

Keeping our focus on Francis

AN SFO REVIEW - Fr. John Sullivan, ofm

ALL CREATION in Christ

B1

have on hand: SFO Rule; Catechism of Cath.Church

St. Paul wrote to the Colossians (1:15-18)

“He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God,
the first-born of all creatures.

In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible.

All were created through him; all were created for him.

He is before all else that is.

In him everything continues in being.

It is he who is head of the body, the church!..

he who is the beginning, the first-born of the dead,

so that primacy may be his in everything.

Friar Celano-I in (-p.250-1) chapter 29 describes the love that he [Francis] had toward all creatures for the sake of the creator and a description of both aspects of his person.

“To enumerate and recount all the things our glorious father Francis did and taught while living in the flesh would be a lengthy or an even impossible task. Who could ever express the deep affection he bore for all things that belong to God.

Or who would be able to tell of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator?

From this reflection he often overflowed with amazing, unspeakable joy as he looked at the sun, gazed at the moon, or observed the stars in the sky.

What simple piety! What pious simplicity!”

And there’s more....

Friar Thomas of Celano reflects (Cel-II, chap.124,in Omnibus,p.494):

“In every work of the artist he [Francis] praised the Artist;
whatever he found in the things made he referred to the Maker.

He rejoiced in all the works of the hands of the Lord and saw behind things pleasant to behold their life-giving reason and cause.

In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself; all things were to him good. “He who made us is the best”, they cried out to him.

Through his footprints impressed upon things he followed the Beloved everywhere; he made for himself from all things a ladder by which to come even to his throne.

He embraced all things with a rapture of unheard-of devotion, speaking to them of the Lord and admonishing them to praise Him.”

Let us now listen to our SFO Rule, art. 11 and 18....

Then have someone read a copy of the Canticle of the Sun/Canticle of the Creatures....

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,

Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing,

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,

and no human is worthy to mention Your name.

Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,

Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

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

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

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

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

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

Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no
harm.
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.

For sharing:

Q1. What are the messages of Francis' closing appeal in this canticle?

Q2. Is my attitude toward all creation "Francis-like"?

Q3. How did Francis step back and see everything from the hand of God? For what purpose?

Q4. How do I approach the following?

- a- Persons – as human beings (body, soul, memory) and as gifted with grace (redeemed and supernatural), the crown of creation, the "image and likeness of God".
- b- God Himself – One Alone and also Three Persons, and Their involvements in our lives.
- c- The world around us, animate and inanimate, is "good", from the hand of God (Genesis 1 & 2), offering us "footprints" of God.
- d- And Jesus Christ Himself, the God-Man, the firstborn of all creation.

For useful background and understanding, read the Catechism of the Catholic Church, especially art. 198, 290, 306-308, 373, 377.

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SISTER SICKNESS AND DEATH

B2

have on hand the SFO Rule, Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

opening prayer:

In the Eucharist prayer (III) we pray: “We hope to enjoy forever the vision of your glory....”

Have someone read from the SFO Rule, art. 19 and 24.

In the last years of his life, Francis wrote his Canticle of the Creatures, that all of creation gives praise to God. And later he added these words, since death and dying are a part of the life of every creature:

“Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

Blessed are those whom death will find

in Your most holy will,

for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks

and serve Him with great Humility.”

FA-2, p. 203-4 #100 (The Assisi compilation)

“Another time during those days, a doctor from the city of Arezzo, named Good John, who was known and familiar to blessed Francis, came to visit him in the bishop’s palace. Blessed Francis asked about his sickness saying: “How does my illness of dropsy seem to you, Brother John?”...

The doctor said to him: “Brother, by the grace of the Lord, it will be well with you.” For he did not want to tell him that he would die in a little while.

Again blessed Francis said to him: “Tell me the truth. How does it look to you? Do not be afraid, for, by the grace of God, I am not a coward who fears death. With the Lord’s help, by His mercy and grace, I am so united and joined with my Lord that I am equally as happy to die as I am to live.”

The doctor then told him frankly: “According to our assessment, your illness is incurable and you will die either at the end of September or on the fourth day before the Nones of October.” Blessed Francis, while he was lying on his bed sick, with the greatest devotion and reverence for the Lord stretched out his arms and hands with great joy of mind and body and said to his body and soul: “Welcome, my Sister Death!”

As found in friar Thomas of Celano’s writings: - FA-2, p.359,

Great was his [Francis’] compassion towards the sick and great his concern for their needs. If lay people’s piety sent him tonics he would give it to the others who were sick even though he had greater need of them. He had sympathy for all who were ill and when he could not alleviate their pain he offered words of compassion. He would eat on fast days so the weak would not be ashamed of eating, and he was not embarrassed to go through the city’s public places to find some meat for a sick brother.

However, he also advised the sick to be patient when things were lacking and not stir up a scandal if everything was not done to their satisfaction. Because of this he had these words written in one of the rules: “I beg all my sick brothers that in their illness they do not become angry or upset at God or the

brothers. They should not anxiously seek medicine, or desire too eagerly to free the flesh, that is soon to die and is an enemy of the soul.

Let them give thanks for all things and let them desire, however, to be as God wills them to be. For God teaches with the rod of punishment and sicknesses those whom he has destined to eternal life as he himself has said: "Those I love, I correct and chastise." [Rev.3:19]

Around the year 1220, Francis wrote a short Letter to the Rulers (found on p.58,in FA-1). Here is part of it:

Brother Francis, your little and looked-down-upon servant in the Lord God, wishes health and peace to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and governors throughout the world and to all others to whom these words may come.

"Reflect and see that the day of death is approaching. With all possible respect, therefore, I beg you not to forget the Lord because of this world's cares and preoccupations and not to turn away from His commandments....

"When the day of death does come, everything they think they have shall be taken from them...."

Q1. What impression is created by Francis calling death his "sister"? How did Francis face death? What was his mindset?

Q2. How does Francis' attitude to sickness and death compare to my own? - or the Catholic Church's?

Q3. Why do we act sometimes as if it's not right that we should be getting sick?

Q4. What virtues does Francis ask us to practice when we are sick? (...see quote from friar Celano) Do I?

Q5. Do Christians sometimes have the idea that sickness is a punishment for having done things wrong? Some seem to say: if I do not picture myself as a big sinner, why should I be suffering this way? (Reflect on Jesus' powerful message to the apostles in John's Gospel, chap.9:3.)

Q6. How does the Mass (and Baptism?) prepare us for death? & for resurrection?

Q7. In facing the trials of pain and cancer and other diseases, it is a natural question that arises in serious illness: "Why me?" And how do I answer?

Q8. Ending of the Creed: "I believe...in the resurrection of the body". Do we really believe this and prepare for it?

N.B. Did you know that a plenary indulgence can be gained under the usual conditions, at the time of our dying? The church writes: "When one of the faithful is in danger of death and no priest is available to administer the sacraments to him with the apostolic blessings, to which a plenary indulgence is attached (according to Canon 468, par.2..), holy Mother church still grants a plenary indulgence to be gained at the moment of death, on condition that they are properly disposed and have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime...."

Paul VI,1967,#18, Indulgentiarum doctrina.

Read in the Catechism of Catholic Church, esp. art.2278-2279. For further readings: art.2258 to 2330.

Keeping our focus on Francis

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seeking Holiness - the VIRTUES

have on hand: SFO Rule

B3

Have someone read the opening paragraph of St. Francis' letter to you, "the Brothers and Sisters of Penance", in your SFO Rule Prologue. Then....

After the reading we reflect: Francis' words are a call to holiness, a call to use the means of identifying with Jesus Christ Himself.

This is our vocation, to be all we have been created to be - to live in the image and likeness of God Himself. This is what Christ has been trying to teach us; this is what Francis came to realize in his own life.

Our opening prayer together:

Father,
teach us to live good lives, encourage us
with your support and bring us to eternal life.
Help us always,
for without you we are bound to fail.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Francis wrote this "Salutation of the Virtues":

Hail, Queen Wisdom, may the Lord protect you
with your sister, holy pure Simplicity.
Lady, holy Poverty, may the Lord protect you
with your sister, holy Humility.

Lady, holy Charity, may the Lord protect you
with your sister, holy Obedience.
Most holy Virtues, may the Lord protect all of you,
from Whom You come and proceed.

"There is surely no one in the entire world who can possess any one of You without dying first.
Whoever possesses one
and does not offend the others, possesses all.
Whoever offends one does not possess any and offends all.
And each one confounds vices and sin."

[...ed.note: Francis then tells us more about these virtues..]

Holy Wisdom confounds Satan and all his cunning.
Pure holy Simplicity confounds all the wisdom of this world
and the wisdom of the body.
Holy poverty confounds the desire of riches, greed, and the cares of this world.
Holy Humility confounds pride, all people who are in the world and all that is in the world.
Holy Charity confounds every diabolical and carnal temptation and every carnal fear.
Holy Obedience confounds every corporal and carnal wish, binds its mortified body to obedience of the Spirit and obedience to one's brother,
so that it is subject and submissive to everyone in the world, and not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well,
that they may do whatever they want with it,

insofar as it has been given to them from above by the Lord.”

(found in FA-1, pp.164-5)

And among Francis' 28 admonitions is this insight:

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

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

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

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

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

(found in Admon.#27, p.136-FA-1)

Similarly Francis' Admonition #16 encourages us:

“Blessed are the clean in heart, for they will see God. The truly clean of heart are those who look down upon earthly things, seek those of heaven, and, with a clean heart and spirit, never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God living and true.” (quoted in FA-1, p.134)

On the topic of obedience friar Thomas of Celano writes:

“Accepting the command of holy obedience with much joy and gladness, they humbly prostrated themselves on the ground before Saint Francis. Embracing them, he spoke sweetly and devotedly to each one: “Cast your care upon the Lord, and he will sustain you.” He used to say this phrase whenever he transferred brothers by obedience.”

(Cel-1, ch.12,29, as in FA-1,p.207)

As Francis studied Jesus, he found all these virtues in Jesus Christ, sent by the Father and revealed in the Gospels. Jesus, both God and man, became the model for how Francis himself was to live.

A virtue may be defined as: a power or capacity, a gift of God, by which we do the good. Or as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, in art.#1803: “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good.” They may remain as human virtues, or be elevated by divine grace (#1810). As Secular Franciscans we pray that our lives give witness that we want to practice the virtues Christ lived by and has taught us, and which St. Francis so admirably put into practice in his life.

Q1. What are virtues? How do you explain what a virtue is, to someone who asks?

Q2. How many virtues does Francis list? Which ones can I give a clear explanation for their meaning?

Q3. What fundamental virtues were given to us as starters at Baptism? How essential are these? How often do we use them, consciously or implicitly?

Q4. What virtues were given to us with the Sacrament of Confirmation? How often are we aware of trying to use them?

Q5. In our spiritual life, is it better (more wholesome) to concentrate on practicing virtues, rather than trying to eradicate vices? What is the practical difference?

Q6. Discuss one or two outstanding virtues that impress you about your favorite Saint...

Q7. How do these individual virtues compare to societal values today?

For further reading, check the Catechism of the Catholic Church, art.#1803 to 1845.

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The TAU

B4

have on hand: *SFO NAFRA Statutes for the U.S.A., Art.16,#3 (Handbook, p.339)*. To quote:

“The external sign of the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States is the TAU Cross.”

In his opening sermon at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, commenting on a text from the prophet Ezechiel, Pope Innocent III called upon the participants to mark themselves and all Christians with the Tau of penance and of the cross:

“Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and its shape designates a cross, at least before the fixing of Pilate’s proclamation. Such is the sign one bears on one’s head if one manifests the radiance of the cross in all one’s behavior; if, as the apostle says, one crucifies one’s flesh with its vices and sins, and if one affirms: ‘I do not desire to put my glory in anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world’....

Be, then, champions of the Tau and of the cross!” And after recalling that God does not will the death of a sinner but his conversion, the Pope ordered them to preach penance and forgiveness everywhere (much like Francis and his first followers had been commissioned by the Pope in 1209).

He also proclaimed: “The Tau has exactly the same form as the Cross on which our Lord was crucified on Calvary. And only those will be marked with this sign and will obtain mercy, who have mortified their flesh and conformed their life to that of the Crucified Savior.”

At this point Francis chose the Tau as the symbol of his penitential life and as the resume of his preaching; as the concrete emblem of the participation of his order in the reform of the church and of souls. The Tau would serve him as a signature for his letters and as a standard up until the day when the stigmata would reproduce in his very flesh the content of this mystical letter imprinted in his heart.”

(quoted from p.28, First Encounter with Francis of Assisi, by Damien Vorreaux; (1978), Franciscan Press, Quincy,IL)

Early in his life of conversion, Francis had seen this sign used by those caring for lepers in Rome. Francis used this symbol to sign his letters, as is clearly seen in the letter he wrote to Bro. Leo. Also, the early friars sometimes marked their cells with it.

In this same vein, friar Thomas of Celano speaks about Francis in his conversion, after saying that Francis “was pierced with compassion for the Crucified Savior”: “He chose this costume [the habit] because of its poverty, but also desired to express the mystery of the Cross. He wished his entire body to be clothed with the Cross of Christ, even as his spirit had put on the Crucified; and since God had vanquished the powers of hell in this sign, so also the Franciscan army should serve its Liege Lord under this standard.” (found in Celano-II, n.10+):

Friar Bonaventure speaks of the TAU associated with Francis and the early friars:

A composer of worldly songs was converted to the peace of Christ by Francis, and was named “Brother Pacifico”. Friar Bonaventure goes on: “Afterwards this man advanced in holiness; and, before he went to France as provincial minister - indeed he was the first to hold that office there - he merited again to

see a great Tau on Francis' forehead, which displayed a variety of different colors that caused his face to glow with wonderful beauty.

"The holy man [Francis] venerated this symbol with great affection, often spoke of it with eloquence, and signed it with his own hand in the letters he sent, as if his whole desire were, according to the prophetic text, to mark with a Tau the foreheads of those moaning and grieving, of those truly converted to Jesus Christ." (Bonaventure, Major Life, ch.4,#9, found on p.556,FA-2)

We recall that Tau is a letter of the Greek alphabet. See Ezechiel 9:4: "Pass through the city [through Jerusalem] and mark a Tau on the foreheads of those who moan and groan over all the abominations that are practiced within it."

For the SFO member: The TAU - *a rich sign of:*
cross - promise - hope - commitment - reconciliation

the cross - The tau has the shape of a person fastened to the cross, the brutal instrument chosen to do away with Christ, but which has become our means of salvation! With Christ we take up our cross daily. It offers freedom from sin and death! ...we are reinstated as children of God, given the offer of eternal happiness, and resurrection!

the promise - The message of the tau being marked on the foreheads of those to be saved gives us assurance about our futures - like an inoculation against dreadful diseases, like the blood of the lamb on the doorposts in Egypt.

the hope - Given this promise, that the franciscan way of life is effective and lifegiving, so we can respond to such a promise by our virtue of hope. We trust God is telling us the truth about our eternal futures if we stay with him.

the commitment - a sign that is not only the cross of Christ, but also the cross we freely embrace on the path of conversion in following Francis's approach to God, when we deny ourselves daily to be his disciples.

the reconciliation - as the cross brought the eternal healing of redemption for all peoples, so it becomes the reminder of our own re-union with our God (who gave us His new and eternal covenant), who loved and loves us so much as to have sacrificed so much on our behalf. This sign reminds us that we are on good terms with God again, and can stay that way.

Undoubtedly, we as franciscans are "people of the TAU".

Q1. How do I view the TAU? What significance does it contain for me?

Q2. How can the TAU be a focus of MY prayers for meditation and contemplation?

Q3. In what ways do I explain to others the meaning and purpose of the TAU in the life of SFO members?

Q4. What is the symbolism of the shape of the tau when related to the "habit" Francis adopted for his way of life (which the Franciscan Friars still use today)?
(see Celano-II, #10, above....)

For further reading, read the TAU book (Franciscan Press, 1800 College Av., Quincy, IL, 62301-2699).

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DAILY CONVERSION TO CHRIST

B5

have on hand: SFO Rule, Catechism of the Catholic Church

Prayer before the Crucifix:

With Francis we pray:

O High and Glorious God,
illumine the darkness of my heart.
Give me, Lord, a correct faith, certain hope,
a perfect charity, sense and knowledge,
so that I can carry out Your holy and true command.

In his gospel, St. Luke (9:23) reminds us: Jesus said to all:

‘Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps.’

We SFOs were called “Brothers and Sisters of Penance” by Francis to help us understand our role of ongoing conversion to the Lord in the circumstances of our daily living.

Have individuals read the following three articles from the SFO Rule: art. 1 - 4 - 7.

Friar Thomas of Celano wrote this about Francis - “In the third year of his conversion, [and before he had his followers]...” he wore a sort of hermit’s habit with a leather belt. He carried a staff in his hand and wore shoes.”

“One day the gospel was being read in that church about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after celebrating the solemnities of the Mass to explain the gospel to him. The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ’s disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff nor to have shoes nor two tunics, but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance, the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God. “This is what I want,” he said, “this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart.”

So Francis...” immediately took off the shoes from his feet, put down the staff from his hands, and, satisfied with one tunic, exchanged his leather belt for a cord. After this, he made for himself a tunic showing the image of the cross, so that in it he would drive off every fantasy of the demons. He made it very rough, so that in it he might crucify the flesh with its vices and sins. He made it very poor and plain, a thing that the world would never covet. As for the other things he heard, he set about doing them with great care and reverence. For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter.” (Celano-I: #22, p.201-202, FA-1)

In the Legend of the Three Companions we find:

“That Cardinal [Bishop of Sabina, named Lord John of St. Paul] then went to the Curia and told the Lord

Pope Innocent III: "I found a most perfect man, who wishes to live according to the form of the holy Gospel, and to observe evangelical perfection in all things. I believe that the Lord wills, through him, to reform the faith of the holy Church throughout the world." Hearing this, the lord pope was greatly amazed and had the cardinal bring blessed Francis to him....

"On the following day, the Pope...blessed them saying: "Go with the Lord, brothers, and as He will see fit to inspire you, preach penance to everyone. When almighty God increases you in number and grace, come back to us. We will grant you more, and entrust you with a greater charge."...

"Drawn by divine inspiration, many people, well-born and lowly, cleric and lay, began to cling to blessed Francis' footsteps, and, after they had abandoned the concerns and vanity of this world, to live under his discipline." (from FA-2,p.96,99)

We read from the SFO General Constitutions: Art. 13:1,2,3

1. The Secular Franciscans, called in earlier times "the brothers and sisters of penance", propose to live in the spirit of continual conversion. Some means to cultivate this characteristic of the Franciscan vocation, individually and in Fraternity, are: listening to and celebrating the Word of God; review of life; spiritual retreats; the help of a spiritual advisor and penitential celebrations. They should approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently and participate in communal celebration of it, whether in the Fraternity or with the whole People of God.

2. In this spirit of conversion, they should live out their love for the renewal of the Church, which should be accompanied by personal and communal renewal. The fruits of conversion, which is a response to the love of God, are the works of charity in the interactions with the brothers and sisters.

3. Traditional among Franciscan penitents, penitential practices such as fasting and abstinence should be known, appreciated and lived out according to the general guidelines of the Church."

Q1. How much of Francis' life was spent in "conversion"?

Q2. As an SFO member, what is the primary meaning of the title given me by Francis?

Q3. Do I live this "penance" from a sense of duty, or of a love relationship? How so?

Q4. Could it be said that being "brothers and sisters of penance" means that the spirit of lent is not just for 40 days a year?

Q5. Of course, this previous question raises another question: "What is the "spirit of lent" in the church year?

Q6. Was Francis a christian "fundamentalist"?

Q7. In what ways do change and conversion require detachment and humility (a form of poverty)?

Q8. Explain why the first two lines of our opening prayer are appropriate throughout our lives...

Other comments you might want to read: the Catechism of the Catholic Church: #1427 & #1431.

FA-1: Francis of Assisi, Vol.1; 1999, New City Press.

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THE STIGMATA

B6

Let us offer our opening prayer, that comes from the loving heart of Francis:

“O Lord Jesus Christ, I entreat you to give me two graces before I die: first, that in my life time I may feel in body and soul as far as possible the pain you endured, dear Lord, in the hour of your most bitter suffering;

and second, that I may feel in my heart as far as possible that excess of love by which you, O Son of God, were inflamed to undertake so cruel a suffering for us sinners.”

In the ruggedness of the craggy terrain of rocky mount LaVerna, some 60 miles northwest of Assisi (some 40 miles east of Florence), along the Apennine spine of Italy lies the site given (by Count Orlando) to St. Francis and the friars as a place of meditation and contemplation. Francis and other friars often went there - not for luxury or comfort, but for the isolation and fraternity conducive to deep prayer. Over the years, many came to LaVerna to pray with the spirit of Francis. For example, friar St. Anthony of Padua spent some time there, as did friar St. Bonaventure Bagnoregio as well.

Here took place the miraculous marking of Francis with his identification with Christ - his stigmata (stig'-ma-ta) with the sacred wounds of Christ in his crucifixion - the four nail marks and the wound in the side.

Friar Thomas of Celano reports: “While he [Francis] was staying in that hermitage called LaVerna, after the place where it is located, two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what this vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph's beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision.

“While he was unable to perceive anything clearly understandable from the vision, its newness very much pressed upon his heart. Signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man hovering over him.

“His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the middle by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner part of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, and their points protruding on opposite sides. Those marks on the inside of his hands were round, but rather oblong on the outside; and small pieces of flesh were visible like the points of nails, bent over and flattened, extending beyond the flesh around them. On his feet, the marks of nails were stamped in the same way and raised above the surrounding flesh. His right side was marked with an oblong scar, as if pierced with a lance, and this often dripped blood, so that his tunic and undergarments were frequently stained with his holy blood”.

“He hid those marks carefully from strangers, and concealed them cautiously from people close to him, so that even the brothers at his side and his more devoted followers for a long time did not

know about them.”

“Rather, in every way possible he tried to hide these marks, so that human favor would not rob him of the grace given him.”

“Although the servant and friend of the Most High saw himself adorned with such magnificent pearls, like precious stones, and marvelously decorated beyond the glory and honor of all others, still his heart did not grow vain. He did not seek to use this to make himself appealing to anyone in a desire for vainglory. Rather in every way possible he tried to hide these marks, so that human favor would not rob him of the grace given him.

“He would never or rarely reveal his great secret to anyone. He feared that his special friends would reveal it to show their intimacy with him, as friends often do, and he would then lose some of the grace given to him. He always carried in his heart and often had on his lips the saying of the prophet [Ps.119]: “I have hidden your words in my heart to avoid any sin against You.”
(see Cel-II.par.94-95, pp.263-4, in FA-I)

These wounds were not just “tattoo” markings on Francis’ body. These were painful wounds, with nails imbedded. These were not five marks of wounds just painted on; they pierced his flesh. We have to realize that from this time, and for two years, the ongoing pain that resulted was in Francis’ every step, his walking anywhere, his moving about, and handling anything.

These wounds serve as a witness of

- a) Christ’s confirmation and approval of Francis to his society (and to us).
- b) Francis’ total mirroring of and identification with Jesus.
- c) Francis’ total love of Jesus.

We recall with devotion each year this stigmata with a franciscan feast on Sept. 17.

Q1. Identifying with Christ – Is this the real goal of my life? How much effort do I put into this?

Q2. Can my acceptance of pain I cannot avoid have a purifying role in my life? If I unite my sufferings to Christ’s, can it ease my pain as well?

Q3. What is MY sense of appreciation for all the things that the Word Made Flesh has suffered for me?

Q4. What do I think of Francis’ expression “Love is not loved”? This reflection often led Francis to tears, as we see expressed in the “Chapel of Tears” near the Portiuncula at Assisi.

Q5. Why do you think Francis would make such a prayer (which we began with)?

Q6. Can the Way of the Cross (Stations) or the Pieta bring me to a closer appreciation of Christ’s sacrifices for me?

In addition, you might want to read friar Bonaventure’s description, Minor Life, ch.6 (Omnibus, pp. 821-826); or in the Legend of the Three Companions, #69 (Omnibus, p.953); or friar Julian of Speyer, in FA-1, on p.410.