

The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order

Exhortation of Saint Francis to the Brothers
and Sisters of Penance

In the name of the Lord!

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Prologue

Chapter 1 - Concerning Those Who Do Penance

All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love their neighbors as themselves (cf. Mt 22:39) and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because "the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them" (cf. Is 11:2) and he will make "his home and dwelling among them" (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are the sons of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

We are spouses, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord Jesus Christ; we are brothers to him when we fulfill "the will of the Father who is in heaven" (Mt 12:50).

We are mothers, when we carry him in our heart and body (cf. 1 Cor 6:20) through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through a holy life which must give life to others by example (cf. Mt 5:16).

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

Oh, how glorious it is to have such a Brother and such a Son, loved, beloved, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10:15) and prayed to the Father saying:

"Oh, holy Father, protect them with your name (cf. Jn 17:11) whom you gave me out of the world. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me and they received it. They have known that in truth I came from you; they have believed that it was you who sent me. For these I pray, not for the world (cf. Jn 17:9). Bless and consecrate them, and I consecrate myself for their sakes. I do not pray for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word (cf. Jn 17:20) that they may be holy by being one, as we are (cf. Jn 17:11). And I desire, Father, to have them in my company where I am to see this glory of mine in your kingdom" (cf. Jn 17:6-24).

Chapter 2 - Concerning Those Who Do Not Do Penance

But all those men and women who are not doing penance and do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and live in vices and sin and yield to evil concupiscence and to the wicked desires of the flesh, and do not observe what they have promised to the Lord, and are slaves to the world, in their bodies, by carnal desires and the anxieties and cares of this life (cf. Jn 8:41).

These are blind, because they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ; they do not have spiritual wisdom because they do not have the Son of God who is the true wisdom of the Father. Concerning them, it is said, "Their skill was swallowed up" (Ps 107:27) and "cursed are those who turn away from your commands" (Ps 119:21). They see and acknowledge; they know and do bad things and knowingly destroy their own souls.

See, you who are blind, deceived by your enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil, for it is pleasant to the body to commit sin and it is bitter to make it serve God because all vices and sins come out and "proceed from the heart of man" as the Lord says in the gospel (cf. Mt 7:21). And you have nothing in this world and in the next, and you thought you would possess the vanities of this world for a long time.

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

The devil snatches the soul from his body with such anguish and tribulation that no one can know it except he who endures it, and all the talents and power and "knowledge and wisdom" (2 Chr 1:17) which they thought they had will be taken away from them (cf. Lk 8:18; Mk 4:25), and they leave their goods to relatives and friends who take and divide them and say afterwards, "Cursed be his soul because he could have given us more; he could have acquired more than he did." The worms eat up the body and so they have lost body and soul during this short earthly life and will go into the inferno where they will suffer torture without end.

All those into whose hands this letter shall have come we ask in the charity that is God (cf. 1 Jn 4:17) to accept kindly and with divine love the fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ quoted above. And let those who do not know how to read have them read to them.

And may they keep them in their mind and carry them out, in a holy manner to the end, because they are "spirit and life" (Jn 6:64). And those who will not do this will have to render "an account on the day of judgment" (cf. Mt 12:36) before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 14:10).

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A View Of The Rule Of The Secular Franciscan Order Through The Lens Of Humility

SESSION 1 GOD Turns to US

Opening:

In the twelfth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, the evangelist recounts for us that after trying to explain his Father's purpose for us and his right intention for all of our relationships Jesus seems a bit exasperated. Having answered direct questions and sharing parables, those listening to him still do not seem to perceive what he is trying to share. We then come upon this desire of Jesus:

I have come to set a fire upon the earth, how I wish it were ignited!

Jesus has inspired persons down through the centuries to ignite this fire beginning with the Apostles, early Church Fathers, and the desert fathers and mothers. St. Benedict, father of western monasticism, founded an Order within which this fire could burn. Many different religious families developed within the Church followed his example. Francis was one of these persons who ignited this flame. Imagine how people turned their heads and opened their hearts to listen to the message of the Poor Man of Assisi. How the flame was turned up then!!

INVOCATION

Francis, your wholeness
haunts this broken world.

Centuries ago—
you heard
the windsong of the Spirit
winkle gentle music
through the stillness of your being.

you danced
it's unpatterned rhythms
every moment of your life.

you splashed
your laughter against the summits
of wealth and aristocracy

and with it transparent freshness.
you cleansed the leper,
 forgave the robber,
 freed the peasant poor.
you torched
 a mediocre Church into flame—
 seasoned wood caught fire,
 and the fire burned,
 and the fire spread,
 and the fire enveloped the earth.

Today, Francis—
 breathe your benediction
 on this crumbling clay;
 crushed, crippled, wounded,
 it desires to dance.

Anoint with peace and goodness
 the fragile fragments of peace and justice
 struggling to be reborn in this weary world—
 it seeks to laugh.

Bond your courage
 to the stumbling steps of this pilgrim people.

Burn the power of your fidelity
 into the Potter's clay—
 the fire is ready.

---Margaret Halaska, O.S.F.

REFLECTION

Examine your own life in light of Jesus' challenge to be a light to the world.

- How willing are you to allow God to mold you into the person he has created you to be?
- What areas of your life are you not yet willing to give to God?
- Why do you hold onto these so?
- Are you ready to take risk?
- Why are you hesitant with God?

INTRODUCTION

Secular Franciscans have been invited by the same message Francis preached, his charism. Secular Franciscans are daughters and sons of this Poor Man of Assisi and have answered the call to rebuild the Church and renew the world in the manner of Francis.

In 2009, the entire Franciscan Family celebrated the 800th anniversary of the Primitive Rule, those bits of Scripture that St. Francis and his followers took to Rome to ask the blessing of Pope Innocent III on their way of life. In April, members of the various branches of the Franciscan Family gathered in Rome to highlight this celebration with our Holy Father. Pope Benedict XVI remarked:

Like Francis, always start with yourselves. We are the first house that God wants to restore. If you are always able to renew yourselves in the spirit of the Gospel, you will continue to assist the pastors of the Church to make more and more beautiful the Church's face, that of the bride of Christ. The Pope, now the same as then, expects this of you.

The Gospel passages that Francis and Bernardo first discovered when opening the Bible to discern God's will for their life together comprise the basis of the Franciscan charism. Charism has so many meanings; I share with you one by Bishop Joseph Galante, Archbishop of Camden, New Jersey:

Charism is an intensely personal reading of the Gospel resulting in an inner enlightenment that changes the way a person relates to God, to self and to others. This new way of relationship is so powerful that it has the potential to attract others who sense in themselves the same desire and capacity to read the Gospel in this "new key."¹

Article 4 of the SFO Rule offers the challenge to "go from gospel to life and life to gospel." This was the pattern of Francis' life and it is to be ours also. One of the main points that is quite visible in the life of Francis is his extensive time in prayer. Various source material tells us of Francis often spending long hours in caves on the sides of mountains.

- Carceri, right outside Assisi – his earliest places of prayer
- In the Rieti Valley

¹ "Renewing Religious Life," unpublished lecture, as quoted in *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life*, Margaret Carney, O.S.F. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 226.

- Greccio where he re-established the importance of the Christmas Crèche
- Fonte Colombo where he retreated to write the Rule
- Poggio Bustone where he realized his grave sinfulness; he asked God for forgiveness and he was assured of that forgiveness
- La Foresta where he had his eyes cauterized toward the end of his life
- LaVerna which he ascended several times a year and where he ultimately received the Stigmata

Francis went to these deserted places to be present to God, and then to discern what it might be that God would have him do. He was willing to leave behind anything that would encumber his relationship with God. After spending a lifetime in this constant relationship with God, he attained ultimate union with his Savior in receiving the Stigmata on LaVerna in 1224. His response in prayer was the beautiful *Praises of God* in which he enumerated the virtues of God:

<i>You are charity;</i>	<i>You are rest;</i>
<i>You are wisdom;</i>	<i>You are gladness and joy;</i>
<i>You are humility,</i>	<i>You are our hope;</i>
<i>You are patience,</i>	<i>You are justice;</i>
<i>You are beauty,</i>	<i>You are moderation;</i>
<i>You are meekness;</i>	<i>You are all our riches to sufficiency².</i>
<i>You are sincerity,</i>	

Decades later, in 1257, St. Bonaventure also went to this mountaintop. After being elected the seventh Minister General of the Order, he went to LaVerna, seeking a place of peace. He also received a vision of a seraph that led him to a unique understanding of the spiritual journey. There he began writing the *Itinerarium: The Soul's Journey into God*.

- Are you familiar with St. John of the Cross' *The Ascent to Mount Carmel* or *Dark Night of the Soul*?
- Are you familiar with St. Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle*?

Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* is our Franciscan spiritual journey masterpiece. Several definitions of the word *Itinerarium* are journey, journal, roadmap for the journey. The *Itinerarium* encompasses them all. The process of sharing envisioned in these sessions that we spend together is to seek out some of the ways Bonaventure points us to God coupled with one of the virtues Francis enumerated *to take a fresh look at our Rule*. We're going to focus on the

² All quotations of the original sources, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from the three volume set *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents – The Saint, The Founder, The Prophet*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellman, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999, 2000, 2001). *Praises of God* found in FA:ED Vol 1, *The Saint*, 108.

virtue Bonaventure describes as *the root and guardian of all virtues: humility*.³ Humility comes from the root word, *humus, dirt, or ground*, and it suggests for Bonaventure the concept of being rooted or grounded. He saw it as the primary underpinning in Francis' life, as Francis tried to follow Jesus in his poverty and his humility. Humility is also the primary characteristic of God in Bonaventure's theology. He defines humility as being "totally turned to the other."

Our Focus:

this session will be to encounter the humility of God as we discover how God turns to Us.

In the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure gives us two names for God: BEING and GOODNESS. In chapter 5, Bonaventure offers love as the highest good, the life force, if you will, of God. Following the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure insists that love is self-diffusive; it cannot be contained. Authors offer the overflowing abundance of Niagara Falls as a finite example of God's abundant love – a love that flows continually.

Bonaventure continues, it is God's nature to choose to *communicate* goodness with another because it cannot be contained. Within the Trinity of Persons, God the Father shares LOVE with a Being exactly like himself, God the Son – the Word. In turn, God the Son returns that LOVE to the Father. The love they share is a continuous outpouring one to the other, yet it still is not contained. The LOVE they share overflows to a third, God the Holy Spirit – the Gift. Bonaventure insists that this outpouring of Love is a primary example of the humility of God. He contends that the humility of God is shown in the fact that the Father chooses to turn to another – to be "other-centered."

God continues to share this LOVE, this goodness outside the Trinity. In time, God chooses to create and to love creation fully. Still more wonderfully, in time God entered creation in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 1). Jesus came to share God's love with us and to show us how to love God in return. Jesus recounts this love exchange for us in the beautiful verses of John 16 and 17.⁴

In the humility of God, God as Trinity, God chooses to turn to someone outside himself – GOD turns to US

St. Bonaventure tells us, "God humbly bends down to lift the dust of our nature into unity

³ Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Major Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Pres, 1978), 129. All works of Bonaventure will be found in this volume unless otherwise noted.

⁴ For a detailed explanation of the fountain fullness of God's love, please see Sr. Ilia Delio's book, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (Cincinnati Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), Chapters 1-3.

with his very own person.”⁵ In the *Tree of Life*, he dedicates a whole section to the humility of God, describing Jesus as “humble Savior,” the “humble God laying in a manger who is the humble Christ.”⁶ For Bonaventure, humility is at the heart of God. It is the basis for the relational aspect of the Trinity. It is the basis for God’s relationship with us and with all of creation. In this session we are striving to discover how humility is at the basis of the SFO Rule and its prescriptions for gospel living.

REFLECTION

- How does God make his love known to you in your life?
- How do we see the Humility of God present in our Rule?
- How does God make Himself known to us through the articles of our Rule?
- Which articles speak to us of God’s overflowing goodness?

HUMILITY EMBODIED, Given Voice, And Lived Out In the SFO Rule

Envisioning how GOD turns to US in the SFO Rule

The humility of God is shown most explicitly in Articles 5, 4, 6, 2, calling to mind the presence of Jesus among us, the Gospel accounts of his life and teachings, the Church he left behind to guide us and the Franciscan vocation to this way of life that we have answered.

Article 5 Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity. The faith of St. Francis, who often said, "I see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this world except His most holy body and blood," should be the inspiration and pattern of their Eucharistic life.

Article 4 The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people. Christ, the gift of the Father's love, is the way to him, the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us, and the life which he has

⁵ These are the opening words of Bonaventure’s “Sermon II on the Nativity of the Lord” in *What Manner of Man? : Sermons on Christ by St. Bonaventure*, trans. and intro. Zachary Hayes, OFM, STD (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press), 57.

⁶ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life* VI, 130.

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

Article 6 They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words. Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialog of apostolic effectiveness and creativity.

Article 2 The Secular Franciscan Order holds a special place in this [Franciscan] family circle. It is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of Saint Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church.

Before going on . . .

Meditate on the words of each article.

- Circle the particular word or phrase that speaks to you of God's goodness, of his love for you
- What gifts await you?
- How is God enticing you into relationship?

ALLOW TIME FOR DISCUSSION

**HUMILITY: GOD turns to US embodied, given voice,
and acted out in the SFO Rule . . .**

The following are offered as guides to foster communication and discussion:

Article 5 Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to **encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity.** The faith of St. Francis, who often said, "I see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this world except His most holy body and blood," should be the inspiration and pattern of their **Eucharistic life.**

Franciscan spirituality is Incarnational, based in this greatest gift of God to the human race, the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father who has taken on our very flesh in order that we might enter more fully into the life that God has prepared for us. *The spirituality of the Secular Franciscan is a plan of life centered on the person and on the following of Christ,⁷ rather than a detailed program to be put into practice (GC 9.1).* Article 5 enumerates various ways by which we can develop our Secular Franciscan spirituality. Although not in the flesh, we are still able to encounter Christ in our brothers and sisters, in the Scriptures, within the Church and its sacramental life.

Reflection

- Name those components which shape your Franciscan spirituality
- Call to mind times when you've encountered Christ in your brothers and sisters. Take as an example Francis and the leper: *what was bitter to me before has become sweet . . .* Test 2⁸
- How do the Scriptures enhance your life?
- How does the Church enhance your vocation?

Article 4 The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to **observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.** Christ, the **gift of the Father's love**, is the way to him, the **truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us**, and the life which **he has come to give abundantly.** Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to gospel.

⁷ See *Rule* of 1221, Chap. 22; *Second Letter to All the Faithful* 51.

⁸ FA:ED Vol.1,124

The core of our Franciscan life is the Gospel; it is the basis of the Franciscan charism. It is the example Francis has left behind. Celano records for us:

Francis' highest intention, his chief desire, his uppermost purpose was to observe the Gospel in all things and through all things and, with perfect vigilance, with all zeal, with all the longing of his mind and all the fervor of his heart, "to follow the teaching and the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1Celano XXX.84)⁹

Francis knew the Scriptures by heart. Secular Franciscans are not called to live the Gospel as Francis did, yet we are to discover our own "reading" of the Gospel, How does it speak to you? *The Secular Franciscan, committed to following the example and the teachings of Christ, must personally and assiduously study the Gospel and Sacred Scripture* (GC 9.2). How are we to incorporate the Gospel into our own lives? One way to carefully read the Scriptures is through Lectio Divina.¹⁰

Reflection

- What do the words *observe the gospel* mean to you? How do you observe the Gospel?
- Which scripture passages do you know by heart – not necessarily word by word, but which ones are imbedded in your heart?
- How is Christ the center for your life?
- In what specific ways do you go *from gospel to life and life to gospel*?

Article 6 They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism; **they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession.** Therefore, they should go forth as **witnesses and instruments** of her mission among all people, **proclaiming Christ by their life and words.** Called like Saint Francis to **rebuild the Church** and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in **full communion** with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialog of apostolic effectiveness and creativity.

⁹ FA:ED Vol 1, 254.

¹⁰ See accompanying handout for explanation

Unlike many of the penitential groups that were formed during the Middle Ages, Francis chose to remain faithful to the Church and its teachings. By his very presence, his words, and his actions, he shared the teachings of the Church with those to whom he preached. Secular Franciscans are also to live in union with the Church and her teachings, and, like Francis, we are called to do so more by our BEing than by anything we DO. Take careful notice of the words, “their life and words” and “witnesses and instruments.” *Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and the witness of building fraternity, sincerely and openly, are their principal services to the Church, which is the community of love. They should be recognized in it by their "being," from which their mission springs* (GC 100.3). *Their preferred apostolate is personal witness* (CG 17.1).¹¹

Reflection

- How would you share your understanding of the Catholic Church with someone who asks?
- In which ways do you make *your presence* known within your local and diocesan Church?
- In which *ministries* are you involved?
- List the numerous ways in which you stay abreast of current Church teachings?

Article 2 The Secular Franciscan Order holds a special place in this [Franciscan] family circle. It is an organic union of all Catholic fraternities scattered throughout the world and open to every group of the faithful. In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of Saint Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church.

How graced each Secular Franciscan is to have been called to this way of life, to this particular charism, to a local fraternity that is bonded with all other fraternities throughout the world, to live a Rule by profession that has the approval and blessing of Holy Mother Church! Beyond the Secular Franciscan Order, members are joined in this life with the other branches of the Franciscan family, the First Order friars, the Second Order Poor Clares and the sisters and friars of the Third Order Regular. According to Canon Law, *the Secular Franciscan Order is a public association in the Church*¹² (GC 1.5). whose *secular state characterizes*

¹¹ See General Constitutions, Article 17 for a detailed description of the many ways in which Secular Franciscans are called to be an active presence within the Church.

¹² ¹¹ See Can. 116; 301,3; 312; 313.

their spirituality and the apostolic life GC 3.1).

Reflection

- List the various ways in which your profession into the local fraternity is a gift of God to your life?
- In what ways do you share your Franciscan life with other local fraternities?
- How involved are you in the workings of your regional and national fraternity?
- How often do you join with other members of the Franciscan family for prayer, celebrations, study, or recreation?

RECAP

We have selected words in the Rule that speak of humility, of God turning to us, of God initiating a relationship with us

The Rule calls us to

- imitate Jesus
- absorb Scripture
- in communion with the Church Jesus founded
- through our Franciscan calling

God turned to us and gave us Jesus

Jesus came to set a FIRE

EXAMEN

The intensity of Francis' vocation only increased with time. How does the intensity of your vocation compare to the day you were professed?

How faithful have you been to your vocation? In what ways have you fallen short?

Share with your neighbor

Bonaventure gives us directives for coming to know God in our lives

If you wish to know how these things come about,
ask grace not instruction,
desire not understanding,
the groaning of prayer
not diligent reading,
the Spouse not the teacher,
God not man,
darkness not clarity,
not light but the fire
that totally inflames
and carries us into God
by ecstatic unctions and
burning affections.
This fire is God,
and His furnace is in Jerusalem;
and Christ enkindles it
in the heat of His burning passion.

*Itinerarium 7.6*¹³

¹³ Bonaventure, 111-2.

EMMAUS WALK (Optional)

Theme

- Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to prepare his way.
- Francis set the friars two by two to preach penance.
- Jesus met two disciples on the Road to Emmaus.

During this time we are going to take an Emmaus walk of sorts

Share with your partner how you are living your vocation:

- **Which area is the hardest for you at this present moment?**
- **Which area is the easiest at this present moment?**

A VIEW OF THE RULE OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER THROUGH THE LENS OF HUMILITY

Session 2 WE turn to God

OPENING Gasping for God

Each day the disciple would ask the same question: “How shall I find God?” And each day he would get the same mysterious answer: “Through desire.” But I desire God with all my heart, don’t I? Then why have I not found God?” One day the Master happened to be bathing in the river with the disciple. He pushed the man’s head under water and held it there while the poor fellow struggled desperately to break loose. Next day it was the Master who began the conversation. “Why did you struggle so hard when I held your head under water?” “Because I was gasping for air.” “When you are given the grace to gasp for God the way you gasped for air, you will have found God.”¹⁴

REFLECTION

- When was the last time you gasped for God?
- What was the occasion?
- Do you spend quiet time with God each day, time away from ritual prayer, silent time just to listen?
 - Note that the words *silent* and *listen* contain the same letters
- Why or why not?

INTRODUCTION

It was this gasping for God that sent St. Bonaventure to La Verna. He tells us in the *Itinerarium*:

Following the example of our most holy father Francis, I was seeking this peace with panting spirit – I a sinner and utterly unworthy who after our blessed father’s death had become the seventh Minister General of the Friars. It happened that about the time of the thirty-third anniversary of the Saint’s death, under divine impulse, I withdrew to Mount La Verna, seeking a place of quiet

¹⁴

Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 43.

and desiring to find there peace of spirit. *Itin Prol 2*¹⁵

St. Bonaventure journeyed to that place of ultimate transformation for Francis, La Verna. There he also received a vision of the seraph as an explanation of the spiritual journey. He recorded his insights in the *Itinerarium, The Soul's Journey into God*.

This session center on the opening words of the *Itinerarium*:

*Here begins the reflection of the poor man in the desert*¹⁶

- What did the words *poor man* and *desert* mean to you?

For Bonaventure, poverty had a very explicit meaning. It stems from his understanding of our total dependency on God. He explains that human beings are poor because they are unable to sustain themselves. God gave humans all of creation to care for and upon which to depend. Think for a moment what would happen to human beings if God were not constantly aware of them.

Secondly, human beings are poor because we are dependent upon the grace of God for our final fulfillment. Human beings are not able to attain union with God for all eternity of their own accord. Salvation is truly a grace received from the hand of God. We are poor because we are dependent on the grace of God for our final fulfillment.

Human beings are poor in a third sense because our sinfulness causes us to turn away from God, *the Summum Bonum, the Highest Good* (Bonaventure's name of God). Through our own fault, we deliberately chose to forgo the goodness God extends to us; we choose to be poor. By our very nature, created in the image and likeness of God, we are made to seek ultimate happiness in God alone because God is the only good that will satisfy our soul.

What about the Desert? What connotations does desert hold for Bonaventure? The desert is a space apart from God's original plan for human beings. God created us to be in intimate relationship with him, but this is no longer the case. With the entrance of sin into the relationship between God and man, a veil exists and St. Bonaventure explains this as a desert, human beings apart from union with God

Because everything we have is a gift of God, St. Bonaventure, notes that the poverty of man is exemplified in that nothing is ours except our sins. Here Bonaventure reiterates Francis'

¹⁵ Bonaventure, 54

¹⁶ Bonaventure, 53

teaching. However, God who is all merciful will cleanse us of our sin.

So, the *poor man in the desert* is the one who is truly aware of his total dependence on God. Francis reminds us of this in Admonition 19, *we are what we are before God and nothing more.*¹⁷ But God wants us to be united with him again. Bonaventure goes on to tell us that

Just as when a person falls,
it is necessary to remain lying there
until someone comes near to reach out and raise the fallen
person up (Isaiah 24:20),
so our soul could not be raised up perfectly from sensible
realities
to see itself and the eternal truth within itself
unless the truth, assuming a human form in Christ,
should become a ladder to repair the first ladder that had
been broken in Adam. *Itinerarium* 4.2¹⁸

We have seen how Christ has already entered into Creation to show us how to love God in return. So Bonaventure:

. . . invites the reader
to the groans of prayer
through Christ crucified . . . Itin. Prol 4,1¹⁹

And he tells us that

Divine aid is available
to those who seek it from their hearts,
humbly and devoutly . . .

17 FA: ED Vol.1, 135.

18 Bonaventure, 87-8.

19 Bonaventure, 55

Our Focus:

this session will be to encounter how and why We are to turn to God

Bonaventure tells us that our only way back to God is through the Crucified. (*Itin.* Prol 3) Christ is always turned to the Father in reciprocal humility. We are to follow his example.

Clare also knows that the way to God is through the Crucified. She gives this advice to Agnes of Prague, *Gaze upon Him, Consider Him, Contemplate Him, as you desire to Imitate Him.* (2LA 19)²⁰

- What image is she speaking of? The poor Crucified Lord.

We must humble ourselves before God. What exactly does it mean to humble ourselves before God in Bonaventure's mindset? Remember, the humility of God is shown in the fact that the Father chooses to turn to another – to be “other-centered.” Our response to God, in humility, is to turn totally to him.

This humility is not a sense of *I am not worthy*. We turn to God, not out of a sense of sinfulness, but we turn to God in awe of his goodness. We freely desire to turn to God once again, as God always intended. We are to turn to God without an agenda.

Turning back to God is the essence of the penitential spirituality that is embodied in the SFO Rule. What does our penitential spirituality entail? In her article, “Reclaiming Penitential Spirituality for the 21st Century,” Sr. Margaret Magee, OSF, comments,

The fundamental value of penitential spirituality is integral to the continued development of Franciscan life and spirituality. The penitential life is not a matter of “doing penance” or accomplishing penitential acts, rather it is the **openness to grow, to be shaped, and formed in a life** that reflects the dynamic movement and **presence of Christ within.** *Metanoia is not something we do; it is God's gracious gift.* Our participation in *metanoia* depends on our capacity to be receptive, bent low in prayerful and contemplative love, to dwell in Christ, and with Christ live in bountiful love and service to others.²¹

²⁰ *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, trans. Regis Armstrong, OFM Cap. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute press, 1993), 46. All works of Bonaventure will be found in this volume unless otherwise noted.

²¹ Margaret Magee, O.S.F., “Reclaiming Penitential Spirituality for the 21st Century,” *The Cord* 57, no 2 (April/June 2007): 152.

The primary focus of our spirituality is to turn back to God without an agenda, without a list of what I must do to atone for my misdeeds. We make ourselves malleable in the hands of our God. We allow ourselves to be formed, to be changed according to the presence of Christ within. We accept the *gift* of this particular form of spirituality that is at the core of the Secular Franciscan vocation and through it enter more deeply into the relationship God has had in store for us since the beginning of time. This understanding does not call us to a passive life style, but one that is grounded in the cooperation with the workings of God within.

For both Francis and Clare, poverty and hence humility were necessary components of coming to God – a humility of our own choosing – a humility that allows nothing to come between our stance with God.

Francis reminds us:

Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally! (Lt Ord 29)²²

Clare tells Agnes:

You also know that one who is clothed cannot fight another who is naked, because she is more quickly thrown who gives her adversary a chance to get hold of her (1LA 27).²³

HUMILITY EMBODIED, GIVEN VOICE, AND LIVED OUT IN SFO RULE

Envisioning how WE turn to GOD in the SFO Rule

Our turning to God in the stance of humility is shown most explicitly in Articles 7, 8, 9, 10, calling to mind the penitential life to which we are called, the active and contemplative modes of prayer that form the basis of our existence, Mary our humble, self-giving role model and taking upon ourselves the redemptive obedience of Jesus.

Article 7 United by their vocation as "brothers and sisters of penance" and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel calls

²² FA: ED Vol. 1, 118.

²³ Clare, 37.

"conversion." Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily. On this road to renewal the sacrament of reconciliation is the privileged sign of the Father's mercy and the source of grace.

Article 8 As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.

Article 9 The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to His every word and call. She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family. The Secular Franciscans should express their ardent love for her by imitating her complete self-giving and by praying earnestly and confidently.

Article 10 United themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed His will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to Him even in difficulties and persecutions.

What do we need for our journey?

Before going on . . .

Meditate on the words of each article.

- Circle the particular word or phrase that speaks to you of turn toward God?
- What examples does it give us?
- What aids are provided for us?

ALLOW TIME FOR DISCUSSION

**HUMILITY: WE turn to GOD embodied, given voice,
and acted out in the SFO Rule . . .**

The following are offered as guides to foster communication and discussion:

Article 7 United by their vocation as "**brothers and sisters of penance**" and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that **radical interior change which the gospel calls "conversion."** Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out **daily**. On this road to renewal **the sacrament of reconciliation** is the privileged sign of the Father's mercy and the source of grace.

The goal of our Franciscan vocation is the closer union God envisioned for us before time began. The grace to live out this call is a free gift of God to us. Because of our poverty, we are in need of consciously turning back to God each day. This metanoia, "turning back", is accomplished by Secular Franciscans being open to the inner promptings of the Spirit and acting upon them. *The fruits of conversion, which is a response to the love of God, are the works of charity in the interactions with the brothers and sisters.*²⁴ *Traditional among Franciscan penitents, penitential practices such as fasting and abstinence should be known, appreciated, and lived out according to the general guidelines of the Church (GC 13.2,3).*

REFLECTION

- What defines your life of penance?
- Do you *do* penance, or *do you live* a penitential spirituality?
- How malleable are you in the hands of God?
- What holds you back?

Article 8 As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let **prayer and contemplation** be the soul of all they **are and do**. Let them participate in the **sacramental life of the Church**, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.

²⁴ See *Second Letter to All the Faithful* 25 ff. found in FA:ED Vol. 1, 45.

The bedrock of the Secular Franciscan life is prayer, stemming from the example of Jesus has given us in the Gospels. Jesus prayed before after and during each encounter of his day. He never moved into action without first being present to and communicating with his Father. It is this example that we are to follow. All that Secular Franciscans are and do stems from this communication with God. *The Eucharist is the center of the life of the Church* (GC 14.2), the source and summit of all its activity. *They should participate in the sacraments of the Church. The brothers and sisters, as well as the fraternities, should adhere to the indications of the Ritual with respect to the different forms of participating in the liturgical prayer of the Church, giving priority to the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours*²⁵. . . . *The brothers and sisters should try to find times of silence and recollection dedicated exclusively to prayer* (GC 14.3, 4, 5).

REFLECTION

- How much time do you devote to contemplative prayer, to the silence of listening to God, each day?
- How does your being in prayer overflow into your actions?
- Which alternate forms of the Liturgy of the Hours do you practice?

Article 9 The Virgin Mary, **humble servant of the Lord**, was **open to His every word** and call. She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family. The Secular Franciscans should express their ardent love for her by **imitating her complete self-giving** and by praying earnestly and confidently.

The world continually puts forth models for us to emulate. Nowhere will we find a better model of discipleship than the Mother of our Lord. *Mary, Mother of Jesus, is the model of listening to the Word and of faithfulness to vocation; we, like Francis, see all the gospel virtues realized in her* (GC 16.1).²⁶ She was the first disciple and the only person recorded in Scripture to have positively responded to the call of God in her life. Notice that the Rule refers to her as the *humble servant*, the servant continually turned to God in all her undertakings. She is a model of *kenosis*, as Bonaventure would have us understand the term, a complete self-giving, being focused continually and totally on the other.

REFLECTION

²⁵ *Ritual SFO*, Appendix 26, 27.

²⁶ Francis of Assisi, *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary* found in FA: ED Vol1. 163

- How is Mary a model in your life?
- Mary seldom speaks in the Scriptures. What lessons can you take from her words for your life?
- What lessons can you take from her silence, her pondering?
- In what ways can you exemplify Mary's humility?

Article 10 United themselves to the **redemptive obedience of Jesus**, who placed His will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the **poor and crucified Christ**, witness to Him even in difficulties and persecutions.

"Christ, poor and crucified", victor over death and risen, the greatest manifestation of the love of God for humanity, is the "book" in which the brothers and sisters, in imitation of Francis, learn the purpose and the way of living, loving, and suffering (GC 10). Our following Christ is only accomplished through obedience. Notice the small word contained in the middle of this larger one: obedience.²⁷ With Jesus, obedient even to death, they should seek to know and do the will of the Father (GC 12.2). Secular Franciscans are called to die to self, with its inclinations, its passions and desires so to make room for the inclinations and desires of God. We are called to die to self so that the self God created us to be will take form. We are to give witness to Christ through the manner in which we accept and transform the difficulties that arise in our life.

REFLECTION

- What does *redemptive obedience* mean to you?
- In what ways have you united yourself to Jesus' redemptive obedience?
- To what human inclinations do you still need to die?

RECAP

We have selected words in the Rule that speak of humility, of our turning to God, of our response to God's initiating a relationship with us.

The Rule calls us to

- daily conversion

²⁷ Fr. Roger Hall, OFM shared during a homily

- prayer and contemplation
- frequent reception of Eucharist, Reconciliation, and the other sacraments
- through the example and intercession of Mary
- by imitating Christ's redemptive obedience

WE turn to God because we are to seek the FIRE that Jesus came to set.

What do we need for our journey?

We take as our "book" the poor, crucified Christ
 our "inspiration" the writings of Francis, Clare, and Bonaventure
 our "guide" the Holy Spirit,
 our "model" Mary,
 our "core" gospel,
 our "focus" the life of penance we profess to live,
 our "sustenance" Eucharist, sacraments and prayer.

EXAMEN

Are you able to acknowledge those habits that keep you from following Christ? Are you able to strip yourselves of them?

- How do you view suffering:
 - As a curse?
 - Or as an opportunity to enter into the redemptive suffering of Jesus?
- Is your heart and mind completely open to the will of God for your life?
- What is your comfort level? Has it changed any since you've professed this Rule?
- What are the Stations of the Cross in your life?

Bonaventure reminds us

There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified.

(Itin Prol 3²⁸)

How do we enter into the Crucified? Bonaventure offers us a way:

Christ on the Cross
 bows His head,
 waiting for you,

that He may kiss you;
He stretches out His arms,
that He may embrace you;
His hands are open,
that He may enrich you;
His body is spread out,
that He may give
Himself totally;
His feet are nailed,
that He may stay there;
His side is open for you,
that He may let you enter there.
– St. Bonaventure, *Soliloquy I*, 39²⁹

A VIEW OF THE RULE OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER THROUGH THE LENS OF HUMILITY

Session 3 We turn to others

OPENING There Are Two Seas

A Parable by Bruce Barton

There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it, and stretch out their thirsty roots to dip of its healing water. Along its shore the children play.

The River Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine. And men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The River Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travelers (sic) choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs above its waters and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink. What makes this mighty difference in these neighbor seas? Not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not

²⁹ Bonaventure, "Soliloquy on the Four Spiritual Exercises," in *The Works of Bonaventure*, trans. Jose` de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1966), 69.

the soil in which they lie; not the country round about.

This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. It is named the Dead.

There are two seas in Palestine.

There are two kinds of people in the world.

*What kind are we?*³⁰

REFLECTION

- There are two kinds of people in the world. What kind are you?
- How often do you go out of your way for another?
- How often do you give in to another?
- Can you discern why you do the things you do?
- We must be empty to accept God's love
- We must share God's love with others

INTRODUCTION

This session takes us to the beginning of Francis' conversation, when in prayer before to the San Damiano Crucifix, he asked God: "What would you have me do?" He desired to enter into relationship.

Relationship is what humility is all about. We are in true relationship when we are turned away from ourselves and totally turned toward the other.

In the Circular Letter of John Corriveau, OFM Cap, and the then Minister General on Oct. 4, 2003:

To be humble is to glory in the fact that we were created in love and redeemed through love in order to have a loving relationship with the Triune God who created and redeemed us, and with all creatures with whom we share life.

³⁰ Stephen C. Doyle, OFM, *The Pilgrim's new Guide to the Holy Land* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press 1985), 136-7.

A good barometer of how humble we are is an analysis of our dialog with another.
When the other is talking, are we truly listening with every fiber of our being

OR

Are we busy formulating our response?

Is our mind wandering, contemplating all the other things that we could be doing with this time?

Francis entered into relationship with God; he wanted God to be his All in All. He chose God to be his Everything. He was so enamored with the love God had for him, as revealed in the Crucified, that he put aside everything that stood in the way of this relationship. We note the radical change in his life. He put aside friendships, occupations, recreations, possessions that would take him away from God.

Bonaventure tells us that

From then on he clothed himself with a spirit of poverty, a sense of humility, and eagerness for intimate piety. (*LM* 1.6³¹)

Moved by the love of Christ, Francis came to realize that he was not alone in his search for God. The love God had instilled in him had to be shared. As we saw with the Fountain Fullness of God's love in the Trinity, God's love could not be contained in Francis either. We have to look no further than his encounter with the leper to know the truth of this.

Bonaventure continues

True piety had so filled Francis' heart that it lifted him up into God, transformed him into Christ, turned him to his neighbor and reconciled him with each thing, refashioning him to the state of innocence. (*LM* 8.1³²)

Everything in creation became his brother and sister because Francis realized that they all had the same beginning. No thing, no person was beneath him, because all were sons and daughters of God. He truly believed that Christ was the Word through whom all of creation came into being. We know from Colossians

For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible — all things have been created through him and for him. (Col. 1:16)

³¹ Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior* found in FA:ED vol. 2, 534.

³² Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior* found in FA:ED vol. 2, 586.

Francis recognized the reality of his relationship with others because of his relationship with Christ. Each person, every created thing, has Christ as its center. Each radiates Christ to the world. Each is an expression of God's love, God's goodness in the world. Sr. Ilia Delio reminds us that as Jesus is the Eternal and Incarnate Word of God, then each person or thing that exists can be considered a little "word" of God that speaks to us of God's love and goodness.

- What can creation speak to us of God?
- What unique gift of God does the other bring to us?

Bonaventure taught that there are two books by which we come to know God, Scripture and Creation.

He warns us:

Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened
by such splendor of created things
is blind;
whoever is not awakened by such outcries
is deaf;
whoever does not praise God because of all these effects
is dumb;
whoever does not discover the First Principle
from such clear signs is a fool.
Therefore, open your eyes,
alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips
and apply your heart
so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise,
love and worship, glorify and honor your God . . .
Itinerarium, 1.15 ³³

Our focus:

this session will be to encounter humility as we discover why We are called to turn to Others.

We are to live as an example of God's love and embrace those around us, those we meet, and those whom we do not know. We are to be poor and humble, turned always to the

³³ Bonaventure, 67.

other, because God is humble and turned continually to us.

A God-centered life calls us to make room within ourselves
to receive the Other (God)
and go out and embrace others in love.

For Francis, humility was a necessary component of coming to God – a humility of our own choosing – a humility that allows nothing to come between our stance with God.

Francis reminds us:

Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally! (Lt Ord 29³⁴)

So we end where Francis began: Kenosis

How would you define kenosis?

Bonaventure defines Kenosis of one's self, not as an emptying of self but as a total self-giving.³⁵

- Remember how Mary is portrayed in Article 9: her complete self-giving!

Bonaventure claims that love is a union that results from the soul going out of itself to unite itself to another object, and he calls us to this union through compassionate love.³⁶

Bonaventure defines compassion as “sharing the pains of the utterly blameless, meek, noble and loving Christ.”³⁷

To follow this statement to its completion, when we reach out to the others in our midst, we are reaching out to Christ.

We are also called to see with the eyes of our heart. We have a reminder in 1Sam. 16:7:

³⁴ Francis of Assisi as Found in FA:ED Vol 1, 118.

³⁵ Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF, *Crucified Love: Bonaventure's Mysticism of the Crucified Christ* (Quincy IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), 107.

³⁶ Delio, 100.

³⁷ Delio, 101.