

Keeping our focus on Francis

AN SFO REVIEW - Fr. John Sullivan, ofm

THE SERAPHIC VISION ON LA VERNA

have on hand: SFO Rule,

D1

Have someone read for the group SFO Rule, art.1

Then recall what friar Thomas of Celano wrote: "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."....

quoted from Cel-II.par.94-95(p.263-4) FA-I,p.410 Cel-II,95 (p.264). FA-2, p.402

St. Bonaventure offers this insight in his book Soul's Journey into God. Friar Bonaventure gives us a lengthy and prayer-filled interpretation of Francis' spirituality, and in general of the franciscan approach to life. Bonaventure sets the scene for his book by saying:

"Following the example of our most blessed father Francis,... I withdrew to Mount LaVerna, seeking a place of quiet and desiring to find there peace of spirit. While I was there reflecting on various ways by which the soul ascends into God, there came to mind, among other things, the miracle which had occurred to blessed Francis in this very place: the vision of a winged Seraph in the form of the Crucified."

"While reflecting on this, I saw at once that this vision represented our father's rapture in contemplation and the road by which this rapture is reached.

The six wings of the Seraph can rightly be taken to symbolize the six levels of illumination by which, as if by steps or stages, the soul can pass over to peace through ecstatic elevations of Christian wisdom. There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified, a love which so transformed Paul into Christ when he was carried up to the third heaven (2Cor.12:2) that he could say: With Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me (Gal.2:20). (from Soul's Journey into God; W.Spir.)* *

Friar Bonaventure then goes on and writes his book using the imagery of the six wings of the Seraph as indicators and reminders of the comprehensive and full spirituality of Francis, and of anyone who would follow him.

How all-encompassing is this vision of reality!

And again, Christ (and Christ crucified) is the center!

Friar Bonaventure reminds us that two of the six wings run parallel with the crucified Christ. These two outstretched wings represent mankind; they become "images" of God. One wing recalls that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, on the natural level. We are given intellect, free will (with its capacity to choose and to love), and memory. We are "fabulously made". We are immortal, with all our senses, and all creation is subject to us. We are an "image" of God - like seeing an image in a mirror.

Then the other wing which is outstretched level with Christ represents the reality that human beings are

privileged to be supernatural as well. We are raised to being children of God (thru the Sacraments).

Human nature re-formed, graced, re-imaged.

We share such gifts as: the Church, the Scriptures, His teachings, sacraments, commandments, virtues, promise of eternal glory/happiness, yes, and forgiveness.

Such blessings to recall!

The lower two wings, represent all of creation below human beings. They are not “images” of God as such, but serve as “footprints” of God (clues, hints, traces, analogies). All created things with their endless array of color and form give witness to the generous and beautiful God who created it all. The second lower wing represents how nature functions, is organized, and structured; these operations also give us clues to a great God - the laws and patterns of nature (such as the natural sciences), the harmony, balance, interplay, profusion, complexity, coordination and care we find around us. This all gives us much to rejoice and celebrate in God.

Looking at the upper two wings is “...like peering into the Holy of Holies...”. The Divinity is symbolized by the one wing above Christ. God Himself - His oneness, Yahweh, eternal, unmade, the absolute, the alpha and omega, Love, the Creator.

The other upper wing reminds us of the Trinity: Father/Son/Holy Spirit. Our God is community, is harmony, goodness, love, and peace.

Each of these six wings offer much to contemplate, to revel in. Yet there is more. These six wings form, as it were, a crown around Jesus Christ the center. Here in the center is the model of all creation - the Word made Flesh, the first-born of all creation; our Redeemer and Savior.

Stepping back, we see in this seraphic vision the composite of all our franciscan theology, our spirituality - all of which are the wisdom needed to make our ascent into God.

Q1. Can you describe the symbolism of each of the six wings of the Seraph, as Friar Bonaventure sees them?

Q2. Can we use the Seraphic Vision of LaVerna as a source for contemplation in our own lives? How might we do this?

Q3. Do we understand the priority built in creation as expressed by Friar Bonaventure? How do human beings compare to animate and inanimate creatures? How do they differ fundamentally? How does he highlight this?

Q4. Francis is called the “seraphic saint”. What is the special characteristic associated with the angels called “seraphs”?

(Why was St. Bonaventure named the “seraphic Doctor”?)

** For a full reading of Bonaventure’s Book quoted here, see Bonaventure, “The Soul’s Journey into God”, The Classics of Western Spirituality(1978);pp.53-101;Ed:Ewert Cousins; Paulist Press. Also see p.xiii and pp.305-6)

Keeping our focus on Francis

AN SFO REVIEW - Fr. John Sullivan, ofm

D2

Perfect Joy -

have on hand: SFO Rule, Catechism of Catholic Church

We begin by listening to our SFO Rule, art.13 & 19.

We recall the words of St. Paul:

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again, Rejoice!

Everyone should see how unselfish you are. The Lord is near. Dismiss all anxiety from your minds.” (*Philippians 4:4-6*)

We are all familiar with the following story, this dialogue in Francis’ life. We use this shorter form here, taken from an undated writing (see FA-1, p.166):

“The same [Brother Leonard] related in the same place that one day at Saint Mary’s, blessed Francis called Brother Leo and said: “Brother Leo, write.” He responded: “Look, I’m ready!” “Write,” he said, “what true joy is.”

A messenger arrives and says that all the Masters of Paris [University] have entered the Order. Write: this isn’t true joy!

Or, that all the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and the King of England [have entered the Order]. Write: this isn’t true joy!

Again, that my brothers have gone to the non-believers and converted all of them to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn’t consist in any of these things.”

“Then what is true joy?”

“I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It’s winter time, muddy, and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come to the gate and, after I’ve knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: ‘Who are you?’ ‘Brother Francis,’ I answer. ‘Go away!’ he says. ‘This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not come in!’

When I insist, he replies: ‘Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don’t come back to us again! There are many of us here like you – we don’t need you!’

“I stand again at the door and say: ‘For the love of God, take me in tonight!’ And he replies: ‘I will not! Go to the Crosiers’ place and ask there!’

“I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this.”

*(This story is also contained in the “Little Flowers”,
...in the Omnibus of Sources, #8, p.1318-1320).*

Q1. What makes this “perfect joy”? What essential requisites do I need to develop to be able to share Francis’ opinion in such a case?

In the “Assisi Compilation” we read: “And Francis said: The devil is delighted when he can extinguish or prevent devotion and joy in the heart of a servant of God which spring from clean prayer and other good works...”. Blessed Francis had this as his highest and main goal: he was always careful to have and preserve in himself spiritual joy internally and externally,... He used to say that if a servant of God always strives to have and preserve joy internally and externally which proceeds from purity of heart, the devils can do him no harm. They would say: “Since the servant of God has joy both in tribulation and in prosperity, we do not know where to find an entrance to enter him and do him harm.” (FA-2: p229-230, #120).

In the same “Assisi Compilation”(FA-2,p230) we read: “One day he [Francis] reproved one of his companions who looked sad and long-faced. He told him: “Why are you sad and sorrowful over your offenses? It is a matter between you and God. Pray to Him that by His mercy He may grant you the joy of His salvation. Try to be joyful always around me and others, because it is not fitting that a servant of God appear before his brother or others with a sad and glum face.”

Friar Thomas of Celano makes this observation about Francis. “He so loved the man filled with spiritual joy, that at one chapter he had these words written down as a general admonition: “Let them be careful not to appear outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites but show themselves joyful, cheerful, and consistently gracious in the Lord.” FA-2, p.331,#91

Friar Thomas of Celano recalls: “This holy man insisted that spiritual joy was an infallible remedy against a thousand snares and tricks of the enemy. He used to say: “The devil is most delighted when he can steal the joy of spirit from a servant of God. He carries dust which he tries to throw into the tiniest openings of the conscience, to dirty a clear mind and a clean life. But if spiritual joy fills the heart, the serpent casts its poison in vain. The devils cannot harm a servant of Christ when they see him filled with holy cheerfulness. But when the spirit is teary-eyed, feeling abandoned and sad, it will easily be swallowed up in sorrow, or else be carried away toward empty enjoyment.” The saint therefore always strove to keep a joyful heart, to preserve the anointing of the spirit and the oil of gladness.” (as found in FA-2, p.329).

An interesting spiritual insight is expressed in the words of the “Legend of Perugia” (Omnibus, p.1074):

He, [Francis] also said: “I know that the devils envy me because of all the graces I have received from the goodness of the Lord. Since they cannot harm me directly, they try to do it in my companions. If they cannot strike either me or my companions, they withdraw full of confusion. Conversely, if I happen to be tempted and downcast, I need only contemplate the joy of a companion and I go from the temptation and despondency to interior joy.”

The perfect joy Francis speaks about is not “giddiness” or “flightiness”. It is a gift of God, a virtue, a fruit of the Spirit.

Q2. Do I judge “joy” to be the result of everything going my way - all going well and smoothly? How does my idea compare with Francis’?

Q3. Nehemiah recommends: “Rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength.” (ch. 8:10). Does that describe Francis’ approach? Do we rejoice in the Lord enough in prayer?

“While Francis, the man of God, was making his way through a certain forest, singing with glee praises to the Lord in French, robbers suddenly rushed upon him from ambush. When they asked who he was, the man of God, filled with confidence, replied in a prophetic voice: “I am the herald of the great King!” But they beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with snow, saying: “Lie there, you stupid herald of God!” After they left, he jumped out of the ditch, and exhilarated with great joy, he began in an even louder voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of All”.(FA-2,p.539)

Q4. When we as franciscans see the big picture through the perspective we receive from Francis, how can anything or anyone destroy our joy in the Lord?

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Sister HUMILITY of Christ

D3

have on hand: Catechism of the Catholic Church and Bible.

Jesus Christ is the exemplar of humility. Francis reveled in this reality. We recall the words of sacred Scripture, how Jesus emptied himself as told to us by St. Paul in Philippians 2:3-8:

“Never act out of rivalry or conceit; rather, let all parties think humbly of others as superior to themselves, each of you looking to others’ interests rather than his own.

Your attitude must be that of Christ:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at.

Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.

He was known to be of human estate,

and it was thus that he humbled himself,

obediently accepting even death, death on a cross!”

(also read Matthew 20:17-28)

In our SFO Rule we read, art.9: “The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to his every word and call.”

And in art.11: “Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly.”

Q1. What are some of the false descriptions among Catholics for this word “humility”,.... as people around us often use it? ...to put oneself down? ...to act like we didn’t do anything when we did? ...our good grades? When is a person a “show-off”?

In Catholic Church teachings “Humility is the virtue by which a Christian acknowledges that God is the author of all good.” (See Catechism of Catholic Church: art.. 2559, 2713, 2546, 1866; also see “humility” and “pride” in the “Glossary” at the back of book.)

Q2. “Sincere love leads to humility.” Can you explain this?

Of Francis we read: “In order to show himself contemptible and to give others an example of true confession, when he did something wrong he was not ashamed to confess it in his preaching before all the people. In fact, if he had perhaps thought ill of someone or for some reason let slip a harsh word, he would go with all humility to the person of whom he had said or thought something wrong and, confessing his sin, would ask forgiveness.” (Celano-1,#54, p.228 in FA-1).

“The man of God not only showed himself humble to the great, but also to his peers and to the lowly, more willing to be admonished and corrected than to admonish others. For example, one day he was riding a donkey, since he was too weak and sickly to walk, and he passed through the field of a peasant who was working there. The peasant ran to him and asked anxiously if he were Brother Francis. When the man of God humbly answered that he was, the peasant said: “Try hard to be as good as everyone says you are, because many people put their trust in you. So I’m warning you; don’t ever be different from what people expect!”

When the Man of God, Francis, heard this, he got down from the donkey on to the ground, and prostrate before the peasant, humbly kissed his feet, thanking him for being so kind to admonish him.” (page 339, FA-2)

“Francis, the pattern of humility, wanted his brothers to be called *Lesser* they had come to the school

of the humble Christ to learn humility. The teacher of humility, Jesus Christ, to instruct his disciples in true humility, said: "Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all." (p.572,FA-2)

Another definition is found in First Encounter with Francis of Assisi,(1978), Damien Vorreaux, p.57. "Humility is not a debasing of ourselves but a simple acknowledgement that we possess nothing of our own except our sins and vices."

Q3. Why does this seem to be so hard for us humans to acknowledge? What can be done about it?

Q4. How important is true humility?

Q5. Is there a place for "just pride"?

Q6. What do you think of this description, that "Humility is truth"?

"Francis would remind himself: 'Francis, if the Most High had given so much to a thief, he would be more grateful than you!'" (friar Bonaventure, p.571,FA-2)

While Francis' 28 Admonitions were addressed to the friars, the principles are the same for all of us. Three times the issue of humility surfaces in Francis' Admonitions - 17 - 19 - 23. (And by contrast, Admonition 5 deals with pride.)

Admon.17: "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.

A person sins who wishes to receive more from his neighbor than what he wishes to give of himself to the Lord God."

Admon.19: "Blessed is the servant who does not consider himself any better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered worthless, simple, and looked down upon - for what a person is before God, that he is and no more.

Woe to that religious who has been placed in a high position by others and [who] does not want to come down by his own will.

Blessed is that servant who is not placed in a high position by his own will and always desires to be under the feet of others."

Admon.23 (FA-1,p136)

Francis reminds us to consider, in his 23rd Admonition,

"Blessed is the servant who has been found as humble among his subjects as he was among his masters.

Blessed is the servant who always remains under the rod of correction.

Faithful and prudent is the servant who does not delay in punishing himself for all his offenses, inwardly through contrition and outwardly through confession and penance for what he did."

Q7. In Admon. 19 we have just read: "...for what a person is before God, that he is and no more". Is Francis' advice here a good norm by which we can judge ourselves, and even others? (This leads to honesty with God, and serves us well with our examination of conscience - to see how we are in the sight of God - not how other persons see us).

Q8. In what ways is Mary a model of humility?
(check the *Magnificat*, for example; how she lived.)

Keeping our focus on Francis

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FRATERNITY for Franciscans
have on hand: SFO Rule, the SFO Constitutions.

D4

A. Looking at our SFO Rule and our SFO General Constitutions, we see a wealth of reminders of what we professed as Secular Franciscans. The fraternity is always an essential part of the franciscan story. In the Prologue to the SFO Rule, when Francis wrote to all “the brothers and sisters in penance,” notice his frequent use of “we” and “all”. While today’s review is not based on quotes from St. Francis, it does give us approved clues to 21st Century SFO life.

In the SFO Rule, Art. 22, we read:

- “The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order ...and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love.

...This should be the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members.”

art. 23 - “The entire community is engaged in this process of growth by its own manner of living.”

Q1. How well have we of our fraternity been fulfilling these goals explained in art. 22 of our SFO Rule?

B. Fraternity - Essential elements:

There are many ways to approach the topic of fraternity. Some of the essential elements are: sharing, caring, and family spirit.

Q2. In what ways does a fraternity show SHARING on the part of the members? How is this manifested in daily life?

Q3. In what ways does a fraternity show CARING on the part of the members? How is this manifested in daily life?

Q4. In what ways does a fraternity show FAMILY SPIRIT on the part of the members? How is this manifested regularly?

C. Reviewing our SFO Rule we see:

art. 1 - “The Franciscan family....[is] in life-giving union with each other...[and] their common Seraphic Father.”

art. 2 - “In these fraternities the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state.”

art. 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.”

art. 8 - “Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.”

art. 13 - “A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly”

art. 15 - “Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice...”

art. 19 - “Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue....

art. 20 - “The Secular Franciscan Order is divided into fraternities of various levels - local, regional, national, and international. Each one has its own moral personality in the Church. These various fraternities are coordinated and united according to the norm of this rule and of the constitutions.”

art.23...Members who find themselves in particular difficulties should discuss their problems with the

council in fraternal dialogue.

Q5. Do our monthly meetings become a means of spiritual nourishment in the franciscan (SFO) way? Why, or why not? What needs to be added to our meetings, if anything?

D. SFO Networking: A noticeable change in the new Rule is the networking of communication and responsibilities for secular franciscans today, not only within their own fraternity, but with the other fraternities and the other levels (such as the regional and national fraternities).

Q6. How well have we ourselves been developing this expected networking?

E. The important role of the council is also emphasized.

art. 21 - On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister....

art. 24 - To foster communion among members, the council should organize regular and frequent meetings of the community.... as well as meeting with other Franciscan groups, especially with youth groups.

It should adopt appropriate means for growth in Franciscan and ecclesial life....

...and encourage everyone to a life of fraternity.

F. Financial support: Part of our caring and sharing in fraternity includes sacrificing for it, which includes financial support. This is addressed in

art. 25 - "all the brothers and sisters should offer a contribution according to their means [regarding expenses].

and... Local fraternities should contribute toward the expenses of the higher fraternity councils."

art. 26 - the councils ... should ask for suitable and well prepared religious for spiritual assistance [to the fraternity].

G. ROLE of the COUNCIL - need for a council.

These members help determine "Where are we headed?"

They are asked by their positions to supply means for fraternal growth [see point "E" above] Fr. Ben Brevoort, ofmCap, wrote in 1995: "Francis & Christian life, apostolic activities and charity, initial and ongoing formation, fraternal life and contact between members...preparation of fraternity meetings, planning and evaluating fraternity activities; evaluation of candidates to be admitted to the Order or to profession; preparation of the chapter or another special meeting; formation courses for leaders, actual and prospective, or for members of the fraternity." This can serve as a great monthly checklist for the council to include in their meeting. They are called, they promise to help the fraternity not with arrogance, nor with indifference, but with dedication and with faithfulness. The fraternity needs the blessings developed by the council. He also listed the 4 elements of fraternity meetings - "prayer, formation, activities, and fraternization".

Q7. What are the four recommended elements of a regular monthly meeting?

H. VISITATIONS..."and to receive greater support in the life of the fraternity, the minister {and council} should ask for a regular pastoral visit and a fraternal visit ...every 3 years."

Q8. How are these visitations arranged for?

I. ELECTIONS: Speaking of councils raises the need for elections - to fulfill responsibilities to and for fraternity, as well as being willing candidates for positions of service.

Q9. How do I make my judgments when it comes to elections in my fraternity? ...as a potential candidate & making my choice? Why are there term-limits?

I strongly suggest you read from the SFO General Constitutions, art. 28-32, & 49-50,53.

Keeping our focus on Francis

AN SFO REVIEW - Fr. John Sullivan, ofm

Our SFO ROOTS

D5

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

How did we come to be? Did Francis group us together and start us up? *Have someone read SFO Rule, art.1.*

Friar Bonaventure wrote in his "Major Life, (FA-2, p.553):

"For set on fire by the fervor of his preaching, a great number of people bound themselves by new laws of penance according to the rule which they received from the man of God. Christ's servant decided to name this way of life the Order of the Brothers of Penance. As the road of penance is common to all who are striving toward heaven, so this way of life admits clerics and lay, virgins and married of both sexes. How meritorious it is before God is clear from the numerous miracles performed by some of its members."

Among the almost countless number of men and women who have professed to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis for almost 800 years, our Church offers us some 126 canonized saints (35 are SFOs) and 286 blessed (86 are SFOs) for our edification, encouragement, and assurance that this is an effective way of salvation.

In Lauds of the Divine Office of St. Francis (FA-1,p.338),

friar Julian of Speyer and others wrote, ca.1228:

"He wandered round about to preach. And, by no human teacher taught, left the learned struck with awe.

Of valor were the words he spoke, so that a fresh militia came to follow their new captain.

Three were the Orders he arrayed: the Friars Minor he called the first;

and the Poor Ladies were next, becoming the middle order; then thirdly came the Penitents, comprising men and women."

Our Prologue to the present SFO Rule is recognized as Francis' written guidance to those wanting to follow his way, as he addresses his letter to the "Brothers and Sisters of Penance." *Choose to re-read it in the group.*

Friar Thomas of Celano writes: "Many people, well-born and lowly, cleric and lay, driven by divine inspiration, began to come to Saint Francis, for they desired to serve under his constant training and leadership."

...All of these the holy one of God, like a fertile stream of heavenly grace, watered with showers of gifts and he adorned the field of their hearts with the flowers of perfection."

... He is without question an outstanding craftsman, for through his spreading message, the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes according to his form, rule and teaching, and there is victory for the triple army of those being saved." (see FA-1, p.216)

"On account of these things [proclaiming peace, repentance and God's word], many people who had previously hated both peace and salvation, with the Lord's cooperation, came to embrace peace with all their heart; they became themselves children of peace and ardent seekers of eternal salvation." (see FA-1, p.320, Celano)

And Friar Julian of Speyer writes in 1234/5:(FA-1, p.385):

“Then, comforted in the Lord, St. Francis began to speak out more boldly owing to the apostolic authority he had been granted, and going around through cities, towns and villages, he steadfastly preached penance. He was particularly careful to show himself blameless in all things, lest he be thought to gloss over the truth with flattering words. “Educated men marveled at the power of the words of him who had not been taught by man, and seeing the noble and lowborn, rich and poor crowd around him in bands, they astutely made their way to him as though to a new star rising in the darkness. In fact, he provided a plan of salvation to persons of every state and condition, age and sex, giving them all a rule of life. Today, the church rejoices that his felicitous leadership of both sexes has brought about a threefold army of those who are to be saved.”

“As we mentioned above, he founded three Orders, the first of which he prized above all others by profession and habit, and which, as he had written in its Rule, he called the Order of Lesser Brothers. The Second Order, the Order of the Poor Ladies and virgins of the Lord, also mentioned above, likewise took its fruitful origin from him. The Third, also an order of considerable perfection is called the Order of Penitents, which profitably brings together clerics and laity, virgins, unmarried, and married persons of both sexes.”

The Three Companions wrote: “...both married men and women given in marriage, unable to separate because of the law of matrimony, committed themselves to more severe penance in their own homes on the wholesome advice of the brothers. And thus, through blessed Francis, a perfect worshipper of the Holy Trinity, the Church of God was renewed in three orders, just as the earlier repair of the three churches foreshadowed. Each of these orders was in its time approved by the Supreme Pontiff.” (FA-2, p.103)

Reviewing the life-sequence of St. Francis (1182-1226), what date is attributed to the start of the SFO? We know Francis went with his 11 companions to Rome for approval as Penitents of Assisi in 1209; Clare began her new form of life in 1212. Many think that 1210 is the likely start of this movement among the laypeople which evolved into the SFO.

Q1. What were the expressed reasons for these people forming a “third order” around Francis?

Q2. What is considered the starting date for the SFO? Who are often named among the first SFO members?

Q3. How did the Church fit into the picture of the SFO then? ...and now?

Q4. What are MY reasons for being a member of the SFO fraternity?

Q5. What might I do to improve the purpose and effect of the SFO in my life?

Unfortunately, we do not find many identified SFO persons mentioned in the writings about Francis in those early years. Read about Luchesio & his wife, often listed as the first members....see p.7, To Live as Francis Lived (St.A.M.Press)

Check the material on the role of the laity supplied in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, esp. #897 to 913, and 940 to 943.

Keeping our focus on Francis

Friar Celano tells us: "In all his preaching, before he presented the word of God to the assembly, he [Francis] prayed for peace saying, "May the Lord give you peace." He always proclaimed this to men and women, to those he met and to those who met him. Accordingly, many who hated peace along with salvation, with the Lord's help wholeheartedly embraced peace. They became themselves children of peace, now rivals for eternal salvation."FA-I. p.203, chap.10,#23)

Have some participants now offer to read

SFO Rule 7 - 15 - 17 - 19.

Francis treasured the blessings of peace. He promoted peace, he became a guide to peace for peoples of many walks of life. We know well the Peace Prayer of St. Francis. This prayer must not only be a begging for peace, but a prayer of commitment to do on our part what is needed to find peace in our world - peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with one another.

We can recount some other events in his life, such as the Wolf of Gubbio.

His Three Companions recall: "He used to tell us: "As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your hearts. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness, and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken, and recall the erring. In fact, many who seem to us to be members of the devil will yet be disciples of Christ."

(see FA-2, p.102)

Another example is cited in the Assisi Compilation: "...Although very ill, blessed Francis was moved by piety for them [the Bishop of Assisi and the mayor/podesta']. He said to his companions: "It is a great shame for you, servants of God, that the bishop and the podesta' hate each other in this way, and that there is no one intervening for peace and harmony between them."

And so, for that reason, he composed one verse for the *Praises*:

"Praised be by 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, they shall be crowned."

Afterwards he called one of his companions and told him: "Go to the podesta' and, on my behalf, tell him to go to the bishop's residence together with the city's magistrates and bring with him as many others as he can."

"And when the brother had gone, he said to two of his other companions: "Go and sing the Cantic of Brother Sun before the bishop, the podesta', and the others who are with them. I trust in the Lord that He will humble their hearts and they will make peace with each other and return to their earlier friendship and love."... and so it happened! (see complete event in text FA-2, p.187).

"I call upon the Eternal Father through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that through the intercession of the most holy Virgin Mary, the mother of the same God and Lord Jesus Christ, and through the intercession of blessed Francis, our leader and father, he may enlighten the eyes of our soul to guide our feet in the way of that peace which surpasses all understanding.

"This is the peace proclaimed and given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ and preached again and again by our father Francis.

"At the beginning and end of every sermon he announced peace; in every greeting he wished for

peace; in every contemplation he sighed for ecstatic peace – like a citizen of that Jerusalem of which that Man of Peace says, who was peaceable with those who hated peace: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.(Ps.120:7 & 122:6)

“For he knew that the throne of Solomon would not stand except in peace, since it is written: In peace is his place and his abode in Sion.”(Ps.76:3) Friar Bonaventure pp.53-54 in Western Spirituality, Paulist Press.

Q1. How do we explain what “peace” is? What are some different meanings for the word “peace” - among governments, neighbors, in families, relationships?

Q2. What did Francis mean by this word?

Each morning at the Church’s morning prayer we reflect and remind ourselves of these words of Zechariah’s description of the Savior (Luke 1:78-79): “...the Dayspring comes “...to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The angels on Christmas morn sang of “...peace on earth...”

Christ on the Cross, and at each of our Masses, prays for our peace when he asks: “Father, forgive them....”

Christ’s first words to his followers on that first Easter Sunday evening addressed them with “Peace be to you”.

Q3. What does Sacred Scripture mean by this word?

Q4. Since we are called to be “peacemakers” by Christ, go line by line and explain how each suggestion (pledge line) of the Peace Prayer of St. Francis helps promote peace.

Q5. What does the liturgy at Mass mean when it uses this word several times before Communion?

Q6. Is the “sign of peace” at Mass - only a gesture? or is it a prayer? What meanings do I give it at Mass?

Q7. Following Zechariah’s view, do we (do I) let Christ “guide our feet into the way of peace”?

One of the critical statements that help us on our way to finding peace in our society is that of Pope Paul VI, who declared: “If you want peace, work for justice.”

Q8. How do the example and principles of prominent people (and neighbors) in our lifetime fulfill this call? Give examples:

such as: M.L.King - stood for non-violence, what’s important is “doing God’s will” (in his Mountain speech), and “Some day, we will judge boys and girls not by the color of their skin, but by the quality of their character.” (I-have-a-Dream speech) Q. What has happened to these MLK messages?

Also examine the Catechism of the Catholic Church; see glossary “peace’, and esp. #1784, & 2302 to 2330.