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Franciscan Spirituality

1. What is spirituality?

The aim of these reflections is to offer some understanding of the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi. It is obvious that one saint differs from another as, for example, in the New Testament the personalities and styles of Saint Peter

and Saint Paul differ markedly. We could say that they had different spiritualities. What then does the word spirituality mean? Spirituality is the way a person is attracted to the Lord and how he or she develops this attraction into a discipline of life. In St Paul it is clear that the dominant influence in his life was the vision he had on the Damascus Road. As he set out with his soldiers to persecute the Christians, the Lord appeared to him and said: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? [Acts 9:4]. Paul was overwhelmed by the thought that the Lord identifies himself with every Christian. To strike a Christian is to strike Christ. In his preaching and thinking Paul often came back to this thought. He developed a theology or spirituality based on his experience of Christians being the body of Christ and he said in 1 Corinthians 12:27: Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Was there an experience in Francis' life that shaped how he thought of the Lord? There certainly was as is evident when we read his Testament. Before he died the incident he recalled as shaping his life was his meeting with a leper. He described this incident not long before he died and in the following meditation we will see how this incident affected Francis.

2. Meeting a leper

In his Testament Francis states that the sight of lepers made him feel sick. But one day, as he was riding outside the town of Assisi, he met a leper on the road. Face to face with the leper, Francis experienced a challenge of grace. He realized that how he reacted to the leper was how he reacted to Christ himself because in the leper he experienced the presence of the Lord. His experience was similar to the experience of Saint Paul on the Damascus Road. Francis could easily have greeted the leper, perhaps given him money and wished him well without even getting off his horse. But Francis felt this was not enough. Instead he got off his horse and kissed the leper. In his Testament Francis said of this incident: 'What had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world'. To appreciate the significance of this incident we must remember that Francis was a young, educated citizen of Assisi. His father was a cloth merchant and Francis had travelled with his father to France to buy cloth. He was ambitious for glory and was popular with the youth of Assisi. We can presume that since his father was a cloth merchant Francis wore fine clothes. A leper was an exact opposite of Francis. A leper had no place in society, was not allowed to enter a town and his or her ambitions were completely thwarted by illness. Yet it was in a leper that Francis experienced the Lord and this experience became the dominant influence in his life. In the next reflection we can see how this experience became the basis of Francis' spirituality.

3. A spirituality of poverty

What thoughts went through Francis' mind as he remembered his meeting with the leper? Firstly, he felt a sharp embarrassment. In the leper he had experienced the presence of the Lord who is sinless, who is all perfect and is God. Yet in the leper the Lord appeared ugly, deformed and repulsive. Francis, on the other hand, was embarrassed that he, a sinful human being,

was well dressed, highly regarded, popular and ambitious. Should he not then live and dress in a way that reflects more clearly how he felt before the leper? Later, Francis would say that we are what we are in the eyes of God and no more. In this way Francis began to translate his meeting with the leper into an ideal or spirituality of poverty. Secondly, he realized that since the Lord met him in the person of a leper, it was clear the Lord did not attach any importance to social status for its own sake. The leper had no social status and was not allowed to enter a town. Francis was a prominent young citizen of Assisi with an attractive future ahead of him. Francis began to feel that he should live as a person who is unimportant to society and so he gave up his position in society and took this second step towards a life of poverty. Thirdly, Francis had found where he would find true sweetness in life: 'What before had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body'. With St Paul, Francis learnt to regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord [Phil 3:8]. This was Francis' third step toward Lady Poverty.

4. Admonition 1: The Body of Christ

The Lord Jesus said to His disciples: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me." · "If" you know "Me," you would know "My Father as well; and from now on you shall know Him and have seen Him." · "Philip said to Him: Lord, show us the Father, and that suffices for us." · "Jesus said to him: So much time I have been with you, and you do not know Me? Philip, he who sees Me, sees even" My "Father" (Jn 14:6-9). · The Father dwells "in inaccessible light" (cf. 1 Tm 6:16), and "God is spirit" (Jn 4:24), and "no one ever sees God" (Jn 1:18). · For this reason He cannot be seen except in spirit, "since it is the spirit which vivifies, the flesh is good for nothing" (Jn 6:64). · But neither does the Son in that, which He is equal to the Father, seem to anyone to be otherwise than the Father, otherwise than the Holy Spirit. · Whence all who saw the Lord Jesus according to the Humanity and both did not see and believe according to the spirit and the Divinity, that He Himself is the true Son of God, have been damned; · so even now all who see the Sacrament, which is sanctified by the words of the Lord upon the altar by the hand of the priest in the form of bread and wine, and do not see and believe according to the spirit and the Divinity, that this is truly the Most Holy Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, have been damned, since the Most High Himself testifies, who said: · "This is My Body and" My "Blood of the New Testament [which is poured forth on behalf of the many]" (Mt 14:22,24); · and "He who eats" My Flesh "and drinks" My Blood, "has life eternal" (cf. Jn 6:55). · Whence of the Spirit of the Lord, who dwells in His faithful, is he who receives the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord. · All others, who do not share this same Spirit and presume to receive Him, eat "and" drink "judgement upon themselves" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29).

Whence: "Sons of men, how long with a heavy heart?" (Ps 4:3) · Why is it that do you not know the truth and believe "in the Son of God?" (cf. Jn 9:35) · Behold, every day He humbles Himself (cf. Phil 2:8), just as when "from royal thrones" (Wis 18:15) He came into the womb of the Virgin; · every day He comes to us Himself humbly appearing; · everyday He descends from the

bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. · And just as to the holy Apostles in true flesh, so even now He shows Himself to us in the Sacred Bread. · And just as when they gazed at His very own flesh they saw only His flesh, but contemplating with spiritual eyes believed Him to be God, · so we too seeing bread and wine with bodily eyes, are to see and firmly believe, that they are His Most Holy Body and Blood, living and true. · And in such a manner the Lord is always with His faithful, just as He Himself says: "Behold I am with you even to the consummation of the age" (cf. Mt 28:20)

One way to know a person is to listen to the sort of advice he or she gives. Some people always seem to give sad advice pointing out what can go wrong. Others encourage us to be happy and look at what is bright in our lives. Saint Francis has left us twenty-eight snippets of advice, known as Admonitions, so by looking at these we can see what sort of a person Francis was. It can be said first of all that he was a person who was concerned with the most important thing in life, namely, how to recognize Jesus. Francis said that when the apostles saw the Lord they saw a man like themselves and when we look at the Lord we see only sacred bread. But what the Apostles saw with their eyes was only part of the truth for the Person they saw was God. So when we look at the host during Mass we see only bread but we believe that we are looking at God. So Francis advises us: 'Let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are His most holy Body and Blood living and true'. We commonly use the word admonition to mean a warning. But Francis in his these twenty-eight Admonitions is not so much warning us as giving us advice. It is hoped in these articles to look at more of these Admonitions and so build up a picture of Francis. To know Francis is to know Franciscan spirituality because the aim of Franciscan spirituality is to look at life, prayer, creation, the Church and God in the way that Francis looked at them.

5. Reverence for priests

In the previous article I mentioned how Francis advised us to see the Lord as God in the bread of the host. But Francis also gives us advice by his actions as well as by his words. Not long before his death Francis wrote a testament in which he spoke again about how he saw the Lord in the bread of the host. Francis realized that we have the Eucharist and the mass because we have priests who consecrate the host and offer mass. When Francis attended mass and looked at priests he concentrated on the presence of the Lord. He was not distracted by any sins he saw in priests because he was totally absorbed in looking for the Lord. Francis was not blind to any sins the priests might have committed. He said that when he sees any sin in them, he turns his attention to the Lord. He acted in his way 'because,' he said, 'in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others'. Today, it is all too easy for us to consider sin in priests. Sadly, the sins of some priests have received much attention in our newspapers and news programmes. This is sad and it is a severe test to our faith that, perhaps, is being tested more than was the faith of Francis. Can we say with Francis that while we are

aware of the sins of priests we do not let these sins distract us from the presence of the Lord in the sacraments they give? Saint Francis did not want to live in an unreal world. He saw sin in priests but he did not let the sin blind him to the Lord present in the sacraments and in the Eucharist. He acted in this same way with the Pope and Bishops to whom he gave obedience even when they did not understand what he felt the Lord was calling him to do. This example of Francis is a challenge to us.

6. Finding God in creation

Francis recognized the presence of Jesus in the sacrifice and sacrament of the Eucharist. But he also found God and the Lord in other people, in the world and in animals. This is a significant element of Franciscan spirituality and it is the reason why Francis has been declared the patron saint of ecology, of the care of the earth. Francis met the Lord in a special and personal way when, standing before the leper, he realized that how he reacted to the leper indicated how he reacted to the Lord. He found the sight of lepers quite sickening just as all people feel about embracing the cross of the Lord. But when Francis generously kissed the leper and so responded to the Lord in the leper, he found that what had seemed bitter to him was turned into sweetness of soul and body for him. After this experience he began his religious vocation and retreated from his usual pattern of life. In a remarkable way he also found images of God in fire, water, the sun and the moon and in the whole world that God has given us. He also found a peace with wild animals. On one occasion Francis was able to tame a wolf that had been attacking the people of the town of Gubbio. This showed that within his lifetime Francis had come close to becoming one with Christ. He was marked with the stigmata, the marks of the passion of our Lord to show that he had carried his cross to his Calvary; he showed that he had reached a state of peace in the kingdom of God. Long before in history, the prophet Isaiah had foretold this peace, namely, that the lion would lie down with the calf in the kingdom of God [Isa 11:6].

7. Admonition II: The evil of self-will

The Lord said to Adam: From "every tree eat, however, from the tree of good and evil you may not eat" (cf. Gen 2:16.17). · From every tree of paradise he could eat, because while he did not go against obedience, he did not sin. · For one eats of the tree of the knowledge of good, who appropriates his own will to himself and exalts himself because of the good things, which the Lord says and works in him; and so through the suggestion of the devil and the transgression of the mandate it has become the fruit of the knowledge of evil. · Whence it is proper, that he endure punishment.

In his second Admonition Francis speaks about the evil of self-will. By self-will Francis means disobedience. When God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they disobeyed God and ate the fruit. They listened to what they wanted and not to what God wanted. Francis expresses this most vividly when he says: 'And so, through the

suggestion of the devil and the transgression of the command, it became the apple of the knowledge of evil'. It is pointless to recognize Jesus in the sacraments, in the Church and in creation if we do not listen to what Jesus is saying to us. At times this is a challenge because many conflicting voices tell us how to live, what is right, what is allowed and so on. Francis believed that Jesus was telling him to start a new way of life based only on the Gospel. Many bishops and many of his companions tried to persuade him to accept the form of religious life as worked out by earlier monks such as Saint Benedict and Saint Bernard. But for Francis to do this would have been to go against what he believed the Lord was telling him to do. Had Francis done what they wanted he would have felt that he was eating the apple of self-will. So in this Admonition Francis asks us to listen to our conscience and not put the suggestions of other people before the voice of our conscience. To follow our conscience is to refuse to eat the apple of self-will. Francis says: 'For they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good who make their will their own and, in this way, exalt themselves over the good things the Lord says or does in them'.

8. Admonition III: Perfect obedience

The Lord says in the Gospel: "He who does not renounced all that he possesses, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:33); · and: "He who will have wanted to save his life, shall lose it" (Lk 9:24). · That man abandons all that he possesses, and loses his own body, who offers himself whole to obedience in the hands of his prelate. And whatever he does and says, that he himself knows, which is not contrary to his will, as long as what he does is good, is true obedience. · And if at any time the subject sees better and more useful things for his own soul than those which the prelate precepts him, let him sacrifice these willingly to God; but those which are the prelate's, let him strive to fulfill. · For this is charitable obedience (cf. 1 Pet 1:22), since it satisfies God and neighbor.

If indeed the prelate precepts anything against his soul, though he is not to obey him, nevertheless let him not give him up. · And if he has endured persecution by others for that reason, let him love (dilectio) them more for God's sake. · For he who will endure persecution rather than wanting to be separated from his brothers, in truth remains continually in perfect obedience, since he lays down "his own life" (cf. Jn 15:13) on behalf of his brothers. · For there are many religious, who under the appearance of seeing better things than those which their prelates precept, look back (cf. Lk 9:62) and return "to the vomit" of their own will. (cf. Prov. 26:11; 2 Pet 2:22); · these are murderers and on account of their bad examples cause many souls to perish.

A single remark can be misleading. On one occasion Francis said that obedience meant being like was a skeleton that can be put wherever one wishes. So an obedient person is one who accepts without question the circumstances of life. To take this remark as Francis's whole advice on obedience would be most misleading. Francis showed a broader attitude towards obedience when he wrote a short letter to his companion, Brother Leo. Leo and Francis had been walking from one town to another. As they

walked Leo told Francis of a difficulty he had. After the journey Francis wrote a letter to Leo. In the letter, Francis speaks to Leo as a mother speaks to her children, that is, he speaks kindly not looking for faults but anxious to help Leo. Francis' advice to Leo then is kindly and considerate. He encourages Leo to come back and talk to him if he ever feels the need for this and this would have encouraged Leo. Francis then gives the surprising advice that Leo is to decide on what to do by listening to his conscience. Francis wrote: 'In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience'. This advice should not surprise us because Francis himself found his obedience by following his conscience. Many people advised Francis to adopt one of the tried and approved rules for religious life. In his conscience Francis was not free to do this and by following his conscience he gave us the Franciscan way of life.

9. Admonition IV: Let no one make being over others his own

I did not come "to be ministered unto, but to minister" (cf. Mt 20:28), says the Lord. · Let those, who are set up over others, glory as much because of that office of superior, as if they had been appointed to the office of washing the feet of the brothers. And in as much as they are more disturbed because of having lost their office of superior than because of (having lost) the office regarding feet, so much more do they assemble purses for themselves to the danger of their souls (cf. John 12:6).

A strong tendency in our society is for personal independence, even for living on one's own in a unit or house. Perhaps we may not want to be in charge of other people but we can be reluctant to have other people over us. Be as it may, it will always be necessary to have someone in charge of work, of government, and to be in management. It was the same for Francis. He founded an Order and was in charge of the Order he founded. He was its founding father. Like anyone else Francis had to work out how best to be a superior. In his fourth Admonition he shows how he worked this out; he then advises us how we to act when in charge. He said: 'Let those who are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would as if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers'. More than that, he advises us not to be upset should we lose a position of authority. In fact, Francis resigned from being the head of the Order and asked that one of the brothers be appointed as his superior. He said that he would be happy to obey a novice who had just entered the Order if he were appointed his superior. Francis founded an Order that was to be a group of brothers but within this group he laid down that there be superiors to regulate the life of the Brothers. While Francis did go away to caves for times of prayer, his life was a life of obedience. This is a long way from wanting an independent lifestyle. Francis gave a new way of life to the Church. He did not do this for the sake of being independent but for the sake of trying to live the Gospel in a literal way and to follow the footprints of the Lord who was obedient even to the point of death.

10. Admonition V: Let no one be proud, but boast in the cross of the Lord

Be conscious, O man, to how many wondrous things the Lord God has placed in you, since He created and formed you "to the image" of His own Beloved Son according to the body "and to (His) likeness" according to the spirit (cf. Gen 1:26). · And all the creatures, which are under heaven, each according to its nature, serve, know and obey their Creator better than you. · And even the demons did not crucify Him, but you together with them have crucified Him and even now you crucify (Him) by delighting in vices and sins. Whence therefore can you glory? · For if you were so subtle and wise that you had "all knowledge" (cf. 1Cor 13:2) and knew how to interpret every "kind of tongue" (cf. 1 Cor 12:28) and to search subtly after celestial things, in all these things you cannot glory; · since one demon knew of celestial things and now knows of earthly things more than all men, (even) granted that there has been someone, who received from the Lord a special understanding of the highest wisdom. · Similarly even if you were more handsome and wealthy than all and even if you were working miracles, as would put demons to flight, all those things are injurious to you and nothing (about them) pertains to you and you can glory in them not at all. · But in this we can glory, "in" our "infirmities" (cf. 2 Cor 12:5) and bearing each day the Holy Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Lk 14:27).

We tend to write about and preach outstanding events in the lives of the saints. In Francis we point to the wonder of the stigmata and his ability to tame even a wild wolf. But when Francis speaks about himself what he mentions are his weaknesses. This should not surprise us. A saint like Francis is a person who has experienced more keenly than us the presence and wonder of knowing God. When a person experiences God, the person also experiences the vast difference between God and us. When the prophet Isaiah was given a vision of God he said I am a person of unclean lips [Isa 6:5]. Before the presence of God, Isaiah felt unworthy. In his fifth Admonition Francis reminds us of our dignity in being created in the image and likeness of God. Yet, he adds, all other creatures obey God more faithfully than we do. Creatures follow the laws of nature just as we should follow the law of the Gospel. But in fact each of us has to take responsibility for Our Lord being put to death for our sins. Of what can we boast? Francis says we should not boast of our knowledge or of our human skills, great as they may be. Nor should we boast of our abilities and talents that have been given to us as gifts from God. But we can boast of our weaknesses and in carrying the cross of the Lord. Like St Paul, Francis knew that by recognizing his own weakness he allowed the Spirit of the Lord to work in him and make him strong: I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me [2 Cor 12:9].

11. Admonition VI: Imitation of Christ

Let us be attentive to the Good Shepherd, who to save His own sheep endured the Passion of the Cross. · The sheep of the Lord have followed Him

in tribulation and persecution, shame and hunger, in infirmity and temptation and all other things; and because of these they have received from the Lord everlasting life. · Therefore, it is a great shame to us, servants of God, that while the saints did the works, we wish to receive glory and honor by merely recounting their deeds.

Are saints more talented than we are? For us it is difficult, almost impossible to persevere through Lent with some penance we have chosen for ourselves. Yet when we read the lives of the saints we wonder at their long fasts, their hours of prayer, their great virtues and the miracles they worked. All of this seems to be a long way from what we know of ourselves. And yet Our Lord said to us in the Gospels that we should be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect. St Francis felt the same as we do as we see in his sixth Admonition in which he speaks of imitating Christ. Clearly he found it difficult to imitate the saints he knew and venerated because he wrote in this Admonition: 'it is a great shame for us that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honour by recounting them'. Living a Franciscan spirituality then has to be more than taking on the name of Franciscan be it as our identity or as our ideal. Everyone admires Francis of Assisi but to what extent do we feel that we can imitate him and by imitating him imitate Christ. All Francis wanted to do in his life was to live the Gospel and this we can all want. A first and necessary step in the imitation of Christ is to want to imitate Christ. This we can all do. Then when we feel embarrassed at how poorly we imitate Christ we can remember that Francis too felt inadequate and a poor disciple of Christ. Throughout his life he retained the feeling of being unworthy, the feeling he had when meeting God in the leper.

12. Admonition VII: Let good action follow knowledge

The Apostle says: "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life." (2 Cor 3:6). · Those have died by the letter who desire to know only the words, so as to be esteemed as wiser among others and be able to acquire great riches to be given to relatives and friends. · And those religious have died by the letter, who do not want to follow the spirit of Divine, but rather desire only to know the words and to explain them to others. And those have been vivified by the Divine Letter, who do not attribute every letter, which they know and desire to know, to the body, but in word and example render them to the Most High Lord God, of whom every good belongs.

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life [2 Cor 3:6]. To imitate Christ we have to know Christ and we learn of Christ from the Gospels. But we can know Christ for many reasons. For example, we can read the Gospels out of curiosity, out of a sense of duty, or simply to be able to tell others what the following of Jesus entails. This gives us knowledge but knowledge of itself is of little value. Knowledge must flow over into what we do. Francis heard a passage of the Gospels read in church and the passage struck a chord in him. He heard the words that say a disciple of Christ should not have gold or money, but should preach the kingdom of God and do penance. When Francis heard these words from the Gospel of Matthew he said: 'This is what I want, this is what I

seek, this is what I desire with all my heart'. Immediately, Francis went out of the Church and began to put these words into actions. Franciscan spirituality entails knowing Francis, how he thought and what he did. Through this knowledge of Francis we have a road map showing us how to follow the footprints of Christ. But, with this map in hand, do we say, yes this is what I want to do and then go out and do it? It is all too easy to have knowledge, even to keep learning more and yet not put into practice what we know. We can know the letter of the Gospels but, unless we listen to the voice of the Spirit within us, the letter will kill us.

13. Admonition VIII: Avoiding the sin of envy

The Apostle said: "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3); · and "There is no one who does good, not even one" (Rm 3:12). · Whoever therefore envies his own brother because of the good, which the Lord says and works in him, tends towards the sin of blasphemy, because he envies the Most High Himself (cf. Mt 20:15), who says and works every good.

It can come as a shock to realize just how sensitive Francis was to the words of Scripture. There are two short sentences in St Paul that Francis used to great effect. Paul said that unless the Holy Spirit is active within us we are not able even to say Jesus is Lord. He also says that of ourselves we are not able to do good because without the grace of God we can do nothing. Apart from me you can do nothing [Jn 15:5]. Francis applied these two statements of Paul to his reflection on envy. When we envy the good done or said by others we have to remember that they speak and act by the power of the Spirit within them. So to envy them is really to envy what the Spirit is doing. To envy what the Spirit does in others is to envy the Spirit. So Francis did not hesitate to say that this is a sin of blasphemy against the Most High God. Perhaps behind this Admonition there is an echo of Francis's meeting with the leper, the event that prompted his conversion. When Francis met the leper he realized in a moment of grace that in meeting the leper he was meeting Christ. This is true of everyone because the grace of God and the Spirit of God are active in everyone. To envy this then is to envy what God is doing in a person. But at the basis of envy is the thought that what another person has is more than we have. When then we envy what God is doing in others, we are really saying that God is not doing the same in us. This is dangerous and untrue because Our Lord died not for others but for me and for all. The same Lord is active in all of us and loves us.

14. Admonition IX: Love

The Lord says: "Love your enemies; [do good to those who hate you, and pray on behalf of those who are persecuting and calumniating you]" (Mt 5:44). · For he truly loves his enemy, who does not grieve because of the injury, which he did to him, · but, concerning the sin against his own soul, burns for the sake of the love of God. And he shows love for him by (his) deeds.

As used in films, on television and in novels the word love almost always presumes an attraction of one person for another or of a person for some object. It is difficult for us to use the word love of anything that does not attract us. Yet in the Gospels our Lord speaks of the need to love our enemies. In general we use the word enemy of anyone or anything that we harms us or that we would want to harm. Francis in his ninth Admonition used the word enemy of anyone who hurts us. A hurt can come to us in many ways. We can be hurt by people wanting to hurt us and we can be hurt by people who are unaware they are hurting us and who do not intend to hurt us. How often we are offended and upset by a thoughtless remark. Francis always thought first of God. So when someone hurt him, his first reaction was to think of how he had hurt God by his sins. In spite of his sins God continued to love him and so he in turn had to show love to those who hurt him. He showed this love by what he did. He said: 'That person truly loves his enemy who is not hurt by an injury but, because of love of God, is stung by the sin of his soul. Let him show him love by his deeds'. In this Admonition we see again just how conscious Francis was of the presence of God in his life. He lived in the presence of God and tried to gauge all his actions by the standards of the Gospel.

15. Admonition X: Castigating the body

There are many, who while they sin or receive injury, often blame their enemy or neighbor. · But it is in error because each one has in his own power (his) enemy, namely the body, through which he sins. · Whence "blessed is that servant" (Mt 24:46), who having surrendered such an enemy into his own power, has held it always captive and wisely guarded himself from it; · because, as long as he has does this, no other enemy, visible or invisible, will be able to harm him.

St Paul called out: Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? [Rom 7:24]. We need to be rescued from danger, from enemies and from whatever is harmful to us. For Paul, the enemy was his own body. In the tenth Admonition Francis echoes this thought exactly. Francis points out how easy it is to blame someone else when we sin. We can so easily say that so and so tempted me. To say this is to say that we need to be rescued from other people. This is not what Paul said nor is it what Francis says. For Francis we all have an enemy in our bodies and we have to take charge of our bodies. Francis says: 'Each one has the enemy in his power, that is, his body through which he sins'. A person is blessed when he or she holds captive the enemy, namely, one's own body. The body has been given into our charge and we are wise to safeguard ourselves against it. This was advice that Francis put into practice even to an extreme degree. Once when he was tempted by the devil we read that he took off his clothes and whipped himself with a cord saying: 'Come on, Brother Ass, that's the way you should stay under the whip!' Francis tamed a wild wolf, he preached to birds, he brought peace to people but he achieved all this by subjecting his body to discipline, by treating it as his enemy.

16. Admonition XI: Let no one be corrupted by the evil of another

No thing ought to displease the servant of God except sin. · And in whatever manner another person would sin, even on account of this the servant of God, out of charity, would not be upset or grow angry, (as one who) hoards up fault for himself (cf. Rm 2:5). · That servant of God, who does not grow angry nor disturbs himself on another's behalf, lives rightly without anything of his own. And blessed is he, who does not let anything remain for himself, rendering those things "which are Caesar's to Caesar, and those which are God's to God" (Mt 22:21).

When speaking of envy in Admonition VIII, Francis warned us against envy by pointing out that the good done by people is done in them by the action of grace and of the Holy Spirit. So to envy others is to presume that God is not as active in our lives. But the only action that is not a product of grace is sin. Sin should displease us but the important thing to know is how and why it should displease us. Francis says quite clearly that we are not to be disturbed and angry at sin in other people. We are to be disturbed and angry not because of the sin but because of our love for others. To be angry over sins in other people is to store up guilt for ourselves. Behind these words, that are at first difficult, there is the reality that we are not to judge others because we cannot see into the conscience of another person. We can see a sinful action but we cannot read a human heart and know whether or not a person has sinned in his or her heart. But we do know what is in our own conscience and when we act against conscience. We are fully aware of our own sins. These must disturb and make us angry because they offend God. In this context Francis quotes Matthew's Gospel: Return to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's [22:31]. As Francis uses this text, Caesar applies to other people to whom we must extend love not anger while we must show to God obedience, for we must obey God and not sin.

17. Admonition XII: Knowing the Spirit of the Lord

Thus can the servant of God be known, if he has the spirit of the Lord: · when the Lord works through him anything good, if his flesh for that reason would not exalt itself, because it is always contrary to every good, · but if he rather would hold himself up before (his own) eyes as more vile and esteem himself less than all other men.

When we do some good deed we are tempted to feel pleased, even wanting what we have done to be recognized and praised by others. Francis says that such a thought does not come from the Spirit of God. It has already been mentioned in these articles that Francis was aware that we are able to do good only by the power of the Spirit acting in us. But what we do of ourselves without the Spirit is a product of a sinful nature that 'is always opposed to every good'. Francis draws two conclusions from this. He says first that a servant of God does not boast when the Lord performs some good through the servant. The glory belongs to God and to the grace of God. But he

concludes further that this servant will regard him or herself as worthless and esteem him or herself less than all others. The reason for this is that the servant believes that had anyone else received as much grace as the servant that person would have done more good than the servant. For this reason the servant esteems him or herself as the least. St Francis lived this out in his life. In his Major Legend of Saint Francis, Saint Bonaventure says that Francis tried to hide in his heart the good things of the Lord, not wanting to display his own glory. When others praised him, Bonaventure relates how Francis would say to himself: 'Francis, if the Most High had given so much to a thief, he would be more grateful than you!' Francis says: 'A servant can be known to have the Spirit of the Lord in this way'.

18. Admonition XIII: Patience

"Blessed (are) the peacemakers, since they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9). The servant of God cannot know how much patience and humility he has in himself, while he is satisfied. · However when the time has come, that those who ought to satisfy him, do the contrary to him, as much patience and humility (is) there, that much he has and not more

A Franciscan in Germany who had been a soldier during World War II and who had served on the Russian front said to me one day that it is easier to be a saint on a full stomach. When we are deprived of the basic requirements for life, water, food and warmth we begin to learn what sort of a person we are. And of course in war you are face to face with people whose job is to kill you. Francis wrote an Admonition about patience because it was a virtue he had to learn. The path in life to which had God had invited him to follow was to live the Gospel. But for Francis this did not come easy. His challenge is summed up in his experience with the leper. Our Lord explained how closely we are united to Him when he used the parable of the vine and the branches; Christ is the vine of which we are the branches. But it comes as a shock to realize that the branch growing alongside us on Christ the vine is a leper. Francis realized that instinctively he drew back from what he found distasteful: 'While I was in sin it seemed to me too bitter to see lepers'. But when he answered the call of the Lord to meet the leper he learnt that what had seemed bitter was turned into sweetness. So he began to act against his taste and comfort. As a son of a cloth merchant he was accustomed to having fine clothes; he now exchanged these for a poor tunic. He was accustomed to ambition and the company of his companions in Assisi. All these he left to be with Christ. In this Admonition he assures us that we have only as much patience as we feel when things are distasteful to us and difficult. Patience is not tested when we are comfortable.

19. Admonition XIV: Poverty of Spirit

"Blessed (are) the poor in spirit, since theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5:3). · There are many, who persisting in prayers and (liturgical) offices practice many abstinences and afflict their own bodies, · but because of a single word, which seems to be injurious to their bodies or because of

anything, which is brought against them, being scandalized, they are continually disturbed. · These are not poor in spirit; since he who is truly poor in spirit, hates his very self and loves those who beat him in the face (cf. Mt 5:39).

Sometimes Francis acted in a manner we would call bizarre. For example, we read in one of his biographies: 'Taking off his tunic, blessed Francis ordered Brother Peter to lead him naked with a rope tied around his neck in front of the people'. Why would Francis do this? Perhaps, he did this because he felt that the people who already regarded him as a saint were misled in praising him; they were unaware of his weaknesses. So much is recorded in the biography but one can also speculate that Francis remembered how embarrassed he had felt many years earlier when he stood before the leper. When he met the leper Francis was well dressed and regarded by all as an honourable young man while the leper was ugly and held no place in society. Yet Francis experienced Christ in the leper and became acutely aware that the appearances were contrary to the truth. In the leper he experienced the all holy God while in himself he felt a sense of sin. When the people were praising him Francis wanted them to know what he thought of himself and so acted as he did. In this Admonition Francis says that the opposite of poverty of spirit is to do many penances but then take offence when even a single hurtful word is spoken about him. A person who is truly poor in spirit, he says 'hates himself and loves those who strike him on the cheek'. Poverty of spirit is to acknowledge that we stand before God as sinful people and any offence against us can be and should be accepted as what we deserve for our sins.

20. Admonition XV: Peace Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God [Mt 5:9].

"Blessed (are) the peacemakers, since they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9). · Those truly are the peacemakers, who concerning all those things, which they suffer in this age, preserve peace in soul and body for the sake of the love (amor) of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Francis was called a man of peace and apart from being able to be at peace with a wild wolf he also settled a dispute between the Bishop and Mayor of Assisi. What made him a man of peace? It has already been pointed out that Francis was conscious of the presence of the Lord. This awareness stemmed from his meeting the Lord in the person of the leper. So God was in a way more real to Francis than were his companions and the people to whom he preached. But while he was conscious of the presence and reality of God, he was also aware that before God he was a sinner. So he warned us not to be upset by any injury done to us but to think rather of our own sins. By growing in his relationship with God and aware that the Lord forgave his sins and welcomed him, Francis was at peace in himself. Hence in this Admonition he says: 'Those people are truly peacemakers who, regardless of what they suffer in the world, preserve peace of spirit and soul out of love of our Lord Jesus Christ'. We know that when we become absorbed in anything, be it what we are reading, when watching a sporting event, or busy at work, we

can lose track of time and we can put aside for a time any thought of hurts or injuries done to us. For the moment we are absorbed in what we are doing. The mind and heart of Francis was centred on the Lord so that he could put aside all other concerns. In this way he preserved peace in himself by remaining in the presence of God.

21. Admonition XVI: Cleanness of heart

"Blessed (are) the clean of heart, since they themselves shall see God" (Mt 5:8). · Truly are they clean in heart who despise earthly things, seek heavenly ones and do not ever withdraw from adoring and beholding Our Lord, living and true, with a clean heart and soul.

Francis lists three conditions to be met before a person can be said to be clean of heart. The first is that a person must 'look down upon earthly things'. In his religious experience of meeting the lord in the person of a leper, Francis came to feel a vanity or sense of discomfort in the circumstances of his father's business and his home. In his own words, he left the world after this meeting and put aside his good clothes and his social position in Assisi. He began to look down on earthly things and became known as the Poverello, the Poor Man of Assisi. But he set aside earthly things so as to be free to 'seek those of heaven'. From the beginning of his conversion, he felt a need to stay in caves and remote places so that he might be uninterrupted in his search for God. He listed this as the second requirement for anyone who wants to be clean of heart. But while, on the one hand, he stayed in caves, we know that he also searched for God in places of natural beauty. When we look at photos of the Carceri near Assisi, of Greccio, and of the mountain of La Verna, we realize how far he traveled to find places of natural beauty that spoke to him of God. His third point is that as we seek for the things of heaven we should 'with a clean heart and spirit, never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God living and true'. This is a remarkable sentence. A clean heart and spirit is found in a person like Francis who is fully occupied with the search for God. But it is not only a search. It is also a prayer of adoration, a conversation with God and an experience of seeing God. From such cleanness of heart Francis was able to write the Canticle of the Creatures.

22. Admonition XVII: A humble servant of God

"Blessed (is) that servant" (Mt 24:46), who does not exalt himself more because of the good, which the Lord says and works through him, than that which He says and works through another. · A man sins, who wants rather to receive from his neighbor, what he does not want to give of himself to the Lord God.

Humble service for Francis meant two things. He says firstly: 'Blessed is that servant who no more exalts himself over the good the Lord says or does through him than over what He says or does through another'. It has been noted before in these pages how Francis regarded himself as a poor servant of the Lord. He said that if anyone else had received what he had been given

they would be far holier than he. So whatever good he saw in others he took it for granted that the person was doing more than he was. Francis could not exalt himself because he was aware of his sinfulness. But he could rejoice over the good done by others. This is one aspect of a humble service of God. The second characteristic of humble service is that 'a person sins who wishes to receive more from his neighbour than what he wishes to give of himself to the Lord God'. While I am not sure what Francis meant by these words, I can see a meaning in the following way. If we are more occupied in our minds with our neighbour than we are with God, then we are looking for more from a neighbour than from God. Our Lord said that where our heart is there is our treasure [Lk 12:34]. If we think more often of our neighbour than of God then we are looking for more from a neighbour than from God. Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well [Mt 6:33].

23. Admonition XVIII: Compassion for a neighbour

Blessed (is) the man, who supports his neighbor during his frailty to the extent that he would want to be supported by him, if he falls into an exactly similar situation. · Blessed (is) the servant who renders all his goods to the Lord God, because he who has retained anything for himself "conceals" within himself "the money of his Lord" God (Mt 25:18) and "what" he thought he "had, shall be born away from" him (Lk 8:18).

Francis repeats the words of our Lord: In everything do to others as you would have them do to you [Mt 7:12]. We see a striking example of this in Francis' life. What he wanted for himself was to be left free in the Church to try and live the Gospels in a literal way. He wanted this because he believed that this was precisely what God was asking him to do. But, as has been noted, the Church was reluctant to give approval to such a way of life and even many of his companions tried to get him to adopt one of the older, approved Rules for religious life. The Church did finally give approval to Francis' Rule and so he was then free to shape the way of life for the Order. When Brother Leo was troubled, Francis wrote a letter to him in which he said: 'In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience'. Just as Francis was left free by the Church to live in the way he believed God was instructing him to live, so Francis gave this same freedom to Brother Leo; Francis supported Leo in the way he had wanted to be supported and trusted. Francis adds that a servant is blessed when the servant gives back to God every good that the Lord has given. The God who cares and provides for us has given us everything we have. So when someone is weak and troubled we know that the Lord cares for the person and we are to help this person as we would want to be helped ourselves. This is what Francis did for Brother Leo.

24. Admonition XIX: A humble servant of God

Blessed (is) the servant, who does not consider himself better, when he is magnified and exalted by men, as when for example he is considered to be

vile, simple, and despised, · because as much as a man is before God, that much he is and nothing more. · Woe to that religious, who has been placed on high by others and does not wish to descend by means of his own will. · And "blessed (is) that servant" (Mt 24:46), who is placed on high not by means of his own will and desires always to be beneath the feet of others.

In this Admonition Francis wrote a few words that, in my opinion, summarize his feelings as he stood before the leper, the experience that changed his life. The Admonition deals with a servant who does not consider himself any better when he is praised than when he is considered worthless and simple. Such a servant is blessed. The reason on which Francis bases this advice is that 'what a person is before God, that he is and no more'. It is not difficult to read this as a summary of Francis's experience of meeting God in a leper. As Francis recalled this experience he realized that what the people of Assisi thought of him was not the truth. The truth lay in what God thought about him. That Francis felt a sense of unworthiness before God was to be expected. Francis was a human person with the weaknesses of human nature. But, on the other hand, his experience was positive and affirming because God had come to him and this meant so much: God loved him, God was interested in him, God had plans for him and challenged him to see his life and the whole world with new eyes. Francis understood the call God was making to him for he says that soon afterwards he left the world. No wonder Francis could say we are what we are in the eyes of God and no more. What more could there be than to know we are loved in spite of being weak and sinful. The bitterness of leaving his home in Assisi was turned into sweetness of body and soul as he began a more intense life with God.

25. Admonition XX. The good and vain person

Blessed (is) he religious, who has not cheer and gladness except in the Lord's most holy discourses and works, · and with these leads men forth to the love of God with joy and gladness (cf. Ps. 50:10). · Woe to him religious, who delights himself in idle and frivolous words and with these leads men to laugh.

Francis contrasts the person who finds his or her pleasure and delight in the words and deeds of the Lord and the person whose delight is in idle and empty words. At first these words of Francis seem to be severe. Can a person find delight only in the words and deeds of the Lord and, on the other hand, don't we all need to relax now and then with idle talk and gossip. Francis' words have to be understood as an echo of the Gospels. Our Lord said that unless we hate our father and mother, our brothers and sisters and even life itself we cannot be his disciples [Lk 14:26]. This is more severe language than the words of Francis. Our Lord meant by these words the same thing as he had said a little earlier in Luke's Gospel: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be as well [Lk 12:34]. If the Lord is truly our treasure, the pearl of great price for which we sell everything else in order to buy it, then our heart will be centred on the words and deeds of the Lord. Francis adds other reasons for his statement. He says that if our delight is in the words and deeds of the Lord, then 'with these we lead people to the love of God with

gladness and joy'. But if we put our treasure, our heart, into idle and empty words, then we 'lead people to laughter with them'. It is good to make people laugh but this good thing is not to become our treasure, our goal, the thing on which we set our hearts.

26. Admonition XXI: The frivolous and talkative person

Blessed (is) the servant, who when he speaks, does not reveal all his own (thoughts) in view of (some) reward, and is not swift to speak (cf. Prov. 29:20), but wisely weighs what he ought to speak and answer. · Woe to him religious, who does not retain in his heart (Lk 2:19.51) the good things, which the Lord shows him, and does not show them to others through work, but who in view of (some) gain desires rather to show them to men with words. · He himself receives "his wage" (cf. Mt 6:2; 6:16) and (his) hearers bring back little fruit.

Everybody finds it irksome to listen to advice when it is clear that the one giving advice has no knowledge of the matter under discussion. This was never true of Francis. In this Admonition he says: 'Blessed is the servant who, when he speaks, does not disclose everything about himself'. If anyone could have disclosed something about himself, it was Francis whose gifts included the wonder of the stigmata. Yet we are told he kept the stigmata secret for as long as possible. His biographer says of him: 'He hid those marks carefully from strangers, and concealed them cautiously from people close to him, so that even the brothers at his side for a long time did not know about them'. In this also Francis had in mind a warning our Lord gave. The Lord spoke strongly against people who displayed their good deeds when he said they have already received their reward. In the same way Francis chides those who do not hold in their hearts the good things the Lord reveals to them, but under the guise of a reward wish to reveal them with their words. Like our Lord, Francis says that they have received their reward and that the listeners carry away little fruit. No one could say that Francis had not put this into practice. As has been noted several times already Francis was conscious of his sins rather than wanting to boast of graces he had received.

27. Admonition XXII: Correction

Blessed (is) the servant who would endure discipline, accusation and rebuke as patiently from another as from his very self. · Blessed (is) the servant, who having been rebuked, acquiesces kindly, submits meekly, confesses humbly and makes satisfaction freely. · Blessed (is) the servant, who is not quick to excuse himself and humbly endures shame and rebuke because of a sin, even though he has not committed (any) fault.

'Blessed is the servant who endures discipline, accusation, and reprimand from another as patiently as he would from himself. Blessed is the servant who, after being reprimanded, agrees courteously, submits respectfully, admits humbly, and makes amends willingly. Blessed is the servant who is not quick to excuse himself, and endures with humility, shame, and reprimand for a sin, when he did not commit the fault.' Francis gave advice similar to this to

Brother Leo in a form that has become widely known. Once while Brother Leo and Francis were walking from Perugia to Assisi in wintertime, Leo asked Francis to tell him in what does perfect joy consist? Francis' reply was in the form of a story. Imagine, Brother Leo, Francis said, that on this cold day we arrive eventually at our house and ring the bell. When the door is opened by one of our brothers he does not recognize us but drives us away with curses and blows. We are turned back into the wintry night. Desperate, we ring the bell again but the result is the same. Francis then said to Leo: 'O Brother Leo, write that here and in this is perfect joy.' Why would Francis call this perfect joy? The reason he gave to Brother Leo was that we cannot rejoice in our gifts since they are not ours but God's. But what we have to do is glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus as the Apostle says: May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ [Gal 6:14].

28. Admonition XXIII: Humility

Blessed (is) the servant, who is found to be as humble among his own subjects, as when for example he would be among his own lords. Blessed (is) the servant, who always remains continually under the rod of correction. A faithful and prudent servant is he (cf. Mt 24:45), who in all (circumstances) does not delay to punish his own offenses interiorly by means of contrition and exteriorly by means of confession and works of satisfaction.

It is related by Thomas of Celano, his biographer, that Francis 'in order to preserve the virtue of holy humility, a few years after his conversion, at a chapter, resigned the office of prelate before all the brothers of the religion, saying: "From now on, I am dead to you. But here you have Brother Peter of Catanio, let us all, you and I, obey him". That Francis did this is quite extraordinary. Francis was well aware that the Order he began was something new in the Church. The Church authorities were reluctant to approve his rule of life and even some of his companions tried to change his mind. In such circumstances one would have expected him to want to keep control of the Order so as to ensure that it developed according to the way he believed it had been shown to him by the Lord. But Francis had his mind on other things. In speaking of humility in this Admonition Francis shows on what his mind was centred. For Francis it was far more important 'not to delay in punishing himself for all his offences' than to be in charge of the Order and guide it as its superior. He said that he punished himself 'inwardly through contrition and outwardly through confession and penance'. We then are blessed servants if we are humble as Francis was humble.

29. Admonition XXIV: True love

Blessed (is) the servant, who would love (dilectio) his own brother as much, when he is infirm to the point that he cannot repay him, as when he is a healthy (brother), who can repay him.

Blessed (is) the servant, who would so love and fear his own brother, when he is far from him, as when for example he is with him, and would not say

anything behind him, which he cannot, with charity, say before him.

There is a deep tendency in all of us to relate to people with whom we feel comfortable. No doubt Francis shared this same human inclination and so he wrote in this Admonition: 'Blessed is the servant who loves his brother as much when he is sick and cannot repay him as when he is well and can repay him'. It was emphasized in the first of these articles that a shaping experience in the life of Francis was his meeting with the leper. When he met the leper he had many friends among the people and youth of Assisi. These were his relatives, fellow citizens and his companions. He and they were healthy and could return friendship to one another. But when he met the leper he stood before a person who was gravely ill, who could not return any act of friendship or hospitality because he did not belong to the society in which Francis lived. The leper was an outcast. When he kissed the leper he was showing love to a person who was sick and could not repay him and yet in that love Francis found that what before had seemed bitter to him was turned into sweetness of soul and body. This simple Admonition is challenging and expresses basic truths of the Gospel. Our Lord loved all of us even though we gave Him nothing in return other than death on Calvary. But even so our Lord invited us to walk to Calvary with him assuring us that the yoke of our cross would be easy and light.

30. Admonition XXV: True love

This Admonition deals with the same topic as the preceding Admonition, namely, how to love one another, but Francis applies it to a different aspect of what love demands. Francis had an ability to pick out basic human weaknesses and warn us about them. In this Admonition he warns us of how easy it is to speak of others behind their backs and to say things we would never say in their presence. Francis at times spoke strongly to his brothers when he felt they were betraying Lady Poverty. Once when he was absent from Assisi the people and authorities in Assisi built a large house for the needs of the brothers. When Francis returned to Assisi and saw the building he was so annoyed that he got on the roof and started to throw down the tiles off the roof as he felt the building betrayed his ideal of poverty. He only stopped destroying the building when the authorities in Assisi assured him that the house belonged to the commune of Assisi and not to the brothers. But one searches in vain in all the early writings about Francis to find any instance when he spoke against brothers who were absent. So Francis' advice to us is: 'Blessed is the servant who loves and respects his brother as much when he is away from him as when he is with him, and who would not say anything behind his back that he would not say with charity in his presence'.

31. Admonition XXVI: Let servants of God honour the clergy

Blessed (is) the servant, who puts faith in the clerics who live rightly according to the manner of the Roman Church. · And woe to those who despise them; for though they may be sinners, no one however ought to judge them, since God Himself reserves to Himself alone their judgement. · For as much as their

administration is greater, which they have because of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which they themselves receive and which they themselves alone minister to others, · so much greater a sin have they, who sin against them, than against all the other men of this world.

The vision given to Saint Paul on the Damascus Road has many similarities to the meeting of Francis with the leper. Saint Paul realized from the vision that the Lord identifies with every Christian for whom Christ is the head and they the members of the body. Francis experienced the Lord in the leper and so was made to realize that Christ identifies with the poor and the disadvantaged. From then on, when Francis left the world his concern was to seek the Lord. He found the Lord in a special way in the Eucharist because he saw nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood in the Eucharist. As Francis stated in his Testament this fact made him consider his attitude to priests and especially to priests who sin. Francis did not shut his eyes to sin in priests because he says in this Admonition: 'even though priests be sinners, no one should judge them because the Lord alone reserves judgment on them to Himself'. It would seem that the reason why Francis could say this is because of his overwhelming sense of wonder at priests being instruments through whom we have the presence of the Lord among us. For Francis the important thing is to have faith in what the priests do at the altar provided they follow the rites of the Church. So he says: 'Blessed is he servant who has faith in the clergy who live uprightly according to the rite of the Roman Church'.

32. Admonition XXVII: Virtue puts vice to flight (1)

*Where there is charity and wisdom, there (is) neither fear nor ignorance. ·
Where there is patience and humility, there (is) neither wrath nor disturbance.
· Where there is poverty with gladness, there (is) neither cupidity nor avarice. ·
Where there is quiet and meditation, there (is) neither solicitousness nor
wandering about. · Where there is fear of the Lord to guard the entrance hall
(cf. Lk 11:21), there the enemy can have no place to enter. · Where there is
mercy and discretion, there (is) neither superfluity nor hardness.*

In this Admonition Francis lists eleven virtues each of which drives out an opposing vice. The virtues and vices are listed in six paragraphs, each paragraph having two lines. Since it is informative to ask why Francis chose these particular virtues the comments on this Admonition will cover more than one article. The first paragraph reads: 'Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance'. What experiences in Francis' life stand behind this choice of charity and wisdom as opposites of fear and ignorance? Francis never presented himself as a wise person even though he was noted for his charity. But one area where Francis showed wisdom was in knowing what God was asking him to do and how his Rule should be written. He held to what he was convinced was true in spite of opposition from Church authorities and from the advice of learned people both within and outside the Order. At a General chapter held at Assisi with five thousand brothers present, many learned brothers tried to persuade Francis to adopt the Rule of

Augustine, or of Benedict, or of Bernard. Francis replied to them: 'My brothers, my brothers, God has called me by the way of simplicity and showed me the way of simplicity. And the Lord told me what He wanted: He wanted me to be a new fool in the world'. In Francis, charity and wisdom drove out fear and ignorance.

33. Admonition XXVII: Virtue puts vice to flight (2)

The second pair of lines in this Admonition read: 'Where here is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance.' In his biography of Francis, Saint Bonaventure said that Francis 'would rather hear himself blamed than praised, knowing that the former would lead him to change his life, while the latter would push him to a fall'. To want to be blamed was possible for Francis for he always regarded himself as a sinner and remembered how he felt when he stood before the Lord in the person of the leper. But he showed his humility in a more dramatic and painful way when 'in order to make himself looked down upon by others, he did not spare himself the shame of bringing up his own faults in his preaching before all the people'. Such patience and humility in Francis drove out anger and disturbance. Rather than getting angry when he was mocked, he had one of the brothers mock him whenever people praised him. He experienced truth more in insults than in praise. This is remarkable. When the brother had mocked and insulted him, albeit unwillingly, Francis said to him: 'May the Lord bless you, my beloved brother, for it is you who are really telling the very truth and what the son of Peter Bernadone needs to hear'. Indeed, patience and humility in Francis drove out anger and disturbance.

34. Admonition XXVII: Virtue puts vice to flight (3)

'Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice.' As already noted in these articles, when Francis kissed the leper he found that what had seemed bitter to him was changed into sweetness of body and soul. From reflecting on this experience he was led to choose a life of poverty. Francis followed the ideal of poverty so faithfully that he is still called the Poverello, the Poor Man of Assisi. His pursuit of poverty became a love story that prompted after his death a Franciscan work with the title The Sacred Agreement of Francis and Lady Poverty. St Bonaventure records a marvellous incident that occurred during Francis' life. Bonaventure writes that once, as Francis with some companions was approaching the city of Siena, three poor women, 'exactly alike in health, age and appearance met him and said: "Welcome, Lady Poverty"'. The women disappeared at once but, as Bonaventure says, the brothers continued to reflect on what the vision might mean. Their conclusion was that the vision showed that Francis 'had chosen to glory above all in the privilege of poverty which he was accustomed to call his mother, his bride, and his lady'. While for Francis poverty seemed to be bitter, he found that, when he embraced it, poverty became a source of joy as much as in finding one's partner in marriage. Having found the partner of his life he wanted nothing more and so for Francis it was the joy of poverty that drove out greed and avarice.

35. Admonition XXVII: Virtue puts vice to flight (4)

It is said of Francis that he never rested from doing good, either by spending time with God or by going to people. Bonaventure assures us that Francis divided the time given him by spending some of the time working for his neighbour's good, and he dedicated the remaining time 'to the tranquil excesses of contemplation'. Francis did far more than spend some part of each day in prayer. Now and then he also went away to a mountain retreat to pray for days on end. Still today the places where he went to pray are well-known shrines and sacred sites in Franciscan history. He prayed at the Carceri above Assisi, at Fonte Colombo, at Narni and above all on the mountain La Verna. When Francis found that he was exhausted from his preaching, he would look for the secrets of solitude and a place of quiet. It was in such a setting that he received the stigmata on La Verna. Time spent in prayer is private time between the person and God but we can say of Francis that in going away regularly to fast and pray he was still pursuing the Lord he had experienced in the leper. That experience outside Assisi inspired him to follow the Lord with total devotion. In his search for the Lord, his most intense encounters with this Lord would have taken place in the private days of rest and meditation. One can well imagine that when he received the stigmata, the marks identifying him with the crucified Christ, the intensity of that union with the Lord drove out any anxiety and restlessness.

36. Admonition XXVII: Virtue puts vice to flight (5)

'Where there is fear of the Lord to guard an entrance there the enemy cannot find place to enter.' To fear the Lord means to stand in awe before God. Fear of the Lord implies reverence, an acknowledgment that God is other than us, our Creator, the Person on whom we depend for everything. The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom [Job 28:28]. The enemy driven out by fear of the Lord is the enemy or temptation that would make us self centred, proud with a sense of self-sufficiency. Francis retained a sense of reverence, of fear of the Lord during his whole life because it was this experience of a fear of God that he felt when meeting the leper. It is informative then to see how Francis began his prayers. For example, he wrote Praises of God that begin: 'You are holy Lord God Who does wonderful things. You are strong. You are great. You are the most high. You are the almighty king. You holy Father, King of heaven and earth'. This reverence for and awe of God led Francis to reverence everything on earth that spoke to him of God. It lies behind his ability to have wild animals sense in him a union with their Creator, it made him reach out to all people and even go to the court of the Sultan who was at war with the Christian armies. It led him to reverence even a scrap of parchment on which no words had been written, and above all, it led him to a wonderful reverence for the Eucharist and the presence of the Lord among us in this Eucharist.

37. Admonition XXVII: Virtue puts vice to flight (6)

Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment There is neither excess nor hardness of heart. It is interesting that Francis links mercy with

discernment. Perhaps he had in mind that mercy only exists when a person does not want to impose a command or duty on another. God is merciful to us because God shows mercy rather than power. A Wisdom writer said of God: You are merciful to all for you can do all things [Wis 11:23]. This has a link to discernment for it means to work out what God is asking of us at any particular time or in any particular situation. A proud and dominant person discerns whatever he or she might want to do and this is the opposite of discernment. So Francis can say a heart full of mercy and discernment is not a hard heart. An example showing how Francis was kind, merciful and discerning is given by Bonaventure. Francis urged the brothers to lead an austere life but not to be severe on themselves or others; he asked them 'to put on a heart of piety and be seasoned with the salt of discernment'. Bonaventure relates that one night a brother was so hungry he could not sleep. Aware of this Francis got up and put food before the brother. But, realizing the brother would be embarrassed to eat on his own, Francis started eating first and gently invited the brother to eat. The brother was overjoyed that by his discernment Francis had come to him. Later Francis said to the other brothers that charity is to be their rule with one another: 'He taught them to follow discernment, the charioteer of the virtues'.

38. Admonition XXVIII: Hiding the good that it not be lost

Blessed (is) the servant, who stores up "in Heaven" (Mt 6:20) the good things, which the Lord hath revealed to him and does not desire to disclose them to men for profit or gain, for the Most High Himself will manifest his deeds to whomever He has pleased. · Blessed (is) the servant, who keeps the secrets of the Lord "in his heart" (cf. Lk 2:19.51).

Francis exhorts us 'to store up in heaven the good things which the Lord shows' to us. We have seen how Francis so hid the wonder of the stigmata on his body that not even his companions knew about these marks on his body. Why would Francis think this is important? We are so accustomed to think of the wonders in the lives of the saints that we can ignore what was simple and ordinary. In the life of Francis, his encounter with the leper started him on the way to becoming an extraordinary saint of God. But everyone during life meets the equivalent of a leper. The thing we dread most in life is the leper in our life. This experience may come in facing sickness, suffering, loss, danger, or some shock. In our own human and weak way we try to meet these experiences as Francis did and try to see in them a meeting with the Lord. We know that the Lord showed much to Francis but clearly Francis did not speak of these things as is clear from this Admonition. We should not allow ourselves to doubt that the same Lord offers us a closeness, acceptance and love similar to that shown to Francis. Francis concludes this Admonition with words that are a comfort to us: 'The Most High himself will reveal His deeds to whomever He wishes. Blessed is the servant who safeguards the secrets of the Lord in his heart'.

39. New vision

When we read that Francis tamed a wild wolf, preached to birds and wrote a Canticle in praise of all God's creatures, we have to ask how did Francis come to this vision of the world? Even before Francis met the leper he found that his appreciation of nature and of the world was changing. The catalyst for this was an illness. Celano records that Francis was worn down by a long illness. During this illness he was at home in Assisi and it was some time before he was well enough to walk but, eventually, with the aid of a walking stick he was able one day to go outside the house. Celano notes that when Francis went outside he began to see the countryside with a greater interest because 'the beauty of the field, the delight of the vineyards and whatever else was beautiful to see could offer him no delight at all'. St Bonaventure, when he made a retreat on La Verna and wrote his treatise, *The Journey of the Human Person into God*, said that until we are remade from the disorder of sin we are unable to see the full beauty of God's creation. Francis, after his illness, found that he saw creation with new eyes; he no longer saw beauty in the same way as before. This remaking of Francis by grace was developed further when he experienced the Lord in the person of the leper and realized that what he had thought to be ugly and sickening was in fact sweet to his body and soul. Francis would be remade even more on the mountain of La Verna.

40. La Verna and the stigmata

The conversion of Saint Francis began when he met a leper. In that meeting he experienced the presence of the Lord who challenged and inspired him to set out on a journey in which he would try to walk as literally as possible in the footsteps of Christ. Francis followed this calling and towards the end of his life he went to the mountain of La Verna to pray and fast. He had always made time to go to lonely places to pray. While in prayer on the mountain he saw a vision of a Seraph, an angel such as the prophet Isaiah saw in the Temple. A Seraph has six wings and as Francis watched the Seraph open its wings Francis could see that behind the wings was the figure of a man crucified. This was clearly a vision of Christ crucified. Saint Bonaventure relates that Francis understood from the vision that he was 'to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified'. The most basic duty of a disciple of Christ is to take up the cross and follow Christ to Calvary. For Francis his Calvary was on La Verna where he was marked in his hands, feet and side with the five wounds of Christ. This wonder of the stigmata in Francis is a confirmation that in his life he had indeed followed Christ and lived out the challenge of the Gospel. His love of Christ transformed him even physically into a likeness of Christ. Bonaventure wrote of Francis: 'Now, finally, near the end, you were shown at the same time the sublime similitude of the Seraph and the humble likeness of the Crucified'.

41. The Canticle of the Creatures

Early in his life Francis had been confined to his room by an illness. As he recovered and was able to walk again he found on leaving the house that the valley below Assisi had lost its beauty for him. This was but a first step in the working of grace within Francis so that he might in future see beauty more as God sees it. This remaking of Francis who, the same as everyone else, was

damaged by sin was completed when he was marked with the stigmata, marked as being a perfect disciple of Christ. The remade Francis saw the world in a new light. The work that sums up best the new vision, gained by Francis through his sufferings, is his Canticle of the Creatures. The final form of this Canticle was not completed until a short time before the death of Francis but much of it was written earlier. We are told that Francis said while suffering from weakness and sickness: 'I want to write a new Praise of the Lord for his creatures, which we use every day, and without which we cannot live. Through them the human race greatly offends the Creator, and every day we are ungrateful for such great graces, because we do not praise, as we should, our Creator and the Giver of all good'. In the Canticle, Francis praises God for all the creatures and he singles out the sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire and the earth. But this vision is achieved at a price because Francis adds praise to God for all who bear infirmity and tribulation and who endure these in peace. He also greets his sister bodily death.

42. In praise of brother fire

The extraordinary ability of Francis to praise God in all creatures is dramatically illustrated in his praise of brother fire. Francis suffered from a disease in his eyes so that his eyesight deteriorated badly. Celano says of Francis at this time: 'He could not look at the light of the day because of the great pain caused by the eye disease'. His brothers had put a hood over his head and they sewed a piece of wool and a linen cloth to the hood to cover his eyes. In this condition he was brought to a doctor who treated diseases of the eyes. The medical treatment for this disease was most painful because the treatment consisted of applying a piece of iron heated in a fire to the veins around the eyes. Francis agreed to have the treatment and as he waited he said to the fire: 'My Brother Fire, noble and useful among all the creatures the Most High created, be courtly to me in this hour. I have loved you for a long time and I still love you for the love of that Lord who created you'. Celano reports that as the doctor prepared to apply the heated iron to Francis's eyes all the brothers ran away. This was a most normal reaction and it illustrates to what a degree Francis had been so remade by grace that he could calmly sit before the fire and speak to it as one of God's creatures. He had reached a point of development in his life when he saw as God did; in the act of creating the world and its creatures, God saw that everything is very good.

43. The crib at Greccio

Closely associated with Francis' love for all the creatures of God is the way he prepared to celebrate the feast of Christmas at Greccio. Francis explained to a man named John, his friend, that he wanted to celebrate the Christmas mass in a way that reproduced as literally as possible the crib in Bethlehem. Francis added that he also wanted to see an ox and an ass standing by the crib. The mass was celebrated with many people attending and rejoicing with the saint who preached the homily. We are familiar with building and putting a crib at Christmas in every Church but when Francis did this it was something new. For doing this we owe Francis a debt. The feast of Christmas is a feast we celebrate with ease because, as well as its family aspect with the birth of

the child Jesus, the crib makes the feast more homely and easier to understand and enjoy. Francis had his crib built in a cave on the side of the mountain that overlooks Greccio. In itself this was a humble and poor setting for a Christmas Eucharist but it was surely a setting that fitted so well with Francis' meeting with the leper when he experienced the Lord in the poverty of a leper. More than that, Francis who praised God in his Canticle of the Creatures was at ease in a cave with animals. Here he wanted to celebrate the birth of the Lord to whom he had given his life.

44. A salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Francis showed that he could think in a new way when he made the crib at Greccio and celebrated Christmas in a way that has captured Christian imagination ever since. He was also original when speaking in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It would be strange if Francis who was marked with the five wounds of Christ did not feel a special reverence for the Lord's Mother. Naturally in the crib at Greccio the Virgin was a centre of attention and devotion. In his Salutation to Mary, Francis coined a new expression when he called her 'the Virgin made Church'. Francis was not attempting to write a new theology. What he meant by the words made Church is clear in the following words of the Salutation when he calls Mary the Lord's Palace, Tabernacle, Dwelling, Robe, Servant and Mother. Mary was the Palace, Tabernacle, Dwelling and Robe of Christ when He lived in her womb and, since Christ is the Head of the Church, Mary was made Church. But as a Servant of Christ she was a member of the Church and the Mother of the Head of the Church. Addressing all the holy virtues present in Mary, Francis prays, asking that all these virtues be 'poured into the hearts of the faithful through the grace and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit'. Francis saw Mary as a model and a person 'in whom there was and is all fullness of grace and every good'.

45. A salutation of the virtues

In the previous reflection it was pointed out how Francis saw all the virtues in Mary and prayed that we be given a share in these virtues. But Francis also wrote a salutation to the virtues themselves. It is informative to note which virtues he selected and how he saw the relation of one to another. He addresses Wisdom as the Queen of the virtues while holy, pure Simplicity is the sister of Wisdom. Francis personifies all the virtues and this was already a long tradition in the Bible especially for Wisdom. In the book of Wisdom we read: I loved her [Wisdom] and sought her from my youth and I desired to take her for my bride [8:2]. Francis then speaks of Lady holy Poverty with her sister, holy Humility. The sister of holy Lady Charity is holy Obedience. Wisdom, simplicity, poverty, humility and obedience are virtues that can easily be recognized in the life of Francis. Francis points out then that to possess any of these virtues one must first die. Francis began to die to his worldly values when he embraced the leper and then, as he says, left the world and its attitudes. The result is that whoever possesses one of these virtues and does not offend the others possesses all. Not only are they possessed but they in turn drive out the opposite vices, for example, holy Wisdom confounds Satan and all his cunning, while holy Poverty confounds the desire for riches,

greed, and all the cares of this world. This salutation of the virtues is a hymn to God who protects us in such a wonderful way as the virtues bind us in obedience to the Spirit.

46. A prayer inspired by the Our Father

Francis had an ability to compose prayers and bring together many texts of Scripture from various sources. In this he showed a wonderful knowledge especially of the Psalms. In his Office of the Passion he composed Psalms by joining together verses from many Psalms. In his prayer based on the Our Father he did not join texts of Scripture together but made the prayer into a type of Creed. So the beginning of the prayer reads: 'O Our Father most holy, our Creator, Redeemer, Consoler, and Saviour'. In this prayer Francis prays in a manner that is positive, varied and abounds in petitions to the heavenly Father. For example, when he comes to the second part of the Our Father he says: 'Give us this day in remembrance, understanding, and reverence of that love which our Lord Jesus Christ had for us and of those things that He said and did and suffered for us, our daily Bread, Your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ'. He ends this prayer with the words: 'Forgive us our trespasses ... as we forgive those who trespass against us, and what we do not completely forgive, make us, Lord, forgive completely that we may truly love our enemies because of You and we may fervently intercede for them before You, returning no one evil for evil and we may strive to help everyone in You'. It is not difficult to see that Francis throughout his life had meditated on the Our Father.

47. Saint Clare

After his conversion Francis began to restore small churches close to Assisi. He did this because when he heard a voice from the crucifix say to him: 'Go, rebuild my church', he understood the words literally. The first church he rebuilt was the Church of San Damiano. This was to become the home of his greatest disciple, Clare of Assisi, who founded the Order of Saint Clare. Clare came to Francis six years after his conversion and after overcoming opposition from her family she was able to start a community of sisters. Celano says of the Church of San Damiano: 'This is the blessed and holy place where the glorious religion and most excellent Order of Poor Ladies and holy virgins had its happy beginning'. Late in his life Francis wrote a Canticle for these sisters. His Canticle was meant to encourage them and, as it was clear that his time with them would be limited, they needed assurance for the future. The advice he gave them is simple and practical but at the same time it has an element of inspiration. They are to live in truth, not to look at the life they have left behind, to use the alms the Lord gives them with discernment, to be at peace as they care for the sick, because from their efforts they 'will be crowned queen in heaven with the Virgin Mary'.

48. A letter to the entire Order

Shortly before his death Francis wrote a letter to all the members of the Order. Half of this rather long letter deals with the presence of our Lord in the Eucharist. It is interesting to see how this letter echoes thoughts expressed by Francis in his Admonitions and in his Testament. It has been pointed out in earlier meditations how Francis, even in the first of his Admonitions, exhorted the brothers to show great reverence for the Lord present in the Eucharist and for priests. A good third of this letter is addressed directly to priests who are members of the Order. He says to priests: 'If the Blessed Virgin is so honoured, as is becoming, because she carried Him in her most holy womb ... how holy, just and fitting must he be who touches with his hands, receives in his heart and mouth, and offers to others to be received the One Who is not about to die but Who is to conquer and be glorified, upon Whom the angels longed to gaze'. Associated for Francis with the Eucharist was a reverence for any 'divine written words' wherever they may be found. Francis asks this because 'many things are made holy by the words of God and the sacrament of the altar is celebrated in the power of the words of Christ'. Having asked for reverence to be shown to anything and anyone associated with the Blessed Sacrament, Francis ends by acknowledging his sinfulness and asking pardon of the brothers. He adds the prayer: 'Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footprints of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ'.

49. A letter to a Minister

Francis wrote this letter to a Minister between three and five years before his death. It is an extraordinary testimony to the way Francis thought and acted. In the first part of the letter he encourages the Minister to consider as a grace any difficulty that he may meet. Francis says it is true obedience to the Lord God and to Francis himself when the Minister considers it to be a grace when a brother impedes him or even lays hands on him. He adds: 'And may you want it to be this way and not otherwise.' In this Francis is asking a lot of his Minister. Not only must the Minister accept as a grace any hurt done to him but, more than that, he must be ready to forgive any brother who comes to him. The way Francis expresses this is strong and challenging. He says: 'And if you have done this, I wish to know in this way if you love the Lord and me, namely, that there is not any brother in the world who has sinned, who when he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not looking for mercy you would ask him if he wants mercy'. This is a wonderful portrait to put before the Ministers of the Order. It is challenging in asking the Ministers not to take offence and to be ready at all times to show mercy. In this letter Francis is developing what he would later include in the final draft of the Rule. In the final Rule the words from the Letter to a Minister are put in a more succinct form but Francis adds the following words: The Ministers 'must be careful not to be angry or disturbed at the sin of another, for anger and disturbance impede charity in themselves and in others'.

50. Death

Not long before his death Francis put a greeting to Sister Death in his Canticum of the Creatures: 'Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape'. Francis had experienced a mystical death on La Verna when he was sealed with the marks of Christ's death. Having found years before that what seemed bitter to him was turned into sweetness of body and soul he could have the same expectation of Sister Death. Bitter and all as is the thought of death, there is the sweetness of meeting the Lord face to face. To prepare for death Francis asked the brothers to read a passage from the Gospel of St John. The Minister had already chosen to read this passage. Celano tells us that Francis then 'told them to cover him with sackcloth and to sprinkle him with ashes, as he was soon to become dust and ashes'. As his brothers stood around him 'that most holy soul was released from the flesh, and as it was absorbed into the abyss of light, his body fell asleep in the Lord'. St Bonaventure reflects on his death as follows: 'In all things he wished without hesitation to be conformed to Christ crucified, who hung on the cross poor, suffering, and naked ... O truly the most while living to Christ living, dying to Christ dying, and dead to Christ dead, and deserved to be adorned with an expressed likeness!'

51. Canonization

Francis was born in Assisi in 1181 or 1182. Most of his life was spent in or near Assisi and it was in Assisi that he died. He died near the small Church of Saint Mary of the Angels. After his death his body was carried into Assisi after stopping at the Convent of San Damiano so that Clare and her sisters could see his body for the last time. Many citizens of Assisi were able to see the wounds in the body of Francis and Bonaventure relates that after death 'his limbs were so supple and soft to the touch that they seemed to have regained the tenderness of childhood and to be adorned with clear signs of innocence'. It is hardly surprising with such veneration by his brothers, by Clare and her sisters, by the people of Assisi, the viewing of the wonder of the marks of the stigmata, and the miracles that began to be worked immediately after his death that before long the Pope and Cardinals discussed whether or not he should be canonized. Francis died in 1226. Within two years the Pope had examined his cause and with the 'unanimous advice and consent of his brothers and of all the prelates who were then in the curia' decided 'that he should be canonized'. The Pope canonized Saint Francis in Assisi in 1228. Two years later, during a General Chapter in Assisi the brothers moved his body into the newly constructed basilica where the body remains to this day.

52. Conclusion

There are two basic ways in which Franciscan Spirituality can be described. One can begin with the headings from a textbook on spirituality and this would be the best way if your aim is to find a definition of Franciscan spirituality. Such headings would be prayer, asceticism, rules for daily life, and so on. The other way is to look at the life and writings of Francis and draw out of these examples of how Francis became a saint. The advantage of this way is that the spirituality remains embedded in the story of Francis. This second method has been attempted in these meditations because that is how the spirituality

of Jesus Christ is expressed in the Gospels. The writers of the Gospel tell the story of what Jesus did and said and we try to imitate that story. For Francis we have seen the event and experience that began his conversion, namely, his meeting with the leper and how this experience led him to a life of poverty. In his poverty Francis prayed, was able to find a new beauty in creation, a bond even with wild animals, and he became a preacher of the Good News to people even as far away as the Sultan in Egypt. He founded an Order of Brothers and inspired Saint Clare and her Sisters to begin the Order of Saint Clare. As we read what Francis said and did we know that we cannot live exactly as he did but we can pray that we too will be identified in death with Christ Jesus just as he was identified with the Lord on the mountain of La Verna when he was sealed with the marks of Christ's passion.

Fr Campion Murray ofm is a Franciscan Friar and a distinguished theologian. He lives and works in the Franciscan community at Campbelltown NSW Australia

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