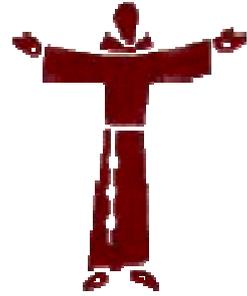


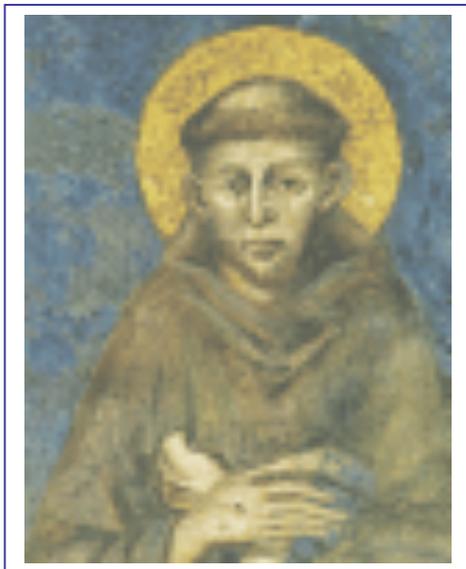
**INITIAL FORMATION FOR THE  
SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER**

*Come*

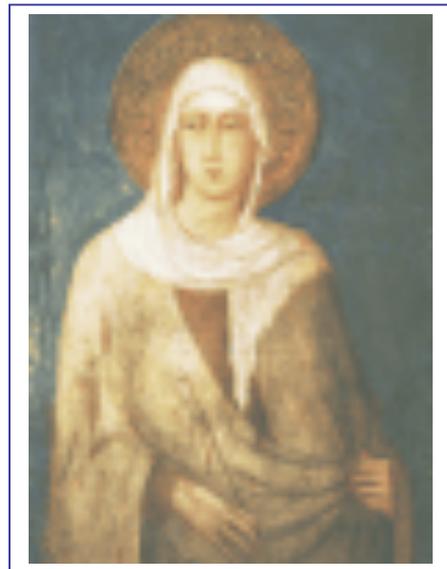


*and*

*See*



**ORIENTATION  
&  
INQUIRY**



**An Invitation to Explore the Secular Franciscan Life**

*Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap.  
Teresa V. Baker, S.F.O.*

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*Come & See*



An invitation to explore the Secular Franciscan Life  
*Orientation & Inquiry*

*Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap.*  
*Teresa V. Baker, S.F.O.*

## *Welcome*

Orientation and Inquiry are times for us to discover, together, the reality of your desire to follow the way of St. Francis.

Franciscans realize the importance of our commitment to the Secular Franciscan way of life. The call to live according to the Secular Franciscan Rule of life requires a dedicated spirit.

We take plenty of time to share with you and have you share with us. This time offers us the opportunity to discover, together, whether our Franciscan way is how you wish and are called to live your baptismal promises.

This journey is not a burden. It is simply a way to walk together to discover whether the SFO is the way you wish to follow. Getting to know one another helps both you and us discover God's way in your life.

Walk without fear or anxiety. We walk a common path. Two choices are possible. You may ultimately commit yourself to our Franciscan way of life – or – we may discover that this is not God's way for you. Both decisions are good ones.

Our role is to listen and share with you in this process of decision-making. Listening to one another enables us to come to a healthy decision.

Welcome – and may the Holy Spirit guide our common journey.

## *Helps & Hints*

### *Formation*

This section is dedicated to  
Secular Franciscans  
who are Formation Directors  
or part of a Formation Commission/Team  
In their Fraternity.

**Use the material in the way that will help you most.  
Formation is vital for the healthy growth and development  
of a Fraternity and our Order.**

*Teresa V. Baker, S.F.O.*

*David & Therese Ream, S.F.O.*

*Ed Shirley, S.F.O.*

*Richard Trezza, O.F.M.*

# *Orientation*

*WELCOME!*

*This is your time for taking a look at our way of life. Orientation gives both you and us an opportunity to share knowledge and experience.*

## **Orientation**

### **SESSION ONE**

#### ***Getting to know you***

The first part of our initial formation journey is what we call “Orientation”. It is a time to get acquainted with each other and some of the issues of Franciscan life. This may take three to six months.

This first session is a personal interview. We find a one-on-one session to be helpful. We can meet at home, have lunch together or whatever suits your situation. The purpose is to know each other better and clarify important elements in discovering and affirming your call, or lack of a call, to the Secular Franciscan way of life.

The form on pages 20-21 covers the information we need from you. Your responses give us personal data about you, your life and family. We do not pry, but knowing your background contributes to knowing you and having a sense of the kind of person you are.

Our way of life requires a person to be a good, practicing Catholic. The Rule requires us to receive the sacraments regularly. If you would not be able to do so, it would be impossible for you to keep the Rule. It’s good to learn such things early on in you Orientation.

It is important for SFO members to continue deepening their faith in Jesus. We want them to be knowledgeable about the implications of Vatican II. Their readiness to continue personal faith growth contributes to their growth in the SFO.

If you are divorced, you may receive the sacraments and it would not hinder your entry into the SFO. However, if you re-marry without an annulment of your first marriage, you would not be able to receive Eucharist. Information on your annulment helps in making a good decision about entering the SFO. No judgments are made except in relationship to the requirements of the SFO Rule. We are looking for any obstacles that would make it impossible for you to keep the SFO Rule. If it is impossible, it would be unfair to continue on this path to enter the SFO.

Since you may be someone we haven’t met before, we need to know if you will be able to attend our monthly formation sessions and Fraternity gatherings. Our community gatherings keep us growing in the Franciscan spirit and strengthen our living of the Gospel. If you know that such gatherings would be impossible for you to attend, it may give us indications about the reality of your call to the SFO, at least at this time in your life. Or we may be able to direct you to another Fraternity with gatherings at a time more amenable to your schedule.

We will share what we, as Secular Franciscans, can offer you. In turn we look forward to knowing what you bring to us through your life. This interaction helps maintain a healthy, dedicated Franciscan life.



## **Orientation**

### ***SESSION TWO***

#### ***What's it all about?***

People are attracted to the Secular Franciscan Order for many reasons. Francis of Assisi may attract them by his directness and joy. They may have met Secular Franciscans who impressed them by their way of dealing with life. They may feel a lack of direction and desire to find a way to better focus in their lives. Or there may be other worthwhile reasons for coming to explore the SFO way of life.

Orientation to the SFO begins to answer some of these concerns. During the course of initial formation we continue to give you information and insights to help you understand our way of life.

Secular Franciscans DO THE GOSPEL! The rule (article 4) says simply: “Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.” This rhythm is the foundation of the symphony of our lives.

The Gospel gives us perspectives with which we interpret life. The Gospel offers us values that guide our actions. The Gospel gifts us with the inner spirit that governs our relationships. The Gospel helps us take action that reflects gospel attitudes on social issues and the judgments we make in daily life is outside the reach of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We do not presume to know the Gospel completely nor do we implement it with perfection. Daily life is where we continue our growth both in knowledge of the Gospel and its implementation. Our Franciscan symphony combines the rhythm of learning and doing the Gospel – day after day after day. We commit ourselves to this process. Without the Gospel we would be lost, feel isolated or threatened, inadequate or despairing. If we only READ the Gospel and never APPLY it, we would be hypocrites with big words but small actions. If all we did was act without knowing the Gospel, we might simply be going through the motions. One role of fraternity life is to nudge us to go from gospel to life – life to gospel!

Franciscans are ordinary people. We work to develop a gospel image. That requires a regular change or conversion. The SFO Rule (article 7) puts it this way: “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.”

This gospel-focus is the heart of our lives. We work together to achieve these ideals. We learn to share insights and failures, dreams and frustrations, excitements and disappointments, vision and action. We do not escape our human condition. We are far from perfect nor do we see ourselves as some elite group. Our concerns cover all of life.

We are concerned about developing a prayerful spirit. We forgive each other when hurts enter relationships. We have hope even when the world seems to gallop toward hopelessness. In our humanness we need a lifetime to achieve these goals. Our Fraternity-community may require things that are not always welcome to our individualism. Daily conversion is our reality – for life.

#### ***Sts. Francis & Clare of Assisi***

Francis and Clare have given direction and a way of life to people for over 800 years. Writings by and about these two fill many library shelves. We invite you to read some of these books. For now, a few words about these two people are in order.

Francis and his brother Angelo were children of Pietro and Pica Bernadone. Pietro was a rich cloth merchant in Assisi, owning his own shop. He frequently went on buying trips to different parts of Europe. Pica was a gentle Frenchwoman whose love helped Francis endure some tough times in his relationship with Pietro.

Francis was born in 1182. He died in 1226. Between those dates he experienced a lifetime of conversion and a way of life that still influences people. In his early years his father tried gradually to prepare him to work in the business. This was not exactly Francis' deepest desire. He enjoyed life and often spent nights at parties in homes and the Assisi Piazza. He worked in the shop and was struck by the needs of the poor who came for handouts. He had a generous heart, sometimes running after beggars he had ignored in the shop.

Knighthood was attractive to young men in the 1200's. It was a way to achieve glory. With local wars going on among Italian cities, Francis had many opportunities to show his mettle. Perugia and Assisi battled and Francis was there. Assisi lost and Francis languished in prison in Perugia for a year as a prisoner of war. He grew seriously ill and when he finally returned home was quite sickly. Slowly, and with great love, Pica nursed him back to health. When he was able, he returned to the ways of the past. But something had changed. Even though he made another attempt at becoming a knight, he had a dream that told him to go home and wait for further instructions. Life was changing. Prison and illness had a difference. Partying lost its flavor. He wandered in and around Assisi.

Ultimately he was praying one day in the Church of San Damiano when he was told to "repair my Church" by a voice from the crucifix. True to the request, he began begging stones and rebuilding little chapels around Assisi. His father was absolutely appalled by his son's behavior. It finally culminated in having Francis brought before the Bishop of Assisi and demanding that Francis return whatever he had of his father's.

Then, in a symbolic gesture, (of many, that became common to him from now on), he stripped himself, laid the clothes at his father's feet and declared that now God was his Father and Pietro Bernadone was no longer his father. It was a decision that prompted a total commitment to Jesus and the Gospel. It began a journey of nearly twenty years in his effort to give flesh to the Gospel in his life. The stories surrounding his life give witness to a continuing search to be faithful to what he had chosen in the presence of his father and the Bishop of Assisi.

It wasn't long before Clare joined Francis on this journey to live the Gospel. Clare belonged to a noble family in Assisi. In fact, the family had to leave Assisi during some civil unrest and flee to Perugia for safety. She was well educated and a beautiful young woman. Her mother taught her well. Despite the fact of having many suitors, she did not choose any of them.

Even when her family pressured her, she remained adamant. She had heard Francis speak. It is said she met with him in the year before she followed him. She finally made the break, left home at night and met Francis' little group of friars. He cut her hair as a sign of her new life and initially had her stay at a Benedictine monastery. Her family was furious and tried to take her home by force, but it didn't work. When her sister Agnes joined her, the same scenario played out with the same results, even more dramatic.

Clare became a dedicated disciple of Jesus and Francis. San Damiano, on the hillside outside Assisi, became the home of Clare and her followers. The Poor Clares owe their foundation to Francis and this great woman. Throughout her life she fought to maintain the vision of poverty that she and Francis had grasped.

Francis and Clare had a lasting impact on the Church and society. Their dream of gospel life was lived in all its reality. Such real living showed the Gospel as a healthy and joyful way to walk through life. Since it was being lived, it was possible. No wonder many people, as well, saw it as an alternative to the violence and power-seeking of their society. Remaining in the world as married and single, young and old, they embraced the spirit that inspired Francis and Clare.

Lay people who followed Francis were called the Third Order of St. Francis. Francis and his Friars were the First Order, Clare and her Sisters were the Second Order and lay people and members of the diocesan clergy were the Third Order. The Franciscan spirit permeates all three Orders. We call that the Franciscan charism. The Rule of the Secular Franciscans (1978) puts it this way:

“Called like St. 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 priest, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity” (article 6). It is important that the open and trusting dialogue be ongoing. Our communion is not one of blind acceptance with no questions asked. Rather, it is dialogue that yearns to see the implementation of the Gospel in all of Church life.

Part of Francis’ conversion came when he was able to overcome his human revulsion for lepers and to walk among them. It was as though some inner obstacles were removed and he saw lepers simply as people, loved by God and in need. The lepers gave Francis a great gift – to see with new eyes. God often does the same for us. But we have to walk among the lepers of our own heart.

Franciscans continually grow in an awareness of God’s presence and work among us. We open our eyes to the faith dimension of life, interpreting life from gospel perspectives. Profits are less important to us than people, even though we can run good businesses. Forgiveness is more important than revenge, even though we may have the same feelings as anyone else when we are hurt. We cling to hope rather than give in to despair, for God is with us in Jesus. The power of the Holy Spirit is stronger than any evil spirit we run up against. We recognize rich and poor alike as our neighbor to be loved. But Franciscans lean especially toward people who are poor and marginalized in any way. We base our hope on the presence of the Spirit given us by Jesus.

### *SOME ELEMENTS OF SECULAR FRANCISCAN LIFE*

1. Secular Franciscans live in the world.
2. Secular Franciscans draw strength from the Gospel of Jesus.
3. Secular Franciscans share in the spirit of the entire Franciscan Family.
4. Secular Franciscans seek to give flesh to the gospel vision
5. Secular Franciscans serve others through social justice and ministries of charity and peacemaking.
6. Secular Franciscans commit themselves to a way of life spelled out in the SFO Rule.
7. Secular Franciscans develop a prayerful spirit.
8. Secular Franciscans attend to the demands of their inner spirit as did Francis and Clare – a spirit of reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit.
9. Secular Franciscans recognize the need for daily conversion.
10. Secular Franciscans walk through life with a Franciscan COMMUNITY – called Fraternity.
11. Secular Franciscans are people of hope and joy – God is with us.
12. Secular Franciscans know it is IMPOSSIBLE to fall out of God’s love. Our brokenness and sin can keep us from growing but we cannot stop God from loving us.
13. Secular Franciscans have a good sense of humor. Life is serious, but not so serious that we lose our sense of joy.
14. Secular Franciscans see work as a partnership with God’s creative power, active in our world.

*This list is not exhaustive, but it gives a flavor of our Franciscan way of life.*

## ***SCRIPTURE***

We are gospel people and the Sacred Scriptures are vital to our lives. Since we desire to implement the Gospel, we have to know the Gospel. Bible knowledge does not come magically. It takes work. We expect such work from Secular Franciscans. We are NOT fundamentalists who can quote chapter and verse. Instead we show the implications of the Gospel by the way we live. Neither are we Lone Rangers using Scripture texts to support what we want to do anyway nor as a club to subdue others in an argument.

Our goal is not to be intellectual biblical scholars but people who practice what we learn from the Bible. We avoid using the Bible as a club to judge and punish others or win arguments. It is not an exercise to see how many texts we can memorize. That is not our way. We will never exhaust the full meaning of Scripture. Hence our lifelong commitment is to continue the journey of learning and applying the Gospel in daily life.

A number of things are required of Secular Franciscans in relation to the Bible:

1. Our guidebook is the Bible – we use it!
2. Jesus and his words have special value to us. We listen to him.
3. In fraternal gatherings we share insights and reflections for implementing the Gospel in everyday life.
4. When we are puzzled about texts, we seek competent help.
5. We avoid fundamentalist attitudes that limit the power of Scripture.
6. We work to deepen our understanding of Scripture.
7. We avoid attitudes that use Scripture to condemn others or identify them as non-salvageable.
8. The circle of our love must never become narrow. We seek to include rather than exclude people.
9. We use Scripture for prayer as well as study, letting its power touch us and soak into our lives.

The Gospel is our guide when we assess the value and attitudes of society that are in conflict with the Gospel. We face situations where our commitment to gospel ideals will be challenged. Our awareness of personal weakness keeps us from judging other who experience the same weakness. We are called both to confront in love and to walk with people who are struggling. Our culture may canonize people for the wrong reasons. Greed is not a virtue. Profit-making does not make people good. Isolationism doesn't reflect the gospel call to welcome others. Tough mindedness may be needed at times, but it is not a lifestyle to be embraced when it diminishes people's dignity.

Following the Gospel is neither easy nor simple. It may be difficult to confront a generous benefactor whose business practices are counter to the Gospel. Friends we care about are not always gospel-value people and it's hard to deal with them lovingly. Our own failures are not easy to address. There is little doubt that we need another's help on this journey.

## ***THE COST***

Personal conversion and change do not happen easily. We are filled with ideas and values, attitudes and perspectives that have built up over a lifetime. Not all of them are healthy for gospel people. The Gospel may require changes. The ability to change may be energizing but it is also demanding. It is never easy to abandon the patterns of a lifetime. It sometimes leads to clumsy places of transformation. Our Franciscan way of life requires us to face such personal issues directly.

“The rule and life of the Secular Franciscan is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint 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 and was to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has come to give abundantly” (SFO Rule, article 4).

Pope Paul VI – himself a Secular Franciscan-gave us some good insight in his apostolic letter On Evangelization in the Modern World – Paragraph 21. His definition of a good evangelist might well describe Secular Franciscans.

This proclamation must be made above all else by witness. We envisage therefore, a Christian or group of Christians as people who, in the midst of the community in which they live, will show that they are capable of understanding and accepting other and of cooperation with all those who are seeking to protect what is noble and good.

We envisage them radiating simply and spontaneously their faith in values which transcend common values and their hope in things which are not seen and of which even the boldest mind cannot form an image. By bearing such silent witness these Christians will inevitably arouse a spirit of inquiry in those who see their way of life. Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? Why are they among us? Witness of this kind constitutes in itself a proclamation of the good news, silent, but strong and effective.

### *QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE*

1. What role do Francis and Clare play in the continuing growth and development of the SFO?
2. Of all the elements (pages 31-32) of the Franciscan vision, which four would you consider most important for yourself? Why?
3. What does daily conversion mean to you? What areas of your life need such conversion?
4. Why is the Bible important for Secular Franciscans?

### *ASSIGNMENT*

- A) Read one of the following books on Francis:
- The Journey and the Dream – Murray Bodo, O.F.M. – St. Anthony Messenger Press – Cincinnati, OH.
  - I, Francis – Carlo Carretto – Orbis Books – Maryknoll, NY.
  - Francis, the Saint of Assisi – A Novel – Joan Mueller-Thomas More Publishing-Allen, TX.
- B) At the next session share reflections on the personality and character of St. Francis and his conversion. What events in Francis’ life correspond to events in your own life? Share them.
- C) Begin reading one of the Gospels meditatively. How does it evoke a change in your life?

## Orientation

### *SESSION THREE*

#### *Franciscan Symbols & History*

When we make a collage we put pictures together in a random pattern. It is not always immediately evident how things connect, but somehow it can be explained. This chapter is a collage of different parts of our Franciscan life. It fits because of the connection between Francis and Clare and our present day lives.

Begin by listening. You have read a book (or books) about Francis. Now we ask you to share some of the things that struck you about Francis. Contribute your picture to the collage. What draws you to Francis? What events in Francis' life echo your own experience? What characteristics of Francis were particularly attractive to you?

#### *The Tau Cross*



The Tau cross is not a creation of Francis of Assisi. It is borrowed from the Hebrew Scriptures and became Francis' symbol for himself and his life.

In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, we read these words:

Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a TAU mark 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...but touch no one who has the mark (Tau)" (Ezekial 9; 4-6, NRSV)

For Innocent III, the Pope in Francis' time, the Tau became an emblem of reform. For Francis it became a sign of dedication to the cross of Jesus and to Christ himself. When Francis wrote a blessing to Brother Leo, he signed it with the Tau to assure Leo of his salvation in Christ. It is through love, shown on the cross, that salvation comes. The SFO in the USA chose it as a sign of commitment to the SFO way of life.

#### *San Damiano Crucifix*



Toward the end of 1205, Francis was praying before a crucifix in the little church of San Damiano. It was there that he heard the words: "Go and repair my house which, as you see, is all being destroyed." (Francis of Assisi – The Founder – Armstrong / Hellmann / Short – New City Press – Page 536).

The San Damiano crucifix is a 12<sup>th</sup> century icon painted by a Syrian monk. This icon is something of a caricature. It speaks of different elements of faith. The large figure of Jesus shows him to be the alpha and omega of our faith. The other figures offer the story book of events and people from Jesus' life (see The Icon of the Christ of San Damiano – Marc Picard, O.F.M. Cap Casa Editrice Francescana – Frati Minri Conventuali).

The San Damiano Crucifix is special for Franciscans. It reminds us to continue our conversion as well as calling us to be aware of your need to repair the Church. The prayer of St. Francis before the crucifix has great power. It is a prayer of discernment. Pray it often, especially at formation sessions, and make it your own.

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command.

## *FRANCISCAN FAMILY HISTORY*

Once Francis had followers, the number grew rather quickly. By the end of his life, thousands of friars had entered the Order of St. Francis. Not all friars were of one mind and attitude in regard to the *Rule* Francis had written. The Spirituals wanted to retain the eagerness and simplicity of the early days. These friars were the earlier companions of Francis. They considered the Testament of Francis as the primary interpretation of the Rule.

The community felt that the interpretations given by the Church were meant to govern their way of living. The two opinions gradually grew into two separate groups of friars, each following their sense of the Rule of Francis. They did not accept each others' opinion and interpretations.

The Church Council, Lateran IV (1215 AD), required formation for people joining religious Orders. This brought another demand on the young Franciscan Orders. Changes, not all to Francis' liking, came to the Order. Others replaced Francis as superiors in the Order. In September of 1230 AD, the Pope issued a papal bull called *Quo Elongati*, in which he said that thy Testaments of Francis was not binding on the friars. Brother Elias worked to centralize authority in the Order from 1232 to 1239. Haymo of Faversham (1240 – 1244) made the Order more clerical and it became more monastic than mendicant. Brothers and priest in the Order were no longer on an equal standing.

The work of John of Parma (1247-1257) brought about a reform and a return to the Rule and Testament of Francis, but the roots of division remained.

The two groups, the Spirituals and the Community friars did not unite. By the end of the century there were, for all practical purposes, two branches of the Order. By 1373 they had their own Vicar General who was responsible to the Community Minister General. The names now changed. The Spirituals became the Observants. The Community became the Conventual friars. During this period there were many saintly leaders, among them St. Bonaventure, St. Bernadine of Siena, St. John of Capistrano and St. James of the Marches.

The unity of the First Order of St. Francis was not to be. By the 1400's the division between Observants and Conventuals led to separation. By September of 1415 the hierarchical union of the Order was gone. Each group had its own superiors. In 1451 the Observants published their own Constitutions. The Conventuals were unhappy with the reforms and remained adamant that the interpretations of Rome be followed.

Two equal but separate branches were now in existence. Between May 29 and June 12, 1517, Pope Leo X decreed total separation between the Observants and Conventuals. All the splinter reform groups were joined to the Observants.

A future reform of the Observants began around 1525. Some Observant friars desired a more eremitical life, i.e. in hermitages. Their desires were opposed. Political power was used against them. Despite this, the Capuchin reform survived, partly because of the support of Catherine Cibo, Duchess of Camerino (niece of the Pope) and later by Vittorio Columna, Marchioness of Pescara. These women supported the Capuchin reform. Both had been impressed by Capuchin service to the sick during a plague in their cities.

In 1528 Catherine approached "Uncle" Pope Clement VII and asked permission for the Capuchins to follow their dream. The Pope published his decree *Religious Zelus* on July 3, 1523. It legalized the new brotherhood and they became the third branch of the First Order of St. Francis. By April of 1529 they

numbered 12 friars and wrote their Statutes of Albacina, describing the Capuchin life. By 1537 they numbered over 700 friars.

These are many tales of the events surrounding all these reform movements. But the fact remains that there are now three branches of the First Order of St. Francis: The Franciscans (Observants) – OFM / the Conventuals – OFM Conv. / the Capuchins – OFM Cap. They follow the same Rule of Francis but have Constitutions that differ from one another in their interpretation of the Rule. The initials “OFM” stand for “Orders of Friars Minor.”

### *SISTER CLARE*

Initially, the Poor Clares followed a Benedictine Rule of life. Cardinal Ugolino, a good friend of Clare, had strict rules for the cloister and inserted a number of elements from the Cistercian Rule. Clare accepted this but protested that her beloved Privilege of Poverty was not in these rules. Ugolino wanted her to have possessions and fixed revenue. Clare was determined to trust God rather than some fixed income. Churchmen – Popes, Bishops, other Church officials – argued that it was impractical, but she stuck to her ideals over the years. She wrote a Rule of life for her Sisters. Her Rule included her idea of the Privilege of Poverty. She received approval of her Rule on August 9, 1253, two days before her death.

Poor Clare monasteries are loosely joined with no central administrative organization. At Clare’s death there were about 110 monasteries of Poor Clares. By the year 1300 about 413 monasteries were in existence. They spread through Italy, Spain, France, Germany-Slavonia and the British Isles. San Domiano was a model but was not a controlling presence.

The reform pattern of the Clares is similar to that of the Friars. In the 1400’s St. Collette began a reform movement of the Clares. She sought to return to the original spirit of Clare. By 1447 Collette had founded or reformed 22 convents. This group is called the Colletines.

The Capuchin reform also sparked some reforms among the Poor Clares. Maria Lorenza Longo established a community of Franciscan Tertiaries in Naples. When the Capuchins came in 1529, they stayed at her hospital and Maria put them in charge of the young community. St. Cajetan of Thiene gave the group a contemplative character. In 1535 he obtained canonical approval from Rome for them. In 1538 the Capuchins were given the spiritual care of the group. People named them the Monastero delle Trentetre. In some places in Italy they are still known as the Capuchinesses.

Sister Maria Lorenza adopted the Constitution of St. Collette and incorporated many points from the Capuchin Constitutions. The community spread to other cities. By the year 1600 there were about 18 houses of Capuchinesses in Italy. They spread beyond Italy in 1588 and are in a number of countries around the world today, including the USA.

Individual Poor Clare monasteries for the most part, retain their independence but are joined, in the USA, in voluntary federations of the Poor Clares. The spirit of Clare lives in them. Some monasteries are cloistered, others focus their lives on prayerfulness but also minister to people from their monasteries. Still others are directly involved in ministries as active contemplatives. Some Poor Clares serve as Spiritual Assistants to Secular Franciscan fraternities.

### *THE THIRD ORDER OF FRANCIS*

The Third Order of St. Francis involved lay people and members of the secular clergy (bishops, diocesan priest and deacons) who chose to follow the spirit of Francis in their daily life. Luchesius of Poggibonsi

and his wife, Buonadonna, were driven by status seeking and social climbing. Being rich was all they wanted. They manipulated the grain market to achieve their ends (insider trading?). When the time came that they saw the folly of their ways, they sought out Francis, asking to become disciples of poverty. Francis invited them to join his movement as a married couple. Thus was born the Third Order of Penance. It brought the Franciscan spirit into everyday life. It also showed the power Secular Franciscans have influencing their world. Their refusal to bear arms, for example, put a large dent in the war-making capacity of power-hungry leaders (see Francis of Assisi – Arnaldo Fortini – Pages 520-522).

The Third Order Secular has wandered through many ups and downs in its long history. It often reflected the vagaries that infiltrated the Church and the Franciscan Order. A brief summary is in order here.

There were many penitential groups in Italy at the time of Francis. Some were heretical, others more moderate groups of lay people. Some of them accepted St. Francis as their leader. Under the guidance of the Church they took on a new direction influenced by the spirit of Francis. Among the things they embraced: + Simplicity of dress + fast every Friday + not bear arms + guide their families in living a Christian life + attend Mass together once a month + visit the sick and pray for them + settle legal disputes among themselves (Omnibus of Sources – Pages 168-and the following). Anyone joining the Third Order had to first pay any outstanding debts, reconcile with any neighbor with whom they quarreled, and be free of all suspicion of heresy.

In 1223 Pope Gregory IX acknowledged the existence of the Third Order of St. Francis. In 1289 Pope Nicholas IV recognized St. Francis as the founder of an Order of Penitents. The Rule of Nicholas IV contained 20 chapters. It put a more juridical order to the Rule of 1221. This Rule was revised in 1883 by Pope Leo XIII.

The Rule of Leo XIII in 1883 contained three chapters. Seculars should, for example, avoid extremes, avoid lewd shows, receive communion monthly, go to confession each month, recite an “Office” of 12 Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Glory be’s, etc. The Gospel and Jesus’ name were never mentioned. This Rule made the SFO more devotional than spirited. It became passive rather than a movement of people living the Gospel. Numbers increased, but fire of the Order was dimmed.

In 1978, after Vatican Council II, the Secular Franciscans has a new Rule. It was written through the work of SFO members and other Franciscans beginning in 1965. It was initiated by the First Order and TOR (Third Order Regular) but by 1970 came to include members of the SFO. This Rule was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on June 24, 1978.

The Rule of 1978 offers a way of life that challenges the members. It looks at the signs of the times. It invites a Franciscan dedication to transforming themselves and society through the Franciscan way of life. Anyone who wishes to become a Secular Franciscan must have solid knowledge of the Rule and a dedicated spirit in fulfilling it. We expect you to **read the Rule of 1978** during the orientation period!

The Rule has an official interpretation through the General Constitutions of the SFO (1990 – revised in 2000).

“Constitutions are a human tool. They are fallible. They do not supplant the Rule nor replace the gospel. Their goal is to help our Franciscan movement operate in a way that improves our following of the gospel. The beauty of the Constitutions is their ability to help the SFO’s organizational development without losing sight of our final goal” (Called to Rebuild the Church – A Spiritual Commentary on the General Constitutions of the SFO – Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap. – SFO Resource Library – Franciscan Press, Quincy, IL – Page xii)

The Third Order also has some divisions. Some people who followed Francis as Secular Franciscans were unmarried and free to gather into communities. These men and/or women developed viable groups whose members took vows and lived in community. With the approval of the Church they blossomed throughout the years since Francis.

They are known as the Third Order Regular (TOR) to distinguish them from the Third Order Secular (Secular Franciscans). Members of the TOR take vows and live in community. The SFO monthly gatherings serve to draw Secular Franciscans together. Monthly gatherings and other time together secure community ties for SFO members.

### *QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE*

1. What is the recognized symbol that Secular Franciscans in the USA wear and what meaning is attached to it?
2. Why is the San Domiano crucifix precious to SFO members?
3. Why did the Franciscan Order (all three Orders) face so many reforms in its lifetime?
4. What is the role of the SFO Rule? What is the role of the SFO Constitution?

### *ASSIGNMENT*

Obtain a copy of the SFO Rule of 1978. Read it carefully and then answer these questions:

1. Which articles of the Rule will be easy for you to adapt to your lifestyle?
2. Which article will be difficult?

### *BOOKS*

Franciscan History – The Three Orders of St. Francis of Assisi – Lazaro Iriarte, O.F.M. Cap. (1982) – Franciscan Press – Quincy, Il.

Francis of Assisi – Arnaldo Fortini (1985) – Crossroad Publishing Co.

Called to Rebuild the Church – A Spiritual Commentary on the General Constitutions of the SFO – Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap. – (1997) Franciscan Press – Quincy, Il.

Consult not your fears, but your hopes and your dreams.  
Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential.  
Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what it is still possible to do.  
*Blessed Pope John XXIII SFO*

## **Orientation**

### *SESSION FOUR*

#### *Franciscan values & theology*

There is a way of perceiving God and God's world and people that has a Franciscan flavor. It offers a way of interpreting life that is God-centered. It offers a way of imagining God that makes God an attractive lover rather than an all-seeing judge. People who are attracted to Francis embrace this way of looking at God and God's relationship with all of creation.

#### *VALUES*

These Franciscan values were shared by Franciscans at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, Wi. (STRITCH Magazine – Milwaukee, Wi – Summer, 1999 – Page 14)

##### **+ Creating a caring community:**

- Respect for individual dignity
- Hospitality, courtesy, kindness
- Friendship, openness
- Fostering loving relationship.

##### **+ Sharing, compassion for others:**

- Serving, caring for the poor and oppressed
- Concern for social justice issues
- Taking responsible social action
- Offering unselfish service, altruism.

##### **+ Reverence for creation:**

- Respect for all creatures
- Fostering a simple lifestyle, stewardship
- Human dignity and empowerment of people
- Concern for environmental issues.

##### **+ Peacemaking:**

- Healing and reconciliation
- Conflict resolution
- Forgiveness
- Care and understanding, to eliminate fears.

Franciscan values call for interaction with other people and creation. They flow from the two great commandments – to love God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. The underlying principle for living these commands is a healthy love of self. To uphold the dignity of others requires a healthy respect for our own dignity. Embracing our own dignity enables us to show hospitality, courtesy and compassion to others. This opens the door for a relationship that can grow into friendship. Lacking self-esteem, choices are often mandated by others rather than by our personal inner love for God and people.

“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” (SFO Rule, article 13).

Respect and reverence for the dignity of all people means taking an active stance when people are oppressed. We speak out and act against injustice in individual situations as well as in societal-political situations. We show solidarity with the poor and oppressed wherever they are.

God created all things out of love. We love God. Hence we care for all of creation in response to God's love. As Francis (in St. Bonaventure's words) saw in all things the footprint of the Creator and revered all creatures as an imprint of God, we do the same. All creation becomes our concern.

"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" (SFO Rule, article 18).

The resources of our planet are meant to be shared by all people. Hoarding them is contrary to Franciscan living. We choose a simple lifestyle that allows us to use material goods in a spirit of stewardship rather than a clinging, profit-making ownership.

"Let the Secular Franciscans seek 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" (SFO Rule, article 11).

We are created in the image of God. As well advanced and supported the God-given dignity of all people, reconciliation and peacemaking become a hallmark of our Franciscan life. We will not walk away from negative situations without attempting to bring about a resolution of the conflict – according to our competency. We will be ready to work toward forgiveness and become ambassadors of peace. Such action can open the door to reconciliation among people. St. Francis wrote these words:

"Praised be you, my Lord, through who give pardon for Your love... Blessed are those who endure in peace, for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned" (Francis of Assisi – The Saint – Armstrong/Hellmann/Short – New City Press – Page 114 – Canticum of the Creatures).

## *FRANCISCAN THEOLOGY*

Our approach to life, self, people, God, Church and creation is colored by Francis' spirit. It is a spirit of openness and a spirit-filled love for Jesus. Jesus is central in our faith-life. We believe that Jesus, God-made-flesh, would have come, among us no matter what humans may have done. Francis' God is a good God, all good, the highest good (Praises of God-IBID – Page 109). God is love (1 John 4: 16 – NRSV), John also writes:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4: 7-8 – NRSV).

Love always seeks to give itself to the Beloved. God's reason for becoming human was God's own love. No matter what humans might do, God was determined to come among us. God did not come because of sin nor was God dominated by outside influences. God's decision came from within, a deep desire to be with God's people on earth. (teachings of John Duns Scotus, Franciscan – died 1308)

Jesus is the expression of God's love. Jesus is not an afterthought because humans sinned. Jesus is primary in God's mind. Otherwise we would be forced to say that sin was necessary for God to come among us. Francis' desire was to have an intimate relationship with Jesus. From this intimacy came his love for everything and everyone created by God. Francis was related to all of creation because of Jesus.

For Francis, God is a dynamic, self-giving Trinity. The Incarnation is the manifestation of God's love for us. In the Incarnation God bent down to take our human nature into unity with the divine nature. Even more, having loved us so much, Jesus, God-made-human, chose the cross out of love. Francis saw the cross as the ultimate sign of love that God has for us. This seraphic lover desired to embrace the love Jesus shows us. He received the stigmata (signs of the wounds of Jesus) as an expression of his love for God.

Francis' spiritual travels journeyed him to new discoveries of the presence of God's love throughout creation. Even robbers deserve love. Lepers were to be especially cared for as God's precious poor ones. He wanted to depend on nothing but Jesus in his poverty. Little wonder that he cared for all creatures in God's world. Understandable is his attempt to stop war by talking to the Sultan. He delighted in Clare's spirit. She understood his vision.

At the center of everything Jesus – the sign of God's covenant love for all creation. Nothing and no one would replace Jesus in Francis' heart. His love for Mary, his rich love for the brothers, his readiness to forgive as well as his challenge to lazy friars, found their source in his love of Jesus and the Gospel.

God is not a punishing God, waiting to catch us in sin. God is a loving God who walks with us even when our free choices get us into trouble. When unhealthy desires overcome our dedication, God is with us. When our emotions move in destructive ways, God is with us. When we sin arrogantly and despise God, God is with us. When crises of accidents happen it is not God punishing us. We may close the door of our life to God, but we cannot keep God from being a faithful lover. Our loving God is with us. God enables us to walk through our pain and the consequences of poor choices. God is love. To think otherwise was unthinkable for Francis and Clare.

God is not looking for ways to get us when we fail to follow the Gospel. God is not waiting patiently to ladle out punishment for past sins that now bother our conscience. In every instance, God is looking for ways to help us be free and have joy. Such is the God that Francis knew, loved and followed. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1: 16-18 – NRSV).

When you choose to follow Francis, the kind of thinking about God and Jesus becomes your way. When you decide to become part of the SFO, this kind of theology colors your thinking. When you become part of the Franciscan family, we expect you to see people and creation through the eyes of love – no matter what! We believe that God wishes all people to walk in the light and bring life to our world and its people. As John puts it: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1: 4 – NRSV).

Our role is to be light for a world (people) often in darkness and despair. Our task is to bring life to a world (people) often absorbed in destruction and violence. Our task is to celebrate with a world (people) that needs an alleluia celebration. Our task is to bring hope to a world (people) often mired in frustration and depression.

Our task is to bring people the gift of forgiveness rather than revenge, acceptance rather than exclusion, embrace rather than coldness, life rather than death, respect rather than oppression, community rather than individualism, prayerfulness rather than cursing, the power of love rather than the power of control and dominance. We would fail trying to accomplish this by ourselves. This is the work of the Holy Spirit working within us and within the SFO community. It is why our monthly (or more frequent) gatherings are so important! Your presence at gatherings is a vital ingredient of your commitment to the SFO. Very few things should keep you away. We are on this path together. Together we will make a difference!

There are many implications to our Franciscan theology. Your discussions will uncover more of them. Share as fully as you can. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. give an indication of where this love will take us:

“To our most bitter opponents we say: Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our houses and threaten our children and we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory”

*(St. Francis and the Foolishness of God – Dennis / Nangle OFM / Moe-Lobeda / Taylor / Orbis Books – Page 88)*

Franciscans seek solutions in which everyone wins. We use our skills, our intelligence, our hearts, our emotions and imagination to find ways for win-win situations to be achieved. Read the SFO Rule. It expresses this theology throughout. Secular Franciscans try to live this way – every day and 24 hours a day.

### ***St. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio\****

*Settling a conflict between the ravenous wolf and the citizens of Gubbio*

*\*Story can be found in the:*

Little Flowers of St. Francis #21  
Omnibus of Sources – Page 1348

## **QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE**

1. Share three incidents from your life that you would see differently if you looked at them from the viewpoint of Franciscan theology.
2. What specific promise(s) did God make to us, through Jesus, that enable us to be hopeful people?
3. What is your present image of God? Describe it in detail with its consequences for daily life.
4. After answering question three, what changes do you want to make in your image of God? What would be the consequences of such changes? RE: Values: *(Page 45 and the following)*
5. Which Franciscan values are already part of your lifestyle?

6. How might you adjust your life to live a simpler lifestyle?

7. Share some instances when you have been a peacemaker.

8. Which Franciscan values must you still strive to achieve?

**SCRIPTURE – Ephesians 1: 3-20**

1. How do these words support our focus on Jesus as the foundation of our faith?

2. How do these words to the Ephesians energize your ability to bring hope to our troubled world?

**BOOKS**

**St. Francis and the Foolishness of God** – Dennis / Nangle OFM / Moe-Lobeda / Taylor / Orbis books

**Spirit and Life** – Franciscan Studies – The difference women are making – Vol. 8 -1999 – Franciscan Institute St. Bonaventure, NY

**The Holy Longing** – Ronald Rolheiser – Doubleday

*He is the image of the invisible God,  
The firstborn of all creation;  
For in him all things  
In heaven and on earth  
Were created, things visible  
And invisible, whether thrones  
Or dominions or rulers or powers – all things  
Have been created through him and for him.  
He himself is before all things,  
And him all things hold together.  
He is the head of the body, the church;  
He is the beginning, the firstborn  
From the dead, so that he might come to  
Have first place in everything.  
For in him all the fullness of God  
Was pleased to dwell, and through him God  
Was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
Whether on earth or in heaven,  
By making peace through the blood of his cross.*

*Colossians 1:15-20, NRSV*

## Orientation

### *SESSION FIVE*

#### *The process of discernment*

The Orientation period is important for discovering whether you are called by God to follow our way of life. We invite you to pray and reflect on what you have learned about us. We consider this process of discernment to be important.

Your reflection may tell you that our Franciscan way is **NOT WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR**. We appreciate your insight and thank God for helping you know that. We wish you blessings in your search for other ways to follow Jesus.

Perhaps you are still attracted, but **NOT TOTALLY CERTAIN** that this is the way you wish to live you baptismal promises. Please continue your search while pondering whether God is calling you to our Franciscan way of life. We will work together to ascertain the integrity of your call.

You may **BE CERTAIN** this is the way you wish to follow Jesus. We thank you for your decision. Together we will pray and dialogue to affirm your decision.

In all cases, the decision is made through dialogue. The decision is best when it is a mutual one,

Together we will come to an agreement on your call to our Franciscan life – or- an awareness that this is not your path to follow. Honesty is a precious quality as you share your reasons with us. We (Formation Team / Council) will be honest in our sharing with you. Our common decision is better than either of us could make in isolation.

A few ideas about discernment can help us. Though this is not an exhaustive essay on discernment, it may help in discovering God's call or its absence.

Discernment might be described as the human, prayerful discovery of God's preference for my life. It looks at the movements and tendencies in life to discover their source. Some come from one's own human spirit, some come from the Spirit of God and others may come from the evil spirit. Frequently there is a combination of spirits involved in discernment. But ultimately we can say that IT SEEMS that God is calling someone to this decision.

*The human spirit* – These ideas arise from your emotions, a pet idea, a human desire or intellectual data. They need to be taken into account. What reasons do you have for making this decision? Do you have enough data to make a decision? What is influencing you decision? Do you feel at ease with this decision? Have you talked it over with a competent person?

*The Holy Spirit* – The movement comes from a deeper love for Jesus. It seeks an increase of faith. There is an inner joy with the decision. The Holy Spirit is stretching you to surrender more completely to gospel living. What is the source of your decision? Do you sense an inner nudge by the Spirit in making your decision? Is there joy in the decision? Even though you are aware of the struggle to accept daily conversion, do you feel at peace with the decision? Do you feel prompted to take action on your decision? Have you talked it over with a competent person? When the Holy Spirit acts, it's like water on a sponge – it soaks in.

*The evil spirit* – If things come too easily with little real preparation, the evil spirit may be at work. If you feel there's nothing demanding in the SFO, you may be the victim of a con job by the devil. If you are paralyzed and find it impossible to decide, the evil spirit may be at work. If you are confused about

your decision, the evil spirit may be working. Check to see if this is a human fear or a confusion caused by another spirit. Do you find yourself constantly putting off your decision? If you have little hope and everything looks negative, the evil spirit may be at work. If all you do is gripe about things, you may either be humanly negative or moved by the evil spirit. When the evil spirit acts, it's like water on marble, a big splash but no integration. Have you talked to a competent person about your decision?

Notice, often there is the influence of both our own spirit and the Holy Spirit. It may happen that our human spirit moves in the same ways the evil spirit may lead. Confusion is not always the work of the evil spirit. Sometimes God simply invites us to a greater trust. Good discernment takes time but leads to a healthy decision. You conclude that it seems that God is calling you this way rather than another. If you discover you've misread the signs, you are free to change the decision. Spiritual Direction can be a big help in both decision making and continued spiritual growth.

### ***ONE WAY OF DISCERNMENT***

1. Ask the Lord, in prayer, for the gift of knowing God's preference for your life.
2. Clarify what you are looking for. Concretize the issues involved. Be patient as you gather data and continue to ask for God's help.
3. Seek the advice of a competent spiritual guide (Spiritual Companion). It can help to list the pros and cons of the issue or decision. What are the advantages / disadvantages of your choice? What are the consequences of your choice? Look at the positive and negative sides of your decision. Clarify your opinions. Choose the option that seems to offer more life and light.
4. **MAKE YOUR DECISION** and be at peace. These decisions are good but not infallible. Go with them! If it becomes clear the decision needs adjustment, make such adjustments prayerfully and patiently.

### ***CRITERIA FOR VALIDITY OF YOUR CHOICE***

1. Is your decision in accord with Scripture?
2. Is your decision in accord with basic teaching of the Church?
3. Is your decision in accord with your vocation in life? If it causes havoc to your vocation (married, single, priest, deacon, etc.), you need to review your decision.
4. Does your decision bring you peace? This should be a persistent and lasting peace. Even poor decisions can bring temporary peace. Test it out for a while.

It is important not to make quick decisions. Take your time but decide within a reasonable period to time. Orientation is a good time to deal with this issue, but there is more time available if needed. Inquiry and Candidacy in the SFO continue to offer time for decision-making, but it is good to make your decision as soon as reasonably possible. Both prayer and conversation with a competent person are vital ingredients of good discernment. When you come to a decision, talk it over openly with the Formation Team and the Fraternity Council. They can be a big help. Respect and courtesy require that they be involved in the process.

### ***QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE***

1. How has the information of this chapter helped move you toward a decision about becoming a Secular Franciscan? What was most helpful?

2. What obstacles (if any) hinder you from deciding? Do you sense a call to another way of life? Please dialogue with us.

### **SCRIPTURE – Matthew 5:38-48**

1. What is there about this gospel text that resembles the Rule of the SFO?
2. Does Francis' way of life fit this text? How?
3. How might you put a limit on your goodness? (see verse 48)

### **BOOKS – *At this point we invite you to read and reflect on one of the following books:***

St. Francis of Assisi – G.K. Chesterton – Image Books

St. Francis of Assisi – Omer Englebert – Servant Books

Living the Incarnation – Praying with Francis and Clare of Assisi – St. Frances Teresa O.S.C. – Franciscan Press

Francis of Assisi – Adrian House – Hidden Spring (Paulist Press)

### **ASSIGNMENT**

At our next session, share the insights you gained about Sts. Francis/Clare through your reading.

*Francis, Clare, Thank you.  
Thank you for proving that the gospel is livable and joyful.  
Thank you for showing that simplicity is a gem not a burden.  
Thank you for teaching us that poverty is not a trap, but a gift that frees.  
Thank you for helping us with suffering that cannot destroy joy when embraced with love.  
Thank you for keeping Jesus at the center of life and for your trust in the Holy Spirit.  
Thank you for responding to God's call with such wholehearted love.  
Thank you for the warmth of your friendship with each other.  
It helps us realize the importance of relationships.  
(Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap.)*

## Orientation

### SESSION SIX

#### *Reviewing the situation*

The orientation period is coming to an end. It is a good time to look at where we've been and where we intend to go. Orientation has given us the opportunity both to know about Francis and Clare and the SFO as well as some insights into our individual personalities. Its purpose was to offer understanding of the SFO and begin to know ourselves better. In doing so, we hope your personal decision about entering the SFO has been clarified. Your decision at this point will be much better informed and aware than when you first came to us. Taking time to reflect on these past few months can help.

We begin the session by listening to your reflections on the books you have read. Then we will continue with a review of other issues.

#### *REVIEW*

We examined your ideas and situation as a Catholic. A review of where we've been is in order.

1. Read pages 5 and 6 of this book. There is a description of various personality types. We are generally a mix of types. It helps to know how we lean in our way of learning and behaving. Share personal insights on how you ordinarily deal with life.
2. You've been studying books on St. Francis. What incidents or stories in Francis' life reflect your own? What is most important about the spirit of St. Francis? How have these months of reading and reflection changed and challenged you?
3. How would you describe or define Franciscan theology? How does it differ from your previous way of viewing the Incarnation and God's love? What are some of the implications for daily life? What changes has it made in your way of being Christian?
4. How would you describe Clare's influence on the Franciscan movement? Have you had an opportunity to read any of her writings? Would you like to do so? One resource is: *Clare of Assisi – Early Documents – Edited & translated by Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. – Paulist press*
5. Franciscans have various symbols that mean a lot to us. What is the meaning of the TAU cross? Why is the San Damiano Crucifix important to Franciscans? Do you know the prayer that Francis prayed before that crucifix? How has praying this prayer changed your life? (*Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command*)

6. We presume you have read the 1978 Rule of the SFO. This IS our way of life. We suggest that you read a commentary on the Rule (There will be more reflections on the Rule during Inquiry and Candidacy). What role do the SFO Constitutions play in our Franciscan life? Have you had an opportunity to peruse them or a commentary on them? If not, check with the formation people for the information you need.
  
7. Session five has some helpful materials for discernment. We also suggest that you read pages 18 and 19 in this booklet. This is a serious and prayerful decision for you.

Your decision to follow our Franciscan way of life might have been made by this time – or – you may need more time. Entering the **Inquiry** phase of Initial Formation is an important step. It deserves reflection, prayer and dialogue. A welcoming ceremony begins your next phase of initial formation.

### + *Coming events*

If you choose to continue your initial formation, we expect your presence at our regular sessions together. We have already invited you to come to our Fraternity gatherings. **At this point it is essential that you become part of our regular Fraternity gatherings.** You will be part of these people in your Franciscan life. It is important to get to know them and participate in their gatherings. We understand that there may be times when this is impossible. In such situations we simply ask that you let us know either before or after the gathering time. This is the courtesy Franciscans develop in their relationships.

There is a CEREMONY OF INTRODUCTION AND WELCOMING to initiate the next period of initial formation known as INQUIRY.

### + *Inquiry*

This phase of initial formation continues our study of the vocation to the SFO. It takes a look at the implications of a gospel life and our call to live it. We explore how the Franciscan life becomes our way of fulfilling our baptismal promises. We deepen our understanding of Church in the light of the documents of Vatican II. We delve into the Rule and Constitutions as guides for our lives.

+ This phase last **as least six months.**

### **Suggested materials:**

Videos:

[Saint Francis, Troubadour of God's Peace](#) – Performed by Leonardo Defillippis – 55 minutes. Available from: St. Luke Productions – P.O. Box 761 – Beaverton, OR 97075 – 800-683-2998

[The Message of St. Francis for Today](#) – Michael Crosby, O.F.M. Cap. – 40 minutes – A Fisher Production – Box 727 – Jefferson Valley, NY 10535 – 914-245-8509

# WELCOME TO INQUIRY

## Inquiry

### *Chapter one*

#### *A look at the call to holiness*

All Christians are called to be whole and holy. It is not reserved for a few. It is the norm for everyone who follows Jesus. Life is not divided between spiritual and secular.

“And we also believe that religion and everyday life are intimately and indissolubly linked, part and parcel of each other. We cannot divorce what happens in religion from how we live our everyday life. Simply put, there is no split between faith and everyday life. Jesus himself repeatedly warned against dividing life and religious belief in this way. So did the prophets of the time before Christ! Therefore, let there be no false distinctions between one’s professional and social life and one’s religious life. If you neglect your temporal duties, you also neglect your spiritual ones!” (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - #43 – quoted from the book: Vatican II in Plain English – Bill Huebsch – Vol. 2 – The Constitutions – Page 158).

Future quotations of Vatican Council Documents will be from the three volumes series: [Vatican II in Plain English](#) - Bill Huebsch with Paul Thurme – Thomas More Publications – Allen, TX.

Foundational to our Franciscan way of life is fulfilling this quote from Vatican II. We do not jump out of the world to join the SFO. On the contrary, we join the SFO to be present in our world as witnesses to Jesus. We keep learning to implement the Gospel in everyday life. Nothing escapes the purview of the Gospel. Nothing is left aside without being nudged and nourished by gospel ideals and values. No one is outside the circle of love that the Gospel calls us to have for one another. We make no false distinction between one’s professional life and one’s spiritual life. Separation goes counter to a Franciscan vision of life. We integrate faith and life. Division is NOT our way of implementing the Gospel. Unity is important for us, both personally and as a community. We are called to live our baptismal commitment through the SFO.

In the ritual of Baptism we make a faith commitment to reject sin and its glamour, and believe in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit and in the faith community of Jesus. When we are anointed at Baptism, these words are used:

“God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life.”

As you were clothed in white garment:

“\_\_\_\_\_, you have become a new creation, and have clothed yourselves in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. “

And finally, as you received a lighted candle:

“Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. These children of your have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts. When the Lord comes, may they go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.”

You are now a member of God’s holy people (Community). You are a new creation. You are clothed in Christ. You are light to the world. You are accompanied by friends and relatives on the journey. You are a member of the Body of Christ.

The issue is: *How do we maintain the identity?*

People are called to follow Christ in many ways. Even a brief look at people in our faith community illustrates that. The differences, the variety of gifts, the physical bodies, the intellectual understandings, the use of imagination and emotions, the perspective from which judgments are made, the attitudes toward God, people, self and creation show an abundant variety. Various religious groups within the Church offer a delightful panorama of viewpoints about faith and practice in the way life is to be lived. This healthy variety is reflective of a generous God, sharing gifts with God’s people. Clones we are not! Each person and group of people offer their particular flavor to the people of God. Together we are a blend that is called Church.

“It is the very mission of the human person to understand and use the benefits of creation for the good of all. Therefore, in everyday life, as well as in more dramatic ways, when we work for our livelihoods, God is present, unfolding ongoing creative work. Hence, far from thinking that such human advances are in opposition to God’s desires, we are convinced they are signs of God’s grace. We therefore say with confidence that we are not hindered from improving the world by the Christian message but, on the contrary, bound to do just that” (IBID - #34 – Page 150).

“And therefore, we can say that we, the Church, are a people united by our common heritage: created in love by God, assembled in the name of Jesus, and bound together in the Holy Spirit. The same power that mysteriously unites this threefold divine presence also binds us together in love. .... Begun by his preaching the Good News which had been promised for centuries, this Church was enlivened and illuminated by the words, the works, the miracles, the very person of Jesus Christ” (Constitution on the Church - #4-5 – IBID – Pages 24-25)

Obviously this is a call to all believers. However, we don’t all reach the goal of the Church in the same way. This is where we find people being touched by differing ideas, charisms and spirit. For some folks, searching out new ideas and intellectual stimulation is their way to grow in love of God. For others, the feel of a loving God touches them deeply. Some struggle to get past a judging God in their lives, while still others have a God who seems indifferent to a betrayal of the covenant. For some a saint like Dominic or Ignatius of Loyola is very attractive. Others may see in John of the Cross or Terese of Lisieux, is most attractive. Some nationalities have patron saints who influence their culture and lives. There are others who find their way to Jesus through Mary, the mother of Jesus. For each person the goal is the same. They choose a particular path to come to Jesus. If Jesus is absent, the call needs another look and may need to be reshaped.

In speaking about the call of God, Vatican II says:

“We are called to holiness by Christ himself, who taught, in the words of St. Matthew, that we must be perfect as God is perfect. By transforming the activities and events of everyday life into holy moments, all the faithful grow in this perfection and the world more and more resembles God’s reign.”

“So it is clear that everyone, lay, religious, and ordained, is called to be holy. Love God with all your heart, the Scriptures tell us, with all your soul, with all your understanding, with all your strength. Love one another as Christ loves you. These commands in Scripture are really an invitation to be holy. By our holy love, we nurture in the world a way of life that is more gentle, more beautiful, more human.”

“There are many ways to live out this call to be holy. Everyone should walk according to his or her own personal gifts and duties in the pathway of a living faith” (Constitution on the Church #40-41 – IBID – Page 51-52).

We believe God calls Secular Franciscans to bring our gifts and duties to be touched by the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. The Rule of the SFO gives direction to the spirit in which we come to Jesus and serve God’s people. We must be aware of how this looks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Franciscans do not isolate themselves from the Church. Neither do we move in ways that would minimize the wonder of God’s presence in all people and the whole of creation. Franciscans bring the flavor of earthiness to the Church. We bring a spirit that is so loyal it is not afraid to be the loyal opposition when that seems needed. We bring a respect for all of creation so that ecology flows naturally from our spirit. We are deeply concerned about family life and God. We make the family home a place with an atmosphere of respect and understanding for the people who live there. Francis’ love was stretched to include rather than exclude the lepers of his time.

The SFO Rule invites us to embrace people rather than reject them. “A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ” (SFO Rule, article 13).

We are called to contemplation, that place where the wonder of God and God’s wonders come together. All of creation opens the door to contemplation. The wonder of loving people tells us something of God’s love at work. Some moments we are absorbed by beauty or aware of how God makes the difference at this moment. We capture Francis’ spirit that discovered God in everything. Francis could sing a canticle to Sir Brother Sun whose very rays brought agonizing pain to his eyes. With God all things are possible! “As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do” (SFO Rule, article 8).

Our Franciscan spirit embraces justice and peace issues. All people deserve peace and justice in their lives. People are not meant to be controlled by anyone through unbridled use of power, prestige or possessions. Knowing God’s desire for peace and justice for God’s people, we naturally serve and support initiatives that bring dignity to people. “Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in 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” (SFO Rule, article 15).

I read a story about a lady who visited Assisi and was taken by a cabbie, free of charge, to visit the Carceri (hermitage). She was delighted with Assisi. She did not need to go to the hermitage (Carceri) up the hill. When she had done so, it became THE experience in her Assisi visit. She wondered what made the difference between the town of Assisi and the beauty of the hermitage. She had found Francis in both places.

The cabbie replied in his broken English: No same. In eremo, Francesco talk easy God. In eremo, la Signora talk easy God. In eremo all people talk easy God. Silencio. God no make building. God make tree, rocca, sky, sun, moon, star, no building, no wall. Free. Beautiful. You breathe eremo air, you

breathe God. In *eremo*, God in air, every day, every night. Sometime God in *chiesa*, in building. Not so easy, God in building. In *eremo*, easy find God, tree, rocca, air, moon, sun. In *eremo*, God in every place, easy. *Eremo* 'God place'.

(The Way of St. Francis – Nov-Dec 2000 – Vol VI - #6 – Assisi's Enchanted Forest – Liza M. Tilson – Page 35)

Franciscans develop an interpretation of life that comes from a Jesus-gospel perspective. Faith in Jesus is fundamental. We realize God's great love for us and feel secure in that love. We recognize that Jesus is God's way of saying I love you. Jesus becomes the center and foundation of life. We are secure because God's love cannot be dissipated by our meager responses. We find joy in following the Gospel of Jesus. It is quite natural then that we would follow the SFO Rule:" ...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" (SFO Rule, article 7).

Fulfilling the Rule of the SFO (1978) is our way of contributing to the Church. It spells out the flavor that we add to the people of God. We approach life with the spirit that Francis and Clare showed in their lives. If we fail either to understand or implement the Rule, we fail not only the SFO but the entire People of God called Church.

"Working through the ordinary lives of us all, the Spirit gives the Church everything it needs both for leadership and service and thus allows the Church to keep its youthful energy. Praying through the hearts of the faithful and dwelling in us as in a temple, the Spirit unifies us all in love. And therefore, we can say that we, the Church, are a people united by our common heritage: created in love by God, assembled in the name of Jesus, and bound together in the Holy Spirit" (Constitution on the Church - #4 – IBID – Page 24)

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father I heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16 – NRSV)

## *SUMMARY*

"The Holy Spirit has lost none of the propelling force of the time of the early Church; He acts today as in the time of Jesus and the Apostles. The wonders he worked... continue to happen in our day too, but often go unrecognized since in many parts of the world humanity lives in secularized cultures which interpret reality as if God did not exist" (Message for World Mission Sunday – 1998 – Pope John Paul II).

The Spirit of Jesus propels the Church now as always. It is not simply our gifts and skills that continue the work of Jesus. It is the Spirit of Jesus working through God's people called Church. It is not simply decisions of the Holy Father, but the response of all God's people to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

We Franciscans always begin with the Scriptures. As Cardinal Martini put it: "Ordinarily I prefer to start from the Scriptures but I recognize that a catechism is necessary because the New Testament itself, every so often, seeks to give an organic synthesis of its message. This effort at synthesis over the centuries has little by little been condensed in the catechism. But I would not entrust myself to the formula that the catechism is the instrument for a new evangelization. That instrument is the Bible" (Cardinal Martini – Milan, Italy – Interview in the Tablet [London, England] – 10/30/99).

We too see the Bible as the guide for our way of life, a guide that teaches through the community of believers and not in isolated interpretation. Francis willingly accepted the implications that the Gospel required of him. His trust in God found expression in poverty and contemplation. It meant a surrender to all that the Gospel teaches. Within the framework of the Church, he brought new life to a Church sometimes caught up in search for power and possessions. We can do no less in our world and our Church in this time of history.

We are Christ's body and our lives continue the way of life laid out by the Holy Spirit in the Bible. "Every lay person is, therefore, at the same time a witness and a living instrument of mission of the Church itself" (Constitution on the Church - #36 – IBID – Page 48)

Francis reminds us: "Where there is charity and wisdom there is neither fear nor ignorance. ... Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart" (Francis of Assisi – The Saint – Armstrong/Hellman/Short – New City Press – Admonition XXVII – Pages 136-137).

### *QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE*

1. What do you understand by the term "Holy"? How do you see your own holiness – what does it look like?
2. How could the SFO Rule of 1978 help you in fulfilling your baptismal promises?
3. What, in particular, attracts you to Francis of Assisi?
4. How, in everyday life, do you bring light/life to people and situations?

### *SCRIPTURE – Philippians 1:3-11*

1. Please explain the passage in your own words.
2. What does Paul especially desire for his friends? What desires or feelings of your life reflect Paul's prayer?

Francis had crossed many barriers, within himself, between himself and others, and between others. Stories abound of his interactions with animals and birds, but he also crossed some barriers between Christianity and Islam, even while the Crusades were still being fought. This was at a time when dialogue had never been thought of and the two religions seemed to be on either side of great and impassable divide. Towards the end of his life, Francis was to cross some ultimate and un-nameable barrier between himself and God, returning to ordinary life with the wounds of Christ imprinted on his flesh, a living reminder of the presence of God in the flesh of our lives. His own roots were so deep in the humus of Christ's humanity that he himself became this tree of unfailing healing powers, an incarnation of the city of the future where God is. (Living the Incarnation – St. Frances Teresa, O.S.C. – Franciscan Press – Page 116)

## **Inquiry**

### *Chapter two*

#### *You and the Holy Spirit*

“Today, as is the case with every generation, we are being asked to re-imagine our faith life and our church structures. Unfortunately, we too often are not up to the task. We stand before very complex and radically new situations with either petrified imaginations (the proclivity of the conservative ...”We’ve never done it this way before!”) or with the fuzzy uncritical imagination (the proclivity of the liberal ...”let the new times roll!”). In both cases, there is very little chance that fate might be turned to destiny, very little reading of the signs of the times. In the cases, of petrified imagination, there is too much sticking one’s head in the sand whereas with the fuzzy uncritical imagination there is an abdication of any critical response in favor of rubber-stamping recent opinion polls. In both cases, the imagination is dead. Religion dies with it.

“We must be able to look at our lives, our church, and our world and be able to name where we’ve died, claim where we’ve been born, know what old bodies need to ascend, and recognize the new spirit that is being given us. That is the job description for the religious imagination.”

“Looking at history we see that many of the great religious reformers had great imaginations. People like Francis of Assisi, Dominic, and Ignatius of Loyola were able to look at religious life in their day and imagine a new way of living it. The specific way in which religious life had been lived out (for centuries) had died, but religious life has not died!”

“These reformers were able to name a death, claim resurrection, let (with proper love and reverence) the old go, and then live with the new spirit that God was now giving. Religious life was re-imagined and, under the vision that came from their imaginations, exploded in tremendous birth of growth.”

“...For those of us who remember another time... the church as we knew it, parish life as we knew it, religious life as we knew it, what it means to be Catholic as we knew it, and even family life as we knew it, are, in the face of contemporary forces, irrevocably different. “We can like it or dislike it, but the fact is indisputable.”

“We can respond to this with petrified imagination (“only what worked before can work now!”) or with fuzzy uncritical imagination (“change is always a sign of progress!”). Or, we can respond with a paschal imagination, we can look at the pattern of death and resurrection in Christ and then move on to positively and critically shape our destiny by naming our deaths, claiming our resurrections, letting the old ascend, and living with the spirit that God is actually giving us” (Against an Infinite Horizon – Ronald Rolheiser Crossroads Publishing – Pages 151-152).

We chose this long quote because it gives food for thought about the working of the Spirit in our lives. This is not a pie-in-the-sky approach of life. It is a practical, faith-filled call to be honest about life and faith. It calls us to stop wringing our hands over problems and to offer ourselves and the world the light of the Gospel. But words will never be enough. Hence the need for a gospel life that illustrates what a gospel person looks like.

That brings us, quite naturally, to our Franciscan way of looking at the world and God and people and Gospel. The SFO Rule of 1978 carries us in the direction of paschal imagination.

We let our imaginations soar as we try to implement what the Rule requires of us – a transformation of life that is able to name our deaths, recognize our resurrections and get moving!

At this point of formation, it is important to examine your own attitudes, beliefs and understanding. If you find things that lack life-giving possibilities, you may need to give them a gentle burial. If some things seem threatening but have life-giving possibilities, you should see if they need to be embraced and followed. The easy path is to evade serious reflection and exploration, but that would leave us stuck where we are. The Spirit of Jesus does not ordinarily leave us in non-life-giving situations. The call of the Spirit is to light and life. To reject that call would be foolish for a dedicated Franciscan. Darkness and death are not our choices.

If we listen to the Gospel and its implications, then the SFO Rule of 1978 offers a way to do more than listen. Listening is the first step. Absorbing is the second. Living it is the third. Somehow they all coalesce and bring us to new life. The power of the Holy Spirit urges and calls us to a faithfulness that is full of life. It makes religion not an intellectual exercise but a lived experience. Compassion, for example, is not only caring for others, it also speaks of the failure of society to embrace the marginalized in order to protect our security. Compassion speaks loudly of the dignity of all while society tries to prevent the intrusion of people who diminish our consumerist-centered lifestyle. The SFO Rule of 1978 is radical. If lived, it challenges many policies and practices of government and people. People who embrace the Rule become instruments of that challenge.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit, given by Jesus, this would be useless speculation. Who wants to be a challenging and radical-gospel person? Hopefully it will be a Franciscan. But this is neither simple nor easy. The Holy Spirit draws us together in fraternity because we'd fail without it. Our ACTIONS produce the challenge simply by being lived. Whenever we show godliness in our actions, even good people may think this is more than is required. They may even encourage us to be more practical and realistic. The problem is, our faith tells us that any other way would be impractical and unrealistic. We have seen a new reality and can no longer sponsor evasion to the call of the Holy Spirit. It is the nature of our commitment that the Holy Spirit will lead us beyond where we thought we could go. We repeat the words of Jesus who said that with God all things are possible.

The call of the Holy Spirit to follow the Secular Franciscan way of life will change things in our lives. We cannot expect this to be another cozy little organization for shy people. It is quite the opposite. It is a community of clear-sighted people nourished by the gospel and the spirit of Francis of Assisi. Franciscans are willing to accept the teachings of Jesus with all their implications for daily life. Since they find it difficult to do this alone, they gather in fraternity. From that source comes continuing new examples, insights, teachings, sharing, and prayer. This is our support system when we must implement the Gospel alone in a setting away from the Fraternity.

Francis put it this way in one of his undated writings:

“Therefore, it is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honor by recounting them” (Francis of Assisi – The Saint – Armstrong/Hellman/Short – New City Press – Admonition VI \_ Page 131).

St. John put it another way in his first letter:

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18 – NRSV).

These words of Francis speak of the consequences for a person in love with Jesus, ready to follow the Gospel.

Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance.

Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance.

Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice.

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

Where there is fear of the Lord to guard an entrance, there the enemy cannot have a place to enter.

Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.

(Francis of Assisi – The Saint – Armstrong/Hellman/Short – New City Press – Admonition XXVII – Pages 136-137)

The Holy Spirit helps clarify our thinking, often through the good insights of others. The Holy Spirit moves us to act, often through the example of others. The Holy Spirit often leads us to contemplation, simply because God’s gift fills the world with possibilities of surrender to the God of love. Sometimes the Holy Spirit leads us through lousy choices that awaken us to their consequences. Then we begin to make choices that are life-giving. It is not magic, simply a growing awareness that God is always with us. With God there is always “more,” for the Spirit does not know how to be miserly.

*Blessed are the meek....the non-violent....the gentle....the caregiver of creation....they shall inherit the earth.*

Recognize the work the Holy Spirit does in your life every day. We attribute to the Spirit the sanctifying action God performs in our lives. Jesus sent his Spirit to bring us understanding. He sent the Spirit to continue his life-giving ministry to people. Jesus sent the Spirit to give us boldness in professing our beliefs.

“To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 – NRSV).

The Holy Spirit is given to us. The Spirit’s call to follow the Franciscan way of life is our call. The Trinity is a community of Three Persons working as one in us. They can’t forget us. They can’t stop seeking to give us new life. We are richly blessed by such a relationship.

*Two men looked out through prison bars, the one saw mud, the other, stars.*

*It’s often a matter of where you look and what you look for.*

*Whether it matters to you that God is alive or whether you’re only concerned that you are alive.*

*Things start within our hearts and our perspectives and the way life looks to us.*

*We reflect on how people see us, or how we see us, or on how Jesus sees us.*

*The Spirit operates in our hearts, where it counts and makes a difference.*

*The Spirit reaches people in different ways.*

*Sometimes through prayer, or through pain, through love, or through people, or through hatred, even.*

*Through loneliness and loss.*

*Through gain and sorrow and joy.*

*The Spirit always blows with a breath of kindness, forever waiting for us to provide an opening in our heart that lets the Spirit break out.*

*Like a mother bending over her child, waiting, waiting for the warmth and power of Spirit-love to come forth!*

*Francis, on La Verna, arms outstretched, felt the power of the Spirit in the agony of the stigmata – Identity with Jesus was everything.  
Francis said another ‘Yes’ to the Spirit.  
Francis accepts the consequences with a loving heart – today and always.*

*Come, Spirit of God, fill me with the power of your love.  
My heart, filled, is ready to share what you have given me with other people in my life.*

(Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap.)

### **QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE**

1. How would you describe the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives?
2. What is the role of fraternity life and gatherings on our journey to God? How would a fraternity best fill our need for support and help in being faithful to the SFO Rule?
3. Share some of your paschal imagination as it relates to your personal life or to our fraternal life. How does the SFO Rule of 1978 offer us opportunities for paschal imagination?

### **SCRIPTURE – 1 Corinthians 2:9-13 / 3:16-17**

1. After reading and reflection on the first text, how would you relate contemplation to what Paul is writing?
2. How does the text about us being temples of the Spirit affirm our dignity?

**BOOKS** – Some suggested readings in connection with this chapter.

The Prophetic Imagination – Walter Brueggemann – 1978 – Fortress Press.

Against and Infinite Horizon – Ronald Rolheiser – 1999 – Crossroad Publishing Company – NY.

Texts That Linger, Words That Explode – Walter Brueggemann – 2000 – Fortress Press.

The Powers That Be – Theology for a New Millennium – Walter Wink – 1998 – Random House

<i>As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. (SFO Rule, article 8)</i>
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## **Inquiry**

### *Chapter three*

#### *The importance of listening*

We've written a great deal about the importance of attentive listening. It is an ability to listen to God and how God speaks to us. It is an ability to listen to one another so we hear what's being said. It is an ability to listen to one another so we hear what's being said. It is an ability to listen to our own spirit and see how it is touched by the Holy Spirit. It is an ability to listen to the wonders of God's creation in the universe and in people. It is an ability to listen to our imagination and discover how paschal imagination might develop healthy ways of life. It is an ability to listen to Scripture and let it permeate our lives.

“But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes”  
(Psalm 81: 11-14 – NRSV).

Listening is demanding. The willingness to put aside personal agendas and listen to another's story can be difficult. We may hear what we presume others are saying rather than what they actually say. Generational gaps can hinder our listening. Personal experiences and desires can impede our listening. Stubborn convictions, religious and otherwise, can keep us from hearing anything that might threaten our ideas and insights that would challenge pet ideas. Distrust of others makes it hard to listen to them. Listening with prejudice or a biased outlook, we hear only what fits our prejudice or bias. Sometimes new ideas need a fresh look lest we reject them out of hand and refuse to change.

Fear can influence our listening. Ideas that sound radically different can be rejected without consideration. We can refuse to engage in the work of integrating the new into the old in our thinking. Our desire to keep everything calm in our hearts keeps us from hearing ideas that may upset that calm. Sometimes our arrogance refuses to listen because we think we already know all the answers.

Listening is difficult when we are tired, irritated or angry. Physical illness can drain our ability to concentrate and listen. Inner turmoil or a focus on personal problems makes it difficult to listen to someone else's needs. The quality of my listening changes when these physical, psychological or emotional elements interfere.

A fundamentalist attitude does not allow us to listen to anything that threatens our interpretation of things. If I already know it all, who can possibly teach me anything? When anything different is automatically wrong, there is an end to listening. Since we possess the whole truth, others should simply listen to us and they will do fine!

These human obstacles hinder not only human communication but also our way of listening to God's Word in the Bible. The Bible is filled with stories, teachings, proclamation, healing, encouragement, confrontation, praise and pleading. It is quite easy to refuse any interpretation of the Bible that counters what we want to believe. We may feel inadequate in listening to scripture words. New translations of the Bible threaten familiar Bible translations. These and many other obstacles keep us from listening to God's Word.

Listening to Scripture requires that we put aside any wall to listening. These walls may protect us (*we think*), but they actually keep us from growing. Our cemented ideas may help us feel good (*we think*), but they diminish the power of Scripture to touch our lives. When we read Scripture we trust God to share with us. When we read the Scriptures within the faith community we are unlikely to go astray. The faith

community will keep us on track (presuming we don't share only with people who think exactly the same as we do).

Sharing with the faith community allows us to test our understanding. To refuse integration with the Church means we stand alone – and are easily misled. Being comfortable is not a sign that our faith is on target. It may simply mean we don't want to be disturbed. Franciscans do not embrace such a stance.

### *LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD*

“An elderly woman approached ‘Jacob the Baker’. She had some questions for Jacob and said she wanted some answers from him. Jacob said: ‘It sounds like you already have the answers.’”

“The woman did not accept that response but pushed Jacob for answers. Jacob told her that he didn't think he had anything to tell someone of her experience. The he thought for a moment and added: ‘On the other hand, sometimes we don't need to know new things but to know in a new way.’” (Jacobs Ladder – Noah Ben Shea – Villard, NY – Pages 50-51)

The Bible has many stories. It reveals people at their best and their worst. It offers words for prayer. It reveals a God who seeks faithfulness and receives betrayal. The Bible has stories of healing and stories of sinfulness. All of human experience finds expression in the Bible. To listen well requires us to know whether we are reading history, stories, teachings, wisdom, letters or another literary form. It speaks of past events but invites us to see how they influence today's reality.

The whole gamut of human experience is found in the Bible. To listen well requires a heart ready for learning. The meaning of God's word is not always obvious, but God is not trying to confuse the issue. We will find meaning through the exploration of Scripture scholars. We will discover insights through prayerful reading of the Bible.

Franciscans grow accustomed to going to the Bible. We listen without coloring the meaning by expecting answers to OUR problems. The Bible is not an answer book but a conversation between God and us. Controlling the dialogue with our own agenda and looking for proof texts tends to fuzzy the communication. Know that the Holy Spirit is our teacher. The better we listen, the more freely the Holy Spirit is able to teach us. The fewer obstacles we have, the better we will hear God's Word and understand it. It may take persistent time and prayer reading and reflecting, sharing and hearing to capture the meaning of a given text. This open, unhindered listening to God's Word is one way we surrender to God.

Going from gospel to life and life to the gospel (SFO Rule, article 4) invites us to the dialogue. Franciscans choose to surrender to the Word rather than manipulate it. God's Word is, indeed, “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12 – NRSV). We may not always get the point immediately. It may take time. But God invites us to surrender to the Word as fully as we can.

Because we are human, we may go to Scripture to seek answers or consolation or support. But be free to surrender to the Word of God without letting desires hinder your listening. Then God can teach us through his Scriptural word.

There is a Scripture story about a man possessed by demons. They made his life miserable. There was no help for him.

“Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Legion;’ for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

“Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

“...then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear! ... The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” (Luke 8: 30-39 – NRSV)

Consider the lessons contained in this one story – and what it might mean to you.

1. The painful life of one man is transformed by the presence and power of Jesus.
2. The power of evil is real.
3. Jesus is compassionate, apparently even to demons.
4. The pig-owners took a big loss.
5. Pigs were the lowest kind of creatures in Jewish eyes and that’s where demons belong.
6. The economic losses moved the owners to reject Jesus. A common justice issue. If Jesus asked too much, we politely ask him to leave.
7. People are astounded by the power of Jesus.
8. Jesus dialogues with the demons before driving them out.
9. The possessed man has a new life.
10. Jesus has great power and uses it wisely.
11. Pigs can be a symbol of my own inner rejections of the Gospel. These things need to be “drowned” so I can be free.
12. Question: “Can I name my own demons?”
13. The story makes no sense since I don’t own any pigs.
14. People in charge don’t always understand what is happening. (see verse 34 and the following)
15. Praising God and sharing the story at home is important – as the possessed man learned from Jesus’ words. (see verse 39)
16. Even demons know Jesus and recognize his power.
17. Being from the city I don’t get the point. Who cares what happens to a bunch of pigs?
18. People are sometimes afraid when they see the power of Jesus at work.
19. God cares more about people than pigs.
20. Jesus can change my life with his presence and power.

One story – an abundance of meaning. We may hear it differently on different days depending on our mood, experience, the day’s happenings, a similar experience or because of someone’s insights shared with us. How depressing to think there is only ONE meaning in this story. Franciscans try to avoid such a fundamentalist stance.

Listening is vital in life. As you move along in initial formation in the SFO, keep in mind the importance of listening. If you discover obstacles in yourself, engage in the work it takes to remove those obstacles. This is part of the conversion that occurs in our Franciscan life. It is never finished. Our interchange with each other in fraternity life will require the ability to listen. Francis wrote to his friars and the thought applies to the SFO as well:

“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 (see 1 Thess. 2:7), how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit!” (The Later Rule – St. Francis of Assisi – Writings for a Gospel Life Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. – Pages 122-123)

### *QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE*

1. What are some important qualities of a good listener?
2. How does listening relate to our ability to understand Scripture?
3. What obstacles to listening do you find in yourself? What are you going to do about it?
4. How familiar are you with the Bible? What can you do to become more familiar? (Rather important if you are going to be a gospel-person as a Secular Franciscan!)

### *SCRIPTURE – Matthew 7:24-27*

1. What meaning(s) do you discover in this text?
2. What is the symbolism of “sand” and “rock” in this story?

However, those who read these words (of Scripture) today must study them carefully in order to understand the original message of God. It is, therefore, necessary for today’s readers to investigate what the writers intended to say. There are, for example, various forms of literature used in the Scriptures: historical, prophetic, poetic, and others. In addition, there were circumstances in the days of the writers that differ from those in today’s world and culture. In order to understand the words of Scripture, one must understand these factors also and how they influenced the text. Not only that, we must also be careful to consider Scripture as a whole, not in fractions and broken parts. The words of Scripture, after all, are human words imbued with the truth and holiness of God, and we must scrutinize them carefully to understand them fully. (Constitution on Divine Revelation #12 – Vatican II in Plain English – Vol 2 Bill Huebsch & Paul Thurmes – Thomas More Publications – Pages 81)

## **Inquiry**

### ***Chapter four***

#### ***Clare – a woman's touch***

Clare of Assisi (1193-1253) – a light springing from Assisi to touch the world. Clare grew up in a family used to power and violence. Her uncles formed a consortium of seven knights who had great power in Assisi. They were strong, daring, cruel and able in their use of the instruments of battle. They belonged to the nobility of Assisi. They were enemies of the rising class of merchants. Clare's mother was Ortulana. Her father was Offreduccio di Favarone. She had two sisters – Catherine (Agnes) and Beatrice. Their home was next to the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi.

In 1198 an uprising against the nobles blossomed in Assisi. Clare's family fled to Perugia for safety. They remained there until 1205 when they returned to Assisi. The men of the family had little sympathy for people like Francis. Clare, on the other hand, was impressed and attracted to him. For a year she met secretly with him. Gradually she came to the conclusion that her heart wanted to follow the same path.

The family, on the other hand, was match-making for Clare. She was a gracious and beautiful young woman, but she resisted all their attempts. Francis and his telling of God's message became her suitor. She was determined to marry no one else.

Clare made the break on Palm Sunday, March 27, 1211 (or possibly 1212). She attended Mass at the Cathedral. That evening she chose a little-used door to leave her home. She traveled quickly to the Portiuncula, the little church of St. Mary of the Angels, so precious to Francis. There, before the altar, surrounded by the friars, Francis cut her hair and she received the poor habit of the friars. She was now dedicated to the poor, crucified Christ. Her first home was the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo delle Ancelle di Dio, some distance from Assisi.

Her family's reaction was predictable. The men were outraged. The women were unsure of Clare's action. As they spoke with Clare, they realized she was not coming home. The men even tried to force her back, but it didn't work. Indeed, throughout her life, there was no turning back. Lady poverty became her special guide. In time others followed her. San Domiano, the first church rebuilt by Francis, became their home.

Like Francis she showed the wonders the Spirit does when there is a generous response. She became truly a Sister to all the brothers. It was her conviction that supported them after the death of Francis.

Her writings present a woman with a rich, reflective inner life. She prayed and pondered God's Word. She remembered and reflected on the events of life. It was her ability to remain faithful to the vision of Francis that encouraged the brothers to do the same. She was a beacon of hope when the dream of Francis seemed to have gone pale among the friars. If she were a little plant that Francis had sown, she grew to become a plant exceeded only by her beloved Francis.

The poor and the sick came to know Clare as a special friend. Her Sisters at San Damiano came to know her as a gentle, spirited and determined leader. The Church came to know her as a woman intensely dedicated to the dream of Francis. Popes, Cardinals and Bishops came to know her as a woman of great spiritual integrity and conviction.

She struggled with the Church throughout her life. She sought approval for her Privilege of Poverty, her way of saying that she would trust in God alone and not in possessions. Practical churchmen said this was impossible.

Clare said she both could and would trust God alone! She finally received approval for her Rule and her beloved Privilege of Poverty on August 9, 1253, two days before her death on August 11, 1253.

Clare's life was filled with much physical suffering. Chronic illness brought her much pain. Her struggles with the Church about poverty sapped energy and brought frustration. But Clare was confident of God's help. Throughout her life, Popes, Cardinals, bishops and beggars came for her counsel and prayer. Invading Saracens were treated to the power of her faith, holding high the monstrance to ward them off. Once Pope Gregory IX wanted to forbid the friars from visiting the sisters. She responded by sending away even the friars who begged food for the monastery. If we can do without spiritual bread, we can also do without material bread. The Pope gave in! (Francis of Assisi – Arnaldo Fortini – Page 361)

A Letter of Clare, written to Sister Agnes of Prague, reveals the warmth of Lady Clare:

“What more can I say? Let the tongue of the flesh be silent when I seek to express my love for you; and let the tongue of the Spirit speak, because the love that I have for you, O blessed daughter, can never be fully expressed by the tongue of the flesh, and even what I have written is an inadequate expression. I beg you to receive my words with kindness and devotion, seeing in them at least the motherly affection that in the fire of charity I daily feel toward you and your daughters, to whom I warmly commend myself and my daughters in Christ. On their part, these daughters of mine, especially the most prudent virgin Agnes, our (blood) sister, recommend themselves in the Lord to you and your daughters.” (Fourth Letter to Blessed Agnes - #35-37 – Clare of Assisi – Early Documents – Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. – Page 50)

The Testament of Clare expresses her deep sense of devotion to Francis. She saw him as the instrument of God in drawing her to this form of life. She writes in her Testament:

“Therefore, I, Clare, a handmaiden of Christ and of the Poor Sisters of the Monastery of San Damiano – although unworthy – and the little plant of the holy father (Francis), consider together with my sisters so lofty a profession and the command of such a father and also the frailty of some others that we feared in ourselves after the passing of our holy father Francis, who was our pillar [of strength] and, after God, our one consolation and support. Time and again we willingly bound ourselves to our Lady, most holy Poverty, that after my death, the sisters, those present and those to come, would never turn away her” (Testament #37 – Clare of Assisi – Early Documents – Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. – Paulist Press – Page 57).

Clare might well be labeled the custodian of the spirit of Francis. She lived for 27 years after the death of Francis.

During that time she clung to the spirit of poverty in a way equaled only by Francis. She, like Francis, discovered the treasure that is Jesus and felt no more was needed. It was not simply a matter of emptying everything out of her heart. It seems more certain that there was a sense of God entering her heart through the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Once she bonded herself to Jesus other things became secondary in her life. Life was viewed through the lens of the Gospel that gave her the guidance of the Spirit.

Poverty became an expression of love rather than merely the process of getting rid of things. Her heart was captured and the relationship with Jesus became so important nothing else mattered. St. Matthew puts this in gospel words:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13: 44-46 – NRSV)

The treasure that Clare and Francis found was Jesus. Once that discovery was made, there was no need to cling to anything else. They sold everything in order to have that treasure, and did it with joy. Their poverty came not from a fire-sale but from a heart of love that discovered the Beloved. It was joyful for them and gave them a new sense of freedom. They felt secure in relying on the Beloved. Their lives were clearly free, joyful and secure. It is this kind of dedication to Jesus that is expressed in the SFO Rule of 1978.

Clare writes with love about Lady Poverty:

“O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her!

“O holy poverty, God promises the kingdom of heaven and, in fact, offers eternal glory and a blessed life to those who possess and desire you!

“O God-centered poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ who ruled and now rules heaven and earth, who spoke and things were made, condescended to embrace before all else!” (First Letter to Blessed Agnes – Clare of Assisi – Early Documents – Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. – Paulist Press – Page 36).

For Clare and Francis the life of Jesus became the model. Once the relationship became firm, the gospel word became THE rule for both of them. Their written Rules reflect that dedication to God’s Word. For them life is found there. Joy is found there. Security is found there. Love is found there.

God’ overflowing love, shown through Jesus coming among us, energized their lives and drove them to the life they lived. Writing about this change G. K. Chesterton speaks about the style of a good man. A good man might initially say his lady looks like a flower. Then, as love grows, he begins to think that every flower looks like a lady (see St. Francis of Assisi – G. K. Chesterton – Image books – Page 76). So it was with Francis. Everything and everyone he saw reminded him of his beloved Jesus.

For all of us who follow Francis, both Clare and Francis offer a way to follow Jesus. As we grow in their spirit, our perspective on life changes. It draws closer to the values and vision that the Gospel offers. We embrace the Gospel because it offers a clear alternative to the way in which our world often handles life. The dignity of people, respect for creation, the value of love and forgiveness, of compassion and joy, become our values and ideals. The *SFO Rule* is our expression of the love of Jesus finding flesh in daily life.

### *QUESTION FOR DIALOGUE*

1. What is your impression of Clare? What kind of person is she?

2. What did Clare contribute to the growth of the Franciscan movement?



## **Inquiry**

### *Chapter five*

#### ***Rule, Constitutions, etc.***

The SFO, Like many other organizations, began with a group of people dedicated to a person, in this case, Francis of Assisi. In his lifetime, his own presence kept things together. But it was clear that some form of Rule would be needed after his death. Francis himself wrote a Rule for the First Order and shared a Letter to the Faithful which became an original document for the SFO.

When we speak of a Rule, we generally refer to a document that is changed infrequently. It contains the vision and dream of a founder. It is generally written in a more visionary fashion. It contains the dream of a founder in human words. It becomes a source document on which future growth and development depend. When and if it is changed, the change is meant to accommodate the Rule to new times and situations. This is precisely what happened after Vatican II in the 1960's. It became obvious that the Rule given to the SFO by Pope Leo XIII in the 1880's needed change. Secular Franciscans from around the world invested time and discussion on the matter. After many years of writing and re-writing, the SFO Rule of 1978 was approved by Pope Paul VI on June 24, 1978. It is the SFO Rule we now follow.

In the prologue to the Rule of 1978, we find the Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (also called the "1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Faithful"). Francis addresses an exhortation to the first penitents who desired to share the gospel was of life. It was written some time between 1209 and 1215.

The letter gives us a feel for Francis and his use of Scripture. Scripture texts are scattered throughout the letter. Francis linked life and Scripture. We experience the feelings Francis had about faithfulness and unfaithfulness. His insistence on a generous response to God's love is strong. He desires that people understand how important conversion is for those who would follow his way of life. Conversion and penance were intimately linked.

Notice how Francis writes to those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength (see Mark 12: 30), and love their neighbors as themselves (see Matthew 22: 39) (*SFO Rule – Prologue*). The empowering force is love. It always will be the foundation of his life. He invites us to make love the foundation of our lives as well. He contrasts those who respond with love and a faithful life, and those who refuse to follow such a path. In his mind, followers of the gospel have made their choice. He expects them to act accordingly – with love and faithfulness to the gospel. Those who refuse to follow the gospel are blind, captives of the devil, deceived. They ultimately will lose what they thought they had.

The letter is blunt but real. It invites reflection. More will be said about this when you enter candidacy. It would be good to read this Prologue to the *Rule*. Francis was realistic and knew that not everyone who came to follow him would be faithful. His heart aches for them. His *Letter to the Faithful* reflects his concern. It also asks them not to allow the deceit of other attractions draw them away from their Franciscan calling.

#### ***THE SFO RULE OF 1978***

This *Rule* divided into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the relationship of the First and Second Franciscan Orders and the Third Order Regular (TOR) with the SFO. This concerns relationships within the Franciscan family. This section also indicates the linkage between the SFO and the Church. It indicates the role of the Church in the development and promulgation of this Rule.

The heart of the *Rule* is Chapter Two. The way of life is spelled out in detail. During Candidacy we will study each article of the *Rule* in detail. Suffice it to say that it has ideals that would stretch any gospel person. It invites a dedication to a gospel life that gives a vision of Franciscan life at its best. Since we usually are not yet at our best, we will never run out of the need for “*radical interior change which the gospel itself calls ‘conversion’.*” (*SFO Rule* article 7). Read it and understand it and the implications of its words.

Chapter Three takes a look at the organizational structure of the SFO. We gather in fraternities. There are fraternities at various levels in the SFO. At the local level is the **local fraternity**, a gathering of the Secular Franciscans in a given, geographically adjacent area. They are governed by a **fraternity Council** elected by the professed members of the fraternity (see *SFO Constitutions*, article 46-52).

In the USA fraternities are gathered together in **regional groupings**. These regions link the local fraternities within a designated geographical area. The collection of local fraternities is governed by a **Regional Council** with an Executive Council. It is known as a Regional Fraternity. There are 31 regional fraternities in the USA. Some larger geographical regions are divided into **Districts**. Each district has a representative on the Regional Council (see *SFO Constitutions*, articles 61-64). Regions assume names for themselves, e.g., La Verna Region, Lady Poverty Region, St. Katherine Drexel Region, etc.

The SFO has a **National fraternity** (NAFRA) with an Executive Council. The National Fraternity consists of the ministers of the 31 regions, the National Executive Council, the members of the CNSA (Conference of National Spiritual Assistants) and the International Councilor. The full NAFRA group meets once annually. The Executive Council of NAFRA is elected every three years and consists of a National Minister, Vice-Minister, Secretary, Treasurer, the International Councilor, at least one elected Councilor and the President of the CNSA. Their election takes place every three years at an annual NAFRA Council meeting. The **Executive Council** manages the day-to-day operations of the SFO in the USA. The International Councilor is the USA representative on the International Fraternity Council (see *Constitutions*, articles 65-68; *National Statutes*, articles 3, 5).

The **International Fraternity** is the organic union of all Catholic SFO fraternities in the world. It is composed of professed brothers and sisters of the SFO, Franciscan religious of the First Order and the TOR who are Spiritual Assistants to the SFO, and representatives of Franciscan youth. The four General Spiritual Assistants are part of the International Council. Within the International Fraternity is the **Presidency** (similar to our National Executive Council). The Presidency consists of the SFO Minister General, the Vice-Minister, International Councilors representing linguistic areas, a member of Franciscan Youth and the General Assistants of the SFO. The election of the members of this group is held every six years. The International Fraternity is guided and animated by the SFO Minister with the International Council (CIOFS) (see *SFO Constitutions*, article 69-75).

In addition to these specific offices, there are commissions appointed to address particular ministry needs. Depending on needs and availability of competent Secular Franciscans, the following **commissions** are part of the fraternity structures at each level – **Ecology, Family, Formation, Peace & Justice, Work, and Youth/Youth Adults**. Commissions focus on elements of the Rule that have special impact in today’s world. Each fraternity should do what it can in developing commissions in the fraternity.

SFO officers have **opportunities to serve** the SFO. Issues arising in the SFO are settled at the lowest level possible. Recourse to a higher level is made only if the issues cannot be resolved at a lower level; this is referred to as the principle of subsidiarity. These structures are supported (financially, prayerfully and idea-wise) by SFO members throughout the world. They serve as official connections with each other as well as being the SFO link to the Church and the world.

## *SFO GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS*

The *SFO General Constitutions* serve as the ordinary interpreter of the Rule. The *Constitutions* spell out the responsibilities of the members and detail the manner in which the Rule is implemented. They serve the SFO in its organizational aspects. They spell out the implications of the Rule and point out ways to be more efficient in the operation of the SFO. While efficiency is good, it is not our primary goal.

Our task in using the *Constitutions* is not simply to be efficient. They are meant to enable the whole SFO to develop a richer gospel life. The *Constitutions* offer ways of organizing things and relieve us of having to design organizational things for ourselves. They help us follow applicable Church law and good procedural practices. This contributes to our goal of intimacy with Jesus. While it is easy to see them as a response for organizational efficiency, they must also help us be gospel people. As they guide our lives at different levels, they free us to continue our growth in gospel living and conversion. The *Constitutions* are one of the tools that call us to faithfulness to the Rule.

The *Constitutions* are a human tool. They will need changes and adjustments as time passes. We use them to function well as a movement in the Church. The Gospel remains our fundamental resource for Franciscan living. The *Constitutions*, for example, protect the dignity of people who are dismissed from the SFO. The *Constitutions* offer criteria for people we elect to office. The *Constitutions* support our gospel life. Being familiar with the *Constitutions* assists our understanding of the SFO way of life. We encourage you to become familiar with them!

The division of the *Constitutions* follows the same pattern as the Rule of the SFO. It spells out the implications of SFO relationship with the First Order and the Third Order Regular. It develops the essentials of our relationship with the Church. Elections, acceptance, dismissals, transfers, council responsibilities, formation and the role of visitations all receive treatment in the *Constitutions*. The *Constitutions* spell out the role of the Councils at various levels as well as sharing ideas on the role of Spiritual Assistants to the SFO. The *Constitutions* fill in gaps that the Rule does not explain. The most recent revision of the *SFO General Constitutions* was approved on December 8, 2000.

The *SFO Constitutions* encourage us to seek God with all our heart. While they certainly are meant to keep us legal, they also help us to greater faithfulness to our Franciscan calling. Hopefully we will always seek you “my God, I seek you, my soul thirst for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water ... because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will lift up my hands and call on your name” (Psalm 63: 1-4 – NRSV).

## *FRANCISCAN STORIES*

Like any family, we have many characters in our Franciscan history. Some stories contain reflections on the spirit of Francis and his early followers. Books are filled with stories of Francis and his early companions. Some of them serve as part of a debate about the early living of the Franciscan way of life. But they also offer insights into the flavor of early Franciscan life.

The writing of Sts. Francis and Clare offer insight into the spirit of these two Franciscans. Stories about Brother Giles and Juniper give us humorous ways of seeing some of our family characters. Exploration of the lives of Franciscan saints, show the impact of these two people. St. Elizabeth of Hungary and St. Louis (King) of France were competent and holy lay people who are patrons of the SFO. Their lives show that even at the highest levels of government Francis had influence. Both Elizabeth and Louis knew the ways and power of court life and chose the simplicity of Franciscan life.

Now is a good time to become familiar with some of these family tales. They offer us a family album. We may not necessarily slavishly imitate them nor follow the total simplicity of a Brother John, nor the directness of Brother Leo, but they help us understand Franciscan life. The story of, the Wolf of Gubbio or Francis' journey to meet with the Saracen Sultan, give written evidence of Francis' confidence in God. Take time with these stories. They connect us with our Franciscan heritage. One simple story goes like this:

“Brother Tebaldo once told us something that he himself had seen. When St. Francis was preaching one day to the people of Trevi, a noisy and ungovernable ass went careening about the square, frightening the people out of their wits. And when it became clear that no one could catch to or restrain it, St. Francis said to it: ‘Brother ass, please be quiet and allow me to preach to the people.’ When the donkey heard this it immediately bowed its head and, to everyone’s astonishment, stood perfectly quiet. And the Blessed Francis, fearing that the people might take too much notice of this astonishing miracle, began saying funny things to make them laugh” (A New Foretti – Omnibus of Sources – Page 1882).

*At Fraternity gatherings you may discover other characters who follow Francis. They too have their stories.*

### ***BOOKS that relate to this chapter***

Called to Rebuild the Church – A Spiritual Commentary on the General Constitutions of the SFO – Lester Bach, O.F.M. Cap. – Franciscan Press – Quincy, IL.

St. Francis of Assisi – Omnibus of Sources – Edited by Marion Habig – Franciscan Herald Press (Franciscan Press) – (Contains multiple Franciscan resources)

The Sun & Moon Over Assisi – A Personal Encounter with Francis and Clare – Gerald Thomas Straub – St. Anthony Messenger Press

Tales of St. Francis – Ancient Stories for Contemporary Living – Murray Bado, O.F.M. – Doubleday

The History of Franciscan Theology – Edited by Kenan Osborne, O.F.M. – Franciscan Institute – St. Bonaventure University – (Franciscan theologians throughout history)

The Wisdom of the Poor One of Assisi – Eloi Leclerc – Hope Publishing House – Pasadena, CA

Brother Leo Remembers Francis – Roderic Petrie, O.F.M. – St. Anthony Messenger Press

### ***QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE***

1. Read the Prologue of the Rule (that is, The Letter to All the Faithful) – What struck you most forcefully as you read the letter?



## **Inquiry**

### *Chapter six*

#### ***The Gospel and Faithfulness***

“Should the Franciscan tradition teach people to recreate the experience of a Francis and Clare? Certainly not! The attempt would be fruitless and frustrating. And even if it could succeed, then, like Francis and Clare themselves, it would have to be dead. It continues to be living tradition today because others have carried on the tradition, in new times and places, in their own words and example. Francis presents us with one example, a moving and inspiring example, but the tradition does not stop with him. In his words, ‘I have done what was mine to do, may Christ now show you what is your’” ([Poverty and Joy, the Franciscan Tradition](#) – William Short, O.F.M. Orbis Books – Page 127).

May Christ show us what is ours to do! Putting the Gospel into action requires dedicated Franciscans. It is no little task nor is it ever completely finished. As long as life is in us, we can learn better ways of following the Gospel. Our expression of gospel living will not necessarily imitate the actions of Francis and Clare. They lived in a particular time when what they did made gospel-sense to people. But we aren't ordinarily going to wander through the countryside nor walk miles to far away places like 12<sup>th</sup> century people.

We live in a technological age that sees progress and profits as twin gods to be worshipped with one's whole mind, heart and soul. We see these gods very well. Haste and immediacy characterize many people in today's world. Reflection and patience seem like devils that hinder what the twin gods call for. If people stand in the way, the gods require that we move past them, a little like the priest and Levite moved past the Samaritan who was mugged.

In our attempt to live the Gospel in today's world, we need to understand our world and read the signs of the times, signs saying that we may neglect people for profit, or may selfishly use earth's resources without thought for future generations. The signs of our time may find it satisfying to imprison people and throw away the key rather than the quality of love that a person shows. Signs of our time may speak loudly about helping the poor without actually doing anything about people who are poor. Some signs would close the gates of our country to others because we may lose our comfortable lifestyle. We may see life as disposable – through abortion, euthanasia, warehousing of the elderly, or the death penalty for criminals.

Power, in our time, often becomes a way to control people's lives. Merging corporation giants have less and less contact with ordinary workers and may dispose of them when the bottom line takes a nose dive. Care for people may be at the silent end of the discussion about closing plants and stores. Business sometimes create working conditions that are abusive or lack any real hope of promotion. Thanks for a job well done may be absent while criticism is frequent. Church people may sometimes abuse authority or become authoritarian. Misuse of power touches people no matter what their profession.

Families may invest in so many options for parents and children that they rarely have time for one another. It is easy to create needs that cause more problems than they solve. Economic poverty can keep families on a constant survival program. Middle class people may find themselves overwhelmed by debts and mortgages and other payments that demand two or more jobs to make ends meet. No family members dare get sick and face the astronomical medical bills.

Our nation can easily use its economics and military force to impose our ideas on others without taking account of their real needs. Prejudice and bias can box people into an isolation that is destructive.

Our Church can be lacking in compassion for sinners. It may sometimes be too controlling and dependent on law to achieve conversion. People may forget about love (required by our faith) when they disagree with Church actions. When parishes are closed, anger, resentment and rumor sometimes replace understanding, support and prayer for one another. Many other abuses indicate that the humans in our Church are not perfect.

You can ass to this list. Our season for exploring these ideas is to hint at what a gospel person might offer as alternatives to these things. We don't begin our conversation with people out there but with the person in here, in our own lives.

### *ON THE OTHER HAND*

Our world is also reaping the benefits of caring people. Many people work hard to achieve the justice that real peace requires. Many people join together in peace and justice groups to educate people, making them aware of injustice and offering possible solutions. Many people invest time, energy and money to help people who are poor, homeless, or marginalized. Legislators design laws to protect the innocent. Some people in authority question the need for the death penalty.

Many family members care for relatives with chronic illnesses. Others care for spouses with Alzheimers as well as other crippling diseases. Health-care professionals give compassionate care back to the sick. Hospice care volunteers soften the blow terminal illness bring and walk with hurting family members. Volunteers help teach underprivileged and mentally challenged children and adults. The Special Olympics provide special opportunities for people with special needs. Lots of folks are involved in mentoring on various levels – helping people to learn and get through tough times. Competent Church people offer leadership to parishes and groups. Their dedication to Jesus shines through in their lives. The prayerful support of the homebound is a great resource of support for those in ministry. The gentle peace of people with rich prayer life is a model for all of us. To watch caring people at work gives us an example that is hard to ignore.

Many business people struggle in their efforts to be just in their dealings with employees and consumers. Some companies continue to pay employees after a tragedy destroys the workplace. Many politicians seek to develop laws that will give access to greater dignity to all people. The justice system sometimes strives to bring about equal treatment for all people who come to it for judgment. Many young people dedicate time and effort to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Their energy and dedication are often hard to match.

Here too, we might continue to review the goodness all around us. The point we wish to make is this: Franciscan gospel-people are faced with choices and decisions day in and day out.

As followers of Francis our choices ALWAYS lean toward a decision that reflects the Gospel. Our decisions reflect ways that will bring light and life. They lean to the ways of forgiveness and reconciliation, to understanding and acceptance, to justice and peace for all people. We lean to living so that God is not ignored nor prayer becomes a forgotten practice. We live in ways that create an atmosphere of openness to the radical change which is called conversion. We help each other on this path. We share ideas and stories at gatherings to support each other on the way. There is never an end to learning better ways of following the Gospel. Now situations are studied to see what is at stake and finding a gospel way to deal with it. No matter what period of life we are at, our spirit remains alive and ready to walk new paths as the Lord calls us.

“Our whole study allows us to see how closely Francis’ vision and its consequences for the Christian life follow the Gospel. It is a vision which is not confined to any one class of people. It challenges everyone

equally and cannot be fully and finally realized either by an individual or by a community. Like the Church of Christ, it is a Utopia, not in the sense of something that is unreal or that cannot possibly exist, but as something towards which we try to advance day and night, towards which we stretch out our hands but never fully grasp here below.

When we see how far short we fall of the demands proposed by Francis, can we help feeling some remorse? And is this not more true when we measure ourselves against the standards of the Gospel of Christ to which Francis simply tried to call our attention and to which he could not and did not wish to add anything? (Francis of Assisi – The Message in His Writings – Thaddee Matura, O.F.M. Franciscan Institute – St. Bonaventure, NY – Page 183).

One advantage Secular Franciscans have in following a gospel way of life is the SFO Rule of 1978. It stretches us to follow the Gospel in every corner of our lives. Properly understood, it invites a loving dedication to the demands of the Gospel. Especially Chapter Two of the Rule calls us to **be** gospel people, not just talk about it. Throughout our formation we discover more to change in our lives. We grow more competent in reading the signs of the times and facing them with gospel vision. God's call continues to grace us with all the help we need through the Holy Spirit. Our Franciscan fraternity people walk with us through the good and the tough times. We share our personal knowledge and experiences to assist fellow Franciscans. Our concern is more other-centered than self-centered. We care for self, but not in isolation or with a *gimme* attitude.

### ***A REPEAT PERFORMANCE***

In the summer of 1996, Marguerite B. Stein, S.F.O. wrote about the conduct of good Franciscans (see *TAU-USA* – Issue #12 – Page 11). Her words stimulated us to share these ideas with you.

What is expected of a dedicated Franciscan? Let us count the ways!

1. They are faithful to liturgical and personal prayer.
2. They read the gospel each day, letting it soak into their lives.
3. They have healthy loyalty to the Church, treating all people with respect.
4. They have a love for the Blessed Virgin Mary that brings them closer to Jesus.
5. They fulfill their vocational duties each day.
6. They live simply and avoid power-seeking that dominates others rather than serving them.
7. They accept people of all kinds with respect and serve all people with love.
8. They stand up for justice, especially defending it by word and action.
9. They work for peace, both in their families and in the world.
10. They respect all of creation and are ecologically aware.
11. They grow in faith and welcome Sister Death when she comes.

The same article indicated some of the ways that Secular Franciscans might seriously violate the Rule they have professed as members of the SFO.

1. Members who announce that they will follow parts of the Rule of 1978 but not others. They claim a right to pick and choose. This is not acceptable and can easily begin to destroy our community dedication.
2. Some members appear only once or twice a year at fraternity gatherings. They offer their contributions, but are rarely present at gatherings. They may be good people but are dead wood in fraternity life. Presence at gatherings is more vital than money.
3. Members who use gatherings to promote self-serving ideas, or need to be the center of attention, can easily hinder a fraternity's growth in prayer, study and sharing.

4. Members who loudly and publicly criticize the private lives of people, Franciscans and others, true or not. Done publicly, they often identify themselves as Secular Franciscans. They do no one any good!
5. Members who always oppose whatever the fraternity proposes, causing discord and upset during gatherings. When members disagree with Council decisions, there is a good way to address the issue. Discord is not one of them. Respectful listening and dialogue is a better way to iron out disagreements.
6. Some members seem to enjoy causing confusion by declaring their theological expertise without thinking through the consequences. They need “to be right” no matter how disruptive their ideas may be.
7. Some members accept some tenet of the Church while rejecting others – a sort of “pick and choose” what to believe and follow. Not a good stance for Franciscans.

These are a few of the ways that Franciscans can disregard portions of the *SFO Rule* of 1978. Fraternities need to deal respectfully, but honestly, with these members. It may even be necessary for them to be dismissed if there is no change in behavior or attitude. Any activity that causes division in the Fraternity needs correction. For the Fraternity Council, this is simple stewardship, promoting true gospel life in the Fraternity. We are all accountable for the way we live our Franciscan life. We give it our best effort. Indifference and apathy never fit a Franciscan. ***Be careful how you live. You may be the only gospel your neighbor ever reads.***

Everyday life for Secular Franciscans is permeated by the Gospel. Ordinary things are touched by attitudes flowing from words of Jesus. Our life is full of ordinary things that need the flavoring of the Gospel. The ways we show love to one another is a gospel requirement. The manner in which we perform our jobs is penetrated by the Gospel. The way we deal with crises in life is fashioned by the modeling of Jesus in the Gospel. The joy we have in leisure and recreation springs from a gospel perspective on the wonder of good times.

Family life is touched by the constant question: ***How do we love each other in this situation?*** Life doesn't stand still or remain the same. Our implementation of the Gospel changes with our growth and the fresh situations that life brings. Our profession as Secular Franciscans requires the daily conversion that human frailty demands.

Chesterton speaks of St. Francis as a person who scattered the seeds others had gathered into barns. He and his companions went marching through the world like a gentle army, ready to serve. As he went, his song rang through the courtside and his joy penetrated hard hearts. It is hard to find anyone quite like this Little Man from Assisi. (see St. Francis of Assisi – G. K. Chesterton – Image Books – Page 98)

## ***QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE***

1. As you read the signs of the times, positive and negative, where might you be most competent to insert gospel values and actions?
2. If Franciscans *lean* (strongly) to gospel solutions, what personal perspectives might you have to change to *lean* to gospel ways?

3. What personal contribution is most important for Secular Franciscans at Fraternity gatherings?
4. If we are to *recreate the experiences* of Francis and Clare, how do we have Franciscan impact in today's world?

**SCRIPTURE – Wisdom 7: 7-30 / 8: 1-9**

1. What relationship do you see between the gift of Wisdom and the gift of the Holy Spirit?
2. How can the gift of Wisdom help Franciscans follow the *SFO Rule* of 1978?

Brother Leo, your brother Francis  
health and peace. I am speaking to  
you,  
my son, in this way as a mother –  
because all the words that we spoke  
on the road I place and advise  
briefly in this message and  
afterwards, it is not necessary  
to come to me for counsel.  
Because I advise you thus: In whatever  
way it seems better  
to you to please the Lord God  
and to follow His footprints and  
poverty, you may do it  
with the blessing of the Lord God  
and my obedience.  
And if it is necessary for you  
For your soul for some  
consolation to you, and you want  
to come back to me, come.  
(Letter to Brother Leo – Francis of Assisi – The Saint  
Armstrong / Hellmann / Short – New City Press  
Page 123)

## *ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS*

We have finished the first steps of the SFO Initial Formation process. It is time to move on to **Candidacy**. Once again you make a deliberate personal decision to continue on the path that will lead to profession in the SFO. Take time with your decision. If the call is clear, move ahead. If it is not, consider whether you need more time or whether you know God is not calling you to the SFO. Both decisions come from God and will draw you closer to Jesus.

Prayer and dialogue help in making your decision. An evening or day of reflection together might be appropriate. The Formation Team and the Inquirers need time to pray and reflect together. The Fraternity Council may need to spend time with the Inquirers before approving their admission to Candidacy.

At the Fraternity gathering, a *RITE OF ADMISSION* will affirm your readiness to move into Candidacy. The time as Candidates must be at least one year and a two year period is recommended. A lifetime commitment deserves time to get to know our way of life and to know us. You are expected to attend the gatherings of the Fraternity each month during this time. Get to know the members and let them know you. In all things, may God give you peace.

A bird does not sing  
because it has an answer.  
It sings because it has a song.