to follow God, at least a time to rethink old values and priorities.

Whatever his thought processes through these two “retreats,” they did not extinguish Francis’ desire for knighthood, nor his clamor for worldly recognition. As soon as he was able, he headed to war again, this time with Walter of Brienne. While he was

preparing for this excursion, the Lord broke through Francis' consciousness in terms that Francis held in high regard. Francis had a dream in which he was shown a room full of armaments. He was told that the swords and shields were for him and his followers. He felt that his discernment had been confirmed and off he went to join Walter in Apulia. While he was journeying, he stopped at Spoleto for a night's rest. There he heard a voice, the voice of the Lord, asking him:

"Francis who can do more for you, a lord or a servant, a rich person or one who is poor?" When Francis replied that a lord and a rich person could do more, he was at once asked: "Why then are you abandoning the Lord for a servant and the rich God for a poor mortal?" And Francis replied: "Lord, what do you want me to do?" And the Lord answered him: "Go back to your own land, because the vision which you have seen prefigures a spiritual outcome which will be accomplished in you not by a human but by a divine plan."

LMj 1. 3

Francis returned to Assisi and began to turn to the bidding of the Lord. He often left the confines of the city and went off to a cave with an unknown companion. We are told that he spent long hours of deep prayer, time when his heart and life were laid bare before him, time when he came to know himself as he was known by God, time to examine, evaluate, and consider what he was going to do with the rest of his life. Biographies recount for us the next few months and years of his life. He wandered through the countryside, heard a voice telling him to rebuild the God's house; he started to beg stones and physically rebuilt San Damiano; he sold his father's cloth and gave the money to the poor priest; he was dragged before the bishop of Assisi by his father who demanded retribution.

The accounts of Francis' conversion are easy to glean from the pages of the early sources, and we might think that Francis' conversion story ended with his dramatic stripping; however, this was not the case. Conversion becomes the mainstay of his life. Francis, who began this walk as a solitary journey, was astounded that others choose to follow him. He had to discern if he was going to live a life in solitude or a life of service to God's people. He was challenged to put to parchment the "Rule of Love" that the Lord has placed on his heart, not once but many times. His concept of a life of poverty was challenged by some of his followers. He constantly felt called to a life of martyrdom, but his plans of preaching to the infidels were thwarted by Church authorities. When he finally arrived at Damietta, he was not killed but embraced by the Sultan. He gave up control of the Order when he was asked by the Lord, "Whose

Order is it anyway, Francis?" He submitted to numerous painful treatments for his eyes, none of which gave any relief to his impending blindness.

These are external conversions that everyone could see. What of the deeply personal changes that were constantly erupting within him? We are told that he ordered Masseo to drag him through the streets so that the world would recognize him as a sinner. Sources record his need to confess his eating meat, even though he did so in a state of extremely poor health. He refused to have patches sewn on the inside of his habit for warmth unless there were similar patches sown on the outside. We might look on these occurrences as extreme, but they do speak to us of Francis' desire to be completely honest to the call of God that resonated within him.

Why all these changes? Francis believed them to be his response to the call of the gospel in his life. As we have seen, the gospel call was an ongoing challenge for Francis, a challenge he took up every day. We are called to take up the challenge of the gospel everyday and make present in our own lives, not the changes Francis made in his, but the individual changes that the gospel demands of each of us. This is our own road to conversion.

This change, this conversion, is based on the first call of our Lord after his Baptism in the River Jordan, "Repent, and believe in the good news"(Mk1:15). The biblical term for repent is *metanoia* and involves a willingness to change the orientation of one's life. We are called to seek not our own good, but the good that will draw us closer and closer to God. This is exactly what Francis did, and it is the example he has left us to follow.

This conversion or *metanoia*, is a daily turning of one's mind and heart to God

- to his Presence, always listening to and abiding with the gentle voice within;
- to his Word, which along with Eucharist, is the spiritual food for our journey;
- to his call in our life, the various vocations he is calling us to live;
- to his challenge to stretch beyond our self-imposed limitations to reach out to others;
- to his bidding to come to him in the stillness, to sit at his feet and listen;
- to his mercy, acknowledging our faults and failings and seeking his forgiveness;
- to his Spirit dwelling within, offering gifts to be used in our dealings with others.

Conversion is not a once in the morning activity, but a continuous encounter with God throughout the day. St. Clare gives advice to Agnes of Prague. She suggests that Agnes “cling” to him. Think of static electricity and how it enables different articles of clothing to stick to each other. This is a good example of clinging. Is our conversion this adherent? Is our turning to God this intense? Clare gives Agnes a delineation of the gifts that accompany our clinging to Christ. His gifts are ours, the fullness of his glory. Christ never asks more of us than he is willing to give in return. May the invitation of Clare to Agnes of Prague be ours also:

. . . that [we] might cling with all [our] heart to Him
Whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven unceasingly admire
Whose affection excites
Whose contemplation refreshes,
Whose kindness fulfills,
Whose delight replenishes,
Whose remembrance delightfully shines,
By Whose fragrance the dead are revived,
Whose glorious vision will bless
all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem:
which, since it is the splendor of eternal glory, is
the brilliance of the eternal light
and the mirror without blemish.

4LA 9-14

The Lord is never to be outdone in his goodness or his generosity. When we turn our whole minds and hearts and souls to him, he showers us with gifts that serve only to renew us. Conversion occurs in response to our trying to live out the message of the gospel, our trying to make the life Christ patterned for us a reality in our own circumstances. What happens interiorly bursts forth onto the fields of our own human endeavors. The graces with which God gifts us are poured forth upon those whom we meet because conversion is not only an inside job. Conversion happens if and when we take time to make the life of Christ our own by reading, contemplating and enfleshing it. In the First Letter to the Faithful, the Prologue of our Rule, Francis exhorts us to “. . . produce worthy fruits of penance”(4). These fruits are an outgrowth of a life lived in daily conversion.

We are reminded by this article of the Rule that our call is to live a life of penance. The word “penance” may hold a negative connotation for many people. We tend to associate it with two aspects of our life: the penance of Lent, and the penance of Reconciliation. One is a giving up of something; the other is doing something to make

reparation. When we think of the word “penance,” our first inclination is to focus on *what* we are to do. In our life of penance, our focus should rather be on *why* we are doing what we do. We are doing penance in order to remove those things that take us away from the Lord and his call for our life. We do so to allow the goodness of his life to take root in us. St. Nicholas of Flue prayed, “Lord, take away everything that keeps me from you.” Our life of penance has the same desired outcome, nothing standing between us and God. However, the action needed to bring about this result is ours to accomplish, not the Lord’s. Our life of penance requires daily conversion, examining and discarding all those things, relationships, habits, and attitudes, that keep us from being in closer union with God. Our life of penance enables us to make conversion, *metanoia*, a daily part of our lives. It allows us to make room in our minds and hearts for God.

Reconciliation is an extremely important element of this process of conversion. Reconciliation requires more than forgiveness. Surely, we are to seek forgiveness when we have wronged another, but we are also exhorted to extend forgiveness before we are asked:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Matt. 5:23-24

Going beyond ourselves, our hurts, extending forgiveness to another, bringing the peace of Christ into all our situations is a definite component of our conversion process.

We are also reminded that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an honored place of encountering the grace of God. Francis held confession, as the sacrament was known in his day, in high esteem. He exhorted the brothers in the Earlier Rule:

Let all my blessed brothers, both clerics and lay, confess their sins to priests of our religion. If they cannot, let them confess to other discerning and Catholic priests, knowing with certainty that, when they have received penance or absolution from any Catholic priest, they are without doubt absolved from their sins, provided they have humbly and faithfully fulfilled the penance imposed upon them.

ER 20. 1-2

Down through the ages, this sacrament has had different names and with each name,

the focus of the sacrament seems to have changed. Our own “naming” of the sacrament may be indicative of how we conceive it. At the time of Francis, it was known as “confession” and referred to as such by the Fourth Lateran Council. Emphasis, as the name implies, was on the confessing of sins. With the Council, as the writings of Francis attest, the emphasis of the sacrament shifted to the proper and timely fulfillment of the penance prescribed. Subsequently, the name of the sacrament was changed to Penance, thus giving prominence to this aspect of the sacrament. In the wake of Vatican II, with the revival of the sacraments, the name of the sacrament has been changed to Reconciliation signifying this intense reality of the sacrament. With its proper reception we are reconciled to God and made right with one another. Although the names by which we refer to the sacrament differ, its form and the outcome remain the same. At all times, we are called to confess our sins; we are exhorted to perform the penance given; we are asked to make an act of contrition with a firm purpose of amendment; we are granted absolution; we are at-one with God and each other. How we individually view the sacrament may make the sacrament more or less appealing to us. For some, reception of the sacrament is considered a burden, a chore that can be put off, an encounter to be feared. This is not the Church’s intent for the sacrament at all. As was once shared in a homily, Reconciliation is not a place we go to be judged, rather to be forgiven. Ultimately, Reconciliation is a celebration of the forgiveness we have received from God. Above all, it is a Sacrament of Healing. This is the emphasis the Church wishes to place on our reception of the sacrament today, one of coming home to the welcoming arms of a loving God through the ministry of her priests. In Second Celano, we are reminded to “realize the power of a good confession. It is both a cause and sign of holiness”(2C 28).

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis' calls to conversion came from different sources. Are there passages in Scripture, circumstances in your life, murmurings within your spirit that are calling you to change your life? List them.
2. Which of these changes will bring you into a closer relationship with God?
3. Choose one to act upon this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. In the Prologue to the Rule, we are called to produce worthy fruits of penance. What worthy fruits of penance has daily conversion led you to produce lately?
2. What challenges to a deeper life of penance is the Spirit placing upon you?
3. Which challenge will you take up this month?

ARTICLE 8
PRAYING AS THE BASIS OF ALL WE ARE AND DO

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

“What do you think, brothers, what do you judge better? That I should spend my time in prayer, or that I should travel about preaching? I am a poor little man, simple and unskilled in speech; I have received a greater grace of prayer than of speaking. Also in prayer there seems to be a profit and an accumulation of graces, but in preaching a distribution of gifts already received from heaven.

“In prayer there is a purification of interior affections and a uniting to the one, true and supreme good with an invigorating of virtue; in preaching, there is a dust on our spiritual feet, distraction over many things and relaxation of discipline.

“Finally, in prayer we address God, listen to Him, and, as if living an angelic life, we associate with the angels. In preaching, it is necessary to practice great self-emptying for people and, by living humanly among them, to think, speak, and hear human things.

“But there is one thing to the contrary that seems to outweigh all these considerations before God, that is, the only begotten Son of God, who is the highest wisdom, came down from the bosom of the Father for the salvation of souls in order to instruct the world by His example and to speak the word of salvation to people . . .”

He was not ashamed to ask advice in small matters from those under him, true Lesser Brother that he was . . .

Choosing, therefore, two of the brothers, he sent them to Brother Sylvester, who . . . at that time, spent his time in continuous prayer on the mountain above Assisi. He was to ask God to resolve his doubt over the matter. He also asked the holy virgin Clare to consult with the purest and simplest of the virgins living under her rule, and to pray herself with the other sisters to seek the Lord’s will in this matter. Through a miraculous revelation of the Spirit, the venerable priest and the virgin dedicated to God came to the same conclusion: that is was the divine good will that the herald of Christ should preach.

When the two brothers returned and told him God’s will as they had received it, he rose at once, girded himself and without the slightest delay took to the roads.

LMj 12. 1, 2

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis was in a great dilemma about how to divide his time. How do you separate your active life from prayer life?
2. What is the basis for how you decide to divide your time?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Sylvester was the priest from Assisi who gave Francis quite a hard time as the Order began, yet in this moment of needing discernment, he chose Sylvester to petition God for him? Do you ask others to discern with you? Whom do you choose to discern with you?
2. What criteria do you use when choosing persons to discern with you?

THE RULE

As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do.

Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.

In his mind, Francis' need for daily communion with God and his desire for continuous conversation far outweighed his body's basic needs of food clothing and shelter. His at-one-ness with God was paramount and he was willing to sacrifice everything in order to achieve this desire. Prayer more than food, contemplation more than clothing, presence more than shelter, these were the values that Francis held most dear. Nothing was more important to him than his ongoing relationship with God who created him and desired to hold him dear. Francis realized the value of this relationship over and above all else. This was his goal in life and he earnestly strove for it daily.

In his solitude, Francis soaked up all of God's love that his finite body and spirit could contain.

[Francis] made himself insensible to outside noise,
gathering his external senses into his inner being
and checking the impetus of his spirit,
he emptied himself for God alone.

.....
[T]hat is why he often chose solitary places
to focus his heart entirely on God.
.....

For his safest haven was prayer;
not prayer of a fleeting moment, empty and proud,
but prayer that was prolonged,
full of devotion, peaceful in humility.
If he began at night,
he was barely finished at morning.
Walking, sitting, eating, drinking,
he was focused on prayer.
He would spend the night alone praying,
in abandoned churches and in deserted places
where,
with the protection of divine grace,
he overcame his soul's many fears and anxieties.

1C 71

The love of God cannot be contained either in the Trinity of God or in God's presence in our lives. St. Bonaventure speaks of God's love as fountain-fulness: it continues to well up and overflow as does a fountain. It cannot be contained; it must constantly give of itself to another. Francis came to realize that his relationship with God would either grow stagnant or burst at the seams if he did not share the fruit of this union. He sensed a desire to share this bounty with others, yet the part of him that wanted to be fed continuously by the love of God desired to remain apart. It was this dilemma that beckoned Francis to send two brothers on a mission of discernment to Clare and Sylvester, two companions who were graced to be living a life of solitude. He abided by their discernment, to leave his desire for solitude and preach God's Word to God's people.

How to choose the better portion? How to divide time? This was as much an issue for Francis in his day as it is for us. But Francis came to know the value of time spent alone with God. After all, it is the command that Jesus issued to his disciples when they returned from their missions. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while"(Mark 6:31). Francis would have liked to take this injunction of the Lord as

the rule of his life, but discernment was to show him a different road. He accepted the discernment of Clare and Sylvester; how jealous he might have been of these two persons who were able to spend their time in solitude. However, just because this was not his given priority does not mean that he still did not seek it. Fr. Michael Higgins, T.O.R., in his doctoral dissertation, averaged that the the sources tell us Francis spent between 50 and 62% of his time in solitude,²⁴ and yet he was still active enough to challenge all peoples to take a fresh look at their relationship with God. He preached and he prayed. He traveled and he prayed. He worked in the fields and he prayed. He balanced his life, and we are called to follow his example.

How, you ask in our busy world, are we to follow an example of Francis? How do we give flesh to this spirituality we have been called to live? How do we make time and space for this spirituality of action and contemplation? We can begin by looking to our own SFO General Constitutions. They offer us a brilliant blueprint for dividing our time.

Art. 9.1 states that

The spirituality of the Secular Franciscan is a plan of life centered on the person and the following of Christ, rather than a detailed program to be put into practice.

Central to our spirituality is person. Francis saw the personhood of Christ, the *Incarnation*, as the gift of God's love to us. The Incarnation did not occur for the sole purpose of our redemption. It was in God's plan, before the beginning of time, that Jesus would have come to be among us. This is attested to in the Scriptures. Christ's becoming man was not dependent upon our sinfulness, but on God's love of us and God's wanting to be with us. *Redemption* happened because God loved us, not solely because we sinned. In contemplating God's love, Francis realized the giftedness of his own person and subsequently the giftedness of all other persons, of all other creatures, animate and inanimate. Francis discovered this gift through his meditation on Scripture and his long hours devoted to prayer. So we must do the same. This is the core of our spirituality. We are called to enter into a personal relationship with the person of God to discover our own goodness. We do not enter into this relationship with God, this encounter with Goodness, this knowledge of our own goodness and giftedness, without deep, daily prayer.

²⁴ Higgins, 112.

There is a mistaken notion in our busy world that our work can become our prayer. Not so for us. Not if we are to come to know who we truly are before God, not if we are to discern God's will for our lives. Art. 14.5 reminds us that

[i]n all places and at all times, it is possible for true worshippers of the Father to give him adoration and to pray to him. Never the less, the brothers and sisters should try to find times of silence and recollection dedicated exclusively to prayer.

To do this we need leisure time. Leisure is defined as "freedom from time-consuming duties, responsibilities, or activities." Leisure: a time that has no designated outcome or product. Do we take leisure time? Or do we fill our every minute of down time with activities? Are our vacations restful? Or do we swamp them with theme parks visits and sightseeing tours? OR Do we take time away from the hustle and bustle just to BE? This is the true meaning of leisure--just to BE. Time set apart from our busyness to be open to the presence of God. Francis did! 62% of the time!! And he still had time to accomplish all that he did.

Art. 21.2 even mentions leisure time as a necessity:

Leisure and recreation have their own value and are necessary for personal development and growth.

Art. 12.2 gives an example of a healthy, prayerful use of this time.

They should seek to discover the presence of the Father in their own heart, in nature and in the history of humanity in which his plan is fulfilled.

However, we can't do this if we come to leisure time with an agenda already in place.

If we don't have a specific plan of spirituality, what then are we to do with this time set aside for God? Emanuella De Nunzio, former Minister General of the SFO, at an Elective Chapter of the National Fraternity in Oct. '95 in Andover, MA, challenged the members of the Secular Franciscan Order to read a chapter of the gospel each day and an article of the Rule. Her reasoning is that we profess to live the gospel according to the Rule. How can we do either effectively if we are not intimately familiar with both? Read the gospel as the story of your God who loves you, who invites you into a personal relationship with him. Enter into the story. Sit at his feet and listen. Allow him to penetrate your life; allow him to challenge and change your life.

Art. 12.1 exhorts us to gain “Inspiration from the example and writings of Francis.” I might add the writings of Clare. The richness of the Admonitions alone, in living a Franciscan life, are without comparison, as is the Canticle in offering God praise in, through, and by all of Creation. In his Letter to the Entire Order, Francis exhorts us to

[h]old back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that he who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally (23).

Clare reiterates this sentiment: “Love Him totally who gave Himself totally for your love”(3LA 15).

We must ask ourselves if we have truly given everything to the Lord? If not, we can begin here. Do we nakedly follow the naked Christ, as Clare exhorts and Francis exemplified? Daily conversion is our way of life. Take time to meditatively read all their writings. They are our mother and father in faith. It is their example, their spirituality that we are trying to emulate. It is their practice of these admonitions that gave birth to this movement of which we are its newest members.

Art. 12.1 reminds us that we “. . . should seek to know and do the will of the Father.”

How? The answer is in Article 11:

They should listen to the exhortation of the Saint to desire above all things “the spirit of God at work within them.”

Are We able to recognize how the Spirit is moving in our lives? Do we ever stop to name the Spirit’s activity in our lives? Are we able to be quiet enough to discern the gentle whisperings within? Are we familiar enough with the Spirit’s action in our lives to recognize the gentle stirrings? It takes time to sit down and listen, truly listen to the inner movement of the Spirit. And when we do, we come to the ultimate realization that we must begin to die to self so that the life of God may take root in us. We have to work through all the plans and ideas that are ours, all those good intentions we have for living out God’s will in our own lives, to truly discern what the Spirit is encouraging and gracing us to do. We have to give up our own dreams of who we want to be to be able to discern who God is actually calling us to be. It is the Spirit who enables us to call the Father “Abba.” It is the Spirit who initiates and sustains our relationship with God. It is the Spirit who gifts us for ministry.

Listening to the Spirit, we will focus on the call we have received. As brothers and sisters of penance, we are mindful of our need for continual conversion. Art. 13.1 gives these examples:

Some means to cultivate this characteristic of the Franciscan vocation, individually and in fraternity, are: listening to and celebrating the Word of God; review of life (Fr. DeGrandis' Prayer of Forgiveness); spiritual retreats (Solitude); the help of a spiritual advisor; and penitential celebrations. (suggestions added)

Art. 14 exhorts us further

. . . to participate in the Eucharist as often as possible (2); also to participate in the sacraments of the Church not only for our personal sanctification, but for the building up of the Church and the spreading of the Kingdom (3); to participate in the liturgical prayers of the Church, giving priority to the Liturgy of the Hours (4).

Remember all the different forms of Liturgy of the Hours we are entitled to pray found in the Ritual:

1. Morning and Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours;
2. A shortened form of the Liturgy of the Hours;
3. The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin;
4. The Office of the Passion (written by St. Francis of Assisi);
5. The Office of the Twelve Our Fathers;
6. Other forms of liturgical prayer approved by the Spiritual Assistant;
7. Special prayer forms for the liturgical seasons (an example would be the Stations of the Cross during Lent).

Change these forms in your daily life, in your fraternal gatherings, as the liturgical season calls them forth. Become familiar with Francis' Office of the Passion, *Geste of the Great King*.

All of this private time, Scripture reading, liturgical prayer, sustained conversion, leads us to the realization that we are loved by God in a truly unique way! From this place of graced personal relationship with God, strengthened and promoted by the filial love of the members of our fraternities, we are able to move into the world. Clothed with the knowledge that we are walking with the Lord, and in the spirit of the Beatitudes we move into the world as did Francis, NOT TO DO great acts, BUT TO BE PRESENT to others as we encounter them on our journey. If we set out with an agenda of good works to do, we run the risk of becoming the priest or the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan: we are too busy to care for the person we find along the road. But if

we enter the world arena, conscious of God's presence within and seeking the good of all persons we meet, we will have the time and the inspiration to help those less fortunate than ourselves whom we encounter along the way.

It is when we have grasped this true meaning of our vocation, our relationship with God, that we become aware of the person God has created us to be. Art. 12.1 calls us to then

- . . . bear witness to this faith before all:
 - in their family life;
 - in their work;
 - in their joys and sufferings;
 - in their associations with all men and women, brothers and sisters of the same Father;
 - in their presence and participation in the life of society;
 - in their fraternal relationships with all creatures.

When God's love in us can no longer be contained, it must by its very nature, flow from us to all whom we meet. From this stance of proper motivation, we move, as Art. 18 exhorts us

. . . toward a civilization in which the dignity of the human person, shared responsibility, and love may be living realities. . . committed to "create worthy conditions of life" for all and to work for the freedom of all people.

We move into the temporal, social sphere and there share, with all whom we meet, our Franciscan system of values. Better than any other branch of the Franciscan family are we equipped for this task, because our life situations place us in the marketplace, on the forefront to promote justice and to work for peace in the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves. Each of us will be placed in a different space. We gently allow our prayer and contemplation to be at the core of all we are and do. In Admonition 27. 4, Francis reminds us that

Where there is rest and meditation,
there is neither anxiety nor restlessness.

INTEGRATION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. How have you been able to divide your time between activity and prayer? Do you have a new understanding of leisure time?
2. Among the examples given in the Constitutions, which ideas concerning prayer are new to you?
3. Choose one new prayer form and decide upon a specific time that you will set aside for your spiritual growth this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. How would you describe your prayer life? Which is your most familiar prayer form? Do you change your prayer form with the liturgical seasons? When was the last time you prayed in a different manner?
2. Which aspects of prayer life mentioned in the Constitutions are new to you? How do you envision them enhancing your relationship with the Lord?
3. Choose one. Decide when and how you can implement it into your spirituality this month.

ARTICLE 9
IMITATING MARY'S VIRTUES

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

***H**e embraced the Mother of Jesus with inexpressible love, since she made the Lord of Majesty a brother to us. He honored her with his own Praises, poured out prayers to her, and offered her his love in a way that no human tongue can express:*

2C 198

*Hail, O Lady,
Holy Queen,
Mary, holy Mother of God,
Who are the Virgin made Church,
chosen by the most Holy Father in heaven
whom he consecrated with His most holy beloved Son
and with the Holy Spirit the Paraclete,
in whom there was and is
all fullness of grace and every good.*

*Hail, His Palace!
Hail, His Tabernacle!
Hail, His Dwelling!
Hail, His Robe!
Hail, His Servant!
Hail, His Mother!*

*And hail all You holy virtues
which are poured into the hearts of the faithful
through the grace and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit,
that from being unbelievers,
You may make them faithful to God.*

SalBV

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. If you were asked to compose a prayer in honor of Mary, which characteristics would you include?
2. Why are these important attributes of Mary for you?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Which of the titles of Mary used by St. Francis most expresses your reflection of Mary?
2. Explain why this title is so rich for you.

THE RULE

The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to his every word and call. She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family. The Secular Franciscans should express their ardent love for her by imitating her complete self-giving and by praying earnestly and confidently.

Francis was known for his great devotion, reverence and imitation of Mary, the Mother of God. He acknowledged the unique position given her by God: she is the daughter of the Father, the mother of the Son and the spouse of the Holy Spirit. She is intimately related to God in a way that, hitherto, no other human being had been. From all time, the Father had chosen this woman to be the mother of his Son. This miraculous occurrence would take place by the overshadowing of the Spirit, for Mary did not know man. The outcome of this grace is Mary's motherhood. Through her "yes" to the beckoning of the angel, Mary becomes the Mother of God. She gives birth to the Son in accord with God's plan. We might ask ourselves if her "yes" was voluntary. The answer is, "Yes." Mary, like all of us, was born with free will, able to cooperate with God in every instance. She was also just as free to say, "No." Thank God, she did not. Thank you, Mother Mary.

From the titles Francis has attributed to Mary in the Praises, we can see the great reverence and devotion he had for the Mother of God. The first four titles share with us the ways in which Francis envisioned Mary as holding within herself the Son of God. Palace, Dwelling, Robe, Tabernacle are all words that conjure up thoughts of enclosure. Mary held within her, both physically and spiritually, the Word of God. One of the first examples of Mary that Francis tried to emulate was her hearing and obeying the will of God. In our mentality, hearing and obeying seem to be two steps in a process; in the Hebrew language this is not so. The word "hear" or "harken" carries with it the innate duty to accomplish what is heard. Therefore, in the Hebrew language, what one heard is what one did! In our own culture, this is not necessarily the case. We hear, then we discern, then we act. However, if we were to take a careful look at the root of "obey" in our own language, we might be surprised to discover what's there. Our word "obey" has as its root the Latin "ob-audire," to "hear" or "listen to." Implicit in our obeying is the need to listen and then to act upon what we hear. How well Francis did this.

One can say definitely that Francis was a very literal person: what he heard is what he did. Take for instance his response to hearing God tell him to rebuild his house. Francis went out begging stones to enable him to rebuild not one of God's houses, but three. The second of these chapels that he rebuilt he named for "Our Lady of the Angels." This small chapel became the foundation church for the Order of Friars Minor. From it, Francis and the other friars left to preach the Word of God. To it, they returned to gather in fellowship and enjoy the goodness God had bestowed on them. It was to this small chapel of Our Lady of the Angels that the friars would return for their Chapter of Mats. In seeking God's will for his life, Francis went to the gospels, opened them three times and literally took those three passages as the basis of his Rule of Life. He attests that no one but the Lord told him how he was to live. Also from the gospel passage in Matthew 10:10, he took his outward appearance, his habit: no walking staff, no two tunics, no traveling bag, no sandals. Francis passed on the literal words to his followers and to those who read his letters. As he accepted these words to be true and pertinent to his life, so he felt them to be so for everyone. Francis very literally heard and obeyed, without hesitation. Just as Mary did, he accepted the Word of the Lord as it came to him and acted on it immediately.

Soon after her encounter with the angel, Mary goes off to the hill country to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. To be of service, yes, this is one reason, but she also went to seek the

guidance of another who was learned in listening to the Lord. Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous in the sight of the Lord. Francis also sought the discernment of others in some of his decisions. Was this Order, this quickly growing band of men, truly of the Lord? After all, Francis thought the Lord had originally called only him. What about the heretical groups that were wondering the countryside. Francis did not want to be known as one of them. What of his loyalty to the Church Christ founded, his allegiance to the Pope? He needed to know. So off he went to Rome to ask the discernment of the Holy Father, Innocent III. He asked Clare and Sylvester to discern with him concerning the manner in which he should be living this evangelical calling: should he go about the countryside and preach to the people or should he remain behind in solitude? Later in his life, when the opportunity came for him to follow his heart's desire and go off to the missions, should he? When the bishop of Assisi told him not to leave, Francis put his desires behind and followed the discernment of the Bishop. In this manner, Francis was obedient to the will of God as he heard it expressed in the discernment of others. He did not always rely on his own understanding. At key turning points of his life, he sought out the spiritual guidance of others, as did our Mother Mary.

For nine months Mary was the dwelling place of the Most High. After giving birth, we are told several times that Mary held all prophecies spoken to her about her Son and all memories of his own words and actions in her heart, and there she pondered them. A unique word, ponder. It has a different connotation than our present day notion of process. Ponder brings with it the sense of reflection or contemplation, slowly, carefully, thoughtfully bringing to one's consciousness the underlying meanings of the point at hand. In our psychological framework, we often take our thoughts and put them through a preset, prescribed series of steps to arrive at an understanding of what has come before us. Francis followed Mary's example here, as any careful reading of the early sources will display for us. He did not analyze the thoughts or visions or dreams he received from God. Rather, he took them and went off to a deserted place to ponder the meaning God had for him. He tells us in the Testament that no one showed him what he was to do but the Lord himself. As we follow the life of Francis, we observe how he pondered God's goodness to him and acted on it in due time.

Mary's last recorded words in Scripture are found in the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. John: "Do whatever He tells you to do"(2:5), words spoken to the waiters at the Wedding Feast of Cana, words spoken to each of us every day of our lives. Francis, following the example of Mary, is a good guide. Both listened and acted

on the Word of God as they were given to understand it. At certain times, they sought to be in the company of other spiritual persons who would help them discern the Word of God as it came to them. Then there were those times when there was not space for anyone to interfere with the intimacy God had in store for them. At those times they just pondered what the Lord had already placed in their hearts. We are asked to follow this same example of listening, pondering, acting. Mary is for us our model *par excellence* as she was for Francis.

Several Marian traditions have been attributed to the Franciscan charism. Legend holds that the Angelus might be one of them. While visiting the Sultan in 1219, Francis was inspired and awed by the Muslims call to prayer five times a day. On his return home, in a Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples, he exhorted them:

. . . that every evening an announcement be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God.

LtR 7

Following Francis' fervor, the members of the Franciscan Family have always held Mary in high esteem. Two followers in particular have championed her cause. One is the beloved St. Anthony of Padua, the "Evangelical Doctor." In his many sermons, Anthony praises Mary for her role in our redemption, from her initial "yes" to her stalwart stance at the foot of the Cross. For her steadfastness and allegiance to the will of God in her life, Anthony preached of her Assumption, a natural conclusion to her being chosen as Mother of the Son, of her continuous living in God's will. We know from Francis' practice of his five yearly Lents how important this feast was to him. He began his "Lent of St. Michael" on the Feast of the Assumption each year.

A second Franciscan worthy of mention in regard to Mary is Blessed John Duns Scotus. He was a Franciscan philosopher theologian who, against most of the prominent voices of his time, including St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, held firm to the concept that Mary was conceived without the stain of Original Sin. Although St. Bonaventure fluctuated on his view and eventually conceded, St. Thomas Aquinas never did. Scotus' argument for the Immaculate Conception was very simple. In Latin, "Potuit, decuit ergo fecit;" translated, "God could do it, should do it and so he did do it." It was possible for God to grant this favor to Mary, her release from Original Sin before the actual act of redemption, and he deemed to do so. These two teachings held so firmly by our Franciscan forebearers are two of the three dogmas proclaimed infallible by the

Church, Mary's Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1854 by Pope Pius IX and her Assumption on November 1, 1950 by Pope Pius XII.

These dogmas were reaffirmed by the Council Fathers of Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. Chapter 8 of this document is devoted entirely to Our Lady. We are told to reverence Mary, a practice different from worship or adoration, as these practices are reserved for God alone. Mary is seen in a threefold role, as the mother of the Son, the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit, relationships, as we have seen, that were not unknown to Francis. The document continues by explaining Mary's role in Salvation History, the necessity of her "yes" that God's plan might come to fruition. It recounts the many instances found in Sacred Scripture that speak of Mary's cooperation with the graces of God and of her involvement in the ministry of her Son.

The Church has granted her several titles of distinction: Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, Mediatrix. None of these are meant to take away from the pre-eminence of Christ as Redeemer. Mary is our helper on the road to salvation; she points the way to Jesus, never to herself. Mary points us to Christ who has told us, "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life" (John 10:6). In this role, she is a model for the universal Church, leading others to Christ, not seeking prestige of her own but always working to help all persons achieve the goal of redemption won for them by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, the document takes up the cult of the Blessed Virgin. Cult is defined as a formal means of expressing religious reverence. Mary's title as "Mother of God," *Theotokos*, declared at the Council of Ephesus in 431, is reiterated. It is also mentioned that this is the oldest title we have for Mary, and the only title the Eastern Churches use to this day to reverence her. Cautions are issued to theologians, preachers and the faithful at large not to go overboard in either direction when speaking of the Church's position in regard to Mary. We are not to mislead separated brethren into thinking that we regard Mary as the "fourth person of the Blessed Trinity," nor are we to demote her to a role of relative non-importance. She is to be treated as she deserves; her place in Church is second only to that of her Son. She is to be accorded all the reverence that this position entails. As we are devoted to her as the Mother of God and as our own Mother, we are to love her, follow her example and imitate her virtues. The document makes itself clear that it does not offer a full explanation of the cult of the Blessed Virgin.

However, such an explanation can be found in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultis, For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, promulgated on February 2, 1974. Here, Paul VI goes into depth concerning Mary's place in liturgical worship, proper mention of her in the Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and Liturgy of the Hours. Her prominent place on the liturgical calendar is pointed out. A detailed understanding of her role as Virgin Mother is given. Great emphasis is placed on her relationship with the Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Suggestions are given for incorporating Mary into our modern times and settings, thus guarding us against relegating Mary to the past. We are also warned against doctrinal deviations in regard to Mary; devotional practices must be grounded in Scripture and history. We are reminded that the ultimate purpose of all devotion to Mary is to lead us to her Son. Great detail is given to a proper understanding of praying the rosary; it is meant to be a prayer of meditation on the life of Christ. The exhortation concludes with the theological value for devotion to Mary as a way of renewing our Christian life. A careful reading of both these documents gives the reader a very detailed placement of Mary in our Catholic belief system.

Our own Franciscan tradition holds up for our consideration two devotions to Mary as alternative means of praying the Liturgy of the Hours: the Franciscan Crown Rosary and the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. The Franciscan Crown Rosary was never prayed by Francis. Its tradition dates back to 1422, when a young man named James was entering the Franciscan Order. Daily during his postulancy, he would adorn the statue of the Blessed Virgin with a wreath of flowers. As he was preparing to enter novitiate, he was told that this practice would have to stop. He sincerely thought of leaving the Order, so he knelt before the statue seeking Mary's guidance. There Mary told him she would teach him to weave a crown that would never die, one that would be more pleasing to her and more meritorious for himself. She then taught him the Rosary of the Seven Decades recounting the Seven Joys of her life:

The Annunciation: Mary's call to trust in God

The Visitation: Mary's being with and ministering to Elizabeth

The Nativity and Visit by the Magi: Mary's giving birth to the Son of God and sharing for the first time the Incarnate Word with both Jews and Gentiles

The Presentation in the Temple: Mary and Joseph fulfilling the Law

The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple: Mary's fear and concern, ending in a new discovery

The Resurrection: Death giving way to new life

The Assumption and Coronation: The consequences and rewards for a life lived in fulfillment of God's will

The second devotion given us as an option when praying the Divine Office is the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. The prayers are taken from the Roman Missal, and the recitation of this Office dates to the Middle Ages when the Office was used on the feasts of Mary. It has undergone several changes over the course of the centuries. Its present version consists basically of Morning and Evening Prayer; however, they incorporate longer readings than we are accustomed to in Christian Prayer. Also contained in this edition are abbreviated versions of Office of Readings, Midday Prayers and Night Prayer. The Office is set up for one week only rather than the four week cycle we find in the regular Liturgy of the Hours. Each day's prayers focus their attention and petitions on a different aspect of Mary's life:

Sunday	Mother of the Church
Monday	Immaculate Conception
Tuesday	Annunciation
Wednesday	Visitation
Thursday	Nativity
Friday	Sorrowful Mother
Saturday	Assumption

Each of these devotions, in their unique style, helps us to focus on the great example of Mary's life, a life truly lived in the will of God. Francis found Mary to be such an example. He noted her to be the first disciple of our Lord. He accepted for himself all that the Lord asked his dearest mother to undergo. If it were good enough for Jesus' mother, than it definitely was good enough for Francis and for those who followed him. He followed her example unreservedly. He urges us to do the same. May Mary become for us the example of true discipleship she was for Francis. May our response be as stalwart as was his.

Lastly, in the Scriptures, we find Mary praying with the Apostles and disciples in the Upper Room after the Ascension of Jesus, praying for the coming of the Spirit as Christ had promised. She was not alone in her prayer; she was praying as part of a larger community. Her presence there seem to give comfort to those who were with her.

She became the stabilizing force for these early followers and believers in Jesus. As she was present at the birth of the Son of God into our world, so she was present at the birth of his Church into history. In her own way, she was already interceding for the Church. She was present to these distraught men and women and cared for them as only a mother can do. Francis relied on her intercession and protection as well. He chose her as the patroness of his Orders, asking Mary to watch over us always. Francis rarely prayed prayers of intercession; his prayers were mostly prayers of praise to God for all his goodness to us. However, in his Office of the Passion, Francis made an exception. He wrote an Antiphon to the Blessed Virgin to be prayed before and after each Psalm. In it, he praised Mary in her trifold role as Mother, Daughter and Spouse; he also petitioned her to pray for us from her privileged place at the side of her Son. As he left us Mary as mother and protectress, may his prayer of praise and petition to the Mother of God be ours also.

*Holy Virgin Mary,
among the women born into the world,
there is no one like you.
Daughter and servant
of the most high and supreme King
and of the Father in heaven,
Mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ,
Spouse of the Holy Spirit,
pray for us
with Saint Michael the Archangel,
all the powers of heaven
and all the saints,
at the side of your most holy beloved Son,
our Lord and Teacher.*

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Describe your relationship with Mary, the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of God, our Mother.
2. What are some of the titles, relationships or examples of Mary that are not part of your lived experience?
3. Choose one and try to incorporate it into your relationship with Mary this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Read *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Chapter 8 or *Marialis Cultis, For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (found on the web).
2. Enumerate concepts that are new to you or have not been part of your recent practice.
3. Choose one and decide how to make it part of your lived experience this month.

ARTICLE 10
ENTERING INTO REDEMPTIVE OBEDIENCE

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Worn out with sufferings on all sides, it was amazing that his strength could bear it. But in fact he did not call these tribulations by the name of "pains," but rather "Sisters." There was no question that they came from many causes. Truly, in order that he might become even more famous through victories, the Most High not only entrusted to him difficult tasks during his early training but also gave him occasions for triumph when he was a veteran.

*In this too the followers have him for an example,
for he never slowed down because of age
or became more self-indulgent because of his illness.*

.....
*But I believe the principle reason for his sufferings was,
as he affirmed about others,
that in bearing them there is great reward.*

2C 212

As his illness grew worse, he lost all bodily strength, and deprived of all his powers, he could not even move. One of the brothers asked him what he would prefer to endure: this long-lasting illness or suffering a martyr's cruel death at the hands of an executioner. "My son," he replied, "whatever is more pleasing to the Lord my God to do with me and in me has always been and still is dearer, sweeter, and more agreeable to me. I desire to be found always and completely in harmony with and obedient to God's will alone in everything.

1C 107

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis never looked on his illness or any other circumstance as a excuse or reason not to fulfill the purpose God had for his life. Are there circumstances in your life that pull you away from completing those duties that the Lord has given you to fulfill? Have there been any? Do you foresee any? Share them.

2. How do you justify your reasoning in light of Francis' example?

Ongoing Formation:

1. No matter what the situation, Francis always chose to obediently follow the will of the Father for his life over his own because of the example of Jesus. How do the choices you make fall in line with the redemptive obedience Jesus exhibited in fulfilling God's will? Share an example.
2. Why is it sometimes hard for you to choose God's will over your own?

THE RULE

United themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed his will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to him even in difficulties and persecutions.

In all things, Francis desired to imitate his Lord, Jesus Christ. We have seen how Francis chose to establish his relationship with the Father based on the relationship Jesus had with his Father. Jesus went off to pray to be in communion with his Father, so Francis went off and prayed to seek the Father's will. We know that Francis chose to work with his hands and commanded his brothers to do so, even to the point if one did not have a physical skill, he was to learn one. One of the reasons for this choice of Francis was that Jesus worked with his hands. In the gospels, Francis encountered Jesus caring for the less fortunate; he cured the sick; at times he raised the dead; he fed the hungry. In turn, Francis chose to care for the lepers, the most despised persons of his society, and ordered that the brothers should do so as well. Our Lord taught those who sought after him the way to live in right relationship with God. Francis, in turn, pointed out an entirely new way to live a life of penance, a life totally turned toward the Lord for any and all who would pay attention – either to his words or to his example. Why did Francis choose to follow Jesus' actions so exactly? Because Francis realized, above all things, that Jesus operated solely in the will of the Father. He chose not to do anything that deviated from that will. Francis wanted nothing else for himself. He wanted to follow the will of God for his life, as closely as possible, to follow the design God had laid out for his life. Francis wanted to imitate the obedience of Jesus as closely as humanly possible.

Is it possible to imitate Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father? After all, might we think, Jesus is God; he has the home court advantage, so to speak. However, we must remember that in coming to earth, Jesus, also became fully human. Francis did not see Jesus' life as a stumbling block; rather he took it as a challenge. After all, Jesus did walk the face of our earth as a human being. He was hungry; he got tired; he had friends and family; he had obligations and responsibilities. He had times of work, times of leisure, times of ritual and prayer. We are reminded of the fact that Jesus fully participated in our human nature in this beautiful canticle from the Letter to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Phil. 2:5-11

Francis wished to imitate Jesus as closely as humanly possible. More than imitate his actions, Francis wanted to put on the mind of Christ. He did not strive to be like God; he realized his own human limitations. Rather he chose to follow Jesus' example of *kenosis*, a total self-emptying. Francis wanted to put aside all things that kept him from being in total conformity with the Father's will. He took on the poverty of Christ, true poverty. Not the poverty which simply demanded that he live without possessions, although he did that. To understand Francis' poverty, we must understand why he gave up his possessions. Why did Francis put aside all reliance on the things of this world? Francis chose to be poor, to be poor in the ways and possessions of this world,

in order to rely totally on God for whatever he needed. He desired that nothing stand in the way of his total dependence on God. God was enough for Francis; he was able to be poor in every other way because he came to realize that the only thing in this life that is of any value is one's relationship with God, one's total reliance on God.

What was the ultimate extent of Christ's poverty, of his *kenosis*? It was the total, obedient giving of his life to the point of death, the cruel agonizing death on the cross. How did Francis incorporate this redemptive suffering into his own life? Francis' vocation began and culminated in the Cross. He first heard the call "to rebuild my house" as he was praying before the San Damiano Crucifix; his vocation reached its climax on La Verna where he received the sacred stigmata. In what ways did Francis pattern his life after that of Jesus? We have already enumerated his manner of prayer as being the first and foremost way in which Francis imitated Christ. We have also seen how Francis mirrored the actions of Christ that he discovered in the gospels, especially the corporal works of mercy that are found in Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel. He also took to heart the tenets of the Sermon on the Mount found in Chapters 5 through 7 of the same gospel. Though a challenge at the beginning of his vocation, these instances did not prove to be the most difficult for Francis. For as he tells us in his own Testament: ". . . What had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body" (3). The difficulties for Francis rose from those things that were so contrary to his own will, yet in line with the will of God for his life. Not only was the Cross the source and summit of his vocation, it was also his daily companion. Think of the many times Francis was scoffed at or beaten. We know of the time his father carried him home and locked him up for selling his goods and giving the money to a priest. For this same incident, his father dragged him before the bishop's palace. Francis was scorned by the Benedictine monks with whom he first sought refuge after leaving Assisi. He was beaten on the road by ruffians when he replied to their inquiries of who he was by answering he was a troubadour of the Great King. The townspeople and his friends mocked him for having the audacity to return to the village and beg food after he had given up his own birthright and social status. The bishop asked him to take his brothers and leave Assisi for awhile to allow the people of the town time to grow into an understanding of his new calling. He was put out of Rivo Torto by a swineherd who wanted this place of refuge for his pigs. At first, the Pope and the cardinals did not understand the depth of his vocation. He and his brothers were not always welcome in the towns and cities they visited. In later years, Francis was not accepted by a multitude of his own brothers. They thought the ideals of the life he laid out before them were

too difficult for them to accept. The way of life he accepted from God was not what they wanted.

A closer look at these instances will show how well they parallel instances in the life of Jesus. Was Jesus not accepted in his own town? Was he not beaten by those who did not understand his mission? Did his own followers not understand him and complain that the way he had chosen was too hard for them? Did the religious leaders of his day not understand the message and mission given him by his Father? Were there towns that could not bear his message? Were his actions misunderstood? Was he locked up because of them? Did his own followers deny and betray him? In all these times of hardship and suffering that Francis endured, he was mirroring Christ. If the good God had asked this suffering of his own Son, should Francis expect the Father to ask anything less of him. Francis did not shun suffering, nor did he look for it! Francis simply accepted suffering in its many forms as an opportunity to imitate Christ. Francis felt privileged to suffer as Christ had suffered. In the end, he was rewarded by God for accepting these sufferings; he was rewarded by being granted the same marks on his body as Christ bore on his, the marks of the sacred stigmata. St. Bonaventure recounts for us:

And although his body was already weakened
by the great austerity of his past life
and his continual carrying of the Lord's cross,
he was in no way terrified,
but was inspired even more vigorously
to endure martyrdom.
The unconquerable enkindling of love in him
for the good Jesus
had grown into lamps and flames of fire,
that many waters could not quench so powerful a love.
With the seraphic ardor of desires,
therefore,
he was being borne aloft into God;
and by compassionate sweetness
he was being transformed into Him
Who chose to be crucified out of
the excess of His love.

LMj 13. 2, 3

Herein lies the difference. Francis accepted what the Lord asked of him. Again, in his Testament, he recalls, "After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I was to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to

the pattern of the Holy Gospel" (14). Francis took these words to heart and patterned his life on them, especially, "Take up your cross daily and follow me." This was Francis' intent from the moment the crucifix spoke to him and he began rebuilding churches. Francis chose the will of God, the cross of Jesus, over any of his own desires. What he learned along the way was that the cross was sometimes intense and called for a radical obedience on his part. More often than not, this obedience called Francis to lay down his life in a small way. In his own Letter to the Entire Order, Francis reminds the brothers that "Our Lord Jesus Christ gave His life that he would not lose the obedience of His most holy Father (LtOrd 46)." Francis chose to do nothing less.

How do we answer this call to unite the difficulties that arise from our duties and state in life to the sufferings of Christ's in our own day? What are these difficulties and sufferings that face us everyday? They come at us on many different levels. In our place of business, or in our homes, do we fulfill our duties with a spirit of joy? Do we accept the responsibilities our daily lives offer us as opportunities to serve the Lord by serving others? Are we content with our life or do we spend a great deal of time agonizing over a life we wish we were living? Do we handle our responsibilities in a mature manner, or do we seek to push them off onto others? Christ and Francis both came to serve. We are each given a unique role to fill in this life. We are called to fulfill it to the best of our ability. Our daily duties offer us instances in which we can join our will to the will of the Father.

There are other occurrences in life that offer us the opportunity to enter into the redemptive obedience of Jesus. There are the purely physical sufferings that come with age and disease. Are we able to accept them by uniting them with the sufferings of Christ? With the minor aches and pains that come to many of us each day, are we able to endure them for but a little while, calling to mind the pain of Jesus on the Cross for a brief span of time before we run for the pain killers? Have we become so accustomed to the "instant relief" syndrome that society offers us, that we are unable to offer up the pain for ourselves or others? A personal aside: as a child, if we complained to my Grandmother Blee that we had an ache or small pain, she would tell us to offer it up for the poor souls in Purgatory. It has been a long while since I've heard anyone suggest such an option. Beyond minor aches and pains that everyone encounters, there is the chronic suffering that some are called to endure. *In no way should medication be postponed in these cases.* However, many of these illnesses and physical challenges come with their own sets of limitations and disabilities that can be offered up: the frustration of not

being able to move as quickly as was once possible; the inability to perform little mundane tasks for one's self; the agonizing frustration of not being able to say what you mean to say; the humbling experience of having others care for your personal needs; the inability to have a full night's sleep. These are but a few "sufferings" that can be joined with the sufferings of Christ. These are but a few rare opportunities that are offered to seek the will of God over our own. Do we take the time in these cases to enter into prayer and ask God how we might make use of these inconveniences to give him glory?

There are the emotional difficulties that are part of every human life and relationship. The most common question that arises here is, "Who is not understanding me?" So often we enter into situations with the best of intentions only to realize that we are being misunderstood. It is hard to read everyone's hidden agendas. We can never be fully prepared for the life situations that others bring to a relationship. We often make innocent suggestions that are misunderstood by the other. Do we allow these situations to destroy us? Are we able to separate ourselves from the suggestions we offer, realizing that it is the suggestions that are being thwarted, not us? Are we overly concerned with what others are saying about us? Do we spend more of our energy trying to track down a story rather than leaving it alone? If it is necessary to clear one's name, there is a proper avenue to follow. If it is just idle gossip, are we able to leave it behind and move on? Do we take the matter to prayer and seek God's will in these situations? Were there not persons who talked about Jesus? Were there not persons who talked about Francis? Can we take these opportunities and align them with the misunderstandings and sufferings of Jesus? There are emotional sufferings that are family bound. Some of these may require counseling for our own well being and that of the others involved. However, sometimes it is just a matter of false pride. Are we able to put our own interests aside to seek the greater good? Jesus did not set out to rectify every misunderstanding he encountered, but he did take time to seek his Father's will.

On the spiritual journey, we encounter many opportunities to surrender our will to the Father's. The spiritual path is one strewn with occasions for growth or stagnation, chances to choose God's will over our own. How do we handle the various encounters that come our way spiritually? Like other areas in our life, the spiritual journey comes with its own set of duties and obligations for which we are responsible. We must put aside time each day to engage our relationship with God. There are many ways this

can be accomplished. Each of us is attracted to different forms of prayer. We may even find that we are attracted to different prayer forms at different times of our lives. The one important aspect that can never be overlooked is that we must give God time to speak with us. At times, it seems this is not happening, but our silent waiting in his presence is assurance enough that we are in relationship with him. What do we do with the dry periods of prayer? Do we continue to sit in the presence of the Lord, or do we abandon prayer until we experience the comforts of prayer? The journey is one of peaks and valleys. We cannot expect to be on a high with God always; there are times when God might seem quite distant. The very words of Jesus on the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" give credence to these times of aloneness in prayer. Do we unite ourselves with Christ in these times of desolation? Do we remember his sufferings, or are we so engrossed in our own thinking that nothing can match what we are going through? Do we place ourselves at the foot of the Cross asking to unite ourselves with Christ's act of accepting the Father's will? Do we challenge ourselves to grow? Do we ask the hard questions of our relationship with God and others? Do we take time each day to examine our actions and our interactions with others and with God? Do we accept responsibility for those missed opportunities to give God glory?

Can we honestly say that we take time each day to seek the Father's will in our lives? Do we examine each decision in light of this one important relationship. All in all, do we accept the daily tasks that come our way as opportunities to take up our cross daily and follow Christ. Do we seek to put on the mind of Christ as Philippians exhorts us to do? Are we able to put on the attitude of Christ, to follow his example, to empty ourselves of all that is selfish in us? Self-emptying is not an easy attitude to adopt. It requires many hours, weeks, years of coming to grips with the truth that God's will is always better for us than our own inclinations. It might even become self-defeating if it keeps us focused on self rather than being focused on God. In her book, entitled *Crucified Love*, Sr. Ilia Delio, O.S.F., gives us St. Bonaventure's understanding of *kenosis*. "Bonaventure defines Kenosis of one's self, not as an emptying of self but as a total self giving."²⁵ This is the true definition of love. Love embraces all and gives all for the well being of the Other. Sr. Ilia continues, "Bonaventure claims that love is a union that results from the soul going out of itself to unite itself to another object, and he calls us

²⁵ Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *Crucified Love: Bonaventure's Mysticism of the Crucified Christ* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), p. 107.

to this union through compassionate love."²⁷ What is compassionate love for Bonaventure? "Bonaventure defines compassion as 'sharing the pains of the utterly blameless, meek, noble and loving Christ.'"²⁸ Are we able to do this in the ordinary circumstances of our lives? Are we able to unite our duties, our misfortunes, our sufferings with those of Christ? Are we able to endure these difficulties by uniting ourselves with Christ in his attitude of redemptive obedience? Can we discern if there are ways in which we can more fully enter into God's will for our lives?

Saint Francis was no stranger to adversity or hardship in his life. As we have seen, he endured trials on many levels, yet he always turned to God in prayer. He emulated Jesus in seeking the will of the Father. In his Letter to the Entire Order, he left behind a prayer that calls his followers to place their lives in the Father's hands. In our own lives, no matter what our circumstances or duties may be, whether good or bad, may Francis' prayer always be ours:

*Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God,
grant us in our misery [the grace]
to do for You alone
what we know You want us to do,
and always
to desire what pleases You.*

*Thus,
inwardly cleansed,
interiorly enlightened,
and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,
may we be able to follow
in the footprints of Your beloved Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*And,
by Your grace alone,
may we make our way to You,
Most High,
Who live and rule
in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,
and are glorified
God all-powerful
forever and ever.*

Amen.

LtOrd 50-52²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 100.

²⁸ Ibid., 101.

²⁹ *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 61.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Take a personal inventory of those areas in your life where you find your duties and obligations burdensome.
2. Do you see places in the gospels where you can unite these difficulties, these misunderstandings, these sufferings to those of Christ? List them.
3. Choose one situation this month and take it to prayer. Discern God's will in the situation and try to amend your life in "redemptive obedience."

Ongoing Formation:

1. Compile two lists: one containing those areas in your life where you are cooperating with the will of God; the second those areas where you are still not cooperating with God's will.
2. Take time and discern the difference between the two lists. Why were you able to take on God's will in some areas of your life and not in others? What is stopping you from giving all areas of your life totally over to God's will?
3. Choose one life situation that is still a burden to you. Discern God's desire for you in this area of your life. Pray for the grace to accept God's will and change your life in this circumstance this month.

ARTICLE 11 LIVING A POVERTY OF DETACHMENT

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

He used to observe the Nativity of the Child Jesus with an immense eagerness above all other solemnities, affirming it was the Feast of Feasts, when God was made a little child and hung on human breasts. He would kiss the images of the baby's limbs thinking of hunger, and the melting compassion of his heart toward the child also made him stammer sweet words as babies do. This name was to him like honey and honeycomb in his mouth. . . .

He wanted the poor and hungry to be filled by the rich, and the oxen and asses to be spoiled with extra feed and hay. "If ever I speak with the Emperor," he would say, "I will beg him to issue a general decree that all who can should throw wheat and grain along the roads, so that on a day of such solemnity the birds may have an abundance, especially our sisters the larks.

He could not recall without tears the great want surrounding the little, poor Virgin on that day. One day when he was sitting down to dinner a brother mentioned the poverty of the blessed Virgin, and reflected on the want of Christ her Son. No sooner had he heard this than he got up from table, groaning with sobs of pain, and bathed in tears ate the rest of his bread on the naked ground. He used to say this must be a royal virtue, since it shown so remarkably in a King and Queen.

When the brothers were debating in a gathering about which of the virtues made one a greater friend of Christ, he replied, as if opening the secret of his heart: "My sons, know that poverty is the special way to salvation; its fruits are many, and known only to a few."

2C 199, 200

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis perceived poverty as the virtue par excellence. Which virtue do you believe to be most important in attaining "the way of salvation?"
2. Why did you choose this virtue? How has its practice changed your life?

Ongoing Formation:

1. What has the virtue of poverty meant to you as you have lived out your vocation? How have you integrated it into your lifestyle?
2. Why did you choose to implement poverty as you did? What has it cost you materially and spiritually to adopt this virtue?

THE RULE

Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God's children.

Thus, in the spirit of "the Beatitudes," and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should strive to purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.

Francis chose poverty for himself because he saw it as the virtue, the attitude of God, that brought Jesus to our earth and our human existence. Poverty was not so much a denial for Francis, a putting aside, as it was an acceptance, a taking on that which Jesus took on for himself and his mother. "Though He was rich, He wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else" (2LtF 5). Jesus could have entered history at any time, adopted any culture, chosen any status, yet he chose to come two thousand years ago, to a country that was politically under the control of another, to a family that was not wealthy. He chose to be born in a stable without the slightest conveniences or comforts. The Son of God was born the Son of Mary under these dire circumstances. St. Paul states in Philippians that

. . . though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient . . .

Phil. 2:6-8

If this drastic form of poverty were good enough for Jesus and his mother, Francis definitely thought it more than good enough for himself and his followers.

Out of all the virtues, we might ask, why did God choose to reveal himself through poverty? We begin with the truth that God is love, and a subsequent truth that love cannot be self-contained. For love to be true love, it must give of itself. In St. Bonaventure's theology, God's love can be seen as a fountain, a fountain that is full and brimming over, a fountain that cannot contain all the love that is within God. God who is total love shares this love within the Trinity of Persons. Again, this fountain fullness of God's love cannot be contained within the Trinity, so God chooses to overflow love beyond – into creation. All of creation comes into being as an overflow of the love of God. What has this to do with poverty? If God does everything to the fullest extent, then when God loves, when God shares completely, God is poor! The poverty of God becomes the richness of creation because God shares his love and his goodness. It is the destiny of all creation to return love to God.²⁹

The human person is unique in all creation because the human person is made of matter and spirit. Before the fall, human beings were totally poor, that is, we were totally dependent upon God. In this poverty, we were extremely rich because the only possession we had or desired was God! In this poverty, we were genuinely happy. We were in right relationship with God.

We have been taught from our earliest years that sin is a turning away from God and choosing our own wants. Was this not the classic case of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis? When we do so, we are no longer poor; we have filled our God-given capacity for God's own self with a self-centered need of importance and material goods.

²⁹ To read more on the poverty of God, see W. Hellman, "Poverty: The Franciscan Way to God," *Theology Digest* 22 (1974), 339-45.

Sin causes us to move from true poverty, our total dependence on God, to a false poverty, "I never have enough." God the Son becomes man precisely to show us how to be in right relationship with God once again. Jesus comes to teach us the way of true poverty.

Poverty is how God reveals himself to us. God binds himself to us without demanding anything in return. God desires our relationship, but does not demand it. We come to God, not by acquiring "things," be they material or spiritual, but by letting go. We come to God as God came to us – without demands.

Francis came to a gut level realization of these truths without dedicated years of theological training. Francis came to these truths through an intense "study" of his Lord and Teacher, Jesus Christ. Francis came to realize poverty as the language of God's love. Thus he chose poverty above all else, not as a denial of possessions so as to be in want, but as an acceptance of his dependence on God so as to be filled.

Francis did not rest in this state of spiritual poverty; rather he acted out of it to care for those he found in greater need than himself. Celano records:

The father of the poor,
the poor Francis,
conforming himself to the poor in all things,
was distressed to see anyone poorer than himself,
not out of any desire for empty glory,
but from a feeling of simple compassion.
Though he was content with a ragged and rough tunic,
he often wished to divide it with some poor person.

1C 76

How do we look upon poverty in the twenty-first century? It is a curse to be avoided at all costs? Does it belong somewhere else, but not in our own back yards? Is it something to be irradiated off the face of the earth without costing us anything? Does poverty, as we envision it, have any relevance to our relationship with God? Do we see it only as a negative? Does poverty have any positive benefit for us at all? For Francis, it provided an open receptivity to God's love. In return, he became an open vessel of God's goodness flowing to another. But how does this concept of being an open vessel for God's use fare in the twenty-first century? For those of us who live in the

developed countries, poverty and how we respond to poverty has a great bearing on how we live our lives in relation to each other. It also begs the question, are we poor enough that God can love us? Are we unencumbered enough that there is space in our lives for God?

Do we as the richest nation on earth share with those who are less fortunate than we? At last reckoning, we, in the United States, comprise 5% of the world's population, yet we consume 80% of the world's goods. Have we stopped to ask ourselves where the equal sharing of God's resources is in these figures? We must ask ourselves, "Can we give up the use of gas guzzling vehicles in order not to deplete the world's supply of oil products? Or can we restrict each household to the use of one such vehicle?"

Instead of sharing the wealth of our nation's heartland with persons starving around the world, the government pays farmers not to grow crops. How are we caring for the poor in our midst with this stance? How will we answer to God for the miserly use of his creation? How will we answer when God asks for a reckoning of the use of his fields? We are all quite familiar with the parable of the the tenant farmers:

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? Matt. 21:33-40

Over the years of having this parable explained to us, we have come to understand one of its meanings in relation to the Jewish leaders not accepting the prophets and those who had come to prepare the way of the Lord. Was there any reason then that they would accept the Son when he came? This has been a typical rendition of the parable. But parables were meant to be open-ended and challenge our sensitivities. During the summer session at Boston College in 1991, Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, known as the father of Liberation Theology, did just that. He gave a totally different rendition of this parable. The landowner is God Almighty. The vineyard is the earth and all its riches, most of which lie right here within the bounds of the United States and the other

developed nations. We have become the tenant farmers. In due season, God sends his "slaves," the persons of the underdeveloped nations to collect his produce. We do not respond appropriately; we do not share with them. Again, God sends other persons of the undeveloped nations to collect his produce, and we send them away also. The questions Fr. Gutiérrez posed left us pondering, "Will we of the developed nations recognize the heir, the Son of God, when he comes? If we do recognize him, how will we respond to him? How will we give an account of our behavior? Or will we kill him, deny his presence in our lives, so as not to have to share what we have come to believe is ours by right?" We, in the United States, have been given much, and as we are reminded in Luke 12:48: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." How are we responding to the needs of the less fortunate in our neighborhood or around the globe? Are we giving in like amount to what we have received? Or are we hoarding, burying the gifts of God, tilling them underground, so as not to have to share them? How can we give a just accounting of our behavior? Are we responding as Francis did, more concerned for those who have less than we do?

Are we living with a true spirit of detachment? We are not being asked to deny ourselves all physical and material comforts as Francis did, but we are being asked not to be possessed by our possessions. Rather, we are to use what we have for the good of others. We are being asked to share the wealth the Lord has given us with others who are less fortunate than we. If we are not being asked to put the needs of others before our own, we are definitely being asked to put their needs on an equal par with our own, especially if we are looking at the "needs" of others in relationship to our "wants." Their needs should always rank first. There are many ways of doing this right within our own communities.

Simply take inventory of your surroundings. What is there in your dwelling place that you have not used in the past six months, in the past year? Begin with simple things like clothing. Could you possibly do with fewer articles of clothing hanging in your closet or folded in your drawers? Is there someone who could make better use of them than you? Many of us have collections of one sort or another. Do you have doubles of anything? Is it probable that others could be enriched by your sharing?

As we move our accumulation and dependency on material goods from the front burner of our reality, we begin to open the door toward total dependence on God. As

we take our mind off our own wants and look to the needs of others, we become less possessive and more readily able to be possessed by the loving God who created us to be one with him. St. Bonaventure quotes Francis on another issue that might stand in our way of attaining this lofty goal of true poverty, our total dependence on God:

Whoever desires to attain this height must renounce in some way not only worldly wisdom but also the expertise of knowledge, that having renounced even this possession, he might enter into the mighty works of the Lord and offer himself naked to the arms of the Crucified. For in vain does one perfectly renounce the world, who keeps the money bag of his own opinions in the hidden recesses of his heart.

LMj 7. 2

One of these opinions that Francis admonished against was thinking oneself better than another. Within the Order, Francis set up that no one should be prior, or father, or canon or abbot. No one brother should rank over another. All were to be equal in the eyes of God and in the eyes of each other. God was their only Father; each brother was to follow the example of Jesus and become servant to all the others. In Admonition XIX, Francis states this point most clearly:

Woe to that religious who has been placed in a high position by others and [who] does not want to come down by his own will.
Blessed is that servant who is not placed in a high position by his own will and always desires to be under the feet of others.

He reiterates this same thought in the Second Letter to the Faithful:

We must never desire to be above others, but instead, we must be servants and subject to every creature for God's sake. 2LTF 47

Our calling is not one to power or possession. Our calling is to be pure of heart, to have our hearts set on those possessions that will help us toward our goal, the reign of God, in this world and the next. Jesus outlines a perfect process for us to follow on this course. It is found in the fifth Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, the Beatitudes. Henri Nouwen once described the Beatitudes as mirror images. The first half of each saying of Jesus, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . , Blessed are those who mourn. . . , Blessed are the meek. . . , Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . , Blessed are the merciful. . . , Blessed are the pure in heart. . . , Blessed are the peacemakers. . . , Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. . . ," describes an attribute Jesus displayed while he lived among us here on earth. Ours is to emulate these same virtues, to mirror Jesus' actions. As we slowly acquire these practices, the

second half of each saying is the promised reward God has for us: “. . . for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, . . . for they will be comforted, . . . for they will inherit the earth, . . . for they will be filled, . . . for they will receive mercy, . . . for they will see God, . . . for they will be called children of God, . . . for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

We must always keep in mind that our final goal is not what we acquire here on this earthly plane; our final goal is to be at home with God in the kingdom of heaven. Here, we are called to live as pilgrims and strangers, owning nothing for its own sake, but using all things prudently for the good of all persons. In Francis' time, there was a law for pilgrims and Francis wanted it to be in place for his sons: “. . .to be sheltered under someone else's roof, to travel in peace, and to thirst for their homeland”(2C 59). How apropos this “law” could be for us today. If we truly believe that we are here on earth only as a pilgrimage journey, then no house that we inhabit is truly our home; rather it is only a resting place on our journey. We are to be at peace with all peoples and in all circumstances, accepting all that comes to us in the spirit of the Beatitudes. No matter the circumstance in which we discover ourselves, there is a good to come of it in the end, if we remain peaceful and look for a God-centered solution rather than a worldly one. We are to thirst for our homeland, our final destiny, and entice those whom we meet to acquire this same thirst. Yes, we are to be pilgrims and strangers in this world, traveling on to a world designed for us before the beginning of time. We are to travel and acquire nothing that would stand in the way of our true poverty, our openness and dependency on God. This is the call Francis discovered; this is the call he invites each of us to claim as our own.

INTEGRATION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Meditate prayerfully on the Beatitudes. How does each call you to a spirit of detachment?
2. List those material items or attitudes, persons or situations that you feel these gospel admonitions are calling you to put aside.
3. Choose one and, with the guidance of your spiritual director, seek a proper spirit of detachment from it.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Meditate upon Francis' thoughts on power, our own opinions and service given above. How do they challenge the Franciscan life you're living?
2. Which attitudes that Francis detests are still part of your life? Which elements mentioned still block you from living a life of poverty, a life truly dependent upon God?
3. Choose one area in your life that you are presently holding back from God. Identify the "possession" you are still clinging to. With the help of your spiritual director, work to eliminate it from your life.

ARTICLE 12

LOVING WITH A PURE HEART

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Then the father hurried to the palace of the commune complaining to the city magistrates about his son and asking them to make him return the money he had taken from the house. When the magistrates saw how distraught he was, they sent a messenger to summon Francis to appear before them. He told the messenger that he had been made free by God's grace and, since he was a servant of almighty God alone, was no longer bound by the magistrates. The magistrates, unwilling to force the issue, told his father, "Because he is in the service of God, he no longer falls within our power."

Realizing that he could accomplish nothing with the magistrates, he made the same complaint before the bishop of the city. The bishop, a discerning and understanding man, duly called him to appear in order to respond to his father's complaint. [Francis] answered the messenger: "I will appear before the lord bishop, because he is the father and lord of souls."

Then he came before the bishop and was received by him with great joy. "Your father," the bishop said to him, "is infuriated and extremely scandalized. If you wish to serve God, return to him the money you have, because God does not want you to spend money unjustly acquired on the work of the Church. [Your father's] anger will abate when he gets the money back. My son, have confidence in the Lord and act courageously. Do not be afraid, for He will be your help and will abundantly provide you with whatever is necessary for the work of his Church."

Then the man of God got up, and comforted by the bishop's words, and, as he brought the money to him, he said: "My lord, I will gladly give back not only the money acquired from his things, but even all my clothes." And going into one of the bishop's rooms, he took off all his clothes, and, putting the money on top of them, came out naked before the bishop, his father, and all the bystanders, and said: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Until now I have called Pietro di Bernadone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also all the clothing which is his, wanting to say from now on: 'Our Father who are in heaven,' and not 'My Father, Pietro di Bernadone.'" At that moment, the man of God was found to be wearing under his colored clothes a hair shirt next to his skin.

Then his father, overcome with unbearable pain and anger, took the money and all the clothing. While he was carrying these home, those who were present at this spectacle were indignant at him, for he left nothing for his son to wear. Moved by pity, they began to weep over him.

The bishop, focusing his attention on the man of God's frame of mind and enthusiastically admiring his fervor and determination, gathered him into his arms, covering him with his mantle. For he clearly understood his deeds were prompted by divine counsel, and realized that what he had seen contained no small mystery. And so, from that moment, he became his helper, exhorting, encouraging, loving, and embracing him with the depths of his charity.

L3C 19

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. How does this renunciation of Francis strike you? What does it tell you about Francis? How far would you be able to go, in public, in making a profession of your belief in God's Providence?
2. What does your reaction tell you about yourself?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Francis gave up everything for his love of God and service to his neighbor. What changes have you made in your life, since your profession, which allow you to love God and neighbor more completely?
2. Why did you choose these changes? How have they affected your life?

THE RULE

Witnessing to the good yet to come and obliged to acquire purity of heart because of the vocation they have embraced, they should set themselves free to love God and their brothers and sisters.

What a moment! What did it all mean for Francis? In this bold renunciation of his father, what all did Francis give up? Did Francis realize all that happened in that brief span of time? Do we? In the Middle Ages, a public judgment, whether pronounced in a civil or Church setting, meant much more than the return of his father's belongings. What was at stake was not only Francis' emancipation from paternal authority, but also the loss of financial security, the loss of his inheritance, and his expulsion from the commune, the new "union" of sorts to which his father and he belonged. Francis was making a declarative stance against everything he had been reared to hold dear. No longer would he "belong" to anyone or anything.

We often tend to think of this display as Francis' conversion experience, his turning his mind and heart totally toward God. Why did the call of the Lord exact such a response from Francis? Why did Francis respond so dramatically? Could his actions in front of the bishop's palace have been a result, a culmination, an outward display, of what was already happening interiorly for Francis? Have you ever had an experience of the Lord that words could not explain? You could only try and explain yourself with gesture or tears. I think this might have been part of what was going on with Francis.

There was a well known idiom of the spiritual journey that is attributed to St. Jerome, was reiterated by Gregory the Great, and became a staple for those persons seeking to live a more committed Christian life in the Middle Ages, "Walk nakedly following the naked Christ." Does the statement require physical nakedness, as Francis so ardently supplied? No, of course not. We hear of many others answering a call to live a more gospel centered life without the fantastic show of Francis. No, the directive of St. Jerome was clearly a call to spiritual nakedness, to a stripping of all things in one's life that stand in the way of a complete, dependent relationship on God. It focused on a stripping of everything negative, evil, self-centered thought or habit in our personalities so as not to give the evil one anything internally by which to tempt us or tear us down. St. Clare shares this bit of spiritual insight with Agnes of Prague when she writes: "You also know that one who is clothed cannot fight another who is naked, because she is more quickly thrown who gives her adversary a chance to get hold of her" (1LA 27). We know from Celano that Francis experienced many of these battles. We are told that he frequently visited a certain grotto around Assisi accompanied by an unknown companion. There,

. . . inspired by a new and extraordinary spirit, he would pray to his Father in secret. . . . He prayed with all his heart that the eternal and true God guide his way and teach him to do His will. He endured great suffering in his soul and he was not able to rest until he accomplished in action what he had conceived in his spirit. Different thoughts followed one after another, and their relentlessness severely disturbed him. He was burning inwardly with a divine fire, and he was unable to conceal outwardly the flame kindled in his soul. He repented that he had sinned so grievously and that he had offended the eyes of majesty. While his past and present transgressions no longer delighted him, he was not yet fully confident of refraining from future ones. Therefore, when he came back out to his companion, he was so exhausted from his struggle that one person seemed to have entered, and another to have come out.

1C 6

Was his radical display before the bishop's palace an instance of his not being able to contain all that God was doing within him? Or an inability on his part to hold back anything from God? Was his display an outward manifestation of an inner reality? Did Francis come to a such a point of conversion and break with his past that he could no longer contain himself? Celano continues, "Even though he could not remain silent because of the greatness of the love inspired in him, he nevertheless spoke curiously and in riddles"(1C 7). Did his actions speak when his words failed him? Certainly there was no one left in Assisi that afternoon who did not hear, either first or second-hand, what he said; they may not have understood totally the motives behind what he was saying, but they definitely heard his message! As he turned and left Assisi, a new life waited to unfold before him. With his total renunciation, Francis was truly free to love God and his brothers and sisters.

Yet it was even before this dramatic display in front of the bishop that Francis recounts in his Testament, "And the Lord Himself led me among them (the lepers), and I showed mercy to them"(Test 2). Where were the lepers? Where did the Lord lead Francis? They were outside the city walls of Assisi, outside the protection of the city, outside the privileges of the city. Francis and his early followers freely chose this space in which to live. They became as *personae non gratae* having no rights at all. And why did he take such a drastic step? Because ". . . the Lord Himself led me among them." In his Testament, Francis further asserts that what had before for him seemed to be bitter had now turned to sweetness (Test 3). What caused this change of attitude in him?

Being with the lepers, the untouchables, the living dead, is just the beginning of a life-long endeavor of Francis to fulfill the Two Great Commandments of the law that Jesus places before each of us. Francis came to love all people because each was created by God. Saints and sinners, friends and foes, rich and poor, males and females, nobles and commoners, sick and healthy, all were loved equally by Francis as sons and daughters of God. This was not a love he kept to himself, rather he chose to demand it of his brothers in his Letter to a Minister. We are not sure to whom this letter was addressed, but its prescriptions to love are apropos in everyone's life. The command to love others is given three times in this letter; each is accompanied by its own directive:

[L]ove . . . And do not expect anything different from them (5, 6).

[L]ove . . . and do not wish that they be better Christians (7).

Love . . . and always be merciful (11).³⁰

³⁰ *Francis and Clare*, 75.

These precepts serve our lives as well as they did the early followers of Francis. Imagine if we were to put them into practice. Imagine how our lives would change; how our expectations of others would change; how our outlook on life would change; how our internal disposition would change; how our outward demeanor would change; how our world would change! The kingdom of God would truly burst forth in our midst!

This is the exact challenge Article 12 places before us. We are to give witness to the good that is yet to come. Our faith, our baptismal call, our vocation all stem from the awesome truth that the kingdom of God is becoming in our midst. We are its witnesses. Like Francis, we can witness with our words or with our actions, but the summons is clear: ours is to make known the reality of the kingdom and God's goodness as the ultimate goal of our being.

One way to give witness is the fulfillment of the obligation to be pure of heart. "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5: 8). This exhortation of Jesus begins with a return to the mandate of St. Jerome: "Walk nakedly following the naked Christ." It was the starting point for Francis. It is a marked beginning for us. What is it that we cling to? What possessions are too meaningful for us to shed? In our day and age, this question moves quickly beyond material goods that we examined in Article 11.

Attachments need not be made to objects alone. Possessions take many forms. We can be destitute in the eyes of the world and still have many possessions, possessions that would keep us further from witnessing to the kingdom of God than any material goods. I'm speaking of the possessions of our hearts. We must ask ourselves, "What is crowding my inner space?"

In the Admonitions, Francis warns against these negative habits of the heart:

- self-will (2)
- disobedience (3)
- lording it over others (4)
- boasting of our self-importance (5)
- following only the letter of the law (7)
- envy (8)
- blaming others for our own faults and failings (10)
- anger (11)

- boasting of our own good deeds (12)
- impatience (13)
- becoming disturbed because of another's view of us (14)
- self-elation (17)
- selfishness (18)
- pride (19)
- idle talk (20)
- bragging (21)
- self-righteousness (23)
- gossip (25)
- talking against the clergy (26)
- spiritual pride (28)

These possessions are more a barrier to our being set free than any amount of material possessions we own. These, more than anything else, can obstruct the purity of our heart. We must set ourselves free of all of these human characteristics if we are to love God as he deserves to be loved.

God is to be primary in our lives; the bringing about of his will in our lives and our world must become our primary task. Setting ourselves free of the inordinate cares of this world and of the self-centered habits that nag us all allows us to be open to God's sharing his life with us. We are to be spirited witnesses to the world of the good that God has prepared for us. Francis knew goodness because he knew God; he had a deeply personal relationship with God. He came to understand all the good that God wanted to accomplish in the world through his unique life. Francis set about to share with others this knowledge of the goodness of God. We too must ask ourselves if our lives give witness to the good that God has planned for our lives, for the lives of others, for this world. We must first be aware of this goodness ourselves, of the promise of this goodness, and of its unfolding in our own lives. We can then share it with others through word and example. How might we best define the goodness God has in store for us? Jesus tells us that the greatest gift he has to give us is love; therefore, the best manner in which we can witness to God's goodness is by sharing love.

Blessed John Duns Scotus (†1289), a Franciscan theologian and philosopher, spoke of our loving God perfectly as being the first step of charity. God's desire is that his love not be held selfishly by any one individual, but that it be shared with others. It is not

enough, Scotus tells us, that we love God perfectly and remain in a little cocoon. If we truly love God perfectly, we desire that everyone we know love God in the same way. This is charity for Scotus, not that we merely love God to the best of our ability, but that we desire the same for the other. He writes,

Hence it is evident that it is by one and the same act that I want God and that I want you to want God. And in this my love is a love of charity, because out of this love I desire a good for you which is due to you in justice.³²

Think of some of the people you love. Does your love come with selfish attachments? We love others, but do we expect that they might change their ways because of our love? Do we share our love with a price tag attached? When we love others, is it always unconditional as God's love is for us? Do we always seek the best for the other, or is our love given with a judgmental heart? Does "their best" need to be what we consider best for them? Do we desire that all those we meet desire God as we strive to do? The ultimate question we each have to ask ourselves is, "Would we want God to love us in the same manner we love others?" In the Lord's Prayer, we petition God to forgive us as we forgive others who sin against us. This is not always easy to do, but it is a petition given us by Jesus. Think about this petition: Father, love us today as we love others. Would we be satisfied with that portion of God's love? Read Francis' prescription for love again:

[L]ove . . . And do not expect anything different from them (LtMin 5, 6).

[L]ove . . . and do not wish that they be better Christians (LtMin 7).

Love . . . and always be merciful (LtMin 11).³³

How different our life would be, how different our relationships, how different our world if each of us were to love as unconditionally as God loves us. The generosity of God is not to be outdone. When we share God's unconditional love with others, God immediately refills our reservoir. God's love is circular. He gives and he receives; he loves us that we might love others. In loving others, we return God's love to him. Francis knew this secret of God's love. He knew it as the good that was yet to be revealed. He knew that if we allow ourselves to be totally open to God, that God would be totally open to us. In his Letter to the Entire Order, St. Francis makes this promise to his brothers, "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He

³² Office of Readings, Feast of Blessed John Duns Scotus, November 8.

³³ *Francis and Clare*, 75.

Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!"(LtOrd 29). May this promise of Francis to his brothers be his promise to us also as we strive to set ourselves free to love God and our brothers and sisters.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis gives us three steps for unconditional love. Which of these three might be the hardest for you to integrate into your life?
2. List the persons you find hardest to love and the restrictions you place on yourself toward loving them.
3. Select one person, one situation on your list and take it to prayer this month. With the grace of God, think of a way to share God's love with this person in the next few weeks.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Article 12 reminds us that we have embraced our vocation. We must ask ourselves, have we truly? Are we able to embrace a vocation that calls us to be open to the will of God, to be active in spreading his kingdom, to love and care for our brothers and sisters if our arms are full of our own self interests? Seriously take time and list the internal dispositions that Francis enumerates in the Admonitions that keep you closed to the will of God.
2. What are some situations that hold you bound, that keep you from hearing, discerning and following God's will in your life? List them.
3. Select the one issue that keeps you from sharing God's love with another. It could be a possession, an obsession, a relationship, a grudge. Take it to prayer this month and, with the grace of God, set yourself free of it. If you are able, embrace the other.

ARTICLE 13
SEEING CHRIST IN ALL

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*Emptying himself
through a wonderful tenderness of compassion
for anyone with a bodily affliction,
in the sweetness of his pious heart,
he turned back to Christ
any need, any lack he might notice in anyone.
He certainly had an inborn kindness
doubled by the piety of Christ poured out on him.
Therefore his soul melted for the poor and the infirm;
to those to whom he could not extend a hand
he extended his affection.*

.....
*In all the poor
that most Christian poor man also saw before him
a portrait of Christ;
he not only gave freely to those he met
the necessities of life, if these had even been given to him,
but he also resolved they should be returned,
as if they truly belonged to them.*

LMj 8. 5

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis saw in all persons the poor Christ. In which persons do you find it hard to envision Christ?
2. Why is this situation difficult for you?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Francis welcomed all persons, but especially the poor and the infirm. Which group of marginalized people are you drawn to?
2. Why have you chosen this group?

THE RULE

As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ.

A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.

Having this particular quote from Bonaventure as the focus might be deceiving when we remember Francis' relationship with the poor and the infirm at the early stages of his conversion. Bonaventure gives us the result of years of conversion on the part of Francis; however, this was not always the case. Francis was born into the new "middle class." He was not poor; he wore extravagant clothes; we know that he picked up the tab for the parties he enjoyed with his friends. We know that he was the "leader of the pack" for all intents and purposes. It seems his father gave him whatever he wanted. His exuberance was encouraged by a father who wanted only the best for his son.

His father outfitted him for war not once but twice. It was this experience of war, however, that presented Francis with his first view of life from the other side. Being a prisoner for a year deprived him of the freedom he knew, deprived him of the extravagance he was accustomed to, deprived him of his status. In prison, no one cared who Francis de Bernadone was. In prison, it did not matter that his father was a rich cloth merchant, except that his wealth might be able to secure his release, which it eventually did. But it was in prison that he came to experience equality for maybe the first time in his life. How would this experience shape his future? It was definitely a step on his conversion journey.

Illness, contracted while in prison, also contributed to his later understanding and identification with the infirm. It was during the illness that he began to know himself on an entirely new level. It was the illness that first introduced him to the silence he would come to know more profoundly in the caves outside Assisi. It was the illness that forced him into time away from the world. In retrospect, it was the illness that introduced him to God's will.

Yet, conversion does not take place overnight. Lessons learned in prison and during the illness will have to be learned over again in different venues. For instance, when a beggar came to his father's shop seeking alms in the name of the Lord, Francis rebuked him; he did not belong in Francis' world. Having realized that he had turned someone away who had *asked in the name of the Lord*, he did go after the man and cared for him. Another turning point!

However, the poor were not so much an obstacle for Francis as were the lepers. In fact, in his own Testament, Francis confesses, "The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers" (Test 1). Anyone who has seen the various movies made about the life of Francis will vividly remember the scenes of horror when Francis would come into sight of a leper, never mind contact. Any biography would be remiss without the detailed aversion Francis experienced when he encountered lepers, the ulcerated skin, the repugnant stench, the social stigma were more than enough to drive Francis away. Celano records that ". . . in the days of his vanity when he saw their houses even two miles away, he would cover his nose with his hands"(1C 17). Yet he himself tells us that it was through an encounter with a leper that he was led from his life of sin to his life with God. The encounter with the leper, the kiss, was the hurdle Francis needed to clear before his journey could continue. Shortly after disrobing before the bishop's palace, Francis sought refuge in a nearby monastery. Not being accepted there, Francis took up refuge with the lepers outside the city. There he ministered to their needs out of love for God. Those whom he had despised welcomed him, while those who had professed to love God and neighbor turned him away.

Francis believed God's call on his life was to be his alone, yet Francis' life did not remain solitary. Others came to join him in this new way of following the gospel message Jesus left behind. The first to follow him was the nobleman Bernardo, who was seeking something more in his life than his devastating experience at the Crusades. He met up with Francis and invited him to spend the night. Bernardo feigned sleep and, instead, observed Francis at prayer. In the morning, he asked Francis if he might join him. Soon to follow was Giles, a farmer come in from the fields, the third to join the band of men. Sylvester, a priest and canon from the town of Assisi who wanted his fair share of Bernardo's wealth to repay a debt Francis owed, joined also. Francis accepted them as brothers in the Lord. Francis' way of life attracted women as well who were to live an enclosed life. Ordinary townsfolk also sought to join this new adventure of gospel

living. Francis was inundated with persons from every walk of life, from every social group, clerics and lay, religious and secular. Later in his life, Francis would travel to Damietta to visit with the Sultan to try to convert him to Christianity. Even in the Sultan, the dreaded adversary of the Crusaders, Francis wished to experience Christ. Life was mushrooming all around him. Each of these situations in his conversion process and each of these persons who sought to follow this gospel way of life brought Francis to a new point of recognizing God's presence within all persons.

Francis' care and concern for persons was not confined only to those with whom he came in physical contact, as his letters attest. In the First Letter to the Faithful he addresses "All those who love the Lord with their whole soul and mind, with their whole strength and love their neighbors as themselves. . . ." In the Later Exhortation, he delineates this grouping, ". . . to all Christian religious people: clergy and laity, men and women, and all those who live in the world." He includes all clergy, "Let all of us, clergymen," the custodians of the Order who were sent far and wide, "To all the custodians of the Lesser Brothers whom this letter reaches," to the rulers of all peoples, ". . . to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and governors throughout the world and to all others to whom these words come." Finally, he writes to the Entire Order, "To all my reverend and dearly beloved brothers . . . the General Minister . . . and all the other ministers who will come after him, and to the ministers, custodians, humble priests of this same brotherhood of Christ, and to all the simple and obedient brothers, from the first to the last." Francis wanted to exclude no one. He wrote to the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, to St. Anthony, and to Brother Leo, a letter Leo carried until he died. Francis truly cared for all God's people. He wanted them all to take to heart and put into practice the message of the gospel, a message to reform their lives, to put aside the ways of the world and take upon themselves the yoke of penance, of turning their lives to God.

Why did he do this? He sought in each person the original beauty that was theirs by their creation. He sought the image and likeness of God in everyone whom he met. He wanted to share with each person the way to return to that original design of God. Even the creatures around him showed forth the truths about the Creator. The Canticle of the Creatures is his explanation of this truth for all of us. He discovered in everything a vestige (a footprint, as Bonaventure calls creation) or an image of God. He chose to imitate Christ in all he did, because he knew Christ was the way, the path by which each of us is to return to the Father.

Blessed John Duns Scotus spoke of all of creation as possessing a “thisness” of God. According to Scotus, we meet God in every single created thing. Everything is important and has dignity because everything holds a “thisness” of God. Scotus challenges us to seek this encounter of God around us. As an analogy, we can view “thisness” as we would view pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Allow the puzzle itself to represent God present in our world through the persons we meet and the creation around us. Each piece of the puzzle holds a unique place in the puzzle as a whole. Without each piece, the puzzle is incomplete. Similarly, each of us, as all of creation, holds a “thisness” of God, as no one else can. We share our own “thisness” with the world around us, and we seek to encounter the “thisness” of others. The more persons we encounter, the more of creation we appreciate, the more we come to know of God. Although Francis was not educated to speak of this theological and philosophical aspect of our “thisness,” he did live it. He revered everything and everyone around him. He respected and cared for all persons and all creation because they bore an imprint of the Most High.

How are we to get involved? Our holy father Francis gives us an example. He chose to minister to the poor and the lepers of his society. Where are the lepers in our society? One doesn’t have to look far. Francis found the lepers outside the city walls; every city and most towns have their own “outskirts;” it might just be that they are in the very center. Are there homeless adults unable to survive in your town? Where are the teenagers whose parents have put them out because they don’t approve of the choices the young people have made? Where are the persons who are strung out on drugs? Where are the mentally ill that the government has turned out on the streets? Where are the persons and families suffering from HIV/AIDS, either from the disease or the stigma?

Another point is that the “poor” person in your neighborhood might not be as easy to pick out as those I have described. Where is the new mother on your block who can’t get out of the house? Where is the person who has recently lost his/her job? Where is the invalid whom everyone is too busy to visit? Where is the young person who needs help with homework, but mom and dad are working? The poor come in many different varieties. I think it is incumbent upon us to redefine poor. Francis did not have to go far to find them; neither do we. We need only to look with new eyes, with new lenses that the call of the gospel provides us. In the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25), Jesus told those who asked when they had cared for him that they did so each

time they gave the hungry something to eat, or the thirsty something to drink, when they visited the prisoners or the infirm, whenever they cared for the needs of their neighbor, whatever that need might be. Remember, there are more situations that imprison a person than metal bars. Ours is to search them out and help release these “captives.” Ours is to see and reverence in every person we meet a “thisness” of God, an image of Christ. Ours is to embrace that which seems to be bitter to us and allow the Lord to turn it into sweetness for us.

The National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States has offered two projects for our consideration and financial support. Both projects request our help for the poorer people in the world. The first is the Franciscan Family Apostolate (FFA). Begun in 1971, the Franciscan Family Apostolate offers aid to 1100 destitute families living in the district of Alpy, Kerala, South India. This area is considered one of the poorest in India. The main economic staple is fishing. Since this is a seasonal trade, and is disrupted by corporate trawlers and sea erosion from the annual monsoons, many families live below the poverty level. FFA aid comes in the form of food stuffs, medical supplies, housing assistance and self-development programs. Ultimately, the goal of Franciscan Family Apostolate is to pair one sponsoring family from the United States with one destitute family in India. The destitute family is provided assistance by the sponsoring family until it is no longer destitute or until the sponsoring family leaves the program.

FFA has set up a Community Development Fund. One of its goals is to assist families and sponsors in providing homes for those living in India. Basically, the funding of a house will cost the family \$300, the sponsor \$520, and FFA supplies up to \$800. To support the Community Development Fund, \$1.25 is taken from the funds supplied by the sponsors each month. If someone is unable to commit to a long term sponsorship, there is another way to participate in the Franciscan Family Apostolate. It is known as the Seeds Of Love. Seeds of Love is a one time donation that provides an animal to a poor family in India. For \$50, one can purchase a goat for a family; for \$250, a milk cow. The donation can be made in honor of a friend or a loved one. There are other one time gifts available also. They range from tools for the family to providing vocational training for the young people, with many other possibilities in between. Check the website at www.franciscanfamilyapostolate.org/how/seeds.html for other suggestions, or to sign up as a sponsor for this rewarding project.³³

³³ If interested or if you have questions, you may contact Alan Ouimet, SFO at 203-458-8172 or E-mail AJOuimet@comcast.net or Sr. Rita in India at SrRitaPeterFFAAlpy@vsnl.com.

The other is the Amazon Relief Project. As its name implies, this project calls for the care of persons living in "the Green Hell," near the equator, located 1200 miles up the Amazon River. Since 1995, the project has targeted three areas of concern, lack of education, poverty and leprosy. This project is aimed at educating children who live in poverty and come from the jungles. As such, they lack the basic skills necessary for entering the traditional school system. Amazon Relief offers these basic skills. The preschoolers are now able to enter first grade with their peers; the older children are doing well also. Nearly all of the children eventually merge into the traditional school system. Amazon Relief funds five schools for children of pre-school age and children in primary grades. Here, besides being educated, the children are given one meal a day. Amazon Relief also has a tutoring program to assist high school children. They fund two vocational schools in remote areas of the jungle where high school age children are taught useful skills, and they provide jobs in their communities. More than 1,000 children are being educated in these schools everyday. An education is needed so that these children will be able to secure employment and break out of the cycle of poverty. Yet the Project is only able to reach about fifteen percent of these children at the present time.

Poverty is another grave issue in the Amazon region, as it is one of the most underdeveloped areas of the world. Families live in shacks that are built on stilts located over the sewage. There is no furniture for the most part and often there is but one meal a day. A Franciscan soup kitchen is being funded to supply the needs of the hungry people in this area of the world. Leprosy is the third target of aid to this area. Presently the number of lepers in the Amazon is 45,000. Amazon Relief Project is helping the lepers by providing housing, food, medicine and clothing. A new endeavor taken on with the aid of General Motors Corporation and Preston Tool, Ltd. is providing lightweight mobile carts to the lepers who have no legs or feet. It offers them a means of mobility.

In addition to the physical and health needs that are provided for, Amazon Relief has constructed twelve chapels to aid the spiritual needs of the lepers and the poor of the region. Religious Education classes are held here to lead the children to God. Amazon Relief also funds approximately a third of the needs for a seminary in the area that serves nine dioceses. Without this aid, the seminaries would likely close. The men who feel called to this vocation would either not follow through with it, or they would go onto the larger cities for seminary training, probably not to return to minister among

the poor in the Amazon. Jim Flickinger, a Secular Franciscan who established Amazon Relief, Alan Ouimet, SFO from Franciscan Family Apostolate, and all who work with them realize in the faces of these poor persons the features of Christ.³⁴

These two projects strive to create for the people of Alpy, Kerala, South India and “the Green Hell” . . . *conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ*. We need not go around the world to discover the poor. They are truly in our midst, if we but have the eyes to see them, if we are able to step out of our comfort zone to be present to them, if we are willing to accept them as the presence of God in our midst.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Prayerfully meditate upon the Final Judgment passage in Matthew 25. Which group of outcasts most pull on your heartstrings?
2. List the persons who come under the umbrella of this group. Don't forget for instance, that the imprisoned need not be only those held behind bars; they could also be persons bound to a wheelchair.
3. Select someone from this group and make it a point to care for them this month.

³⁴ Donations can be sent to: Amazon Relief, c/o James B. Flickinger, SFO, 1456 Blythe Drive NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49504-2531. Phone: 616-453-9104.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Poverty is not always defined by one's economic status. List persons you know who might be poor in ways other than defined by the official poverty level.
2. Select one person from your list. How might you be able to fill the need in this person's life? Have you come to recognize the unique "thisness" the person has to offer you, his or her unique image of Christ?
3. Arrange to spend some time with this person this month, filling their need, but more importantly, taking in the image of God that you find before you.

ARTICLE 14
BEING OF SERVICE

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*Francis,
the pattern of humility,
wanted his brothers to be called Lesser
and the prelates of his Order to be called ministers,
that he might use the words of the Gospel
he had promised to observe,
and that his followers
might learn from this very name
that they had come to the school
of the humble Christ
to learn humility.
The teacher of humility,
Jesus Christ,
to instruct his disciples in true humility,
said:
"Whoever wishes to become great among you,
let him be your servant;
and whoever wishes to be first among you
will be your slave."*

LMj 6. 5

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis chose a life of service for himself and his brothers, following the example and words of Christ. What are the main areas of service in your life?
2. Why does this expression of service appeal to you?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Which forms of service have taught you the most about humility? In what ways?
2. Why do you think this experience has affected you so?

THE RULE

Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively. Mindful that anyone “who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes more of a man himself,” let them exercise their responsibilities competently in the Christian spirit of service.

From the very beginning of his conversion, Francis sought to take on the status of the *minores*, the lesser ones. In the feudal society in which Francis was reared, there were basically two classes of people, the *maiores* and the *minores*. The *maiores*, as their name denotes, were the major persons in the society. They were the land owners, the nobles, the persons of aristocratic birth. They held all the power, all the land, all the prestige, all the money. They had the most extravagant homes, built at the top of the city. They held places of honor in both the city and the Church. They were participants in the local government and they governed the local economy. All persons not of their class promised them allegiance for which the *maiores* offered them protection against the warring city state and the right to work. The *minores*, on the other hand, owed their life and their livelihood to the *maiores*. They were the workers; they tended the land and the vineyards. They performed the household chores in the nobles' homes. They took up arms when the nobles of one village decided to take lands that belonged to the nobles of a neighboring village. The *minores* were the persons who kept the feudal society working while the *maiores* enjoyed its benefits. Their status was a little above that of a slave. The *minores* belonged to the *maiores* who leased them land, who allowed them to live within the walls of a protected town, who assigned them work to be performed. Between the two groups there was a mutual agreement, although it was not an equal agreement. It revolved around land and protection. The *maiores* offered the *minores* the ability to work the land in recompense for protection. The catch is that the *minores* were the ones who were in the forefront of any battle to be fought. A very unequal agreement, but an agreement nonetheless.

It was Francis' father and others of the newly forming merchant class who chose to break this cycle of an unfair relationship. They chose to bind themselves to each other rather than to a lord. They would form communes, guilds, and help each other sustain

themselves in this new model of relationship, a model based on equality. Since there was virtually no way for them to attain the status of nobility, and they no longer desired to belong to the *minores*, they set themselves on a new course of freedom from the feudal system. They would bind themselves not to the nobles, but to each other. They would travel together to purchase their goods; they would secure what they needed from each other; they would liberate themselves from the servitude that had previously been their lot in life. Although it was egalitarian concerning its own members, it was taking upon itself the rank of a middle class. The members raised themselves and the members of their families up, but they did not gain, nor did they seek, equality for all the people. They just set themselves up as a new rung on the ladder, a different barrier for the *minores* to encounter. As we have seen, Francis turned from this form of life also.

Francis chose for himself and his followers the evangelical life, a life based on gospel principles. From the gospels, he chose to follow the example set forth by Christ. Think through the Scriptures for yourself. Are there many times when Christ sat around and let others wait on him? Rarely. We find numerous instances when Christ waited on others or tended to their needs. Physically, he cared for the hungry who followed him to the distant side of the lake. They were hungry and were too far from the town to procure food for themselves, so he fed them, all five thousand with five barley loaves and two fish. For the lepers who came to him, the blind, the lame, those possessed by demons, all the outcasts of society, Christ healed them of their infirmities and returned them to a rightful place in society. Relationally, Christ raised the son of the widow of Naim, he raised Jairus' daughter, he raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. Spiritually, he aided the Samaritan woman, Nicodemus, and all who came to hear his new style of preaching with a true understanding of covenant living, a renewed relationship with their God.

However, the greatest example that he left for all to follow was the recounting of the Last Supper story we find in the Gospel according to St. John. It is the gospel passage that is proclaimed during the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening. It is the only gospel account that does not record the institution of the Eucharist, yet it is the Church's choice for this great celebration. In this gospel, Jesus is reclining at table, but not to be served. He gets up from the table, wraps a towel around his waist and proceeds to wash the feet of his disciples. Peter objects because Jesus is his Lord and Teacher. In his humility, Jesus reminds Peter that this must be done. After completing

this service of love, Jesus directs his followers in these words: "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you"(Jn13:15). Later, in the same discourse, Jesus gives them a new commandment, they are to love one another as he loves them. They had just experienced a tremendous instance of his love, a powerful example of being at the service of another. They are to show their love for each other by their service to each other. The service Jesus leaves as an example is not one of forced servitude; rather, it is a service of love. All of Jesus' actions originate in love. Since most of his actions were actions of service, he set love as a starting point, not duty. There was no sense of duty in Jesus' activities. He came to show us the love God has for us in human form. He gave his disciples, and any who are to follow because of their teaching, an example of loving service. By our love for one another, by our service to one another, we will be known as Jesus' followers.

Francis took this basic truth from the gospel and the sublime example of Jesus' humility and made them the bedrock of his Order and his way of life. The brothers were to be known as Lesser Brothers, *Fraters Minores*, Friars Minor. By their very name, the men who gathered themselves around Francis were to make new again this important example of Christ. We know that Francis cared for the lepers, those unfortunate persons who found themselves outside the acceptable bounds of society. He cared for their physical needs, but rest assured that the lepers noticed in Francis an example of Christ. As Celano records:

Then the holy lover of profound humility moved to the lepers and stayed with them. For God's sake he served them all with great love. He washed all the filth from them, and even cleaned out the pus of their sores, just as he said in his *Testament*: "When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers, and the Lord led me among them and I showed mercy to them."

1C 17

Not only the lepers, but all others who came to him in need of help met with Francis' giving spirit. In *The Assisi Compilation* we read:

. . . a poor old woman who had two sons in religion, came to that place seeking some alms of blessed Francis because that year she did not have enough to live.

Blessed Francis said to Brother Peter of Catanio, who was the general minister at the time: "Have we anything to give our mother?" For he used to say that the mother of any brother was his own and that of all the brothers in the religion. Brother Peter told him: "We do not have

anything in the house that we can give her, especially since she wants such alms as would provide for her corporal needs. In the church we have only one New Testament for reading the lessons at matins." At that time, the brothers did not have breviaries and not many psalters.

Blessed Francis responded: "Give our mother the New Testament, so she can sell it for her needs.

AC 93

In the twenty-first century, this might not seem to be such a gift. Most of us have an extra New Testament lying around the house or know where we can replace one if we happen to give ours away. This was not the case in Francis' time. The printing press had not yet been invented. Parchment had to be prepared, quills gathered and sharpened from bird feathers, ink made from various pigments of the earth, not to mention the painstaking labor of copying the Scriptures letter by letter. The cost of such a gift in today's figures would be close to \$10,000!

He asked his brothers to act in a similar manner. Shortly after Giles came to join the small band of men (Giles was the third man to join), while still in his clothing of the world,

. . . a poor man happened to come to [Rivo Torto] asking for alms of blessed Francis. Blessed Francis said to him who was the third brother: "Give the poor brother your mantle." Immediately, with great joy, he took it off his back and gave it to him.

AC 92

Service did not always have to be in the caring of the sick or looking out for the material needs of another. Francis was well aware that helping another "save face" was also a useful service. He did not always have to look beyond the limits of his small band of friars to be of service. One night a brother was so hungry that he could not sleep. He cried out:

"I am dying brothers, I am dying of hunger." At once that extraordinary shepherd got up, and hurried to treat the sick lamb with the right medicine. He ordered them to set the table, although filled with everyday fare. Since there was no wine – as often happened – they made do with water. Francis started eating first. Then, he invited the rest of the brothers to do the same, for charity's sake, so that their brother would not be embarrassed.

2C 22

In like manner, Clare was not insulated from service simply because she led a cloistered life. In the *Legend of St. Clare*, Celano recounts her various forms of service.

She never shirked any familial chores, to such an extent that she very often washed the hands of the sisters, assisted those who were seated [at table], and waited on those who were eating. Rarely would she give an order, instead she would do things spontaneously, preferring rather to do things herself than to order her sisters. She herself washed the mattresses of the sick; she herself, with that noble spirit of hers, cleansed them, not running away from their filth nor shrinking from their stench. She frequently and reverently washed the feet of the serving [sisters] who returned from the outside and, after washing them, kissed them. Once when she was washing the feet of one of these servants, while bending to kiss them, that [sister], not tolerating such humility, withdrew her foot and, with it, struck the Lady on her mouth. Yet she calmly took the foot of the sister again and, on its sole, placed a firm kiss.

LC 12

In Article 6, we have seen the great service Clare rendered to the churches of the surrounding Umbrian countryside preparing cloths for the altars. She prayed for Francis in his lifetime and for the friars who followed his Rule. She also gave advice to the friars and popes who came seeking her counsel. She cared for persons from the town who were sent to her for a cure. She provided assistance to the friar who was thought to be mentally disturbed. From her cloistered existence, her actions of service were widely known. Even before she joined Francis in this new endeavor of evangelical living, Clare sold her inheritance and gave the monies to the poor.

These two remarkable persons have given us Rules and examples to follow, proofs that living the gospel message is not impossible to do. They have left a legacy and a family that have paved the way before us. Ours is to continue to make a difference in our world as they made a difference in theirs. We are not to imitate their actions; rather, we are called to make the gospel present in our own day, in our own place, to whomever we encounter.

We are called, like Francis and Clare, to become servants of all persons. Like Francis and Clare our calling must begin from the inside. Our calling must originate in our desire to imitate Christ, to bring the message of the gospel to our world today. Like Francis and Clare, we are to work toward building a more *evangelical* world, a world rooted in gospel principles. We must first nurture these principles in our own lives. They must become the core of all we are and do. We must know them as well as we

know the phrases to the Our Father or the Hail Mary. Our service to the world begins as the words of the Scripture become imbedded in our hearts and change our motives. They become the fruit of the seed that is growing within. We don't seek to be of service for service's sake; rather, we seek to be of service because it is the command of our Lord. It is the example he gave us to follow. Service for service's sake can be accomplished by any number of qualified social workers. They are properly trained and motivated to care for the needs of the sick, the lonely, the destitute, the depressed, the imprisoned, the homeless, the impoverished in our midst. But their call does not necessarily begin from the same space as ours.

In the lives of Francis and Clare, we can see how service begins in the gospel and ends in equality. They took the gospel message and made it the basis of a new form of life. Neither desired to be in charge of others. Both chose to serve others; both chose to be the least servant of others. In this manner, the Orders they established and the example they left us, set up a manner of living in which no one was above another; those chosen to lead were to lead as servants.

Our Rule calls us to build up a more *fraternal* world, not a world of the haves and the have nots. Look around you. Is our world much different from the world of *maiores* and *minores* that Francis tried to change? He tried to substitute a world of equality for a world of domination. Our call is to build a more fraternal world, a world where all persons are revered as sisters and brothers of the Lord.

Again, we look to Francis and Clare to see where they began this ministry of caring. It was not in some remote part of the world. It was right where they were living. It began with caring for the brothers and sisters the Lord gave to them respectively. From there, it radiated outward to touch the lives of the persons they met or who came to them. Our call likewise is to be of service to all those in need. May we begin at home and not trip over God in the doorway as we rush out to be of service to others. We begin by being of service to the members of our families. Service doesn't require huge tasks; service can be as mundane as washing the dishes or folding clothes if it offers another relief. Sitting with an elderly relative or reading to a young child are forms of service. Moving beyond our homes, we enter the next sphere of our family circle, our brothers and sisters in fraternity. What assistance can we offer to enliven our fraternal gatherings? Aught we be of service to the members in formation? Who needs a phone call or a visit beyond the gathering time? Do we drop a note or visit the member who

is unable to attend for health reasons? Better still, do we take the gathering to their home so that they do not feel excluded? From these places we can then expand our service to the persons in our local communities. Each community is different and has diverse needs. What are some of these needs in your own neighborhood? Are there homeless persons on your streets? Are there persons in nursing homes who need visiting? Are there shut-ins who need groceries or who would just like to get out of the house for an afternoon? Are there youngsters who need a mentor? Are there needs in your parish with which you could assist?

We must always bear in mind that the hallmark of Franciscan service is the spirit from which our service arises and the goal to which it is aimed. Our service must arise from Jesus' exhortation, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you"(Jn13:15). Franciscan service must have as its goal love for one another as Jesus loves us. We must constantly remember that God has no favorites. Jesus' command to love is equally a command to serve. He places needy persons in our path so that we might love and serve him in them. Francis and Clare conformed their lives to the example Jesus left behind. By the love we have for one another, by our service to one another, we will be known as Jesus' followers and sons and daughters of Francis and Clare.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Which of the ways in which Francis and Clare served their brothers and sisters are new to you?
2. What are some new understandings and avenues of service that these insights might offer you?
3. Choose one and act upon it this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Has your attitude toward service been socially motivated or evangelically and fraternally motivated? Explain.
2. List forms of service that, for you, are based in the Scriptures and which you feel will help bring about the equality of all persons.
3. Seek out a way to pursue one of these forms of service this month.

ARTICLE 15

PROMOTING JUSTICE

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Now in the thirteenth year of his conversion, he journeyed to the region of Syria, while bitter and long battles were being waged daily between Christians and pagans. Taking a companion with him, he was not afraid to present himself to the sight of the Sultan of the Saracens.

*Who is equal to the task of telling this story?
What great firmness he showed standing in front of him!
With great strength of soul he spoke to him,
with eloquence and confidence
he answered those who insulted the Christian law.*

Before he reached the Sultan, he was captured by soldiers, insulted and beaten, but was not afraid. He did not flinch at threats of torture nor was he shaken by death threats. Although he was ill-treated by many with a hostile spirit and a harsh attitude, he was received very graciously by the Sultan. The Sultan honored him as much as he could, offering him many gifts, trying to turn his mind to worldly riches. But when he saw that he resolutely scorned all these things like dung, the Sultan was over-flowing with admiration and recognized him as a man unlike any other. He was moved by his words and listened to him very willingly.

1C 57

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis did not let bodily threats stop him from sharing the truth of the gospel message – even with an enemy. His persistence paid off and the Sultan eventually listened to him willingly. Are you willing to take a stance and speak the truth of the gospel in areas that are in need of justice?

2. Why do you take this stance?

Ongoing Formation:

1. How do you understand justice and your stance in relation to the world, in relation to other people, in relation to yourself?

2. What has brought you to these understandings?

THE RULE

Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront of promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith.

Francis was not shy when it came to responding to an injustice that confronted him. Celano recounts another incident that occurred as Otto of Brunswick was passing through Assisi. Francis was appalled by the wealth this man exuded while many of his subjects were found to be in abject poverty. The whole the town turned out to see this emperor as he passed through in all his regalia. Francis himself refused to budge; he did not join in the festivities. Nor did he allow any of the brothers, except one who was sent by Francis to warn the emperor that all his pomp would not last long. Francis himself allowed his absence to speak his displeasure of the worldly attitude of the emperor.

Silence can sometimes speak louder than words, and one's absence at the scene of an offense to justice may echo louder than one's presence in silence. In many cases, Francis found this to be the case. In other instances, Francis allowed his actions to speak for him. The lepers, the "living dead" who occupied the spaces surrounding the Assisi countryside, were to be segregated so that the people of the town were protected. But who was to care for these poor unfortunates who had been expelled from the city? There were priests assigned to their spiritual well-being, but who was to care for their bodily needs? Francis joined these "brothers." When he left his father at the bishop's palace, he too wandered out of the city gates, to the place of the unprotected. Francis cared for these people, these outcasts, because he felt that in caring for the lepers he was caring for Christ. He shared his life with them for a while; he made it part of the early friars' formation that they spend a year caring for these dispossessed children of God.

Francis believed that all persons were created in the image and likeness of God. All were equal in God's sight; all were equally loved by God. It became a characteristic of Francis' belief that all persons should be treated equally. His brave renunciation before the bishop's palace did more than shock the people of the town. He placed himself on an even par with the poor, with those who had no status in the town, those who had no

voice, those who had no power. He not only gave up his wealth, but all the rights that his wealth entitled him to. He looked upon this as a justice issue; one that had to be faced with the entirety of his being. Once, in his father's shop, he refused to give alms to a poor man who begged in the name of the Lord; in the end, he chose to be one of the poor because he realized that his Lord had chosen that same life.

Throughout his life and his wanderings, Francis always championed the equal basis of all peoples. No one was to lord it over another. Those who were given places of authority were to use it not for their own glory but for the betterment of the peoples entrusted to their care. Francis frequently warned the friars not to be looking for places of honor, but if given the position, to use it as an opportunity to serve the others. In Admonition IV Francis exhorts:

Let those who are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers. And if they are more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a money bag to the peril of their soul.

Francis' first order of justice was equality of all persons. He followed this concept in his own life and set it forth as a way of life for those who would follow him. In order to support Clare and her life of enclosed poverty, Francis promised that the friars would provide food for the Poor Ladies from their daily begging. They were also to provide for the spiritual nourishment of the Ladies as well. This care of the Ladies was to be the subject of Clare's fight for justice. It so happened in the history of the Order that it had been decided that the friars would no longer bring the Poor Ladies spiritual nourishment. In her obstinacy, Clare demanded that they not bring her physical nourishment either; if the brothers were not to care for her soul, she did not want them caring for her body. The friars relented and the Poor Ladies received both physical and spiritual nourishment from the friars from then on.

Justice in our own age is taking on a whole new meaning. As of September 11, 2001, we in the United States have tasted a small portion of the injustice that the rest of our brothers and sisters around the world have lived with for decades and sometimes centuries. We have been thrust into a world where terror reigns, where the will of another is unjustly superimposed on what we believe to be our own good. To be attacked and not understand why, to be held captive by fear not knowing when or if there will be another attack, to have our entire world shattered because others have

decided that they disagree with our way of life are new issues. This is from our own view. What we must begin to ask ourselves is how often have we, as a powerful nation, gone into another's territory and tried to rearrange their way of life because it did not agree with our own system of values? How often have we withheld aid because nations did not follow guidelines for their internal behavior that we had set up? How often do we interfere with other nations because they have chosen a political system that defies our own? How often do we exploit the resources of another nation for our own well being? Do we abolish the debt of the underdeveloped countries that do all they can simply to survive? These are global issues. Did we become aware on September 11 of how people perceive us treating other nations around the globe? Did someone finally turn the tables on us and ask us to look at the world differently?

Indifference has often clouded our view of world justice. "But this is a global situation; we can't be held responsible for the decisions of our government." "We each have only one small voice." Then let's look at conditions closer to home. On a national level, ask yourself when was the last time an issue came to the fore that you felt strongly enough to contact a government official? Just to compile a listing:

- equal, quality education for all children
- abolition of the death penalty
- fair minimum wage for persons who have no other means of support
- adequate housing for all people
- prescription drug support for the elderly and other persons on Medicare
- human life amendment to the Constitution
- an end to the poverty level in this country, especially as it exists in Appalachia and on the native American reservations
- an ending of funding of the SOA (School of the Americas) in Georgia

The list can go on and on. You can add your own interests to it. The basic question remains: Do we do anything about any of these issues or are they just still too overwhelming?

Then look at the local issues that surround you where you live.

- Who is caring for the elderly and the homeless in your locale?
- Is anyone watching out for the teens and protecting them from a drug infested world?
- What of the latch-key children?
- Who is accountable for the shut-ins?

- Who is aiding the single parents in their struggle to survive?
- Who is advocating for medical benefits for the elderly?

I realize I am addressing issues that are prominent here in the United States, but I doubt that they are singularly our own problem. No matter what country we select, there are still

- the homeless
- the jobless
- children at risk
- victims of domestic violence
- the hungry
- the neglected
- the mentally ill who are turned out on the streets
- the orphans who receive inadequate care
- the drug addicts and the prostitutes
- those living with HIV/ AIDS
- those in prison
- those who suffer from religious intolerance
- the religious dissidents.

How do we care for them? How do we take a stand and champion their cause? Are we even aware that there is a course to be taken? This is the question that is posed to us. This is the challenge we continually face. Francis did not shy away from a problem because it seemed too overwhelming. He took it one step at a time, did what he could do, encouraged others to join in his "battle," appointed others to take over as he moved along. The point of his example is that he did something, no matter how small. He saw an injustice and he addressed it. He followed the example of Jesus and we are called to do the same.

On November 14, 2001, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement in response to the events of September 11th. In it, they raise both global and national issues. Addressed to the nation as a whole, they sought to highlight several major global issues that must be addressed if we are to live in a more just and peaceful world:

- the scandal of poverty
- human rights
- weapons of mass destruction
- strengthening of the UN and other international bodies.

On a personal level, the bishops have asked for individuals to give time to

- prayer
- fasting, as a sacrifice for justice, peace and the protection of innocent life
- teaching on the Church's position on war and peace
- dialogue with Jews, Muslims, other Christians, and persons of other belief systems
- witness with lives that value human dignity
- service or assistance to any and all in our midst who are in need
- solidarity with victims of terror throughout the world
- hope, "source for strength and action in demanding times."³⁵

We must ask ourselves the painful question, "Are we too comfortable to promote justice?" It is not easy to be the lone voice that asks for housing for the elderly, or help for the homeless. Starting a soup kitchen might seem to be a daunting task, but it may never be accomplished if everyone remains an "armchair justice seeker." Where are the persons who are being denied justice in your own neighborhood? Can you identify anyone? Are they not in your circle of social awareness? Are we willing to take a stand for justice or do we only practice justice from a spectator point of view? Do we proclaim justice with our lips, but sit back and allow others to be on the forefront in promoting and achieving justice for all peoples? Do we stay in the comfort of our own homes and cheer others on? This is not the example of Francis and Clare or Jesus! They not only sought justice in every aspect of their own lives, but also sought justice for anyone, anywhere, who was being denied their God-given rights.

Again, the question arises, "What can one person do?" In 1982, two Franciscans, a sister from the United States and a friar from Malta felt that it might be time for a Franciscan presence at the United Nations. Separately, they took this idea to their respective Peace and Justice persons. The idea began to swell and with the aid of other members of the Franciscan Family, a Vision Statement is drawn up within the next two years. The Franciscan presence would focus on three areas: peacekeeping, concern for the poor and care of the environment – all Franciscan values which the drafters of the Vision Statement felt were very necessary to bring to the attention of this world governing body. Over the course of the next seven years, the idea was brought to the attention of the entire Franciscan family. In 1989, *Franciscans International* (FI) was given NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) status. In 1990, an office was opened in

³⁵ *A Pastoral Message: Living With Faith and Hope After September 11*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 14, 2001.

New York. At that time, an application for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN was drawn up. This status, later known as General Consultative Status, was granted in 1995. By it, Franciscans International has the responsibility to serve as consultant to the member governments and the UN Secretariat. It is also to act as technical advisors and experts. In 1997, FI, joining with the Dominicans for Peace and Justice, opened an office at the UN in Geneva, Switzerland. Its goal is to promote and protect the human rights of all persons: social, political, civil, cultural, and economic. In 2001, the Conference of the Franciscan Family asked all Franciscans to contribute to and to participate in the workings of FI. Think of it: this effort to have the ideals of Francis and Clare given voice at the United Nations was born of the idea of a Franciscan sister and a Franciscan friar. A single idea that has borne much fruit.

The Franciscan concept of justice has not died; it is alive and growing in the minds and hearts, lives and neighborhoods of Franciscans around the world. It is taking root in places as grand as the United Nations and as simple as the elderly woman's home down the street. Ours is to perceive the world with new eyes, the eyes of awareness, the eyes of Francis and Clare, the eyes of our Lord Jesus.

Our own patron saint, St. Louis IX, wrote these words of advice to his son, concerning the care he was to have for the people of his kingdom. May his advice to his biological son be sound advice to us, his spiritual sons and daughters as well.

Be kindly disposed to the poor, the wretched and the afflicted; help them as much as you can and console them. Thank God for the many blessings he has bestowed on you so that you may be worthy to receive greater ones. Be just towards your subjects; in matters of justice adhere to the line, departing neither to the right or to the left. Incline to the poor man's side rather than to the rich man's until you are certain where the truth lies. Take care that all your subjects are safeguarded in justice and peace. . .³⁶

³⁶ Office of Readings, Feast of St. Louis, August 25.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Select various articles from your local or regional newspaper that deal with a justice issue.
2. Ask yourself how Francis might react to the situation. How did you react? List several options open to you.
3. Choose one issue to act upon this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Take time for a walk around your neighborhood, your town center, a nearby shopping plaza. Walk through the area with new eyes.
2. List issues of social injustice that you notice.
3. Devise a plan to address one issue of injustice. Ask others to join you. Put your plan into action this month.

ARTICLE 16
ESTEEMING WORK AS CREATIVE AND REDEMPTIVE

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Francis used to say that the lukewarm, who did not apply themselves constantly to some work, would be quickly vomited out of the Lord's mouth. No idler could appear in his presence without feeling the sharp bite of his criticism. This exemplar of every perfection always worked, and worked with his hands, not allowing the great gift of time to go to waste. And so he would often say, "I want all my brothers to work and keep busy, and those who have no skills to learn some." And he gave this reason: "That we may be less of a burden to people, and that in idleness the heart and the tongue may not stray into what is forbidden." But he would not have profit or payment for work left to the whim of the worker, but entrusted it to the guardian or the family.

2C 161

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis saw work as a means of pleasing the Lord, as a means of escaping idleness. How do you view work?
2. What is your particular occupation? How do you see it bringing you closer to God?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Francis did not want the amount of the wage left to the worker, but left to the discretion of another. How do you react to this statement? Should others have a say over your wages?
2. What is the basis of your reaction?

THE RULE

Let them esteem work both as a gift and as a sharing in the creation, redemption, and service of the human community.

Francis chose poverty as his form of life because Christ chose poverty as his; however, this choice did not entitle Francis nor any of his followers to beg for their food. This was not Francis' intent. He wished to work with his hands and he wished his brothers to do so as well. They were only to beg for food if the work of the day did not afford them any sustenance. Work was very important to Francis. As the opening passage pointed out, Francis wanted all the brothers to work with their hands. If they did not know a trade, they were to learn one. There were two reasons for his insistence on work: one was so that they were not idle; the second, more important reason, was to give good example.

Francis was no foreigner to hard work. From his earliest years, he had learned the cloth merchant trade at his father's side. He is thought to have traveled with his father on his buying trips to France. They brought the best cloth this part of the world had to offer to the citizens of Assisi. It was on these trips that he learned of the French troubadours and adopted their style of life as his own, a style of life that was costly to maintain. He was known to be very capable in the cloth business. As part of the new merchant class, he learned the ideals of bartering well. His knowledge of the cloth industry is proven true by the selection of materials he took from his father's shop and sold in Foligno to raise money to provide for the chapel at San Damiano. He knew the business well and he was shrewd at what he did.

Francis chose to leave the usage of money behind, because it was a way that the world could still grab hold of him. He did not want any of it. This is what he meant in his Testament when he said he left the world behind: not that he went off to a monastery, but rather, that he put the ways of the world behind, the ways of commerce, the ways of wheeling and dealing, the ways of cheating others out of what was rightfully theirs. These are the ways of the world he left behind. But he did not leave behind the notion that he was responsible for himself. If he were to eat, then he would work for the food he would put in his mouth. He never worked for money, rather for enough food to sustain himself. He instilled this ethic in his followers as well. They were to work along

side the laborers in the fields, and take what was offered them as a just amount of food in exchange. If they were unable to procure work for the day, only then would they beg food to eat – or they would simply go hungry.

These tenets are all recounted in his Testament:

And I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all brothers to give themselves to honest work. Let those who do not know how to work learn, not from desire to receive wages, but for example and to avoid idleness. And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door.

Test. 20-22

To one who chose not to work, Francis had some very harsh words.

In a certain place there was a brother who was no “one” for begging, but was “many” for eating. The saint observed this friend of the belly, who shared in the fruits but not in the labor, and said to him at once: “Go on your way, Brother Fly, because you want to feed on the sweat of your brothers and wish to be idle in the work of God. You are just like Brother Drone, who wants to be the first to eat the honey without doing the work of the bees.” The man of the flesh realized that his gluttony had been discovered, and he went back to the world, which he had never left.

2C 75

Francis may have taken his drastic remarks from Paul’s admonition in 2Thess.3:10: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”

Where did Francis acquire this work ethic? Francis saw working with his hands as a means of cooperating with God’s plan for all of creation. From the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, we recall

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up — for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; . . . then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Gen. 2:4, 5, 7, 15

Francis took the Scriptures very literally as we have seen many times, and this passage from Genesis would have been no exception. Francis felt that the plan of God at the beginning of creation was as directed toward himself as if God had placed Francis in the

garden. Francis saw work as a cooperation with God. This was God's original intent for our labor: not that it be a burden, but that it be a sharing in God's creative action. God created us that we might be co-workers in creation.

Elsewhere in the Scriptures, we see God calling persons from their places of work to be the leaders and prophets of his people. Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when he first caught sight of the burning bush (Exod. 3:1, 2). When Samuel was sent to Jesse's family to anoint one of his sons as the next king of Israel, none of the sons presented was acceptable to the Lord. Only when Samuel inquired did he discover there was one other son in the fields tending the flocks. David was brought in from the fields to be anointed king (1 Sam. 16:10-13). When Elijah found Elisha to succeed him, Elisha was plowing the fields with his oxen (1Kgs. 19:19). Amos, the prophet, was a farmer by trade (Amos 7:14); Nehemiah, a cup bearer to the King, set out to rebuild Jerusalem (Neh. 1:12, 2:5). In the New Testament, we know for certain that Jesus invited five of the Apostles from their occupations to follow him: Peter, Andrew, James and John who were fishermen, and Matthew, the tax collector (Mt. 4:18-22, 9:9). We know that Paul was a tent-maker (Acts 18:3) by trade, and Luke a physician (Col. 4:14). Above all, we must not forget that Jesus probably learned the carpentry trade from Joseph. If working was good enough for all these persons whom God chose to lead his people, work was good enough for Francis.

Think, for a moment, of Francis' reaction when he first heard the voice of God speak to him from the San Damiano Crucifix, "Francis, go and repair my house which as you can see is falling into ruin." He immediately went to work physically repairing three church structures in the Umbrian valley; he immediately understood God's command as an invitation to enter into a relationship with God as a co-worker.

How does all of this translate into our modern world? To begin with, we need to define "work." For a majority of people, work equates with one's occupation or ministry, the place where we spend a good deal of our time. How do we enter into this space and make it creative or redemptive? We can begin by remembering that our work is a sharing in the creative and redemptive work of God. Like Francis, when we enter the workplace, we are accepting the invitation of God to enter into relationship with him. That workplace is as varied as the occupations and ministries we are engaged in, be it a vineyard, a farm field, an office building, a factory, a store, a school, a hospital, a courtroom, a parish setting, or wherever else we are employed. Realizing that we are

not going to work alone, that we are not at work alone, that our response and interaction with co-workers is joined to God, is itself creative and redemptive. This thought brings a prayer to mind:

*Lord,
help me
to remember
that nothing
is going to happen
to me today
that you and I
together
can't handle.*

Each time we encounter a person with whom we work offers us an opportunity to bring the light of Christ into the workplace. Each time we bring a misunderstanding to a peaceful solution, we bring the redemptive presence of God into the workplace. Each time we remain at peace in the busyness of the day, we are ministers of Christ to this place. Above all, our occupation or our ministry gives us the unique opportunity to be of service to our brothers and sisters, as Christ was of service to all persons whom he met. We are also following the example Francis left us; he chose for his brothers to be known as *Fraters Minores*, the Lesser Brothers because they were to be of service to all God's people. They were never to think of themselves as above anyone, but always lower than the lowest person they encountered. Again, like Jesus and Francis, our service is to be given cheerfully, without complaint. We are to enter the workplace with the attitude of Christ, realizing it is God's work we are doing. We are not so much called *to make a difference* in the workplace, as we are called *to be different* in the workplace. We are called to bring the spark of our Franciscan vocation into a space that is probably caught up in the ways of the world. Like Francis, we are not leaving the world behind; we are taking our Franciscan calling into the workplace and allowing it to shine. We are reminded in the Gospel according to St. Matthew not to hide our light under a bushel basket (Mt. 5:15), but to let it shine so that all the room will be lit. It is amazing what lighting one small candle in a darkened room can do. In time the room does not seem dark at all. Taking our Franciscan presence into the marketplace will have the same effect. In time, the space we occupy will begin to radiate from the light we hold within.

However, we must realize that work is more than an occupation or ministry; work entails anything that has a product or an accomplishment as an outcome. So those of us

who do not go out of the house each day to paid employment are also at work. The caring for the home, the rearing of children, the care of an elderly parent, the assistance we give to those who are ill, the paying of bills are all forms of work. Like the paid occupations, these situations can also be fraught with tension and anxieties. As in the paid occupations, we are not alone. We enter into these places of work as a response to an invitation from God to join him in this place of service. Think about the many opportunities during a day with children at home to experience the creative aspect of God. Consider caring for an ill or elderly person in the home as entering into the redemptive action of our Lord. What are considered menial tasks to be accomplished around the home are definitely acts of service to be rendered to God's people. All of them are aspects of work: they have an outcome, we are able to give service to our brothers and sisters and glory to God through them.

Yet, we are not finished enumerating the facets of work. Our hobbies can also be defined as work. These are varied: sporting activities, reading, carpentry, stitching, painting, sewing, sculpting, boating, fishing. The list can go on and on. Here again we have many instances where we are invited into relationship with the Lord. Here again we experience relaxation time as creative, as a gift from God. As we have seen, most of the activities we engage in during the day may be considered work. The challenge before us is to realize all work as an invitation from God to join in his handiwork, in his plan for creation. We are to enter into all these spaces with the proper Franciscan attitude, that of thanksgiving for the invitation from God to enter into both creative and redemptive aspects of his work, and carry out our work as a genuine experience of service to God and his people. Underneath all the externals of the actual workspace, whatever it may be, we are to be people of joy, cooperating with God to bring his light and peace into this world. We may be the only ones in our workplace to do that. Think of the outstanding opportunity, the individual invitation of God that is presented to us every day of our lives.

In order to do this, however, we must be people of prayer, people who take time away from our busy schedules to allow ourselves to be rejuvenated by our relationship with God. We must be aware of two pitfalls, workaholism and materialism. Just because we function in the world, does not mean that we have to buy into the world's notion that more is better. More is better only if it does not lead us away from God. We cannot bring the light of God to our world if we do not take time away from our busyness to be with God. We cannot share what we do not have. If we are to share God's presence

with others, we must be mindful to take time to be present to God. We are his co-workers, not the other way around. We must be in constant communion with him. Francis begged the friars not to leave prayer behind. His letter to Brother Anthony of Padua is a perfect example:

Brother Francis sends greetings to Brother Anthony, my Bishop.
I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers provided that, as is contained in the Rule, you “do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion” during study of this kind.

For Francis, work and prayer were not at odds with each other. Rather work was to be an expression of our cooperation with God’s creative action in our lives. Work is to be an extension of the life we experience with God in prayer.

God affords us many and varied opportunities to be present to the workplace. In order to thank God for these different venues he places before us to share in his creative and redemptive works, I invite you to pray

The Litany of Work

We give thanks, O God, for the work of our lives.	WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
For the work of our hands,	WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
For the work of our minds,	WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
For the work of our hearts,	WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.

Response to all: WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.

For the enlightening work of teachers, librarians, students and coaches,
For the healing work of doctors, nurses and counselors,
For the creative work of artists, musicians, painters and sculptors,
For the precise work of engineers, scientists and computer specialists,
For the nurturing work of homemakers, parents and guardians,
For the wise work of retirees and grandparents,
For the proclaiming work of writers, photographers, editors and publishers,
For the trustworthy work of accountants, bankers, lawyers, politicians and salespeople,
For the faithfilled work of ordained, religious and lay ministers,

For the protective work of police, firefighters, and military personnel,
For the dedicated work of secretaries, receptionists and bookkeepers,
For the compassionate work of volunteers,
For the judicious work of managers, administrators, directors and supervisors,
For the fruitful work of farmers, fishers, growers and gardeners,
For the steadfast work of those who manufacture products,
For the constructive work of builders, surveyors, architects, masons and
carpenters,
For the efficient work of those who transport people and things by bus, train,
plane, taxi, truck and boat,
For the hospitable work of cooks, waiters and waitresses, cashiers, hotel and motel
workers,
For the clarifying work of television, radio and news media workers,
For the dependable work of telephone and postal workers,
For the good of all other workers,

For the work that sheds light on the darkness,
For the work that creates order from chaos,
For the work that builds peace out of hostility,

WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.

For our work that helps others,
For our work that serves others,
For our work that empowers others,
For our work that inspires others,

WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.
WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.

For our work that enriches and ennobles all creation,

WE PRAISE YOU, GOD.³⁷

³⁷ Written by David and Angela Kauffman, © 1992, ACTA Publications, 4848 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640. Used with permission.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Which activities mentioned in this section are new to your understanding of work? List them.
2. Jot down how you see each of them as an avenue of entering into the creative or redemptive work of God.
3. Choose one new activity and seek ways of acting on it this month. Journal the experience and recount either its creative aspect or its redemptive aspect. How has this experience changed your concept of work?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Do you see work as a gift from God? Explain your answer.
2. List the various activities you engage in during a normal day in one column. In the next column, determine if the activity is creative or redemptive.
3. For the next two weeks, enter into your day as if each opportunity were a gift to interact with God. Note if this attitude has changed the atmosphere in which you work. Has anyone commented about your change of attitude? Journal the outcome of your experiences each day. Share them with a member of your fraternity.

ARTICLE 17
LIVING THE GRACE OF MATRIMONY

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*There, also,
having become a herald of the Gospel,
he went about the cities and towns
proclaiming the kingdom of God
not in words taught by human wisdom,
but in the power of the Spirit.
To those who saw him,
he seemed to be a person of another age as,
with his mind and face always intent on heaven,
he tried to draw them on high.
As a result,
the vineyard of Christ began
to produce buds with the sweet smell of the Lord
and, when it had produced
flowers of sweetness, of honor, and of respectability,
to bring forth abundant fruit.*

For set on fire by the fervor of his preaching, a great number of people bound themselves by new laws of penance according to the rule which they received from the man of God. Christ's servant decided to name this way of life the Order of the Brothers of Penance. As the road of penance is common to all who are striving toward heaven, so this way of life admits clerics and lay, virgins and married of both sexes.

LMj 4. 5-6

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis saw the value of a life of penance for all persons. How do you see a life of penance interacting with married life? Do you see it as an aid or as a detriment?
2. Does your response come from experience or from theory? Explain.

Ongoing Formation:

1. In the Rule of 1228, the *Memoriale Propositi*, there was a stipulation that wives needed the permission of their husbands to join the Order. Do you see this as a necessity today? How does the Secular Franciscan vocation of one spouse affect the marriage?
2. Is your response an experiential or theoretical one? Explain.

THE RULE

By living the grace of matrimony, husbands and wives in particular should bear witness in the world to the love of Christ for his Church. They should joyfully accompany their children on their human and spiritual journey by providing a simple and open Christian education and being attentive to the vocation of each child.

In their family they should cultivate the Franciscan spirit of peace, fidelity, and respect for life, striving to make it a sign of a world already renewed in Christ.

Very little is known about the family life of the Bernadone family. The sources give little information as to the daily internal workings of their household. Arnaldo Fortini, mayor of Assisi and extensive biographer of Francis, relates for us that Francis had a brother, Angelo. He gathered this information from the archives in Assisi, but archives only tell us of the external workings of the family. For instance, we know from the archives that Pietro Bernadone had landholdings beyond the gates of Assisi, so besides being a cloth merchant within the city gates, and a member of the new merchant class, we know that he managed property beyond the gates as well. We know from the sources that his father often traveled to France to purchase material and goods. He was in France on the occasion of Francis' birth. It was his love for France that caused him to change Francis' name from Giovanni to Francis on his return. It is thought that Dona Pica, Francis' mother, was from Provence in France.

From the facts of his own life, we can surmise that Francis learned the French language from his mother or while on trips to France with his father. This is the language he used in singing the songs of the troubadours, sometimes disturbing the citizens of Assisi. This is the language he later used to praise God. Again, we can surmise that

Francis learned to pray at his mother's knee. From his father, he learned all the skills necessary to be able to carry on the family business, to be a participating member of the commune, to take up arms against the imperial forces at the Rocca. Francis' desire for knighthood was born in his father's desire to better himself and his family's status within the community.

What opposing influences each of these parents had on Francis' life. In poetic form, Henri d'Avranches contrasts their effects:

The boy's mother was upright, unpretentious and kind;
His merchant father violent and sly.

.....
The boy sees his parents' contrasting characters;
From the two ways he decides to follow the wrong one;
Choosing his father's lead, off he goes to the left on a crooked

And rambling track, instead of a straight course rightward
Along those clear lines of living,
traced by his mother's sound footprints.
Our senses are bent on the worse; too easily
Downward we slide; any skyward ascent is with effort.
So, for long the youth is like a crooked bow

With no thought for his soul and indulging his flesh,
Judging naught with his head, but all with emotion;
Never striving for virtue, nor testing aught with light of his mind,

.....
Now spoilt by his father's first lessons in greed,
With a nose for the import of gain, well up in deceit,
He piles up his stocks, pulls off many a swindle, conducts
Himself haughtily, directs his thoughts to enticements,
Fritters his time away. Yet his character, naturally good,

... [s]till his behavior made good habits
Ugly, rather than ugly conform to the good.

.....
For near years five and twenty his youth passed in such wise.

VL 1.33-34, 42-52, 60-66, 70

It seems true that the influence of his father far outweighed any influence his mother might have had on Francis in his youth, quite the contrary to how one might think of

initial parental influence.³⁸ However, the opinions and attitudes of the youthful Francis are not what we uncover in the Francis who gave up all to follow Christ. The opinions of his father, which he took so deeply to heart in his early years, did not remain the underlying force of his life. Yet in a strange way, albeit an inverted way, this influence of Pietro can be seen as being truly formative in Francis' new way of life. Ernest Raymond in his book, *In the Steps of St. Francis*, makes this unique observation:

. . . [N]o one has pointed out that Pietro was in great part the real creator of St. Francis. No one has pointed out that Francis' life is one long reaction against his father. Pietro was vain and violent; Francis became a passionate believer in humility and the crass stupidity of force. Pietro liked to be master; Francis called himself always a servant, "less than the least of the servants of God." Pietro was acquisitive and money-loving, a faithful esquire of My Lord Wealth; Francis enthroned the Lady Poverty as his inspiration and his "toast," and developed a hatred of money that at times seemed over-stressed (though of this over-stressing I am far from sure). Pietro was a snob and a turf-hunter; Francis threw up all such social measurements, insisted that his brothers should remain *minores*, and aligned them with the poorest of the poor. Pietro worked for every privilege he could get; Francis forbade his brothers to seek from Pope or magistrate any privilege whatsoever, "except the privilege of the most high poverty." It was a one hundred-percent reversal, and thus, to a great degree, Pietro gave us Francis.

Thank you, Pietro.³⁹

Are our parental influences any different in our own day? As parents, we tend to pass on to our children those qualities and virtues, interests and practices that are influential in our own lives. We pass on family and cultural traditions, how we celebrate the different holidays, birthdays, graduations and the various other occasions that we encounter throughout life. We also pass on ethnic traditions, beginning with the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, the the songs we sing, the poetry we read. We share with our children the practice and doctrines of our faith, our manner of worship, our path of spirituality. At an early age, we, too, teach our children to pray, a practice we hope they will carry through life. We pass on our enjoyment of special interests and hobbies, favorite places of recreation, favorite books and authors. We knowingly, or

³⁸ Franciscan scholars caution us not to hold these accounts of parental attitudes to the high standards that our psychological mindset of the twenty-first century would have us believe. The legends are written in a hagiographic style; they had one purpose: to show that the person whose life they are recalling is a saint. Legends were not written as our modern biographies, rather they were written shortly after the death of a holy person to give credence to the cult of his/her sanctity. There is very little about Francis' life in the legends that is seen in the negative. Legends were meant to emphasize the positive aspects of a person's life.

³⁹ Ernest Raymond *In the Steps of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975), 49-50.

unknowingly, pass on to our children how to handle difficulties in life. Parental work ethics are hard for children to miss. From an early age, they watch as parents care for them, go out and earn a living, supply their needs. Or, in some cases, children could experience just the opposite in one, several or all of these categories.

The basis for what we share with our children grows out of our love and concern for them, our love and concern for each other as adults and parents, our love and concern for ourselves as healthy individuals. This love is not something foreign to our nature; it is as much a part of us as life itself. We were created out of the love God has for us. We were created in the image and likeness of God, male and female we were created. St. Bonaventure tells us that God is love, but love could not be contained. Love is only love when it is given away. As love was shared within the Trinity, again, it could not be contained and it flowed into creation, ultimately into our human nature. We were created in God's image; we were created to share the love that is in us. "Be fruitful and multiply" was God's gift to our first parents. God cares for us in that we were not ever meant to be alone. We were created as social beings, to be with others, to share ourselves with others. We are called specifically as parents to share God's love with each other and with our children. Within the Sacrament of Matrimony, we are called to witness to the world the love and unity that exists between Christ and his Church. This belief is poignantly brought to light in § 11 of *Lumen Gentium-Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. In this section, we are given the purpose of this sacrament:

Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church, help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children. By reason of their state and rank in life they have their own special gift among the people of God. From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state.

Noteworthy within this passage of the document is the fact that the first purpose of marriage is the help that the spouses are to be to each other in their attaining holiness of life. Only then is the rearing of children mentioned. There is a great deal of wisdom

in this sequence. As we all know, we cannot hand on to another what we do not possess. Before we can begin to pass holiness onto another generation, we must first experience holiness in our own existence. Like love, we are to share this gift of holiness with those who are closest to us. In the married state, this person is our spouse. Parents are informed in this document that they are the primary educators of their children when it comes to their faith life. As we share our life of holiness with our spouse, so must we be ever vigilant to share it with our children.

Also within the section, we find the celebrated phrase “domestic church.” The family, in its many and varied forms, is a microcosm of what the universal Church is to the world. It is a lived expression of God’s love and care of the people. It also carries with it the responsibilities and duties of the Church, to be a channel of God’s love and grace to each member, to share that love with each other, to be present to each other, to care for each member entrusted to it, to provide for their needs, to shelter them from harm, to teach the doctrines of the faith, to correct errant paths, to aid each other in making choices, primarily to help each member of the family attain salvation.

Vocation is an element of this section that cannot be overlooked. It is the definite responsibility of the parents to encourage and walk with the children as they prepare to choose a vocation. Explore all options that seem to interest them. Go with them to investigate. Seek out career days in their schools; arrange for them to “shadow” someone who is already in that position. Help them explore new and different occupations. We are not to shy away from mentioning a religious vocation to them. Ask them if they feel God calling them to a vocation as a priest or religious sister or brother. Do not be surprised by their answer. Many young adults might simply be waiting for someone to ask the question; they may not think they are worthy enough. No matter their choice, our responsibility is to assist our children in discerning how the Lord is calling them to use the gifts he has given each of them for the betterment of God’s kingdom here on earth.

Lumen Gentium speaks to us, not only of the life of the family within the home, but also of how the family is to impact the society within which it finds itself. We look to § 35 for an indication:

For where Christianity pervades the entire mode of family life, and gradually transforms it, one will find there both the practice and an excellent school of the lay apostolate. In such a home husbands and wives

find their proper vocation in being witnesses of the faith and love of Christ to one another and to their children. The Christian family loudly proclaims both the present virtues of the Kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come. Thus by its example and its witness it accuses the world of sin and enlightens those who seek the truth.

The family impacts the society by its very existence, by the testimony of our lives of loving concern and service toward each other, by our unity, by our teaching and correcting, by our shared experiences, by the love we share with each another. In these times, two of the greatest examples a family can offer the world are tolerance of each other's differences and resolving conflicts in a peaceful way. These values are so contrary to the values the world holds up for our emulation. Look around you: is the world expounding family values anywhere? No, not really. That is the task left to us. Our basic premise is very easy, and very contrary to the way of the world. We are seeking to implement all these attitudes from a starting point of loving concern for the other. How often is the good of the other the source and summit of the ways of the world? Rarely. The task before us is formidable, but it is a goal for which we are to strive.

Is this easy to do in today's society? By no means, and the Council Fathers offer this guide in § 41:

[M]arried couples and Christian parents should follow their own proper path (to holiness) by faithful love. They should sustain one another in grace throughout the entire length of their lives. They should embue their offspring, lovingly welcomed as God's gift, with Christian doctrine and the evangelical virtues. In this manner, they offer all men the example of unwearying and generous love; in this way they build up the brotherhood of charity; in so doing, they stand as the witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church.

Parents and married couples are to support one another in their quest to rear children in a manner that is countercultural to the ways of the world. Again, we are not in this struggle alone; we are there as members of extended families, members of parishes, members of the Order, members of a neighborhood. We aid and support each other in our efforts to bring forth the gospel message to the world through the example of our family life.

For those who are no longer married or who have not been called to the married state, § 41 addresses this role:

A like example, but one given in a different way, is that offered by widows and single people, who are able to make great contributions toward holiness and apostolic endeavor in the Church.

Example of a holy life is key. How helpful it is for any parent to be able to point to another person outside the home, whom the children know, as a living example of the values the parents are trying to instill in their children. Be available to the families you know to introduce children to a cultural religious devotion that may be unknown to them. Invite the children to an activity at the parish that the parents are unable to attend for any number of reasons. Share stories of your faith with them. As we know, children love to hear stories; striking ones stay with them for years. There is definitely a role for you to play. Do not shy away from it.

Above all of these varied ways that the family speaks values into the culture is its manifest respect for the human life of each person. Life is a gift of God that is fostered and nourished within the family unit. Life is the basis of the family unit: life is born there, sustained there, encouraged there, enjoyed there, loved there, revered there. Life is the gift of God that is shared with each of us. A family shouts life to the world around it without saying a word. Everyone notices a pregnant woman, a parent with a child, a youngster with an older sibling, an adult child with an aging parent. Life in its many stages is revered in the family. Life in its many forms, in all its diversities is secure and valued within the family. How a family lovingly cares for a sick member, a challenged member, be that challenge physical or mental, a delinquent member, an aging member, a dying member, gives a living example of how society should be caring for all of its members. A family gives living voice to the truth that all life comes from God and is given by God to be revered. This is the greatest lesson the family can pass on to the community at large. Life is God's gift to us, and respect for all life is our gift to the world.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. As we have seen, parents impact their children's lives in many different ways. List the ways you have positively influenced your children's lives. What have you shared with them that is unique?
2. What are some ideas or concerns that you have not yet shared with your children, no matter what their ages? (It may be something ethnic, stories of your life you have not shared, a devotion that is dear to you, a hobby or a craft.) List the gifts of your life that you have not yet shared.
3. Choose one and take the time to share it with a member of your family this week. If you do not have a family, share it with a young person you know.

Ongoing Formation:

1. How have the members of your family affected your life? Were these influences mostly positive or negative?
2. How have these situations influenced the way you interact with your family and with others? List the positive lessons you've learned from these family situations.
3. Decide upon a way that you can pass on a positive lesson you've learned to another person, preferably a member of your family. Act on your decision.

ARTICLE 18
EMBRACING CREATION

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*He embraces all things
with an intensity of unheard devotion,
speaking to them about the Lord
and exhorting them to praise Him.*

He spares lanterns, lamps and candles unwilling to use his hand to put out their brightness which is a sign of the eternal light.

He walked reverently over rocks, out of respect for Him who is called the Rock. When he came to the verse "You have set me high upon the rock," in order to express it more respectfully, he would say: "You have set me high under the feet of the Rock."

When the brothers are cutting wood he forbids them to cut down the whole tree, so that it might have the hope of sprouting again.

He commands the gardener to leave the edges of the garden undisturbed, so that in their season the green of the herbs and the beauty of flowers may proclaim the beautiful Father of all. He even orders that within the garden a smaller garden should be set aside for aromatic and flowering herbs so that those who see them may recall the memory of eternal savor.

He picks up little worms from the road so that they will not be trampled underfoot.

That the bees not perish of hunger in the icy winter, he commands that honey and the finest wine should be set out for them.

He calls all animals by a fraternal name, although, among all the kinds of beasts, he especially loves the meek.

.....
*All creatures, therefore,
strive to return the saint's love,
and to respond to his kindness with their gratitude.
They smile at his caress,
his requests they grant,
they obey his commands.*

2C 165, 166

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis grew in his love and understanding of nature. How do you view the gifts of creation that surround you?
2. Has this always been your view? Why do you view creation the way you do now?

Ongoing Formation:

1. From the above instances, we can see that Francis saw in all creation sacramental elements, elements that brought the thought of God to his consciousness. Which elements of creation bring God to mind for you? List or share them.
2. How and why do these elements of creation remind you of God?

THE RULE

Moreover they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which “bear the imprint of the Most High,” and they should strive to move from the temptation of exploiting creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship.

In his youth, Francis was busy about many things: trying to learn the intricacies of his father’s business, frolicking with the young men of Assisi until all hours of the morning, destroying the Rocca and using the same stones to build up the walls of Assisi, dreaming of knighthood and outfitting himself for war. He had little time and much less inclination to notice the symmetrical flying of birds overhead, to hear the melodious sound of the lark or the buzzing of bees, to smell the sweet fragrance of the poppies growing in the fields around Assisi, to feel the gentle mist on his face in the early morning, to prick his finger with the thorn on the stem of a rose, to savor the cool, fresh waters flowing in the streams. No, he was too busy trying to fulfill all the demands that the up and coming merchant class placed on a young man of his background and breeding. He was too busy enjoying his role as the leader of Assisi’s youth.

After his imprisonment and illness, Celano recounts for us that “. . . he went outside one day and began to gaze about upon the surrounding country side with greater interest.” But this was an inkling for Francis, as Celano continues that “. . . the beauty of the fields, the delight of the vineyards, and whatever else was beautiful to see could offer him no delight at all”(1C 3). Francis had to grow in his love and gratitude for creation, as he did in many things, and the environs of Assisi provided a perfect classroom for these lessons. There were valuable lessons of relying on God that Francis took from the gospels, saw exemplified in creation around him, and made a literal part of his life. We know that it was at this time of his conversion that he began paying more careful attention to the words of the gospel and the creation around him.

As his life style changed, as the outer clamors quieted down and the inner recesses opened up to receive a different call, as he left the confines of the city and wandered about the countryside, the beauty of creation that eluded Francis at the beginning of his conversion serenaded him. There are numerous stories of animate and inanimate creatures and how they related to Francis:

- the rabbit at Greccio that, when freed, constantly returned to Francis
- the fish that Francis threw back into the lake that remained and played in the water before him
- the birds that Francis reprimanded for making too much noise while he and his brothers were trying to pray
- the larks that quietly listened to a homily that he preached
- the cricket that sang to him each morning during a stay at the Portiuncula
- the herd of sheep that frisked him as he walked by
- the noted wolf of Gubbio that refrained from hurting the people of the town at Francis' beckoning
- the water that came forth from the rock to quench Francis' thirst
- the fire that did not burn him when he needed to have his eyes cauterized
- the falcon at LaVerna that called Francis to prayer.

There are other instances recorded as well, but these give an insight into the gentleness and serenity that other creatures recognized in Francis. Francis began to see these creatures as brothers and sisters to him, noting that they all originated in the same source, God their Father. This is but another example of God not being outdone. When Francis disrobed before the bishop's palace and renounced his family of birth, God had already prepared for Francis a "family" he had not given thought to at that point. In time, God's plan unfolded in his life.

From a reflection on the primary source of all things,
filled with even more abundant piety,
he would call all creatures,
no matter how small,
by the name of "brother" or "sister,"
because he knew they shared the same beginning.
However, he embraced more affectionately and sweetly
those which display
the pious meekness of Christ in a natural likeness
and portray him in the symbols of Scripture.
He often paid to ransom lambs that were being led to their death,
remembering that most gentle Lamb
who willed to be led to the slaughter to pay the ransom of sinners.

LMj 8. 6

As he neared death, Francis went on to praise God through these brothers and sisters in his prayer, the first poem written in the Italian vernacular and accessible to the common people, the *Canticle of Brother Sun*.

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing,
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.

Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

How wondrously Francis praised God through all the creatures. What a marvelous insight on his part. Human beings are the only creatures God gifted with free will. We are the only ones who are able to live outside the will of God for our lives. God loved us enough to give us this freedom, hoping we would choose to be with Him. Francis realized that in his own life he did not always follow the will of God perfectly, but he did know that the creatures around him did. He would praise God through them because their song of praise was always in God's will. What a clue we can take from Francis! What a clue we can take from creation as well!

How do we view creation in the twenty-first century? Do we see creation as a gift of God to be cherished and cared for, or do we see creation as a gift of God to be squandered? In the Book of Genesis, the human race was given dominion over the earth. Was that license to use all of creation to our benefit? Were we given free rein to destroy and pillage at will all that was set before us? A close look at the meaning of dominion does carry the notion of having the right and power to command, decide, rule, or judge. So it might sound like free rein, but how does the Lord direct those who are put in charge of others in the Bible? Are leaders to use their subjects as servants? Are priests to lord it over those entrusted to their care? Are parents to mistreat their children? The answer is a resounding "No." Places of authority are given with a profound sense of duty and responsibility. Persons in authority are to care for those entrusted to them; they were to keep those placed under them from harm. Failure to do so is detrimental to all. Down through the history of the Hebrew people, leaders who did not care for the people not only lost their places of prominence, some lost their lives, others lost their standing with the Lord. The prophet Ezekiel attests to this fact in regard to the leaders who were to be shepherds of God's people, supposedly protecting them from harm and securing their needs. Instead, they let the people drift far from God while the leaders fattened themselves on the spoils of the land. Hear what the Lord has to say to them:

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:

As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:

Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. . . . I myself will be

the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Ezek. 34:7 -10, 15-16

The Lord did not mince words with the leaders. He took them to task for the inferior way they cared for his people. Can we expect him to treat us any differently when we are called upon to give an account of our caring for, our dominion over, the creation he left to us? Our own father Francis, in the words of Carlo Caretto, chastises us:

You have violated the forests, defiled the seas, plundered everything like a bunch of bandits.

Your contempt for nature knows no bounds. . . .

You can scarcely breathe your air. Your food has become unhealthy. Cancer assaults you with more and more regularity.

And now that you have destroyed nearly everything you have appointed me the patron saint of ecology. You have to admit it is a little late.

I don't know what I shall be able to do.⁴⁰

Are we able to come up with a solution to the problems our own greed and negligence have caused? What are some small ways we can impact the disregard for nature that surrounds us? Look to the space that you can call your own first. Simple things like recycling, organic gardening, composting are a beginning. Determining which energy source you will use to heat your home, by its impact on the environment, is another factor. If you drive, ask yourself if there are opportunities for you to take public transportation or car pool with others. Water is so readily available to us in the United States. Are we conscious of our overuse of this seemingly plentiful resource? Our cleaning supplies are another source of concern. Do we choose materials that are safe for the environment? These are very easy conditions for us to rectify. We just need to become more aware.

As far as our local or national policies are concerned, the first thing we must do is become informed. There are many environmental groups that will keep us abreast of what is going on and how we can become involved. Be aware to judge each case on its own merits. Balance the good of the environment with the good of the people involved. Choose wisely.

There is a bit of creation that each of us carries with us daily. That is our own body. We

⁴⁰ Carlo Caretto, *I, Francis*, trans. Robert R. Barr, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), 76.

must be conscious of caring for it as much as we would care for the giant Sequoia trees in California or Niagara Falls on the border between the United States and Canada. Our body is the bit of creation that is our unique responsibility. How will we answer the Lord when asked to give an account of our caring for it? Francis referred to his body as Brother Ass. At the end of his life, when his body was in great need of care, a young friar asked him to give just such an account:

“Tell me, father, if you please, how attentively did your body obey your commands while it was able?” And [Francis] said:

I will bear witness to it, my son,
for it was obedient in all things.
It did not spare itself in anything,
but almost rushed headlong
to carry out every order.
It evaded no labor,
it turned down no discomfort,
if only it could carry out commands.
In this it and I were in complete agreement:
that we should serve the Lord Christ
without any objection.”

The brother said: “Well, then, my father, where is your generosity? Where is your piety and your great discernment? Is it a repayment worthy of faithful friends: to accept favors gladly but then not give anything in return in time of need? To this day, what service could you offer to Christ your Lord without the help of your body? Haven't you admitted that it exposed itself to every danger for this reason?”

“I admit, son,” said the father, “this is nothing but the truth.”

And the son replied, “Well, is it reasonable that you should desert a faithful friend in great need, who risked himself for you, even to the point of death? Far be it from you to sin against the Lord in such a way!”

“Blessed are you also, son,” he said, “you have wisely given me a drink of healing medicine for my disquiet!” And he began to say jokingly to his body: “Cheer up Brother Body, and forgive me; for I will now gladly do as you please, and gladly hurry to relieve your complaints!”

2C 211

If we are not already conscious of the care we should give our bodies, might we take this example of Francis to be our own and begin again caring for this one bit of creation that is ours alone.

Yes, Francis has left us quite a legacy. He referred to all of creation as his brother or

sister. He had a familial love of creation recognizing all creation as emanating from the same loving and caring God who fathers us. He loved and cared for all things he encountered, animate or inanimate, it did not matter. As the Cantic of the Creatures attests, Francis allowed creation to speak to him of God. All of creation mirrored an aspect of God to him. Decades later, St. Bonaventure, spiritual son of Francis and seventh Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, wrote a treatise on the spiritual journey entitled, *The Soul's Journey into God*. In it, he refers to all of creation as the "vestige," the footprint of God. He reiterates Francis' stance, the importance of creation on our journey to God. In the first chapter, we find this advice:

[L]et us place our first step in the ascent [to God] at the bottom, putting the whole of the sensible world before us as a mirror through which we may pass to God, the highest creative Artist.

Itin. 1. 9⁴¹

Francis viewed all of creation as his equal, his brother or sister; St. Bonaventure saw creation as one way for us to encounter God. He once shared that there are only two books one needs to know God, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Creation. Do we take time to care for this book, to read this book, to learn from this book all it has to teach us about God? Do we reverence this book? Do we accept it as a means of God's revelation? St. Bonaventure admonishes us, if we choose to disregard this Book:

Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened
by such splendor of created things
is blind;
whoever is not awakened by such outcries
is deaf;
whoever does not praise God because of all these effects
is dumb;
whoever does not discover the First Principle (God)
from such clear signs
is a fool.
Therefore, open your eyes,
alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips
and apply your heart
so that in all the creatures you may
see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honor
your God . . .

Itin. 1. 15⁴²

⁴¹ *Bonaventure: the Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, translated by Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 63.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67-68.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, where do you rate yourself when it comes to caring for the environment?
2. Research and list some approaches you might adopt to better care for the earth that you've been given dominion over; begin at home and then move your concerns outward.
3. Select one aspect of caring for the environment from your list and put it into practice this month. Ask others to join you.

Ongoing Formation:

1. How have you made creation a brother or sister in your life? Would those who know you recognize you as a Franciscan by the way you care for the earth? What initiatives have you taken to care for the earth?
2. Take a walk outdoors, around your neighborhood, through the woods, along the seashore, up a mountainside, through a meadow. Meditate with creation. Record the varied thoughts creation is able to bring to your mind and senses about God.
3. Write these thoughts down in a journal or as a poem. Conclude by writing your own Song of Creation to God. Share the insights and prayer with your fraternity members next month.

ARTICLE 19
BEING MESSENGERS OF PEACE

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

After blessed Francis had composed the Praises of the Creatures, which he called the Canticle of Brother Sun, a serious misunderstanding arose between the bishop and the podestà of the city of Assisi. Thus the bishop excommunicated the podestà, and the podestà issued an order that no one was to sell anything or buy anything from the bishop, or to draw up any legal document with him.

Although blessed Francis was very ill when he heard about this, he was moved by pity for them, especially since there was no one intervening to make peace between them. He said to his companions: "It is a shame for us, servants of God, that the bishop and the podestà hate one another in this way, and that there is no one intervening for peace and harmony between them."

And so, for that reason, he immediately composed one verse for the Praises, and he dictated:

*Praised be You, my Lord, through those
who pardon for Your love
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.*

Afterwards he called one of his companions and told him: "Go to the podestà and, on my behalf, tell him to go to the bishop's residence together with the city's magistrates and bring with him as many others as he can."

And when the brother had gone, he said to two of his other companions: "Go and sing the Canticle of Brother Sun before the Bishop, the podestà, and the others who are with them. And I trust in the Lord that He will immediately humble their hearts and they will return to their earlier friendship and love."

Therefore, when they had all gathered in the piazza inside the cloister of the bishop's residence, the two brothers rose and one of them said: "In his illness, blessed Francis wrote the Praises of the Lord for His creatures, for the praise of His Lord and for the edification of his neighbor. He asks you then to listen with great devotion." . . .

When the Praises of the Lord were ended, the podestà said to everyone: "I tell you the truth, not only do I forgive the lord bishop, whom I want and must have as my lord, but I would even forgive one who killed my brother or my son." And speaking in this way, he cast himself at the feet of the bishop and told him: "Look, I am ready to make amends to you for everything, as it pleases you, for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his servant, blessed Francis."

Taking him by the hands, the bishop stood up and said to him: "Because of my office humility is expected of me, but because I am naturally prone to anger, you must forgive me," and so, with great kindness and love they embraced and kissed each other.

2MP 101

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Conflict is part of every human relationship. Think of a recent conflict in your life. How did you respond in the situation? What was the final outcome?
2. Do you tend to react or interact when you discover yourself in a conflictual situation? What causes you to respond in this way?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Nearing death himself, Francis did not forsake the issues that were tearing the citizens of his beloved Assisi apart. He enjoined the two factions to heed his words. Is there an instance in your life when you took the initiative to engage two persons who were at odds with each other to dialogue? Share the circumstances.
2. What motivated your actions?

THE RULE

Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon.

Messengers of perfect joy in every circumstance, they should strive to bring joy and hope to others.

Since they are immersed in the resurrection of Christ, which gives true meaning to Sister Death, let them serenely tend toward the ultimate encounter with the Father.

Neither Francis nor Clare were strangers to conflict in their lives. The whole of Italy had been involved city wars from before their births. The cities were constantly trying to advance their boundaries, taking on new fields, waterways, commerce routes, bridges and other structures, anything that would add to the city's prestige, wealth and fortification. Within the cities themselves, the different classes of peoples arose at times against the other, the newly formed merchant class trying to rival the nobility who were losing their foothold in many of the up and coming commerce centers. The commune members of Assisi rose in arms against the Emperor who had his fortress, the Rocca, set above the actual city. During his teenage years, Francis rose with other men of the town and literally took the Rocca apart, stone by stone, subsequently using these same stones to fortify the walls of the city against the Emperor. All of this taking place while the Emperor was "out of town." We are all well aware of the confrontation that occurred between Perugia and Assisi, the very battle that took Francis captive. It was this same confrontation that exiled Clare from Assisi. She and her family, along with the other nobles of Assisi, sought asylum in Perugia so as not to be left at the mercy of the merchant class.

Conflict did not leave them as they they "left the world." Shortly after Francis' disrobing before the bishop's palace, as he left the city, Francis fell among robbers.

When they asked who he was, the man of God, filled with confidence, replied in a prophetic voice: "I am the herald of the Great King!" But they beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with snow, saying: "Lie there, you stupid herald of God!" After they left, he jumped out of the ditch, and exhilarated with great joy, he began in an even louder voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of all.

LMj 2. 5

There were battles within himself. Early in his conversion,

[w]hile he was working steadily at restoring the church, he wanted to have a lamp burning continually in the church, so he went through the city begging for oil. But when he approached a certain house, he saw a group of men gathered for a game. Ashamed to beg in front of them, he backed away. Mulling it over, he accused himself of having sinned. Hurrying back to the place where they were playing, he told everyone standing around his fault, that he was ashamed to beg because of them. And, in fervor of spirit, he entered the house and, for the love of God, begged in French for oil for the lamps of that church.

L3C 24

Probably one of Francis' most disheartening conflicts developed over the Rule he put to paper. His first attempt to write down the spirit of the life he had chosen to follow, and others had joined, met with a great deal of disapproval from within the brotherhood, members who thought that Francis' ideals were just that – ideals – too lofty to be lived by ordinary men. In later years, the persons who joined Francis did not have the same vision as he; they were not about wandering through the woods, sleeping in the outdoors, begging for food, working with their hands. In the years that followed Francis' own conversion, learned men joined the Order. They saw a different purpose, a different end for their vocation. Preaching, yes, but within the confines of a stable place where they were respected. How could they preach if they were not learned? So books became necessary and places within which to live, convents within the city walls, so that they could attend the university. The conflict would extend long after Francis' death.

His battles were not only with other human beings:

He used to struggle hand to hand with the devil who, in those places, would not only assault him internally with temptations but also frighten him externally with ruin and undermining. The brave soldier of God knew that his Lord could do all things in all places; thus he did not give in to the fears. . .

1C 72

Conflict was not the sole possession of Francis. It did not elude his followers. In their travels, although some treated them well, for the most part,

. . . they were considered good-for-nothings, so that many, the small and the great, abused and harmed them, at times taking away from them even the cheapest clothing they had. . . . In addition, they endured immense hardship and suffering from hunger and thirst, from cold and nakedness. Suffering all these things steadfastly and patiently, as blessed Francis had admonished them, they did not become dejected or disturbed, nor did they curse those who brought evil upon them. On the contrary, . . . they greatly exulted in the Lord, considering it pure joy when they fell into temptations and trials of this sort. According to the word of the Gospel, they prayed carefully and enthusiastically for their persecutors.

L3C 40

Their response to conflict went beyond simply not retaliating. Caring more for each other than they did for their own persons, we are told that

[o]ne day, when two of the brothers were walking along, they came across a simpleton who began to throw rocks at them. One of them, noticing that the stones were being thrown at the other, ran directly in front of him, preferring that the stones strike him rather than his brother. Because of the mutual charity with which they burned, they were prepared to lay down their life in this way, one for the other.

L3C 42

These followers learned from Francis' own example; he was also concerned that they avoid forming or harboring conflicts in their hearts, by admonishing

. . . the brothers not to judge anyone, nor to look down upon those who live with refinement and dress extravagantly or fashionably. For, he would say, their God is ours, the Lord Who is capable of calling them to Himself and justifying those called. He also used to tell them he wanted the brothers to show reverence to these people as their brothers and lords. They are brothers, because we were all created by the same Creator; they are lords, because they help the good to do penance by providing them with the necessities of life.

L3C 58

To insure that the brothers were not the cause of conflict in the minds or hearts of those whom they met, Francis

. . . used to tell them: "As you pronounce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your hearts. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness, and harmony through your gentleness. For we are called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken, and recall the erring."

L3C 58

What of Clare? Did her conflicts end when she entered San Damiano? By no means! Upon discovering her disappearance on Palm Sunday eve, her Uncle Monaldus and other relatives confronted her at St. Paul of Bastia.

They employed violent force, poisonous advice, and flattering promises, persuading her to give up such a worthless deed that was unbecoming to her class and without precedence in her family. But, taking hold of the altarcloths, she bared her tonsured head, maintaining that she would in no way be torn away from the service of Christ.

LC 9

After days of trying to convince her, they finally realized that her resolve was definitely stronger than theirs. They returned home and Clare moved on to the Church of San

Angelo de Panzo. Here Clare experienced an inner turmoil within the confines of a monastery that was supported by dowries and property. She did not have the freedom necessary to live her life in poverty as she had understood her calling from God to be. A few days later, Francis moved her to San Damiano. It was here that the fury of her relatives would flare again. This time over Clare's sister's decision to leave the noble life behind to answer the same call as Clare. Sixteen days later, the male relatives would come to take another virgin home. This time, they would not take "no" for an answer. They beat and kicked her and literally dragged Agnes by the hair out of the sanctuary. They carried her away against her will, as Clare prayed for the Lord's intervention. Agnes' body became so heavy that the twelve men were unable to lift her. In his desperation, her Uncle Monaldus tried to strike a lethal blow, but was overcome by such a pain in his hand that he was unable to do so. After they left, defeated, Clare took her sister's half beaten body home to San Damiano.

On two occasions, Clare is credited with saving the city of Assisi from invaders. The first incident occurred when the Saracens entered the cloister of San Damiano in 1230. Sister Francesca recounts that

. . . the Lady made them bring her to the entrance of the refectory and bring a small box where there was the Blessed Sacrament of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ. Throwing herself prostrate on the ground in prayer, she begged with tears, saying among other things: "Lord, look upon these servants of yours, because I cannot protect them." Then the witness heard a voice of wonderful sweetness: "I will always defend you!" The Lady then prayed for the city, saying: "Lord, please defend the city as well!" The same voice resounded and said: "The city will endure many dangers, but it will not be defeated." Then the Lady turned to the sisters and told them: "Do not be afraid, because I am a hostage for you so that you will not suffer any harm now or any other time as long as you obey God's commandments." Then the Saracens left in such a way that they did not do any harm or damage.

Proc 9. 2

Again, in 1241, the troops of Frederick II, led by Vitale d'Aversa, cleared the land leading to the city and threatened that Frederick would not leave until he had taken the city. Clare had the sisters bring ashes and place them on her uncovered head; she then placed ashes on their heads, and sent them to pray for the salvation of the city. The troops departed during the night.⁴³

⁴³This event is commemorated each year in Assisi on June 22.

For Clare, one of her greatest struggles was with the hierarchy of the Church. For almost her entire religious life she saw-sawed back and forth with different Pontiffs over the issue of living in absolute poverty. It was Clare's intention that she and the Ladies of San Damiano be given the right to depend solely on divine Providence for their material needs. She believed that their needs would be met. Francis had promised that he and his brothers would care for them until the end of time. She believed his promise; more so, she believed God would honor the vow of absolute poverty made by the Ladies. She did not want to rely on dowries or benefactors or property or goods, as did the other cloistered women of her time. This was not consistent with her concept of gospel poverty. She did not hear the gospel calling her to store up riches for herself here on earth; just the opposite. She and the Poor Ladies were well prepared to spend their time storing up riches in heaven believing intently that the God who cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields would more than adequately care for them. Clare held this belief and it became the basis of the Form of Life she wrote so that the ideals she chose to live would be maintained through the ages. This Rule, with its basis on absolute poverty, was approved by Pope Honorius two days before she died. It is the first Rule of Life for women written by a woman. She could die in peace.

Francis also died in peace, but not without one final conflict. As Christ died naked upon the Cross, so Francis desired to die naked upon the earth. He did not wish to leave this life with one material possession; naked, he wanted to follow his Master home. Elias, minister at the time of Francis' death, wishing to care for him yet understanding his desire, commanded Francis under holy obedience to put on a garment that was not his. In this way, Francis greeted Sister Death in a spirit of holy obedience and absolute poverty. The brothers sang for him the Canticle of the Brother Sun and added this verse which Francis had recently composed:

Praised be You, My Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

With this legacy before us, how do we face conflict? How do we, in the twenty-first century, extend peace to those whom we meet? What are the conflicts that face us each day? They are many and varied. We each have our own personal difficulties to deal with. They may arise on many different planes. For some of us, it may be a physical

disability that causes strife in our life. How we deal with suffering says a great deal about the inner peace of our being. How we deal with suffering either invites persons into their own experience of the Paschal Mystery or has them shun the experience as “not for them.”

Our clashes might be on a social level. How do we deal with others whose personalities or opinions are obnoxious to us? Does the entire world we inhabit have to be arranged according to our own personal view of the universe? Peace does not come to a situation if we arrive carrying the big stick of our own self-righteousness, “My way or no way.” Openness to the opinions of others and a willingness to listen are the first steps in dialogue. This listening demands that we give the other our whole and undivided attention. True listening requires that we not formulate our response while the other is speaking. In order to promote true dialogue, we must be able to allow room for views that differ from our own. We do not have to agree with all that is being said; we are definitely called to remain faithful to our own values and speak them in truth. Whether this entire discussion takes place in a spirit of peace or hostility depends on our inner state of being. We must continually ask ourselves if we are speaking from a position rooted in peace or from one of confrontation. The latter has no place in our Franciscan calling. A very basic way to discern our stance is to determine whether we are reacting to the situation or interacting with it. This choice will make all the difference. We are placed in the world to bring about peace. We must interact with the persons and situations of the world in order to do so. Reaction only leads to or extends hostility. This is not our calling. Are we able to allow room for views that differ from our own? Do we see this person who crosses our path as a leper to be avoided at all costs? Do we react in these situations with harsh words or sometimes harsher silence, or do we try to interact with these persons whose views are dissimilar to our own?

Do our conflicts arise from a spiritual base, either personally or institutionally? Are our religious and spiritual views so narrow minded that there is no room for anyone else in God’s scheme of things? Do we become Pharisaic in our outlook, only those who truly practice as I do make good spiritual companions for my journey? How do we extend tolerance to those of a different religious persuasion? Are we open to dialogue? Even Francis spoke to the Sultan. Do we have our own internal spiritual struggles that take away the serenity we think should be ours because of our calling? Internal struggles are all part of growth, part of the journey. It can’t always be a sunny

day. We can't always be on the mountaintop. Not even Jesus stayed there.

Trying to keep ourselves in peace at all times requires that we continually die to ourselves and our own wants. This constant dying is one opportunity we have of entering into the Paschal Mystery. These constant dyings and giving way to the will of God in our lives are true preparations for our meeting Sister Death. In the last verse of the Canticle, Francis promises

Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

No story better illustrates our need and our call to be continually grounded in God's gift of inner peace than that of True and Perfect Joy.

. . . One day at Saint Mary's, blessed Francis called Brother Leo and said: "Brother Leo, write." He responded: "Look, I'm ready!" "Write," he said, "what true joy is."

"A messenger arrives and says that all the Masters of Paris have entered the Order. Write: this isn't true joy! Or, that all the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and the King of England [have entered the Order]. Write: this isn't true joy! Again, that my brothers have gone to the non-believers and converted them all to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn't consist in any of these things."

"Then what is true joy?"

"I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It's winter time, muddy, and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come to the gate and, after I've knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: 'Who are you?' 'Brother Francis,' I answer. 'Go away!' he says. 'This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not come in!' When I insist, he replies: 'Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don't come back to us again! There are many of us here like you -- we don't need you!' I stand at the door again and say: 'For the love of God, take me in tonight!' And he replies: 'I will not! Go to the Crosiers' place and ask there!'

"I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this."

We have excellent examples of persons who sought to live in peace in Francis and Clare. They lived in peace with all persons without compromising with their values. It may have taken time for the situations to resolve themselves, Francis and Clare may

have suffered a great deal in the process, but they held to their principles. Working for peace does not require us to compromise our ideals. It does require us to be peaceful in our spirits. No matter what befalls us – personally, relationally, physically, mentally, socially, politically, or spiritually – if we can maintain peace within ourselves, knowing that we are living in the will of God, we will be able to endure whatever the struggle, awaiting the Lord’s promise of peace.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. What are some areas in your life where you are not experiencing peace at the present moment? List them.
2. What will it take for you to resolve these situations in a peaceful manner?
3. Discern which of these might be possible for you to put into practice this month. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, strive for peace in this one area of your life.

Ongoing Formation:

1. List the unresolved conflicts in your life.
2. What will it cost you to bring them to a peaceful solution? Whom will you have to contact? Where will you have to visit? Who or what will you have to forgive? (Remember that forgiveness does not require that you forget, only that you try to move beyond the situation.)
3. After prayer, decide which of these issues you will try to bring peace to this month. (In some instances, this attempt at bringing peace may only occur in your journal, but begin.)

ARTICLE 20
GATHERING IN FRATERNITY

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

As both the truth of blessed Francis' simple teaching as well as that of his life became known to many, two years after his conversion, some men came to be moved to do penance by his example and, leaving all things, they joined in his life and his habit. The first of these was Brother Bernard of holy memory.

He knew well how luxuriously blessed Francis had lived in the world; now he observed his constancy and zeal in the divine service, how, in particular, he was restoring dilapidated churches with a great deal of work, and what an austere life he was leading. He planned wholeheartedly to give everything he possessed to the poor, and, with determination, to join him in life and garb. . . .

After a few days, an Assisian, named Giles, came to them and, on his knees, begged the man of God with great reverence and devotion to accept him into his company, When the man of God saw how unusually faithful and devout the man was, realizing that he was able to obtain great grace from God, as later became clear by his success, he received him with open arms.

L3C 27, 32

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Two years after his conversion, Francis' lifestyle began to entice others to join him. He was not to go it alone. How do you feel about joining a fraternity? What are its advantages and disadvantages to your vocation?
2. Why do you feel this way?

Ongoing Formation:

1. How has fraternity helped your vocation grow? In what ways has it been a hindrance?
2. What is the basis for each of your responses?

THE RULE

The Secular Franciscan Order is divided into fraternities of various levels – local, regional, national, and international. Each one has its own moral personality in the Church. These various fraternities are coordinated and united according to the norm of this rule and of the constitutions.

What began for Francis as a particular answer to an individual call was not to remain that way in the mind of God. Francis originally believed that the Lord's call to his life was for his own conversion. He believed that the call to change his life was an individual call to reform the wayward paths of his youth. So much of his youth was spent with little or no regard for the message of the gospel. This truth gradually became clearer to him through his imprisonment, his illness, his visits to the caves outside Assisi. The Lord's call to change his heart was crystalizing. This call was truly God's will for his life. In time, however, he would realize that although his own conversion was a step along the path, this was not the ultimate goal of God's calling on his life. Francis believed that he received a unique call at the foot of the San Damiano Crucifix to rebuild God's house which was falling into ruin. Literally, as we know, he began to rebuild the dilapidated church buildings that surrounded the city of Assisi. He would later come to realize that this was not a complete understanding of God's call either. In addition to the houses of stone and mortar, Francis would be called to rebuild the minds and spirits of those who would listen to him. But in the beginning, this was all too much for Francis to comprehend. God was satisfied with his changed life and his newly formed, intimate relationship with God. Francis might have been pleased to remain in this position, but it was not God's intent. How surprised he must have been when the knight Bernardo of Quintavalle asked to join in his way of life after secretly observing Francis in a night of prayer. The Canon Peter also asked to become part of his company. From the fields, the farmer Giles journeyed to join. There was something Francis had captured that drew others to follow in this way of life. Francis' basic question seemingly was, "What form of life?" It was at this juncture that he went again to the Scriptures and to prayer to discern what it was that the Lord desired of him. Francis came to comprehend this more clearly as he recounts in his Testament that ". . . after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel" (14).

Notice that Francis used the term “brothers” to refer to those men who asked to join him. Never did he refer to them as followers or sons as was the case in other religious Orders. Francis wanted this group that God had set apart to be known as a family. Even the name he chose for them, the Order of Friars Minor, the Lesser Brothers, gives us an insight into how Francis viewed himself and those with him. They were to form a familial bond among themselves, with the rest of the people in the world and all of creation. They were not to be set above, but to be servants, following the example set by our Lord. Within their own community, no one person was to be set up above the others. The one who was to care for the others was the guardian, guardian of all that would keep them close to God. As opposed to the Benedictines and Norbertines who had abbots and priors in places of superiority, Francis chose the family as his model of relationship.

Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another, let them show that they are members of the same family. Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit!

LR 6. 7, 8

Let each one love and care for his brother as a mother loves and cares for her son in those matters in which God has given him the grace.

ER 9. 11

Beyond making their needs known to one another, they were to care for the sick among them; they were to correct one another humbly and charitably; they were not to remember the faults of another. When in hermitage, the relationship between those praying and those caring for them was described by Francis as being the relationship of a mother for her sons:

Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be “the mother” and have two “sons” or at least one. Let the two who are “mothers” keep the life of Martha and the two “sons” the life of Mary. . .

RH 1

This was Francis’ ultimate concept of leadership, that of mother. He cared gently for each soul the Lord placed in his care, as he challenged them to live the gospel as Christ would have them do.

What of the size of this family? Did Francis have any inkling at this early stage what lay before them? According to the sources, he did:

Saint Francis, since he was already filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, predicted what would happen to his brothers. And calling together his six brothers in the woods next to the Church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula where they often went to pray, he told them: "My dear brothers, let us consider our calling because God has mercifully called us not only for our own good but also for the salvation of many. Therefore, let us go through the world, encouraging and teaching men and women by word and example to do penance for their sins and to remember the Lord's commandments, which they have forgotten for such a long time."

He also told them: "Do not be afraid, little flock, but have confidence in the Lord. And do not say among yourselves 'We are simple and illiterate men, how should we preach?' But be mindful of the Lord's words to his disciples: 'You yourselves will not be the speakers; the Spirit of the Father will be speaking in you.' For the Lord Himself will give you spirit and wisdom to encourage and preach to men and their wives the ways and deeds of the commandments. You will find, however, faithful people – meek, humble and kind – who will receive you and your words with joy and love. You will find others – unfaithful, proud, and blasphemous – resisting you and your words. Therefore, resolve in your hearts to bear all things with patience and humility."

When the brothers heard these words, they were afraid. Realizing that they were frightened, he told them: "Do not be frightened. Keep in mind that within a short time many learned, prudent and noble men will be with us. They will preach to nations and peoples, to kings and princes, and many people will be converted to the Lord. And the Lord will make his family grow and increase throughout the entire world."

After saying this, Francis blessed them and they went on their way.

AP 18

The movement would grow to be all inclusive. Never again would Francis think of God's call to his life as being for him alone. He and those who joined him were to offer their way of life to others who were searching. The Poor Ladies of San Damiano would follow. He would also open up to the laity of the time a spirituality that would be theirs. This small band of men, this brotherhood, would be the basis for the rebuilding of the Church!

As with the friars, so it is with all branches of the Franciscan family. No one enters and remains a single unit. Entering the Franciscan Order, in any of its branches, involves entering a family, a fraternity. In Francis' journey, there was no Rule, no way of life until after God had given Francis brothers. This truth holds true for us today. The basic unit of the Secular Franciscan Order is the local fraternity. It is comprised of persons

who have received an individual call from God to live more deeply the radical call of gospel life. In the Franciscan framework, this call is to be lived, supported, challenged and honored with others. The local fraternity is the home in which the vocation of each member is nurtured and guided. This was the vision Francis had received from God. Family was important to Francis, and so it is important to the entire Franciscan Order.

In any natural family there are extensions. At home, there are parents and siblings, but beyond those intimate relationships, there are cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, great aunts and uncles and so on. At various times, the extended members of the family gather to share joys and sorrows, to mark advancements. Some extended families gather once a year just to keep in touch. Since the local fraternity is a family also, it has extensions as well. Local fraternities are gathered together into regional fraternities. Regional fraternities are likewise gathered into national fraternities and national fraternities are gathered into the International Fraternity. Becoming a member of the local fraternity integrates each person into these other levels of fraternity as well. As such, members have responsibilities and privileges to all levels of fraternal life. The local fraternity is the immediate place of contact for Franciscan life in all its forms: fraternal gatherings, initial and ongoing formation, various individual and group apostolates, spiritual activities, and social get togethers. *However, local fraternities are not to remain an entity unto themselves.* Each of these local encounters is to be reflected at the subsequent higher levels of fraternal life. According to the General Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order, the fraternities are set up on these various levels

. . . to promote, in an orderly form, the union and mutual collaboration among the brothers and sisters and their active and communal presence in both the local and the universal Church. The SFO shall also support the commitment of the fraternities in their service to the world, and specifically to the life of society.

GC 28.2

So one might expect regional fraternal gatherings for prayer such as days of recollection or retreats; there could be days of mutual formation on the regional level; there could be regional gatherings of a social nature. Once a year, the regional fraternity meets to carry on its business. In certain areas, regional fraternities may carry on specific apostolates. Workshops for formation, both initial and ongoing, are offered at regional levels. Likewise, many of these opportunities are offered on the national level as well; perhaps not as often and not as easily accessible as on the regional level, but they are offered. The National Fraternity Council (NAFRA in the United States) gathers once a year to conduct its business. Once every five years, a

Quinquennial Congress is held. All Secular Franciscans are invited to join in this time of gathering, prayer, formation and fellowship. Because each member of the local fraternity is a member of the higher fraternities as well, he or she is invited to these gatherings also.

As an active and communal presence within the Church, we begin by worshiping together, and allowing the grace of this spirituality to reach beyond our Franciscan family. Our spirituality must be more than devotional piety; we are called to share the giftedness of our Franciscan vocation with others. We are summoned to give witness of our spirituality in the varied ways that we exemplify and promote the values of the Beatitudes. In our local parishes, we are to seek out and support those who are less fortunate than we. Are we able to identify the marginalized within the parish community and invite them to more active participation? Within the wider Church, do our Franciscan principles find voice in diocesan policies? Is there a Franciscan column in our diocesan newspapers? Is there a place for us in the diocesan Offices of Peace and Justice? Are there immigrants in our midst who need assistance in settling into a new environment? In what ways can the promptings of our individual and collective spirituality give rise to a more charitable and inclusive Body of Christ?

As a fraternal presence in the world, we are to challenge the world view. Whether on a local, regional, national or international level, we are to bring to the world consciousness the gospel values we profess as our way of life. Our presence in the world, as individuals or as a family, should demand peace wherever there is strife and discord. Our presence should challenge local, regional or national governments to seek justice at all costs and for all persons involved. Peace and justice on a global scale can begin with a local stand at home. Our gospel based lifestyle must be as shocking to all those we encounter as was the original message Jesus spoke over 2,000 years ago. Our call is to take the gospel to the streets, the people, the governments. The message Jesus spoke shocked his hearers, and caused ordinary people to take charge of their lives and look out for the lives of those around them. Francis reiterated this message in the Umbrian countryside and it had a profound effect on the feudal society in which he lived. Class structures eventually broke down as people began to accept each other as brothers and sisters of the same Lord. The message we profess is no different. It made a difference 2,000 years ago when Jesus spoke it; it made a difference almost 1,000 years ago when Francis spoke it. If we are not making the same difference today, perhaps our voices are still too dim.

This is the challenge Francis faced, to rebuild God's house. Beginning within, he fostered his own conversion. We are to take the call that is ours and share its light with all those we meet. We must speak our conviction boldly by our example, make the world realize there is a different path, a different way of caring for each other and our world. As Francis shared the fruits of that conversion with others, the hearts of the people he encountered were also changed and challenged by the new and radical possibilities of living the gospel message. In turn, as the numbers grew, these hearts and minds changed the society in which they lived. Our call is to do no less in our age, in our society! Does the world stand up and take notice of the Franciscan presence scattered within? Is there a Franciscan presence to be noticed? Are those around us aware that there is a Secular Franciscan fraternity in their midst? Does our fraternal light shine in our own "Umbrian valley?"

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. List some areas of need that you are aware of in your own neighborhood.
2. Brainstorm ways in which the local fraternity might be able to make their collective voice heard in regard to one of these issues. With the help of the fraternity, set a reasonable plan in place.
3. Engage members of the fraternity to carry out this plan with you.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Discover various endeavors that are available for you to become actively involved in the Church's mission in your diocese, such as peace and justice initiatives, working with immigrants, sheltering unwed mothers, etc.
2. Select one area and determine a way that the fraternity can answer the need.
3. Invite several members of the fraternity to join you in becoming active in the Church's mission.

ARTICLE 21
ANIMATING AND GUIDING THE FRATERNITY

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

After eleven years had passed since the founding of the religion and the number of brothers had increased, ministers were elected and sent with some of the brothers throughout almost all of the provinces of the world where the Catholic faith was practiced.

In some of the provinces they were received, but were not allowed to build houses. From others they were expelled, because people feared that the brothers were not faithful Christians, for the brothers did not as yet have a rule confirmed by the pope, but one merely allowed by him. For that reason, after they had endured many trials from clerics and laity and had been stripped by thieves, they returned to blessed Francis very embittered and depressed. And these trials beset them in Hungary, Germany, and other provinces beyond the Alps.

The brothers informed the Lord Cardinal of Ostia about these situations. Once he called blessed Francis to himself, he took him to the Lord Pope Honorius – because the Lord Innocent had already died, had another rule written for him, and had it confirmed and strengthened with the force of the papal seal. . . .

Blessed Francis petitioned the Lord Pope for one of the cardinals who would be the governor, protector, and corrector of this religion, as stated in the Rule. And he granted him the Lord of Ostia.

Now that he had this commission from the Lord Pope, the Lord Bishop of Ostia, raising his hand to protect the brothers, sent a letter to many bishops in the dioceses where they experienced hardships. He did this so they would not be opposed to the brothers, but rather give them advice and assistance in preaching and living in their provinces, as good and religious men approved by the Church. Many other cardinals likewise sent letters concerning this.

. . . Once the prelates saw the Rule, confirmed by the Supreme Pontiff, as well as the endorsement of the brothers by the Lord Cardinal of Ostia and the other cardinals, they permitted the brothers to build, live and preach in their provinces.

After this happened and the brothers lived and preached there, many people, seeing their humble way of life, upright conduct, and their very pleasant words, came to the brothers to put on the habit of holy religion.

AP 44, 45

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Francis recognized that the message of the gospel was to be shared beyond the boundaries of Italy, and so Francis sent his brothers abroad. What are the unknown “territories” of your life, the places where you do not feel welcome? How willing are you to share the gospel there?
2. What is holding you back?

Ongoing Formation:

1. The brothers were not accepted in the areas where Francis sent them. Many were persecuted in this ministry. In what ways have you been persecuted for the gospel?
2. What were the circumstances and why do you feel you were persecuted?

THE RULE

On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister (or president) who are elected by the professed according to the constitutions.

Their service, which lasts for a definite period, is marked by a ready and willing spirit and is a duty of responsibility to each member and to the community.

Within themselves the fraternities are structured in different ways according to the norms of the constitutions, according to the various needs of their members and their regions, and under the guidance of their respective council.

As we have seen, the brothers were not accepted in the provinces to which Francis sent them before the Order was given a written Rule by the Pope. The major reason for this non-acceptance was the suspicion of heresy that surrounded any group of wandering penitents. Imagine the concern of the bishops and priests in these provinces of Germany, Hungary and elsewhere, when this group of wandering vagabonds entered their territory and began preaching. Was their teaching orthodox? Were they a new breed of heretics? What new brand of religion were they selling? Were they given permission to preach in the name of the Church? Where was this Assisi that they had come from? Could they be trusted with the welfare of the souls that had been placed in their care? How would they support themselves? Would they turn the parishioners away from the one true religion? The list of questions was as varied as the men thinking. However, once they returned and shared their misadventures with Francis, he took their concerns to the Cardinal; he, in turn, took Francis to the Pope. A Rule was confirmed, permission to preach firmly established, and a Cardinal Protector was given the Order – a man who would signify to all prelates that Francis and his brothers were sanctioned by the Holy See. He, in turn, wrote ahead to the areas where the brothers would be staying to explain their competency and their permission to preach a life of penance to the laity. On their return visit, a noticeable change occurred. The friars were gladly accepted by bishops and priests. The people welcomed their teachings with open arms. Because of their witness, we read that not only did men come to this Order, but virgins and married persons sought to follow this way of life as well.

The Lord gave the brothers the words and spirit suited to the time, to speak with incisive words, penetrating the hearts of many, but especially the young more than the elderly. Those who abandoned mother and father, and all their possessions, put on the habit of holy religion. . . .

In the same way, many women, virgins and those without husbands, hearing their preaching, would come to them with contrite hearts, saying: “And we, what are we to do? We cannot stay with you. So tell us what we can do to save our souls.” In response, they established in every city they could, reclusive monasteries for doing penance. They also appointed one of the brothers their visitator and corrector.

Similarly, married men said: “We have wives who will not permit us to send them away. Teach us therefore, the way we can take more securely.” The brothers formed an order for them, called the Order of Penitents, and had it approved by the Supreme Pontiff.

AP 41

The friars would return to Assisi from these various provinces every spring at Pentecost to attend the Chapter of Mats.⁴⁴ They would share their successes and failures. They would tell of the many opportunities for others to join the movement. From here, the friars were assigned to different ministers and sent out again.

From the earliest years, the Order had structure. Following suit, ours does today. When candidates enter the Order, they do so at the local level, *the primary cell of the SFO* (General Constitutions, 47.1). However, that entrance binds them to the regional fraternity, the national fraternity and the international fraternity as well. Each of these levels of fraternity has its own structure and council with the mandate to guide and animate the workings of the entire SFO family that come under its jurisdiction.

Local Fraternity

On the local level, the council consists of five elected members: the minister, the vice minister, two councilors, one to serve as secretary, the other as treasurer, and the formation director. They are elected for a three year period of service. Normally, they can hold these positions for two terms. Other persons can be added to the council, such a hospitaler or visitor, if the need arises. The spiritual assistant, also a member of this council, is appointed by the appropriate Provincial Spiritual Assistant. The duties of the spiritual assistant are discussed in Article 26 below.

Among other duties, the minister of the local fraternity is responsible to see that the needs of the fraternity as discerned by the council are set into motion. S/he calls the gatherings of the fraternity and the fraternity council to order. The minister receives persons into the local fraternity and accepts their profession. With the advice of the council, the minister asks for fraternal (visit from the higher SFO council) and pastoral (visit from the higher Spiritual Assistant) visitations. The minister represents the fraternity on the regional council. There the minister votes with the interest of the local fraternity in mind. The local minister is also responsible for preparing an annual report to be sent to the regional council.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ A chapter was the name given to a gathering of religious. Its origin is with the Benedictine Order when the monks would gather once a day to have a chapter of a spiritual work read to them. They met in the Chapter Room. Francis and the friars gathered for the Chapter of Mats, so called because when they did, they slept on mats under the skies of Assisi around the Portiuncula.

⁴⁵ Other duties of the local minister can be found in General Constitutions, Article 51.

According to General Constitutions Article 52, the vice-minister of the local fraternity is to lend support to the minister and carry out the needs of the council. When the minister is unable to fulfill the duties of the office, the vice-minister is entrusted with the office of minister.

In addition to other functions, the secretary is responsible for keeping all pertinent records of the fraternity: the receptions, admissions, the withdrawals, the transfers and deaths of fraternity members. The minutes of the gatherings, the attendance and the and correspondence of the fraternity are also the responsibility of the secretary. The treasurer is responsible for recording the collection and disbursal of funds and the payment of all bills incurred by the fraternity. S/he is to render an account of these monies to the council.

The formation director is responsible for the initial and ongoing formation activities of the fraternity. S/he is responsible for choosing suitable materials and processes for all stages of formation, keeping in mind that persons learn in different manners. The particular needs of those in initial formation are to be discerned and addressed. The formation director has the responsibility of informing the council of the preparedness of the candidates for profession.

Regional Fraternity

Moving onto the next higher level of fraternity, Article 61.1 of the Constitutions describes the regional fraternity:

The regional fraternity is the organic union of all the local fraternities existing in a territory or which can be integrated into a natural unity, either by geographic proximity, or by common problems and pastoral circumstances. It assures the link between the local fraternities and the national fraternity in respect to the unity of the SFO and in accord with the cooperative efforts of the Franciscan religious orders to provide spiritual assistance within the area.

Everyone who belongs to a local fraternity is also a member of a regional fraternity. As the local fraternity is guided by a council, so the regional fraternity is given voice by a council. The regional council consists of all the ministers of the local fraternities that fall within the geographical or common bounds of the region. The regional fraternity is

animated and guided by an executive council chosen from the entire regional fraternity and voted upon by the regional council. That is, anyone from the local level can be nominated for office on the regional level. The ministers of the local fraternities are given a vote in choosing who will serve on the executive council. The regional council is to act as a conduit between the national fraternity and the local fraternities. It is to communicate all pertinent information from one level to the other. It is to see that the formational needs of the local fraternities are met. The regional council is responsible to see that all local directors of formation are suitably trained for this task, by holding training workshops and providing adequate information concerning the formational materials that are available. Guidance must also be offered to other members of the local councils, enabling them to animate and guide their fraternities. The regional council is to see that the officers of the local fraternities are adequately prepared for the role and responsibilities to which they have been elected. The regional council is to provide opportunities for the local fraternities to gather and interact whenever and wherever possible. These gatherings are to be formational, informational, social and spiritual. It is the responsibility of the regional council to make fraternal visitations to the local fraternities, even if they are not requested (GC Article 62.2f).⁴⁶

The regional minister has the responsibility of providing a witness to all local elections, and a visitor for all fraternal visitations. S/he is to convene a chapter of elections for the regional fraternity every three years. The minister is to prepare an annual report to the national fraternity and represent the regional fraternity at the annual gathering of the national fraternity council. It is also the responsibility of the regional minister to seek a fraternal and pastoral visitation from the national fraternity.

According to General Constitutions 52.5, the responsibilities of the vice minister, secretary and treasurer at the higher levels of fraternity, while broadened in their scope, remain basically the same as those on the local level.

National Fraternity

The next higher level of fraternity to which all members of the SFO belong is the respective national fraternity. The national fraternity is described in the General Constitutions 65.1 as

⁴⁶ Other responsibilities of the regional council can be found in General Constitutions Article 62.

... the organic union of the local fraternities existing within the territory of one or more states which are joined and co-ordinated among themselves through regional fraternities, wherever they exist.

This level of fraternity is animated and guided by a council that consists of all the ministers of the regional fraternities. In the United States the national fraternity is known by the acronym NAFRA. From amongst the members of the national fraternity at large (all Secular Franciscans living within the boundaries of the country) a national executive council is selected and voted upon by the members of the national council (all regional ministers). In the United States, the national executive council is comprised of the minister, the vice-minister, the secretary, the treasurer, a number of councilors at large and an international councilor, whose responsibility it is to represent the national fraternity on the international level. The national executive council also appoints persons to chair the Formation and Youth Commissions. Also appointed is the Apostolic Commissions Co-ordinator who oversees the workings of the Ecology, Family, Peace and Justice, and Work Commissions. In turn, each of these Commissions is assigned a chair.

Among the duties of the national executive council is first and foremost to see to the spiritual welfare of all of its members. Our Franciscan calling is primarily spiritual in nature. We are called to BE Franciscan before we take on the obligations of DOing Franciscan apostolates in the world sphere. It is the responsibility of the national council to see that our spiritual life is cared for. The national executive council is also responsible to publish and provide suitable formation materials for all persons, along with supplying necessary tools for the implementation of the formation process. The executive council is to see to the fraternal visitations of the regional fraternities. Among its duties in reference to the gatherings of the national fraternity, the executive council is to call to order a meeting of the national fraternity council each year. This gathering is explained in the General Constitutions Article 68.1.

The national chapter is the representative organ of the fraternities existing within the confines of a national fraternity. It has legislative, deliberative, and elective powers. In conformity with the Rule and the Constitutions, it may make legislative decisions and give norms valid within its national confines. The national statutes determine the composition of the national chapter, its frequency, its powers, and how to convoke it.

This annual gathering is important to the continued life of each member of the national

fraternity as it sets the goals and regulations for the coming year. Each national fraternity is guided by national statutes, which adapt the General Constitutions to the country's particular needs. These are approved by the Presidency of the International Council of the SFO, CIOFS (Council International of the Order of Franciscans Secular). Every three years, the national council is to convene a chapter of elections. The national executive council is also to ask for a pastoral and fraternal visitation from the International Presidency at least once every six years (GC 67.2g). With regard to finances, the national executive council has the duty to make prudent use of its funds for the good of the fraternity and make an annual rendering of its accounts to the International Presidency.

Although the responsibilities of the national executive council are shared amongst all its members, the ultimate responsibility resides with the national minister. Among these special duties is the responsibility to share with the national fraternity the state of the Order each year at its gathering. The national minister also speaks on behalf of the fraternity to ecclesial and civil leaders.

International Fraternity

The largest grouping to which each member of the local fraternity belongs is the international fraternity. General Constitution Article 69 describes the international fraternity and its leadership:

1. The international fraternity is constituted by the organic union of all the Catholic Secular Franciscan fraternities in the world. It is identical to the SFO. It has its own juridical personality within the Church. It is organized and it functions in conformity with the Constitutions and its own statutes.
2. The international fraternity is guided and animated by the International Council of the SFO (CIOFS), with its seat in Rome (Italy), by its Presidency and by the general minister or international president.

This international council is made up of one representative from each of the national fraternity councils (the international councilor or alternate), the Presidency of the International Council, members of Franciscan Youth and the four General Spiritual Assistants of the SFO.

It is the responsibility of the respective international councilors to gather for the

General Chapter of the International Fraternity. There they are to speak on behalf of their perspective fraternities; they are to provide reports from each; they are to communicate the happenings of the General Chapter to their respective national fraternities; they are to act as the liaison between the international fraternity and their own national fraternities (International Statutes, Article 7).

The General Chapter is the highest governing organization of the SFO. It gathers for elective chapter every six years, and meets at least once between elective chapters. It guides the life of the Secular Franciscan Order by

- developing new ways to live out its Rule
- interpreting its General Constitutions
- answering or resolving questions brought to it by lower levels of fraternity and other bodies
- approving a three year budget and overseeing the financial obligations of the Order (International Statutes, Article 10).

The Presidency of the International Fraternity is the parallel of the executive council for the national fraternity. It consists of the minister general, the vice minister, seven presidency councilors, a member of the Franciscan Youth, and the four General Assistants of the SFO (International Statutes, Article 11). The Presidency appoints a general secretary and a treasurer to fulfill the functions appropriate to these two offices. It meets at least once a year to fulfill its duties.

According to the General Constitutions, Article 73, it is the responsibility of the Presidency to oversee these duties:

- to carry out the mandates and suggestions of the General Chapter
- “to animate and guide” the international fraternity so that the SFO on all levels may be viable and fruitful
- to serve as the liaisons between the SFO and other branches of the Franciscan family
- to gather with other groups who have similar interests
- to intervene when needed to provide support and clarification to difficult situations when they arise.

In addition, Article 13 of the International Statutes lays out other specific duties, including diligence in the areas of formation, justice, peace, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and the safeguarding of creation.

The Presidency Councilors are seven in number. According to Article 11.2 of the International Statutes, "Every elective General Chapter determines the areas to be represented, based on linguistic, cultural and geographical criteria." The councilors are responsible for sharing the ideas and goals of the Presidency with their respective areas of the world.

The minister general is the visible sign of unity of the Secular Franciscan Order to the world. S/he represents the Order in ecclesial and civil matters, including those undertakings with the Holy See. The minister general is responsible for signing all documents relative to the Order, and for preparing a report for the International Fraternity on the state of the Order throughout the world.

Therein lies an overview of the organizational structure of the Secular Franciscan Order. With so much organization, one might question: Can the individual Secular Franciscan really be heard? Does the individual Secular Franciscan really have a voice? Is the individual Secular Franciscan given a thought? We must remember that the Order is first and foremost a family, a family called together by the example and words of our common father St. Francis. As we review the responsibilities of each of the councils, we note that the primary concern is for the spiritual development of every Secular Franciscan given into their care. This is the commonality of our call – the following of the gospel message as exemplified by our holy father Francis. The overarching objective of each council is to see to the proper formation of each member of the Order. On all levels, opportunities are set forth to animate the members in the arenas of peace and justice, ecology, family and work. Each level also affords opportunities to work in conjunction with Franciscan Youth. In the true Franciscan ideal of family, these selected brothers and sisters serve as guides to our journeys, scouts along the way, to point the way before us.

We must realize that as each person assumes one of these responsibilities, their answer to serve is but an extension of their Secular Franciscan vocation. If we hold this to be true, then the greatest guarantee we have that the individual member of the Order is not forgotten is to call to mind the words of our Lord in whose stead the members of the various councils are called to serve: "I did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

St. Francis, in Admonition 4, realizing the possible tendency to seek office with a less than proper motive, cautions:

Let those who are placed over others boast about the position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of the brothers. And if they were more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a money bag to the peril of their souls.

None of these positions is taken on lightly. May we keep all who have answered the call to serve us in daily prayer, for they will answer for the responsibility they have taken on and the way in which they carry it out for us to a much higher authority.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Of the offices explained above, list those you think you would like to serve in.
2. What skills do you have that would enable you to take on these positions?
3. Share your reflections with your local council member whose role you've selected.

Ongoing Formation:

1. List the areas of fraternity with which you are not familiar.
2. Choose one that you would like to become involved in and investigate further.
3. Talk with the members of your fraternity council and decide on ways for you to become involved.

ARTICLE 22
SUPPORTING EACH OTHER'S VOCATION

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*In this way holy simplicity filled them,
purity of life so possessed them,
that they were totally ignorant of duplicity of heart.
For just as there was in them one faith,
so there was one spirit,
one will, one charity, continual unity of spirit,
harmony in living, cultivation of virtues,
agreement of minds, and piety in action.
There are the lessons of the devoted father
by which he instructed his new sons
not so much in words and speech,
but in deed and in truth, and in which he renewed
the purpose and zeal of an apostolic life.*

BPr 2. 48

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Which of the attributes or virtues mentioned above do you hope to acquire in your life as a Secular Franciscan?
2. How will being a member of the fraternity help you in your growth?

Ongoing Formation:

1. List the ways the fraternity has been a place of nourishment and growth for you? Could you have achieved this growth without the aid of the fraternity?
2. Why do you believe this is so?

THE RULE

The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love. This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members.

Each of the early brothers was called individually by God to a life of simplicity, a life that had one central focus, God. It was a life that called them to be single hearted, wanting only what God wanted for their lives. Being focused on God and centered in his will was the beginning of their call. The call was to leave the cares and worries of the world behind, to change their hearts, to set their gaze differently. Each was called to live a life of penance, a life that focused on their poverty, their need for God. They came to see the goodness of God and recognize their own sinfulness. They came to recognize the values of the gospel as a roadmap for their lives. This was the call that led them to follow Francis. They saw, in his conversion, the seeds of what God was asking of them individually. However, it was in the fraternity that the brothers grew in virtue. It was in the fraternity that they were daily challenged to take up the gospel message. It was in fraternity that the ongoing call of *metanoia* was heard. It was in the fraternity, in their unity of life, their bonding in prayer, their meditating on the Scriptures, their going beyond themselves, their ministry to the lepers and the poor, and their care and service of each other that they grew individually in their likeness to Christ. It was within the fraternity that the virtues and graces of Christ took root in their lives and began to bear fruit. It was within the fraternity that Francis shared with the brothers what he knew of God. It was within the fraternity that the brothers were nourished by the Word and sent forth into the world to share the goodness of God they had discerned within. It is within the fraternity that other persons came to recognize these virtues and wished to follow this example in their own lives. Others desired to join them, men and women, single and married. Francis, realizing his particular way of life was not suited for those who were married, promised these persons a way of life that was suited for them. It first came to them as the Exhortation of Saint Francis to the Brothers and Sisters in Penance, the Prologue to the Rule of 1978:

All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength, and love their neighbors as themselves and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because *the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them* and he will make *his home and dwelling among them*, and they are the sons of the heavenly Father, whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are spouses, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord Jesus Christ, we are brothers to him when we fulfill *the will of the Father who is in heaven*.

We are mothers, when we carry him in our heart and body through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through a holy life which must give light to others by example.

Oh, how glorious it is to have a great and holy Father in heaven! Oh, how glorious it is to have such a beautiful and admirable Spouse, the Holy Paraclete.

Oh, how glorious it is to have such a Brother and such a Son, loved, beloved, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up his life for his sheep and prayed to the Father saying:

"Oh holy Father, protect them with your name whom you gave me out of the world. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me and they received it. They have known that in truth I came from you; they have believed that it was you who sent me. For these I pray, not for the world. Bless and consecrate them, and I consecrate myself for their sakes. I do not pray for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word that they may be holy by being one as we are. And I desire, Father, to have them in my company where I am to see this glory of mine in your kingdom."

Can you imagine the gratification of these people who sought a way of holiness in their secular state when they first heard these words of Francis? There was a way for them to attain holiness, just as there was a way for the Lesser Brothers and the Poor Ladies! There was a life of penance that could be lived in the world. There was a way for lay people to live the words of the gospel, to put them into practice in their daily lives. Francis discerned for them a way to be a spouse, brother, and a mother to the Lord Jesus. In their own lives, they could give life to the Lord Jesus. They could bring his presence to the world in which they lived. They could truly live the words of the

gospel: they could be brothers and mothers and sisters of the Lord, by choosing the will of the Father over their own, by living with a sincere conscience, by uniting their lives with the life of Christ. Is this not what Francis did? Did he not seek to exemplify the life of Christ, to follow it so closely as to make it his own? Here it is available to them! Now, imagine their enthusiasm in wanting to share this joy with others who felt the same way. And so we have persons gathering to share this way of life. It is recounted in the *Assisi Compilation* (74) that this was indeed what took place in the town of Greccio.

So should it be with us. The local fraternity is the place where we, who are individually called, come to live out our vocation as Secular Franciscans. It is the fraternity that becomes the breeding ground for our gospel life. It is within the fraternity that the seeds of our vocation are first discerned and nurtured. It is within fraternity that we come to learn to pray the gospel and discover the presence of God more deeply in our lives. It is within fraternity that our vocation is nourished and we are challenged to grow. It is within fraternity that we are able to share the goodness of God in our lives with each other. Within the fraternity we come to know gospel as the call and the cadence of our lives. It is within fraternity that we discover the true meaning of the Beatitudes for our life. We come together to share the joy of following in the footsteps of Francis and to confront the demands that this call places on our lives. It is within fraternity that we realize our uniqueness and purpose in God's design. It is the fraternity that supports us and stimulates us to become leaven in the Church and in the world at large.

The local fraternity is the privileged place for us to embrace our vocation, as it was with Francis and his first brothers. They came together to pray, to meditate on the Scriptures, to discern what they were to do. It was from this small, secure gathering that they went forth into the world to preach penance with their lives and with their words. They returned again to this place of solace to share both the goodness and the disappointments God had allowed in their lives, to share their joy and their frustrations. We are called to do the same. The local fraternity is for us that same place of safe haven where we know we are accepted for who we are. We come together to pray and discern the Scriptures as they relay God's will for our lives, individually and collectively. We discover, as did Francis and his early followers, our baptismal call to be persons of Church. We try to discern how we might fit into the Church's mission in our modern world. What is it that we as Franciscans can offer the local parish, the local diocese that

is uniquely ours to give? What apostolates can we support from our particular stance as Franciscans? How are we to make the Franciscan presence felt in our own cities or towns? We journey forth from the fraternity into the world, and we return to the fraternity again to share the gracious gifts of God we have received in giving to others. The local fraternity is also a safe place in which to share the hardships of this vocation and the disappointments we have come to bear. Within this caring space, we are freely encouraged to share our perceived failures and allow our brothers and sisters to support us, to encourage us, to gently urge us on. We are reminded that God can bring good out of every situation, so we receive strength from our brothers and sisters to move on again. We pray in thanksgiving for God's goodness to us, all of us, because God's goodness to one of us increases God's bounty to all of us as fraternity. We come home to fraternity to be strengthened to go out and share our Franciscan presence with the world once again. And, we begin again, for up to now, we have done nothing.

Always we must remember that we are intrinsically united with the Church. As Francis united himself and all the Orders he established to the Church, so each local fraternity must be canonically erected, established under the authority and with the permission of the local bishop. A group that seeks to be a Secular Franciscan fraternity is guided by four or five professed members of a nearby sponsoring fraternity. These professed members take on the responsibilities of council members, caring for the spiritual, formational, and business activities of this new group. After a time of trial, members of the "emerging" fraternity are given positions of service under the watchful care of the professed members. After several years, permission is sought from one of the provinces of the Friars Minor or the Third Order Regular to establish a new fraternity. The Provincial Spiritual Assistant seeks permission of the local Ordinary (the bishop) for a new fraternity to be established in his diocese. When permission is granted, and visitations from the regional fraternity deem it viable, the new fraternity can be canonically established.

This new fraternity takes up the Franciscan vision yet again, as did the first group of penitents, to discern the gospel in their lives, to live the gospel in the world, and to celebrate the joys and sorrows of that life with each other.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. List some ways in which the local fraternity has already helped you in discerning your vocation.
2. List some ways in which you feel the local fraternity might help you better understand God's unique call for your life, or help you better integrate Franciscan values into your life.
3. Ask your sponsor or another member of the fraternity to assist you with this understanding this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. List the areas of growth you have come to experience as a member of the local fraternity.
2. List specific instances of how the fraternity has inspired or challenged your living the gospel call? In what ways are you still struggling with your vocation?
3. Share one of these struggles with another member of the fraternity. Ask them to pray and discern with you this month.

ARTICLE 23
ENGAGING THE FRATERNITY

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Day by day the blessed father Francis was being filled with the consolation and the grace of the Holy Spirit, and, with all vigilance and concern, he was forming his new sons with new instruction, teaching them to walk with steady steps the way of holy poverty and blessed simplicity. . . . Saint Francis used to engage carefully in a daily or rather constant, examination of himself and his followers. Allowing nothing dangerous to remain in them, he drove from their hearts any negligence.

1C 26, 42

The Abbess shall carefully provide a Mistress from among the more discerning sisters of the monastery both for these (young girls who have entered and reached the age prescribed by law) and the other novices. She shall diligently form them in a holy way of life and proper behavior according to the form of our profession.

RCI 2. 14

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. What are some of your reasons for entering your fraternity? How do you think this particular fraternity can help you grow in your Franciscan vocation?
2. Why are these points of Franciscan life important to you?

Ongoing Formation:

1. In which areas of your Franciscan life has the fraternity challenged you to grow?
2. How have these challenges affected your vocation?

THE RULE

Requests for admission to the Secular Franciscan Order must be presented to the local fraternity, whose council decides upon the acceptance of new brothers and sisters.

Admission into the Order is gradually attained through a time of initiation, a period of formation of at least one year, and profession of the rule. The entire community is engaged in this process of growth by its own manner of living. The age for profession and the distinctive Franciscan sign are regulated by the statutes.

Profession by its nature is a permanent commitment.

Members who find themselves in particular difficulties should discuss their problems with the council in fraternal dialogue.

Withdrawal or permanent dismissal from the Order, if necessary, is an act of the fraternity council according to the norms of the constitutions.

As we can see from the Franciscan Focus above, Francis took formation into this way of life very seriously. In the beginning, he personally instructed the “new sons” who had come to follow this way of life. He taught them through words and example his love for holy poverty, his reasons for choosing it as his means of following Christ, his understanding of the human pitfalls to be avoided in following it. Francis saw simplicity – relying solely on God – as the unique way of living in this poverty.

He learned to examine his own life each day – how well was he following his Lord? He also examined the lives of his brothers, making known to them any failures he recognized there.

In her Rule, Clare also sought to set aside a sister with the gift of discernment, who was practiced in living this austere life, to journey with those who were entering the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. She desired that the message she heard and shared with Francis would be passed down from one generation of sisters to the next.

As we have come to know from our own history, persons of all walks of life were seeking to follow Francis in his new found way of life. They were seeking a spirituality that was uniquely their own, a spirituality that rose from within, a spirituality that

fostered their own relationship with God. They were seeking to join others who looked to make the gospel the rule of their lives. They were seeking companions on this journey. The Order of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance was formed. As in the First and Second Orders, formation was foundational for this new group of penitents. They were to have a friar come and preach a religious message to them each month, sharing with them some aspect of the gospel, some point of interest about the life of Francis, some challenge to foster their journey in faith.

Formation continues to be the bedrock of the fraternity. It is in formation that our vocation is nurtured and challenged. It is in formation that we grow into our unique expression of Franciscanism to be shared with the world. It is in formation that we seek the companionship that is necessary to live a truly Franciscan life.

Formation is one of the primary responsibilities of the local council. We will look at its stages, its agents and its content. The stages of formation are four: Orientation, Inquiry, Candidacy and Ongoing, with an special emphasis on the first year after Permanent Profession.

Orientation is the “first encounter” stage of formation: Who are you? Who are we? What are you seeking? What do we have to offer? A first glance to see if we are going to fit each other. Orientation provides the beginnings of discernment of the Franciscan vocation. It answers the initial, wide ranging questions of those who are seeking this way of life. It offers a basic introduction into our way of life, our charism, our Rule. It is an open ended space to begin to determine if the prospective member is suited for the Order, and if the Order is the proper place for this person’s spirituality to flourish. Is St. Francis the proper guide for this person’s journey? Do their lives have anything in common? Is a general overview of this way of life enticing or would another “model” of spirituality fit more securely? If we were to compare it to a work of art, Orientation would be likened to selecting and evaluating a subject and a medium.

This phase of formation is critical. It is a time for discerning if the prospective members have the basic dispositions that are essential for entering into this mature committed relationship.

- Do they understand what the Secular Franciscan Order is? Do they understand the life long commitment they will be asked to make?
- Are they mature enough, emotionally and spiritually, to make this decision?

- Do they have a mature understanding of their Catholic faith?
- Are they free of prior commitments to other religious families to make this commitment?
- Are they fully initiated members of the Roman Catholic Church, having received the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist?
- If married, are they married within the Church? (If not, now is the time to help them seek an annulment and/or rectify their married state with the Church)
- Do they have the time necessary to commit to the formation process and the fraternal gatherings?
- Do they have a good sense of community or are they “loners?”

The importance of determining the above information early cannot be over-emphasized for the good of the person and the good of the fraternity. Content for this time of formation is to share broadly who we are, our life, our Rule, our commitment to the gospel, our history, and our spirituality. What is it that makes us uniquely Franciscan as opposed to the other spiritual families within the Church? It is a time for answering the basic questions of those who seek to enter into this way of life. Remember that the persons who come to us do not fail formation; rather formation fails them if we do not aid them in discerning the correct call of God in their lives. Orientation involves an interview evaluation to determine a person’s preparedness to enter the Order. The time period for Orientation is at least three months (NS 19.1a) culminating in the Rite of Welcome, which enters a person into the Inquiry stage of formation.

In relation to our work of art, Inquiry supplies the the outline, broad strokes of the painting, the general form of the sculpture. During Inquiry, a closer look is given to the Rule, the history of the Franciscan family and our place in it. We look at the roots of our own Order, and how we are called to live the gospel way of life in our secular state. We pay close attention to the action of the Holy Spirit as the Inquirer continues to discern this call of life. It is essential to discern with the Inquirers the basis of their motives. The SFO is not a pious society or a group to enter because my friends belong. Neither is this the place to solely satisfy one’s need for social action. Though all these components, prayer, community and service, are part of the Secular Franciscan life, they are just that – components. One cannot be the overwhelming reason a person seeks admission to the Order. The true nature of vocation, of a call by God, needs to be determined at this stage of formation. If the call to pray, to be in community, to serve

others grows out of a desire to be in closer communion with God, then we have an indication that this is truly a call from the Lord. However, this realization may take time to surface. We must be willing to give it time during this stage of formation. According to the National Statutes in the United States Inquiry is to last at least six months (NS 19.2a). A time of discernment and interviews are necessary before the Rite of Admission, which officially inaugurates persons into the Order, although at this stage, they are not fully professed. The Tau cross is given at this Ritual. For Secular Franciscans in the United States, the Tau is the distinctive Franciscan sign as set up by the National Statutes. The Tau has a great significance for us because it did for Francis as St. Bonaventure attests:

The holy man venerated this symbol [TAU] with great affection,
often spoke of it with eloquence,
and signed it with his own hand in the letters he sent,
as if his whole desire were,
according to the prophetic text,
to mark with a Tau
the foreheads of those moaning and grieving,
of those truly converted to Jesus Christ.

LMj 4. 9

Franciscans' love of the TAU extends back to the Fourth Lateral Council when Francis heard Pope Innocent III expound on this passage from Ezekiel:

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. The LORD called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his side; and said to him, "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark [Tau] on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." To the others he said in my hearing, "Pass through the city after him, and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut down old men, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark. And begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the house.

Ezek. 9:3 -6

Francis is reported to have left the great hall, marking his habit with the Tau thus accepting it as his personal mark of Penance. He also adopted it as his signature. It can be seen as such on his Letter to Leo, displayed in the Lower Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. A Tau legended to have been made by Francis' hand can still be seen in the Magdalene Chapel located in the hermitage retreat at Fonte Colombo. This significant symbol of Francis has become our Franciscan sign. How blessed we are!

This next stage of formation is known as Candidacy and it supplies an in depth look into our way of life, the particulars that are necessary to live the active and contemplative dimensions of our Secular Franciscan calling. Chapter Two of our Rule which deals with our Way of Life, and Chapter Three which treats the various aspects of our life in fraternity are the primary sources for this time of formation. In relation to our work of art, Candidacy could be compared to filling in the colors, supplying the fine strokes, etching out the details, chiseling into the outline. Again, a continual monitoring of the action of the Holy Spirit is necessary during this stage as well.

According to the National Statutes in the United States, the period of Candidacy is to be at least eighteen months and not longer than thirty-six months (NS 19.2b). Interviews spaced throughout Candidacy help determine a person's readiness to continue on to profession. A person must be a fully initiated member of the Catholic Church, having received the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, in order to be professed (NS 19.2d). A retreat to culminate this time of discernment and formation is highly suggested. Candidacy culminates in Profession of the Rule. Profession, as stated in Article 23 of the Rule, is permanent. This fact must be emphasized throughout the formation process beginning with our initial contacts. The age of profession is to be determined by the various National Fraternities. In the United States, the age of Profession is set at 21 years; initial formation can begin at the age of 18.

Ongoing formation is the filling in, the fleshing out, the detailing of color and form, size and shape. It is the continual revisiting of what we have accepted into our lives and an examining of what is still missing. It is a time of continually adding to our lived experience of Franciscanism, a time of challenging ourselves to respond more deeply to the gospel call. The local fraternity is that graced place where our values and life style are nourished and challenged. The local fraternity is the soil in which our vocations continue to flourish. A new look at our Franciscan sources, the sharing of a Franciscan project, the reading of a book on a Franciscan topic with a different member of the fraternity leading the discussion each month are just a few examples of how to keep formation alive. Special attention needs to be paid to those newly professed members of the fraternity. We must keep in mind that they have just participated in an intense period of getting to know themselves, of sharing intimately with others, of coming to accept this vocation with its spiritual and social demands. A gentle blending of this intensity with the general fraternal gatherings is to be encouraged for a period of time, preferably a year. This time is set aside for unpacking this lived way of life with the

newly professed. One way (and this is only one way) in which this can be accomplished is to gather the newly professed once a month with one or several members of the fraternity to discuss their Franciscan lives. A book, such as the *Major Legend of St. Bonaventure* serves this purpose well. Each chapter deals with a different stage of Francis' spirituality. The reading serves as a springboard into discussing how this spirituality impacts the actions of our lives. This time together gives the newly professed and the other members of the fraternity an ideal opportunity to get to know each other more intimately.

This brief example illustrates for us exactly what Article 23 states so emphatically, that the entire community is responsible for this growth. According to the *Elements of Formation: A Reflection on the Formation Process* there are two agents of formation, the Holy Spirit and the Candidate. The following persons are set up as a support network to this initial pairing:

- the fraternity
- the fraternity council
- the formation director and team
- the sponsor
- the spiritual assistant.⁴⁷

Notice how far down the list the formation director and team are. They are not the persons primarily responsible for formation. They may be the ones most intimately involved, but not primarily responsible. Note the difference! The entire fraternity is responsible for forming the new persons in our midst! What is vital for us to remember throughout this process is that the Holy Spirit and the Candidate are the agents of formation. Movement from one stage to another is only encouraged when the person in formation feels comfortable moving on, when the formation director and council members discern that the person is prepared to move on, and when the movement of the Holy Spirit in the person's life warrants the move.

The context of formation is three dimensional: informational, formational, and transformational.⁴⁸ The *informational* component supplies the facts needed to undertake this way of life, including an understanding of the gospel and its importance to our life,

⁴⁷ Presidency of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order, *Elements of Formation: A Reflection on the Formation Process*, Rome, 1992, (Lindsborg, KS: Barbo-Carlson Enterprises, L.L.C.), 5.

⁴⁸See "The Privilege of Being Secular - The Grace of Continuous Formation: 25 Years of Living the Rule of 1978" by Teresa V. Baker, S.F.O. and Anne H. Mulqueen, S.F.O. in the June, '03 edition of The CORD for a more detailed description of these dimensions.

the Franciscan charism, our history, our place in the Franciscan family, the demands of the Rule, the structure of the fraternities, the rigors of the life of penance. This is primarily the task of the formation director, the formation team and the sponsor with the aid of the varied resources at their disposal.

The *formational* aspect is the responsibility of the entire fraternity. This involves the manner in which we live our lives as Secular Franciscans. This is not something that can be learned from a book; it is exemplified in the lives of those who have already made a permanent commitment to this gospel life. It is within the context of fraternal life that the new members can be molded, *formed*, into the life of a Secular Franciscan. This is why a good fraternal life is essential in drawing, nourishing and establishing new vocations. The fraternity will draw active and vibrant members to itself in the measure that its existence is active and vibrant.

The third component is *transformational*, that aspect that transpires between the Holy Spirit and the Candidate. No one can take the demands of this way of life upon themselves – it is an answer to a call, an answer that is nourished and sustained by remaining in constant communication with God, who initiated the call. The fraternity members and especially the Spiritual Assistant can aid the transformational component by offering opportunities of prayer, retreats, days of recollection and discernment. We must keep in mind that this aspect of formation is the most personal. A diligent prayer life and daily reading of Scripture are essential.

It is very important to note that these aspects are happening simultaneously. They do not build on one another as steps leading to an ultimate goal. Rather, each is a single dimension that, when brought together, form the three dimensional artwork that is formation. If one were taken away, the image that results would not be true to life; it would fall flat.

Discernment during the formative process cannot be over stressed. It is imperative in helping those persons seeking to follow the call of God, However, there are times and situations that will arise after profession that call one's ability to continue to be a viable member of the fraternity or to continue to live the Rule into question. It may be that one's occupation causes them to move away; an illness may have overtaken a person that makes it difficult to attend the monthly gathering; a person may be in need of time to discern if this call is truly where God would have them at this stage in their life. If

such an occurrence arises, the member who is having difficulty should feel welcome enough to share his/her situation with the members of the council. As they did in initial formation, so the members of the council are to receive this person graciously. The need for good listening skills and fraternal dialogue cannot be over stressed here. Always invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit, for it is this Spirit who directed this persons' vocation. Temporary withdrawal or transfer may be options; however, if these do not offer a solution to the situation, then permanent withdrawal may be the only option available. The Constitutions, Articles 55 through 59, layout the process to be followed.

The fraternity is a place of growth; it is also a place where misunderstandings can occur. The council is responsible for listening to and discerning difficulties experienced by any member of the fraternity. All persons should feel free and comfortable to discuss their problems with any member of the council. The council should offer a ready and willing forum to listen to all sides of a situation, impartially.

It may also happen that there is a person disruptive to the Franciscan lifestyle, a person who may bring disgrace either to the fraternity or to the Church at large. If such is the case, it is the responsibility of the fraternity council to again invite this person to fraternal dialogue. If the issues cannot be resolved, the manner of dismissal from the Order can also be found in the above mentioned Articles of the Constitutions. By the grace of God, this latter situation is rare.

In formation, as in fraternity life, we need each other to grow and develop in the vocation we have received. We need each other to become the persons we are called to be. We need each other to make the gospel message known to the world. To illustrate this point vividly, I share with you a fable:

The Rabbi's Gift

by Francis Dorff, O. Praem.

There was once a famous monastery which had fallen on hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks and its big church resounded with the singing of the chant, but now it was deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised their God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would pass from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the woods." And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long-lost brothers. Then they stepped back and just stood there, smiling at each other with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

After a while the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the Scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the wood of the table with their tears.

After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts," he said. "You came to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you may only repeat it once. After that, no one may ever say it aloud again."

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, "The Messiah is among you."

For a little while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, "Now you must go."

The abbot left without saying a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called the monks together in the chapter room. He told them that he had received a teaching from "the rabbi who walks in the woods" and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah."

The monks were startled by this saying. "What could it mean?" they asked themselves. "Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Brother Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could this mean?"

They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat each other with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them

now which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They lived with one another as men who had finally found something. But they prayed the Scriptures together as men who were always looking for something. Occasionally, visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks, and young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community.

In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. But, somehow or other, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.⁴⁹

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. What has been your experience of formation so far? List its high points and its low points.
2. Have you experienced formation in its three contexts: informational, formational and transformational? To what degree in each case?
3. What one component of your formation do you find lacking? Bring it to the attention of the formation team this month.

⁴⁹ Originally published in *New Catholic World*, Vol. 222 No. 1328, (March-April, 1978), 52. Used with permission of the author.

Ongoing Formation:

1. How has ongoing formation enhanced your Franciscan vocation?
2. List areas of Franciscan spirituality, apostolate, current scholarship, or any other Franciscan interests you would like to bring to the fraternity's attention.
3. Share these with the formation director and team. Assist them in developing ways of bringing these sources to the entire fraternity.

ARTICLE 24
JOURNEYING WITH OTHERS

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

*She [Clare] provided for her children,
through dedicated preachers,
the nourishment of the Word of God
and from this
she did not take a smaller portion.*

*She was filled with such rejoicing at hearing a holy sermon;
she delighted at such remembrance of her Jesus . . .*

.....

Although she was not educated in the liberal arts, she nevertheless enjoyed listening to the sermons of those who were, because she believed that a nucleus lay hidden in the text that she would subtly perceive and enjoy with relish. She knew what to take out of the sermon of any preacher that might be profitable to the soul, while knowing that to pluck a flower from a wild thorn was no less prudent than to eat the fruit of a noble tree.

Once when Lord Pope Gregory forbade any brother to go to the monasteries of the Ladies without permission, the pious mother, sorrowing that her sisters would more rarely have the food of sacred teaching, sighed: "Let him now take away from us all the brothers since he has taken away those who provide us with the food that is vital." At once she sent back to the minister all the brothers, not wanting to have the questors who acquired corporal bread when they could not have the questors for spiritual bread. When Pope Gregory heard this, he immediately mitigated that prohibition into the hands of the minister general.

LC 37

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Clare looked to the friars as her guide and support. Whom do you look to as a guide on your journey?
2. Why have you chosen this person?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Clare wanted the brothers to share the spiritual dimensions of living this life of the gospel with her sisters. With which other Franciscan do you share your journey? Do you find this advantageous to your growth as a Franciscan?
2. How has it helped you better realize your Franciscan calling?

THE RULE

To foster communion among members, the council should organize regular and frequent meetings of the community as well as meeting with other Franciscan groups, especially with youth groups. It should adopt appropriate means for growth in Franciscan and ecclesial life and encourage everyone to a life of fraternity. This communion continues with deceased brothers and sisters through prayer for them.

Clare saw the need of being in contact with the brothers more than the Pope originally did. She saw these meetings as necessary for her spiritual growth. She recognized the need of sharing how the charism was perceived and given life in their lived experiences. It was a fervent need of hers that continued throughout her life.

It is the responsibility of the local council to establish frequent fraternal gatherings. These gathering times are to provide ample opportunity for prayer, formation, business and social sharing. If we only gather once a month, there may be not enough time to support all these components of our being together. We must then look to see if the meeting time could be extended. Another option is to separate the formational and the prayer components into two separate times of the month. We must remember that we come together as fraternity to be nourished and strengthened to go back to the world with the gifts we have received from being together. If the allotted time does not allow for this growth, we might want to think about expanding it.

We could also take a lesson from St. Clare, realizing that within our own fraternity we

cannot nor will not find all the nuances of the Franciscan charism. We are encouraged to join with other nearby fraternities to share our common Franciscan apostolates. Sometimes a fraternity is too small or has too few members who are able to sustain an apostolate on its own. This is a perfect opportunity to join together and work for the good of God's people. It also affords an opportunity for socializing with Franciscans who might have a different manner of living out the charism.

Formation might seem like a daunting task for a newly elected formation director. It is suggested for local fraternities that are in close proximity with one another to share the expertise of the formators. Especially if the group in initial formation is small, this framework allows for sharing among a greater number of participants. It allows the preparation work of formation to be shared among several individuals. Different learning styles and facilitating styles can be experienced. Local fraternities can share different types of resources for formation. Ongoing formation can also be enhanced by sharing materials and ideas with other fraternities. On the spiritual level, days of recollection and retreat times can be shared. Let's not forget the times of socializing. Why not invite the nearby fraternity to your next outing?

On a regional level, times of retreat, formation, evangelical living and socialization are to be established at least yearly. These are times when members of different fraternities can share their accomplishments with each other. What worked? Which apostolates did you take up? How successful were they? Or one fraternity may know of the need for an apostolate, yet not have the resources, either financial, material, or personnel wise, to fulfill it. Sharing this information at a regional gathering might give another fraternity the opportunity it's seeking to get involved. Local fraternities are not immune from problems. This gathering would be an opportune place for members to meet in small groups and discuss difficulties. What seems a problem to one fraternity may have already found a solution in another. Sharing of these resources is an excellent way of growing together. Gathering in a larger group to partake in a day of recollection or retreat on a Franciscan topic might make more sense than trying to set one up for an individual fraternity. Again, it is always good to meet and share with other Franciscans. In this way, we create for ourselves a broader view of Franciscanism than the one that our local fraternity holds.

Nationally, in the United States, there is a Quinquennial Congress held every five years, inviting all members of the Order to gather together. These congresses are held in

different places of the United States to facilitate easy travel for at least a portion of those attending. Keynote addresses are given that deal with all aspects of our Secular Franciscan life. The presenters come from our own Order and the other branches of the Franciscan family as well. During these congresses, breakout sessions are set up for various other topics to be discussed. There are opportunities provided for shared prayer experiences. There are also occasions for networking with other Secular Franciscans who may share a similar hobby or craft, talent or activity. Members of several other national fraternities are invited to attend also. What a grand opportunity to meet with so many different Secular Franciscans from around the country and around the world.

Moving beyond the circle of our own Order, we can join with members of the First, Second and Third Orders in Franciscan based activities. Might we join together for a day of prayer centering around the care of the earth? We can move beyond that gathering and take up a common apostolate that would inform our surrounding neighborhood of ways in which they can make better use of our natural resources. We can offer to work side by side with other Franciscans on a gospel driven apostolate that their community has already set up. We could sit for an evening and share the challenges and rewards of a gospel based life. What about a day of shared formation, an open forum where the members of the different branches of the family could get to understand each other's unique vocation? Within this larger Franciscan network, there are probably many interests that can be shared and ways of assisting each other in bringing them to fruition. What a unique opportunity this would be to take time to share each other's interests.

Article 24 specifically mentions our interaction with youth groups. We can interact with the local youth group in our parish; we can interact with individual young people whom we know; we can interact with Franciscan Youth fraternities. Young people today are looking for an ideal to follow. What better ideal than that of Francis of Assisi! No matter what the group or how many individuals we share with, we have something to offer the young people of today. Remember that Francis was but a youth himself when he began his conversion.

We have many aspects of his story to share with the young people we meet. It may be that he challenged the socio-political structure of his time. What about the drastic stance he took for the gospel? It may be that he took care of the poor and outcasts of society

when everyone else shunned them. Could it have been his countercultural stance? It may be that he saw all creation as a reflection of God. For these and many other ideals as well, young persons, seeking a spirituality for themselves, are being drawn to Francis.

We have our own Franciscan life to share with them. Invite them to participate as you or the fraternity takes on a work of social concern. Invite them to the various rituals and ceremonies we sponsor that speak of Franciscan traditions or Franciscan ideals. Invite them to celebrate *Transitus*. Invite them to our celebration of the Feast of St. Francis or St. Clare. Be available to witness to Francis and Franciscan spirituality during a youth gathering in the month of October. Sponsor one or more young people on a retreat that has discernment or social concerns as its foundation. Invest in books that have a Franciscan theme and are age appropriate and donate them to the youth group library in yours or a neighboring parish. Sponsor a peace award at the local school. There are many other ways that we can initiate and involve the youth in our Franciscan way of life.

Now, all this being said, does this mean that our interaction with youth is meant to make them into “mini SFOs?” No, definitely not. Ours is to feed their hunger for a Franciscan spirituality. Ours is to give freely of the Franciscan understanding we have come to know without expecting anything in return. God has already planted a desire in their hearts; ours is to nurture this desire in the manner and amount of time that is allotted us. We are to step back and allow that desire to take flesh in whatever design God has for it. We are to give, not counting the cost; we are to give, not expecting any rewards. We are to give because it has been given to us. “What you have received freely, give freely as a gift”(Mt. 10:8).

Besides parish youth groups, you may also have heard of Franciscan Youth. What is Franciscan Youth? Is it a feeder group for the Secular Franciscan Order? No! Is it a gathering of “SFO want to be’s?” Not necessarily. Franciscan Youth are young people (ages 18 to 35) who feel drawn to the charism of St. Francis of Assisi in many different ways. They have their own meetings and their own formation process. Although more popular in other parts of the world than in the United States, we especially owe them our allegiance and support.

We are also reminded in Article 24 that our care for each other in fraternity extends

beyond this life. We are to pray for our deceased brothers and sisters continually. We might do this by adding special intercessions mentioning their names at our times of reception and profession. We might set aside a time in November to celebrate a special Mass in their remembrance.

In whatever manner best fits our circumstances, we are called to reach out to other members of the Franciscan family. We are to care for each other, nourish each other, gather with the other branches of the family, share our gifts with the young persons seeking a spiritual identity, and remember in a special way those who have gone before us, who have leveled the path a bit, who have left us a legacy to follow.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. List areas of growth you would like to see in your Franciscan vocation?
2. Which do you see as a possibility for your fraternity to fulfill?
3. Select one and ask about its feasibility in the future. Volunteer to seek out resources to bring to the attention of the fraternity.

Ongoing Formation:

1. Make a list of the fraternities that are close to you. If there are none, explore whether there are other Franciscan groups close by.
2. Draw up plans for various activities to be shared with one or more of these Franciscan communities.
3. Bring these to the attention of the council. Be prepared to lay the groundwork.

ARTICLE 25
CARING FOR EACH OTHER

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

And let each one give to the treasurer one of the usual denari which he shall collect and on the advice of the ministers distribute among the poor brothers and sisters, and mostly to the infirm and those who would not have funeral services. Finally let him offer of that money to the other poor and to that Church.⁵⁰

Memoriale Propositi 7. 2

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. Care of each other in the fraternity has been a founding principle of this Order. Do you feel caring for each other financially is the primary purpose for the fraternity's funds?
2. What are your reasons for your belief?

Ongoing Formation:

1. Have you ever been in need of financial support? Did you make your need known to the members of council? If you had not been in need, but knew of someone who was, did you bring their needs to the council?
2. Why or why not? What is the basis for your response?

⁵⁰ Since none of the early Franciscan sources speak directly of the financial responsibilities of the first fraternities nor the responsibility of the religious interacting with the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, the last two Franciscan Focuses are taken from the first canonical Rule, *Memoriale Propositi*, dated 1228. The texts are taken from the work by Fr. Robert Stewart, O.F.M.

THE RULE

Regarding expenses necessary for the life of the fraternity and the needs of worship, of the apostolate, and of charity, all the brothers and sisters should offer a contribution according to their means. Local fraternities should contribute toward the expenses of the higher fraternity councils.

From its inception, the Franciscan movement has had the care for the poor as its bedrock. While still working in his father's cloth shop, we read that Francis regretted turning a beggar away and swore from that day on he would never turn anyone away who asked something of him "for the love of God." When Bernardo asked to join Francis in his way of life, they went to the Church of Saint Nicolo and there opened the Book of the Gospels three times.

At the first opening of the book, this text appeared: "If you will be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor." LMj 3. 3

Celano records that Bernardo

. . . hurried to sell all he had and distributed it to the poor, not to his relatives. . . . When he had done this, he joined the holy man Francis, in the same life and habit, and was always with him, until the brothers increased in number and he, with the obedience of his devoted father, was sent to other regions.

1C 24

This became a standard for any man who wished to join Francis' company. Celano recounts for us the incident of a man who chose to do otherwise:

It happened once in the March of Ancona after the saint had been preaching, that a man came to him humbly requesting to enter the Order. And the holy man said to him: "If you want to join God's poor, first distribute what you have to the poor of the world." When he heard this, the man went off and, led by the love of the flesh, distributed his goods to his relatives and not to the poor. When he came back and told the saint about his open-handed generosity, the father laughed at him: "Go on your way, Brother Fly," he said, "for you have not yet left your home and family. You gave what you had to your relatives and cheated the poor. You are not worthy of the holy poor."

2C 81

The obligation to give everything away was not only required for the men who followed Francis, but it was also required of those women who wished to join the Poor Ladies. We are even told that Clare,

... from the beginning of her conversion,
sold the paternal inheritance that would have come to her,
keeping nothing of its worth for herself, and gave it all to the poor.

LC 13

Clare extended this command of the gospel to any who would follow her Form of Life. In her Rule, she wrote:

If she (a woman seeking to join their way of life) is suitable, let the words of the holy Gospel be addressed to her that she should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor.

RCI 2. 8

Francis realized this restriction of poverty could not be placed on the lay penitents who asked to follow this new way of life. In the Second Letter to the Faithful, he wrote regarding almsgiving:

Let us, therefore, have charity and humility and give alms because it washes the stains from our souls. For, although people lose everything they leave behind in the world, they, nevertheless, carry with them the rewards of charity and the alms which they have given for which they will have a reward and a fitting repayment from the Lord.

2Ltf 30, 31

This exhortation may have been the basis for the articles from the *Memoriale Propositi* quoted in the Franciscan Focus above. We can see that care for the poor and almsgiving was extended first of all to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance within their own fraternal gathering. If they were truly members of a family, why should some suffer while others were well-to-do? In time, this attitude of caring for each other would undermine the feudal system in Italy. As members from all classes joined the Order, their care for each other extended beyond the time of the gathering. Their fraternal bonds stretched through the boundaries set up by society. In time, the Order would help change the social structure of its time.

The same is being asked of us today. We are to look within our own fraternity and discern the needs of our sisters and brothers. It is here that we become family on a very tangible level. There should be no one in the fraternity who is in need, who is not being helped by the fraternity. No one should feel ashamed to make their needs known to one another. It is often easy to take notice of the needs of a large group or

organization that is advertising on the television or sending bulk mailings to our homes, while overlooking the essential needs of a brother or sister within our own fraternity.

Financial care of the fraternity, its endeavors and the needs of its members, is the responsibility of each member. At each gathering, there is a collection taken for the "Common Fund." Note that these are not dues. We are not paying for membership in the Order, rather we are sharing from our individual resources into a fund that is to be used for the common good of the fraternity, thus its name, the "Common Fund." What are these monies to be used for? Very basically, the needs of the members and the expenses of the fraternity. Depending on the size of the fraternity and the number and the expanse of its apostolates, the needs of each fraternity will vary.

Each family has its own expenses, so does the fraternity. When and how often do we pray together? What is the amount of the stipend given to the Spiritual Assistant or priest who celebrates with us? They give of their time, and some travel great distances to be present with us. Is there a rental fee for the hall we use to gather? How varied are our apostolates? Some apostolates require no monies to support them, such as visits to the sick. However, if the fraternity has taken on a ministry to feed the poor, monies will be needed to fund this endeavor. Has the fraternity adopted a charity to which it tithes? Monies are also needed to supply promotional materials. Who is responsible for purchasing the materials necessary for formation? Does your fraternity have a library? Does the fraternity subscribe to a Franciscan periodical? These are excellent ways of keeping the members abreast of the current Franciscan literature and scholarship.

There are the ordinary expenses of running a household. Communication costs, be it telephone or mailings, cards to be sent to members who are celebrating birthdays or who are ill, need to be taken into account. There are special times of celebration within the fraternity: receptions, professions, anniversaries. Does your fraternity gather for socials once or twice a year so that the members of our families are included in our gatherings? Who picks up these costs?

Does the fraternity support interests outside itself? Article 25 reminds us of our duty to give money to charity. Has the fraternity adopted a particular cause that it supports each month? How has your fraternity answered this mandate of the Rule?

As belonging to the local fraternity also integrates us into the higher fraternities, so the local fraternities are to supply for the needs of the higher levels of fraternity life as well. As we experience needs on the local level, so do the various levels of fraternity experience similar needs on a larger scale. These monies are collected as the Fair Share each year. Monies are sent from the local fraternity to the regional fraternity which is responsible in turn for sending monies on to the national fraternity. Likewise, the national fraternities support the international body. We receive many blessings and benefits from the Order; this is but one small way of contributing to its many endeavors on our behalf.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. What local charities does your fraternity support? Does your fraternity tithe?
2. Are there other charities that might need the fraternity's attention? List them.
3. If the fraternity does not support a charity, suggest to the members and the council that they adopt a local charity this year. Choose one from your list above and give reasons for your support of it

Ongoing Formation:

1. With which works of charity are you involved?
2. Are there ways the fraternity can help you in these works? List the ways.
3. Make these needs known during one of your fraternal gatherings. If the opportunity does not arise there, bring your needs to the attention of one of the members of the council. Invite members to join you in your charitable work.

ARTICLE 26
SEEKING SPIRITUAL ASSISTANCE

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

Let all the brothers and sisters in every city and locality gather together each month whenever it shall be expedient in the church announced by the ministers and there hear the divine word. . .

And then, if they conveniently can, let them have one religious, instructed in the word of God, who would admonish and encourage them to do penance, perseverance and the performance of works of mercy.

Memoriale Propositi 7. 1, 3

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. From earliest times, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance were asked to have a religious speak to them. From what you know of the history of the times, why do you think this was important? Do you feel it is still important today?
2. What is the basis for your reasoning?

Ongoing Formation:

1. In what ways has the spiritual assistance offered to your fraternity helped you grow in your understanding of Franciscanism? List them. How has the spiritual assistance given your fraternity led you to a deeper understanding of your vocation?
2. Why do you feel it was the result of spiritual assistance?

THE RULE

As a concrete sign of communion and coresponsibility, the councils on various levels, in keeping with the constitutions, shall ask for suitable and well-prepared religious for spiritual assistance. They should make this request to the superiors of the four religious Franciscan families, to whom the Secular Fraternity has been united for centuries.

To promote fidelity to the charism as well as observance of the rule and to receive greater support in the life of the fraternity, the minister or president, with the consent of the council, should take care to ask for a regular pastoral visit by the competent religious superiors as well as for a fraternal visit from those of the higher fraternities, according to the norm of the constitutions.

From the beginning of the Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance, a religious was encouraged to be with the members as they gathered each month. Several reasons are given for this measure, not the least being the sharing of the charism, the passing on of Francis's vision from one generation to the next, the passing on of his spirit from one Order to another. This was done primarily through a sharing of the Word, and what better way because it was through the Word that Francis came to know and understand God's will for his life. Notice, however, the qualification for the religious given above; he was to be "... instructed in the word of God." Not just anyone was to take on this significant task, but only those who knew the Word of God. They themselves had to incorporate the Scriptures into their lives, through study and experience. When this was accomplished, then they could share what had come to light within them with others who were seeking to follow a similar path. So the religious would come to these monthly gatherings of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance and begin sharing the Word, thus helping the brothers and sisters take the words of Scripture and apply them to their lives and their relationships with each other and the persons around them.

The Scriptures were to provide the basis for training in their way of life. From the Scriptures, the religious would admonish and encourage those gathered. He would counsel them on proper ways of implementing the gospel message, of making the Beatitudes relative to their circumstances, of taking Jesus' admonitions of caring for the

least of the brethren to heart, as a mainstay for their Franciscan lives. The religious would also correct the brothers and sisters if the need arose, if they were found to be living a life that was not in conformity with the Rule. He would encourage them to live a life of Penance, as Francis had prescribed it, a life of daily conversion, *metanoia*. What in their lives would have to change in order that they might take on the call of self-denial? How would they live a life that held simplicity and humility as its cornerstones? In what ways would they show love and concern for their less fortunate brothers and sisters? How would they care for the less fortunate in their town? These were the responsibilities placed upon the religious who would share with the Brothers and Sisters of Penance each month.

A careful reading of the Rule of 1978 shows that many similarities exist between it and this early Rule of our Order. The need for continued collaboration between us and the members of the First Order and the Third Order Regular is seen in our present Rule. "Communion and coresponsibility" are the words chosen denote this bond. What do these words have to say about our relationship with our Spiritual Assistants? This is clearly spelled out in Article 1 of our Rule:

In various ways and forms but in life giving union with each other, they [the various branches of the Franciscan family] intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.

That radical call to make the gospel a present force in Church's mission to the world is the responsibility of the entire Franciscan family. In order to insure this common witness of the charism, the Church has set up the *altius moderamen* between us and the First Order and the Third Order Regular. According to Article 85.2 of SFO General Constitutions:

The purpose of the *altius moderamen* is to guarantee the fidelity of the SFO to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church and union with the Franciscan family, values which represent a vital commitment for the secular Franciscans.

A basic understanding of the *altius moderamen* is "keeping us on target," making sure we have a correct understanding of the Franciscan charism, our rootedness in the radical gospel life as understood by Francis. We are to live our Franciscan calling in relationship with the other branches on the Franciscan family. Our life and actions are to be in union with the Church and we are to adopt a proper application of Franciscan

values to our way of life. We are to acquire a true grasp of Franciscan spirituality as it pertains to our secular state. What is it that singles us out as Franciscans, different from members of other Third Orders such as the Dominicans and the Carmelites, or members of other associations within the Church such as the Benedictine Oblates, or other persons not connected to any Order who are genuinely striving to live a good life? It is the responsibility of the Spiritual Assistant to challenge us to name this unique spiritual dimension that our Secular Franciscanism adds to the world.

So, how does the *altius moderamen* actually look in the life of the fraternity? First of all, the Spiritual Assistants provide a connection, a bridge, with the larger Franciscan family for us. How do they understand and live out the charism? Francis' parting words, "I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours," illustrate that there are as many ways of BEing Franciscan as there are Franciscans. What can we learn from the Spiritual Assistants and their living of the charism that would be helpful to our giving flesh to Francis' ideals in the world?

The Spiritual Assistants represent the First Order or Third Order Regular in an official capacity.⁵¹ They do not take on this role of their own accord, but are duly appointed by the Provincial Spiritual Assistants. To be a true representative, the Spiritual Assistants need to be present to the individual Secular Franciscans and the Secular Franciscan gatherings. They are to keep in contact with the Provincial Spiritual Assistant who appointed them and also the Regional Spiritual Assistant with whom they minister.

To help newly assigned Spiritual Assistants, be they friars, sisters, diocesan priests or deacons, or Secular Franciscans, with this daunting task, the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants has put together a correspondence course entitled, *Life-Giving Union*. Through it, the prospective Spiritual Assistants become acquainted with the Rule and SFO General Constitutions, the spirituality of our secular lifestyle, our interaction with the world and the Church at large, as well as their role and responsibilities. Anyone interested in becoming a Spiritual Assistant, or those who are already Spiritual Assistants and would like a refresher, should contact the Provincial Spiritual Assistant representing the Province that established your fraternity. It is his responsibility to interview and facilitate the course for persons who fall within his jurisdiction.

⁵¹ According to Canon Law, 303, the *altius moderamen* is to be carried out by a member of the First Order or the Third Order Regular. However, with the shortage of friars, this responsibility is being shared with other competent persons: Poor Clares, Franciscan sisters, diocesan clergy and Secular Franciscans (though, preferably, not for their own fraternities).

In addition to being the official representatives of the friar provinces, the Spiritual Assistants are also the official ecclesial witnesses to the reception of new members into Candidacy and the Permanent Profession of Candidates into the Order. The key word here is *witness*. In the past, it was the duty of the friar, as *Spiritual Director*, to admit the members and accept their profession. Presently, it is the role of the *Spiritual Assistant* to witness, for the Church and the Franciscan family, these two important steps in the lives of Secular Franciscans.

Within the Secular Franciscan Order, the Spiritual Assistants act as members of the council to animate and guide the life of the fraternity. The Spiritual Assistants are full members of the council, with the obligation of voicing those aspects of Franciscan life that are spiritual in nature. They are also the liturgical leaders of the fraternity, providing opportunities for the celebration of Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, benediction services, and the reception of sacraments. Spiritual Assistants are to direct the minds and hearts of the fraternity members toward God's initiative as the principle source of fraternity life and growth.

According to their own statutes,⁵² the purpose of the Spiritual Assistants is two-fold:

The principal task of the assistant is to foster a deeper insight into Franciscan spirituality and to co-operate in the initial and continuing formation of the secular Franciscans.

Article 13.1

Our Franciscan spirituality is both beautiful and deep; it takes time for us to explore it and appreciate it. We are blessed with numerous and varied prayer traditions: the Transitus of Brother Francis and the Blessing of St. Clare's Bread, the Stations of the Cross and the Crown Rosary, the Portiuncula Indulgence and the *Adoramus Te*, the Canticle of Brother Sun and the *Stabat Mater*, Greccio and Gubbio, to name a few. We have unique prayer forms within our spiritual heritage: the hermitage experiences of Francis, the constant going to the cave to be refreshed; the affective prayer of Clare, that took her from the created beauty that could be seen to the unseen beauty of God. We have the contemplative writings of St. Bonaventure and Angela of Foligno, the poetry of Jacoponi di Todi to begin a list. Yet, we must realize that our spirituality is much broader and individual than these devotions and practices. Our spirituality is gospel based and challenges us to a radical form of life.

⁵² Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order, Rome, 2002.

What better place to share this vision of life than in formation? According to the *Guidelines for Initial Formation* and *Elements of Formation*, the Spiritual Assistants are facilitators of formation, initial and ongoing. As such, the Spiritual Assistants are called upon to share the expertise that is theirs through the numerous years of their own formation. There are nuances to the initial formation material that the Spiritual Assistants can add. Knowledge and understanding gained through life experiences are welcomed additions to the written word. By personally sharing, the Spiritual Assistants are more apt to challenge Inquirers and Candidates to look upon their own life experiences in search of Franciscan insights. In ongoing formation, the Spiritual Assistants can urge the fraternity to delve more deeply into the writings of Francis and Clare, the sources concerning the lives of Francis and Clare, and the chronicles of the early Franciscan brotherhood, the lives of our own Secular Franciscan saints. The Franciscan family is immense and branched. Time could be spent sharing about the different Orders and varied congregations within the Franciscan family, their origins and departures, their similarities and their differences. We can search for the good works being performed by Secular Franciscans in our own day. In any of these cases, the Spiritual Assistant is capable of either sharing this background information with the members of the fraternity, or, better still, pointing us in the proper direction to investigate this material on our own. Again, seeking points that speak to the individual lives of the fraternity members, or seeking parallels between the lives of Francis, Clare or modern day Franciscans and our own lives, enables us to have a stronger grasp of the Franciscanism that is truly ours. We will be able to recognize ways in which we are continually challenged to live this Franciscan calling.

The Spiritual Assistants are responsible to help form the members of the fraternity, but hopefully, they will be formed in the process also. Spiritual Assistants are called to nourish the fraternity, but in the course of this endeavor, they will be nourished as well. We share a common charism that bids us to care for and nourish each other. In our statutes, this association is called vital reciprocity. Mutual sharing and caring is necessary for the growth of any relationship. We are to give as much to the well being of the Spiritual Assistants as we expect from them. This is our responsibility. This is how we are to grow together as brothers and sisters in this Franciscan family. This is how we present a united Franciscan presence to the world.

In these various capacities, the Spiritual Assistants share the light of Francis with us and it is with this light that we “. . . intend to make present the charism of [our] common

Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church”(Art. 1).

Article 26 also makes mention of the fraternal and pastoral visitations that are required. As mentioned above, visitation is nothing new. During the visitation, the qualified religious was to instruct, admonish, correct, encourage and challenge the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in living their vocation. Visitations are the lifeblood of the Order. With the advice of the council, the minister asks for fraternal (from the higher SFO Council) and pastoral (from the higher Spiritual Assistant) visitations. The fraternal visitation allows members of the next higher level of fraternal life to meet with and discuss the workings of the individual fraternity. A careful look at the records of the fraternity is important: the register of the fraternity that lists the admissions, professions, transfers, withdrawals, and deaths of the fraternity members; the minutes and attendance records of the monthly gatherings; the accounting of funds collected and how they are disbursed. There is a meeting with the members of the council to discuss their views of how the fraternity is growing. A specific look is given to the formation process that is in place in the fraternity: How it is facilitated? How well it is being received? The visitation provides an opportunity for the members of the fraternity to raise questions, to discuss situations that arise within the fraternity, situations that are good and situations that cause some concern. It allows those with an objective perspective to help shed light on the situations at hand.

The pastoral visitation is carried out by the Spiritual Assistant of the next higher level. The Spiritual Assistant will meet with the Spiritual Assistant assigned to the fraternity to get an overview of the tenor of the fraternity: How is it growing spiritually? Is its spirituality Franciscan in nature? Are there private devotions practiced that do not belong in the fraternal gathering? How well is the formation process functioning? How active is the Spiritual Assistant within the council and the fraternity?

Why the visitations? To insure, as from the beginning of the Order, that we carry into the Church and the world the true charism that Francis left behind. We have the obligation, with all other members of the Franciscan family, to make the gift of our spirituality present to those whom we meet. Collaboration with others will insure that our presence in the Church and the world is true to the basic ideals Francis established.

INTEGRATION AND DECISION QUESTIONS

Initial Formation:

1. List some areas of Franciscan spirituality that are still new or unclear to you.
2. Ask the Spiritual Assistant for materials that would help you understand this aspect of your vocation.
3. Investigate these suggestions and spend time with them this month.

Ongoing Formation:

1. List various ways the Spiritual Assistant has challenged your life. If your fraternity is presently without a Spiritual Assistant, list ways in which the council or gospel readings have challenged your life.
2. Which of these have you not yet put into practice?
3. Choose one and act on it this month.

CONCLUSION

Living Our Call

FRANCISCAN FOCUS

He was very eloquent, with a cheerful appearance and a kind face; free of laziness and arrogance. He was of medium height, closer to short, his head was of medium size and round. His face was somewhat long and drawn, his forehead small and smooth, with medium eyes black and clear. His hair was dark; his eyebrows were straight, and his nose even and thin; his ears small and upright, and his temples smooth. His tongue was peaceable, fiery and sharp; his voice was powerful, but pleasing, clear and musical. His teeth were white, well set and even; his lips were small and thin; his beard was black and sparse; his neck was slender, his shoulders straight; his arms were short, his hands slight, his fingers long and his nails tapered. He had thin legs, small feet, fine skin and little flesh. His clothing was rough, his sleep was short, his hand was generous.

1C 83

In I Celano 83, we discover a physical description of St. Francis. Written just two years after his death and gathering the remembrances of his early followers, we can believe this description to be quite accurate. What we also find in this same selection is a description of Francis' virtues. He did not acquire these virtues overnight; no, they came after a lifetime of struggle with those areas in his life that were not in conformity with the gospel message he took as his Rule of life. Trial and error and trial again; perseverance in the journey for the long haul brought about these virtues in Francis' life.

We, too, have taken the words of the gospel to be our Rule of life. We, too, are called to change our lives daily through that radical interior change which the gospel calls "conversion." As Seculars, we are not called to do so in the same manner as Francis. Even he remarked as he lay dying: "I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you yours"(LMj 14. 3).

Living the Rule, living the gospel as the Lord calls each of us to do according to our unique gifts and circumstances, is the truest answer to the vocation the Lord has placed in our hearts. Making the Rule our own, making the gospel our own, gives credence to the world that there is another way, a better way than the materialism, humanism, and self-centered living that surrounds us daily. If we embrace the gospel and make it the root of all we do, the Lord will truly bless us with his virtues. In his Letter to the Faithful which is the Prologue to our Rule, Francis reminds us that if our lives produce worthy fruits of penance,

. . . “the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them” (cf. Is 11:2) and he will make “his home and dwelling among them” (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are sons of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

This is the promise of our holy father Francis. As we strive to follow the path the Lord lays before us in the gospel, may the virtues with which the Lord blessed the life of Francis be ours also in some small measure. Will others be able to recognize the grace of God active in us as the early followers of Francis recognized it in him?

*How handsome,
how splendid!
How gloriously he appeared
in innocence of life,
in simplicity of words,
in purity of heart,
in love of God,
in fraternal charity,
in enthusiastic obedience,
in agreeable compliance,
in angelic appearance.*

*Friendly in behavior,
serene in nature,
affable in speech,
generous in encouragement,
faithful in commitment,
prudent in advice,
tireless in prayer,
he was fervent in everything!*

*Firm in intention,
consistent in virtue,
persevering in grace,
he was the same in everything!*

*Swift to forgive,
slow to grow angry,
free in nature,
remarkable in memory,
subtle in discussing,
careful in choices,
he was simple in everything!*

*Strict with himself,
kind with others,
he was discerning in everything!*

1C 83

Francis' life was his answer to the call he received from God. His life was the culmination of his daily living the gospel message and making its principles of discipleship, love, peace, joy, obedience, meekness, forgiveness, and service his own. This is the same challenge the gospel lays before each of us today. This is our Rule. Ours is to take it up daily. If we do, the blessing of Francis will be ours:

And whoever observes these things, let him be blessed in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and on earth with the blessing of His Beloved Son with the Most Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, and all the powers of heaven and with all the saints.

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NOTES

To Set Themselves Free

by Teresa V. Baker, S.F.O.



To Set Themselves Free, by Teresa Baker SFO, is a book that fills in many gaps of formation. She shares multiple quotations from the writings OF Francis and ABOUT Francis. The text offers ways to engage in a solid formation to Franciscan life.

Her ideas and responses to the Rule and the quoted words give solid material for both initial and ongoing formation. Her reflection questions for initial and ongoing formation apply the text to daily life. I would especially encourage all formators, whether for initial or ongoing formation, to read the “Guide for Formation Directors” at the beginning of the book. It offers a fine sense of direction for real interaction among those who use the book. *To Set Themselves Free* is another fine resource for deepening our understanding of the Secular Franciscan way of life.

– Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap.