

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 "Renewing Religious Life," unpublished lecture, as quoted in *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life*, Margaret Carney, O.S.F. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 226.

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

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

<i>You are charity;</i>	<i>You are rest;</i>
<i>You are wisdom;</i>	<i>You are gladness and joy;</i>
<i>You are humility,</i>	<i>You are our hope;</i>
<i>You are patience,</i>	<i>You are justice;</i>
<i>You are beauty,</i>	<i>You are moderation;</i>
<i>You are meekness;</i>	<i>You are all our riches to sufficiency<sup>2</sup>.</i>
<i>You are sincerity,</i>	

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

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

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

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

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

#### Our Focus:

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

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

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

God continues to share this LOVE, this goodness outside the Trinity. In time, God chooses to create and to love creation fully. Still more wonderfully, in time God entered creation in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 1). Jesus came to share God's love with us and to show us how to love God in return. Jesus recounts this love exchange for us in the beautiful verses of John 16 and 17.<sup>4</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

## REFLECTION

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

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

### Envisioning how GOD turns to US in the SFO Rule

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

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

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Bonaventure, *Tree of Life* VI, 130.

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

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

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

### **Before going on . . .**

Meditate on the words of each article.

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

### **ALLOW TIME FOR DISCUSSION**

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

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

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

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

#### Reflection

- Name those components which shape your Franciscan spirituality
- Call to mind times when you've encountered Christ in your brothers and sisters. Take as an example Francis and the leper: *what was bitter to me before has become sweet . . .* Test 2<sup>8</sup>
- How do the Scriptures enhance your life?
- How does the Church enhance your vocation?

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

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

<sup>8</sup> FA:ED Vol.1,124

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

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

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

#### Reflection

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

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

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<sup>9</sup> FA:ED Vol 1, 254.

<sup>10</sup> See accompanying handout for explanation

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

## Reflection

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

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

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

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

<sup>12</sup> <sup>11</sup> See Can. 116; 301,3; 312; 313.