

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi

Reflection 1: Introduction

The testimony of history tells us that in the course of his life St. Francis of Assisi exemplified in an outstanding way all of the virtues that Jesus Christ taught and lived by.

This is surely one of the basic reasons for St. Francis' appeal to so many people of faith.

But later in his life, St. Francis himself offers us a particular reflection/meditation on what many consider to be his "key" Franciscan virtues in living out the Catholic faith. These six "key" virtues he highlighted and honored in his Salutation of the Virtues.

The SFO Constitutions emphasize the need to find inspiration in the writings of St. Francis (check SFO Constitutions, articles 12, 40, 44). As Franciscans, we can surely benefit by drawing closer to St. Francis' selection of these six virtues and try to understand them and embrace them as he did – for we too promise to "follow in the footsteps" of the Seraphic Saint. Many see these six virtues as essential for the Franciscan movement down through the centuries. Our families and our society would be so much more just and peaceful if we were to employ these six virtues.

We can't help but notice that St. Francis personalizes the virtues and places them in a "family setting".

And we must keep in mind that, like most of St. Francis' prayers, we must consider them primarily for meditation, rather than just for "recitation".

Here is St. Francis' Reflection:

Praises of - Salutation to - the Virtues

¹Hail, Queen Wisdom,
may the Lord care for you
with your holy sister Pure Simplicity.

²Holy Lady Poverty, may the Lord care for you
with your holy sister Humility.

³Lady Holy Charity,
may the Lord look after you
with your sister Holy Obedience.

⁴All of you most holy virtues
may the Lord protect,
from whom you come forth and develop.

⁵Clearly, there is not a person in the whole world,
who can possibly possess one of you
without dying first.

⁶Whoever has one [virtue]
and does not offend the others, has them all.

⁷And who offends one,
has none and offends all.

⁸And each one of them overcomes vices and sins.

⁹Holy Wisdom conquers satan
and all his evil cleverness.

¹⁰Pure Holy Simplicity overcomes
all the wisdom of this world and
the wisdom of the body.

¹¹Holy Poverty conquers
the thirst for riches and avarice
and the cares of this world.

¹²Holy Humility conquers
pride
and all people who are in the world,
and in the same way all things which are in the world.

¹³Holy Charity conquers
all diabolical and carnal temptations
and all worldly fears.

¹⁴Holy Obedience overcomes all personal preferences,
corporal and carnal,
and limits his mortified body
to the obedience of the spirit
and to the obedience of his brother;

¹⁵and he is subject and submissive to all people who are in the world;

¹⁶and not only to people, but also to all the beasts and wild animals,
so that they might do to him whatever they should wish,
as long as it is given to them from the Lord.

In lines 1-4: The first four lines “set the scene” for these six specific virtues.

In lines 5-8 -- Francis describes the necessary paths to achieve these virtues.

Then starting *in line 9* Francis gives reflections on each of these virtues.

For Sharing:

Q1. What are the necessary paths to achieve these six Virtues as explained in lines 5-8?

Q2. What kind of “dying” is Francis referring to in line 5? Explain.

Q3. How does St. Francis tell us that these 6 virtues are closely related?

Q4. In our Catholic tradition, what is a VIRTUE?

Q5. St. Francis divides his reflection into three parts, which are?

Q6. Which 6 virtues is St. Francis identifying for us here? Any surprise?

Q7. What are the vices contrary to these 6 virtues that we should be cautious about?

Q8. If I fail in one of these virtues, what does that tell me, according to St. Francis?

Q9. As a layperson (and SFO member) how much do I treasure these six virtues?

Q10. How much effort am I making to embrace them more completely?

Q11. How do you see each of these virtues as “counter-cultural”?

Having an SFO Rule & a Bible at hand will be useful for the next lessons.

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi

Reflection 2: The Prayer Itself

What occasioned this poetic presentation is not known, but has been widely open to multiple interpretations down through the centuries. David Flood, ofm, proposes that it is a “celebration of the strengths of the movement” and is offered as an encouragement and inspiration to all who embrace his approach to our Christian calling. Other writers sense Francis’ frustration over the lifestyles of some of the friars. This poem can also clearly serve as a strong reminder to those (especially friars in vows) who find themselves wandering far from their original Franciscan commitments.

At any rate, St. Francis offers this message as definitely counter-cultural in order to breathe life and peace into people’s lives, which the Franciscan movement was creating in many quarters of Christendom.

But was he only addressing friars in this presentation? I think not. There is no clear evidence in this text that he is only addressing friars. He never mentions that it is intended only for the “brothers” or for persons in vows. It is true historically that most interpretations and analyses understandably have been made by the friars. This automatically colors the views expressed in their writings since they are living that way of life and are viewing it from that perspective.

The prayer itself has three major sections:

1st - St. Francis greets the six Virtues and asks God to protect them (for He is their source).

2nd - St. Francis teaches two basic principles: “one and all” and “must die first”.

3rd - Then one by one St. Francis offers a short reflection on each of these virtues.

The 1st Section - St. Francis greets the Six Virtues and asks God to protect them (for He is their source).

Verses 1 to 4 reads:

1Hail, Queen Wisdom,
may the Lord care for you
with your holy sister Pure Simplicity.
2Holy Lady Poverty, may the Lord care for you
with your holy sister Humility.
3Lady Holy Charity,
may the Lord look after you
with your sister Holy Obedience.
4All of you most holy virtues
may the Lord protect,
from whom you come forth and develop.

Each of the six “Ladies of Virtue” is greeted in this rich poetic style, with the imbedded prayer that the Lord take care of them as prize possessions. Wisdom is Queen, and her sisters make up the full array as a part of this special royalty.

Francis also recognizes that they are pure gifts from God Himself, whose hand is involved in their growth and development as well. All this comes again from the sheer goodness of an all-Good God. How truly blest we are to be offered such virtues or powers in our life with God.

The 2nd Section – St. Francis teaches two basic principles: “one and all” and “must die first”.

Here in verses 5 to 8 St. Francis explains:

⁵Clearly, there is not a person in the whole world,
who can possibly possess one of you
without dying first.

⁶Whoever has one [virtue]
and does not offend the others, has them all.

⁷And who offends one,
has none and offends all.

⁸And each one of them overcomes vices and sins.

In verse 5 St. Francis reminds us that the life of the virtues cannot be attained “without dying first”.

As St. Paul wrote: “*Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.... We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin*”
(see Rom.6:3-6)

This basic principle is what franciscan St. Bonaventure explains as the “purgative way” in his treatise on the spiritual life titled “The Threefold Way/De Triplici Via”.
(You might also want to read Luke 14:25-27 & 33.)

Verses 6 and 7 reveal the reminder from St. Francis of his other principle of “all-or-none”.

Knowing that this meditation is not restricted to persons in vowed life, we must all consider its consequences in our personal SFO lives. St. Francis encourages us not to neglect any one of these six virtues, lest our Franciscan spiritual lives have no serious foundation at all.

St. Francis also observes and reminds us that God-given virtues counteract vices and sins, as he tells us in line 8.

The 3rd Section - Then one by one St. Francis offers a short reflection on each of these six virtues -- which we will take up individually in subsequent lessons.

For sharing:

Q1. Were you surprised by any of St. Francis’ selection of these particular six virtues?

Q2. Do I **really** believe, take seriously and embrace these two basic principles of the spiritual life explained by St. Francis? which are: 2a –must take “one and all” & 2b – “must die first”.

Q3. Should we be praying-for/desiring all six virtues?

Q4. What key words do YOU use to describe each of these 6 selected virtues?

Q5. By our SFO profession we are setting aside the values of the world, flesh, devil (*conversion*, SFORule,art.7), & what values are we (am I) embracing instead?

Q6. Are we (am I) ready to embrace (deepen and exercise) all six (6) of these franciscan virtues?

Q7. How does self-denial and sacrifice fit into St. Francis’ picture?

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi

Reflection 3: Holy Queen Wisdom

¹Hail, Queen Wisdom,
may the Lord care for you
with your holy sister Pure Simplicity.

.....

⁹Holy Wisdom conquers satan
and all his evil cleverness.

Of all these six virtues, St. Francis honors Wisdom with the special title of a Queen. He knows only too well that the Scriptures identify God Himself with Wisdom.

St. Francis tries to make it clear that there are TWO kinds of wisdom – the wisdom of the world and spiritual wisdom. And there is a clear dichotomy between them that we must accept. There should be no compromise. And we should pray and seek for true wisdom. It is our best defensive and offensive weapon in the spiritual life.

St. Francis tells us that the success of this virtue is to outwit satan’s snares which can be so deadly. We have seen satan’s snares succeed in the Garden of Eden with our first parents against human wisdom. And as our enemy he continues to try to do the same to each one of us ever since. Yet, with this virtue satan himself is conquered and put in his place.

In St. Francis’ view the Cross is essential to this true wisdom, for it is the wisdom embraced and exhibited by Christ, the King, his liege-Lord.

It would be good to now read (aloud?) the SFO Rule, articles 4 & 7.
St. Francis in his Second Letter to the Faithful explains:

-We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh, but, instead, we must be simple, humble and pure. (2LetFaith: 45).

Later in that same Letter St. Francis tells all of us:

– All those, however, who are not living in penance, who do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, who practice vice and sin and walk after evil concupiscence and wicked desires, who do not observe what they have promised, and who serve the world with their bodies, the desires of the flesh, the cares and anxieties of this world, and the preoccupations of this life [all these] are deceived by the devil whose children they are and whose works they do. They are blind because they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ.

They do not have spiritual wisdom because they do not possess the Son of God, the true wisdom of the Father, within them. It is said of them: Their wisdom has been swallowed up.” (2LetFaith: 63-67)

If you have the time, read St. Francis’ Seventh Admonition – which describes the purpose of learning – learning vs. wisdom.(“smart” vs. “wise”). You might also read Francis’s advice to the friars in his “Earlier Rule” for them: in chapters 8 & 9 & 17:16

There are multiple descriptions in Sacred Scripture for the necessity for true wisdom. For example, we find in the Book of Wisdom (6:12): – *Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom, and she is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her.*

St. Paul gives us a richer New Testament understanding of true wisdom by writing:

– *Yes, Jews demand “signs” and Greeks look for “wisdom”, but we preach Christ crucified*

– *a stumbling block to Jews, and an absurdity to Gentiles; but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* (1Cor:1:22-24)

St. Paul also explains - *Where is the wise man to be found? Where the scribe? Where is the master of worldly argument? Has not God turned the wisdom of this world into folly?*” (1Cor1:20)

C. Basic principles we must consider:

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes wisdom in these words: “A spiritual gift which enables one to know the purpose and plan of God”.

In searching for spiritual wisdom, we have to know that

1- wisdom must be based on TRUTH!

True spiritual wisdom is a gift that allows us to step back and see the bigger picture of reality.

As wisdom's foundation this truth is not established by emotions, and this truth is not established by opinions (or opinion polls).

2- wisdom has two forms – true and false wisdom, or “spiritual wisdom” and “wisdom of this world”.

3- wisdom of the Cross must be included as essential.

4- the help of the Holy Spirit must be the foundation for this search for wisdom.

D. Applications:

In our daily tasks and activities, whose “wisdom” do we really absorb?

This gift of wisdom **we must desire – we must thirst** for it.

The testimony of the saints again and again tries to teach us that we must work to distinguish between our emotions and spiritual wisdom.

And prayerfully we must work to regularly see the bigger picture (stepping back) in order to see reality as God sees it. We must *want* to see it this way. There is no other way.

And spiritual wisdom cannot be complete without including the wisdom of the Cross!

Consider King Solomon, who asked for wisdom, and received it. But sadly his life testifies that this was not enough – (we do need ALL SIX virtues). Just check Solomon's life and see which of these six key virtues he failed in.

Q1. Why is prayerful reflection on the Sacred Scripture essential to gaining wisdom?

Q2. Do we ever think of opening the Bible to meditate on the “wisdom” literature? (esp. – Books of Wisdom, Sirach, and Ecclesiastes) (*I strongly recommend them.*) (also Psalms)

Q3. Why is wisdom necessary to understand and use the other five virtues?

Q4. What is the difference between being a “good” person and a “wise” person?

Q5. What is the difference between being a “smart” person and a “wise” person?

Q6. Which wisdom do TV programs usually offer us? Explain.

Q7. How central to spiritual wisdom is the wisdom of the Cross?

Q8. Why is wisdom necessary to implement the six SFO commissions?

Q9. How does wisdom help me to prioritize my values in life?

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi

Reflection 4: Holy, Pure Simplicity.

¹Hail, Queen Wisdom,
may the Lord care for you
with your holy sister Pure Simplicity.

.....

¹⁰Pure Holy Simplicity overcomes
all the wisdom of this world and
the wisdom of the body.

The virtue of simplicity needs clarification because the word 'simplicity' itself has several different and distinct meanings in the English language. The four common meanings are:

- a) "He is just a simple person – a simpleton - uneducated".
- b) "He lives a simple lifestyle – just lives with the basics" (a form of poverty).
- c) "The operation is simplicity itself – non-complex".
- d) "He is totally God-focused".

The last of these descriptions is what St. Francis has in mind in this meditation.

In writing St. Francis' life friar St. Bonaventure explains Francis' advice to the friars: "They should not study merely in order to have something to say; they should study so as to practice what they have learned and then encourage others to do likewise. I want my friars to be true disciples of the Gospel and to progress in knowledge of truth in such a way as to grow in simplicity,"

Bonav., Major Life, XI,1-2 (found in Omnibus on pp711-712)

"There is a series of evangelical virtues, **not listed in current ascetical treatises**, which in St. Francis acquire their authentic value. To this number belong simplicity and joy..." The Franciscan Calling, Lazaro Iriarte de Aspurz, ofmCap,(1974)
p. 117.

Philotheus Boehner,ofm wrote:

"The ideal of *minoritas* is difficult enough; *simplicitas* is just a little too much for us. Perhaps this is because we have come to associate holy simplicity with what is properly called "unholy stupidity"; we tend to equate the simple man with the simpleton. "Very probably another and much deeper reason to our avoiding the challenge of simplicity, and the reason is that we are afraid of the radical attitudes holy simplicity will demand of us.

"There is no point in quibbling; the fact is that Franciscan simplicity has gone out of fashion among Franciscans. Yet it is an absolutely necessary ingredient in the formation of franciscans, ...eliminating it is to devitalize our entire spiritual life.

"Without simplicity we cannot effect a true *metanoia*." (Conferences(1966), p. 83.

Now take time to read the SFO Rule, art. 4 & 7.

So what does this virtue mean for us Franciscans? Examine St. Francis' meditative

prayer “My God and My All”. When God is our everything we have embraced simplicity. Here is a perfect model of the meaning of this virtue of simplicity.

Here is what St. Francis wrote in his Second Letter to the Faithful:

– “But how happy and blessed are those who love God and do as the Lord Himself says in the Gospel: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Let us love God, therefore, and adore Him with a pure heart and a pure mind, because He Who seeks this above all things has said: True adorers adore the Father in Spirit and Truth.

For all who adore Him must adore Him in the Spirit of truth.” (2nd LetFaith,#18-20)

This virtue of simplicity calls us to primarily develop a single focus of mind and heart. Here are some insights to describe this virtue: “Turning completely from self to God” - “Doing everything God asks of us” - “Complete surrender to Christ” - “Total, complete dedication & commitment” - “Total acceptance” - *ex toto corde* [with one’s whole heart; see Mk.12:30]

Contrariwise, some of the enemies of simplicity are: learned affectation and arrogance, airs of sophistication, being disingenuous, being rationalizers, having excuses for everything.

“As a council of perfection, simplicity signifies the indivision of heart and the singleness of purpose of those who are free from voluntary imperfection and who seek God with great purity of intention. By those who lack this quality, God is not loved perfectly, *ex toto corde*;...” (New Catholic Encyclopedia, McGraw-Hill, XIII, p.229)

Some interpreters of this Salutation of the Virtues claim that St. Francis is reacting to the “academically learned”. St. Francis fears that a division is developing between the learned friars and the non-learned, which can destroy this movement inspired by God. Francis highlights this virtue to make sure the friars never lose it, and help them realize how essential this virtue is to their way of life whatever activities they are involved in. Such concern by St. Francis for the dangers of “academics” and even any kind of work reminds us that this precious gift can be easily lost!

Embracing God with our whole heart (*ex toto corde*) is hopefully calling each of us in our prayer life, our life in society, and in our franciscan fraternity.

The Virgin Mary stands as a model of total simplicity and wisdom. Follow her life and we see her total commitment to God and whatever He willed for her. Meditate on her great prayer, the MAGNIFICAT as given to us by St. Luke (1:46-55) to reveal her sentiments and understanding of the bigger picture, and how we hear her full-hearted response in joy and dedication to the God who is the center of her life.

For sharing:

Q1. What is the difference between the virtue of simplicity and “simple lifestyle”?

Q2. How do you explain St. Francis’ concern over “academics”?

Q3. How does my Baptism call me to simplicity?

Q4. How does our “fallen human nature” impact the practice of this virtue of simplicity?

Q5. What is the full meaning of “to love God with your whole heart” (1st Commandment)?

Q6. Does my prayer life and lifestyle reflect my serious efforts to live more completely by the 1st Commandment?

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi
Reflection 5: Lady Holy Poverty

Holy Poverty confounds
the desire for riches,
greed,
and the cares of this world.

A. Let’s look at the SFO Rule as a reminder about our own Secular Franciscan commitment to the virtue of poverty: art.4a - art.7a - art.10 - art.11 - art.12 - art.18.

In our present society poverty is only seen as something to be removed! In our society poverty is to be stamped out! It is very difficult today for people to understand poverty as a virtue. Yet this value change, this shift which St. Francis surfaced as critical to the spiritual life in following Christ is at the core of his message.

We know that poverty was the planned constant companion for Jesus and for his mother Mary. Look at the Crib and the events associated with this Incarnational event. Look at the Cross, and the events associated with Christ’s sacrifice for our salvation.

Truly poverty is the ROYAL virtue! (for the King and the Queen chose it for themselves.)

As expressed in The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty, Christ “the Son of God, the Lord of virtue and the King of glory, fell in love with this Virtue with a special affection.” (Francis of Assisi, I, p.529)

Francis himself wrote to all the faithful:

“The most high Father made known from heaven through His holy angel Gabriel this Word of the Father – so worthy, so holy and glorious – in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb He received the flesh of our humanity and frailty. Though He was rich, He wished, together with the most Blessed virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else.” (2LetFaith #5)

We remember that Francis himself was called the little poor one, “Il Poverello”. Friar Thomas of Celano in 1229 gave us insights into St. Francis’ view of poverty when he wrote:

“The father of the poor, the poor Francis, conforming himself to the poor in all things, was distressed to see anyone poorer than himself, not out of any desire for empty glory, but from a feeling of simple compassion. Though he was content with a ragged and rough tunic, he often wished to divide it with some poor person.

“This richest poor man, moved by a great feeling of pity, in order to help the poor in some way, used to approach the rich people of this world during the coldest times of the year, asking them to loan him their cloaks or furs. As they responded even more gladly than the blessed father asked, he used to say to them, “I shall accept this from you only on the condition that you never expect to have it returned.” The first poor man who happened to meet him, he would then clothe with whatever he had received, exulting and rejoicing.

“He was deeply troubled whenever he saw one of the poor insulted or heard a curse hurled at any creature. It happened that a certain brother insulted a poor man begging alms, saying: “Are you sure that you are not really rich and just pretending to be poor?” When St. Francis, the father of the poor, heard this,

he was deeply hurt and he severely rebuked the brother who had said these things. Then he ordered the brother to strip naked in front of the poor man and to kiss his feet, to beg his forgiveness. He used to say: “Anyone who curses the poor insults Christ whose noble banner the poor carry, since Christ made himself poor for us in this world.” That is also why, when he met poor people burdened with wood or other heavy loads, he would offer his own weak shoulders to help them. The holy man overflowed with the spirit of charity,...” (I-Cel.;ch.28,par.76).

POVERTY has several definitions -

Q1. Can you give some definitions of poverty ?

Q2. Which definition is being used here in our SFO Rule?

In this context poverty may be defined as...

a virtue, a form of penance and conversion, by which we detach ourselves from our possessions for the sake of others in imitation of (following the example of)

Jesus Christ. *(explain to yourself the various elements of this description.)*

We can readily see that underlying this virtue of poverty is a necessary, sincere trust in divine providence and concern for others (not selfish).

In our social experience, poverty is either involuntary (so many around us, due to circumstances of life) or voluntary (by free choice, by pledge, by vow).

I encourage you to read from the Catechism of Catholic Church: especially paragraphs 2443 to 2449 & 2451 to 2452.

(you may wish to give some examples of what they have written there....)

Consider: When I give of my time, my talent, and/or my treasure, I am giving some of myself!!

Q3.- In what way is this true?

Q4.- What priorities have I developed for my franciscan poverty – of my time, talent, treasure? ...sacrificing to be a candidate for the SFO council? ..with the sacrifice of time and talent for council work?

Q5. How does the monthly fraternity collection fit into my understanding of poverty and penance?

Q6. How does shopping at second-hand stores (e.g., garage sales/Good Will/Salvation Army/etc.) for clothing and furniture show concern for the environment and natural resources?

Q7. Am I comfortable curbing my desire to “want more”? ...any examples of doing this?

Q8. Why do Catholics today find it difficult to understand poverty as a virtue?

Q9. Why did Catholics in Francis' day find it difficult to understand poverty as a virtue?

Q10. What do I know of Francis' romance and marriage with Lady Poverty? (Read elsewhere in Omnibus,p.1531+;or Francis of Assisi, I,p.523+)

Q11. Why did St. Francis call poverty a ROYAL virtue? (Cf. Celano,#200, Omnibus,p. 522 or in Francis of Assisi, II,p.375)

Q12. How does our “commercialized society” impact the practice of this virtue of poverty?

Q13. Did anyone check the Catechism of the Catholic Church during preparation study to find the virtue of poverty listed? What did you observe?

Q14. Is this Franciscan virtue contrary to capitalism?

Q15. What is the difference between “a desire for riches” and “avarice/greed”?

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi
Reflection 6: Holy Humility

¹²Holy Humility confounds pride,
all people who are in the world
and all that is in the world.

Jesus Christ is the exemplar of humility. And St. 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 find, art.9: “The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to his every word and call.”

And in SFO Rule 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.”

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.)

Of St. 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.” (in Francis of Assisi, I, Celano-1, #54, p.228).

“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." (Francis of Assisi, II, page 339.)

St. Francis emphasized with his friars that they should always be conscious that they are "the minores" [the lesser, the lower]. Friar St. Bonaventure wrote about this conviction of St. Francis in this way:

"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." (Francis of Assisi, II, p.572)

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

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"?

Q2. Why does this virtue seem to be so hard for us humans to acknowledge? What can be done about it?

Q3. How important is true humility?

Q4. 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!'" (Francis of Assisi, II, friar Bonaventure, p.571)

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.”

Q5. We have just read in Admonition 19: “...for what a person is before God, that he is and no more”. Is St. 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).

Q6. In what ways is Mary a model of humility? (check the *Magnificat*, for her views.)

Q7. Why is “humility” “knowing the real truth about myself”?

Q8. How does humility differ from “false humility” (e.g., putting oneself down)?

Q9. Is there a “justified pride”? When?

Q10. How does my Baptism call me to humility?

Q11. How does humility foster patience? ...help with offering forgiveness?

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi

Reflection 7: Lady Holy Charity

¹³Holy Charity counteracts every diabolical and carnal temptation
and every carnal *fear*.

Jesus explained the ideal of charity when he taught: “*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” (John15,13) And He did it – for all of us!

And in John’s First Letter we see: “*We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death. Everyone who hates his brothers is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him. The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.*” (1John, 3:14-18)

St. Francis embraced this understanding of love manifested so clearly by Jesus, and as taught by the Holy Spirit in the Gospel. The washing of the apostles' feet at the Last Supper is another basic reminder.

This God-founded love is self-giving love, essentially bound up in service and dedication. From the above text and from Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) we also realize that the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. (Take time to read again and meditate on the passage above from St. John as well as the parable of Jesus in Luke 16:19-31.)

And what is this 'carnal fear' that St. Francis speaks of? This is that dread and fear, that hesitation, (like he said he experienced when he embraced the leper). Similarly when he chose a poverty way of life that forced him at times to beg, he had to counteract his emotions of embarrassment. The same held for when he went begging for the poor, especially for the lepers. This is the fear that sets in when we are afraid of taking a risk on behalf of doing good, of being of service in a way we have not tried before.

Read again the lengthy list of virtues contained in this Christ-like love, as expressed by the Apostle Paul in 1Cor.13:1-13.

While St. Francis did not write the "Peace Prayer", its message is really a call to love God and self and neighbor. Examine it carefully to see the abundant ways of practicing charity.

St. Francis addresses four of his Admonitions to this topic of practiced charity. (here we check 9, 18, 24, 25).

Admon.9: The Lord says: Love your enemies [do good to those who hate you, and pray for your persecutors and calumniators]. For a person really has love for his enemy when he is not offended by the injury done to himself, but instead for love of God feels burning sorrow for the sin his enemy has brought on his own soul; in this way he proves his love in a practical way."

Admon.18: Blest is the person who accepts his neighbor in his brokenness, as he would wish to be accepted by him, if he were in a similar situation.

Admon.24: Blest is the servant who so loves his brother when he is sick and cannot return the favor, as when he is healthy and can return the favor.

Admon.25: Blest is the servant who so loves and honors his brother when he is away from him, just as when he is with him, and does not say anything about him that in charity he would not say in his presence.

In his "Our Father Prayer", Francis reflects this way:

Your will be done on earth as in heaven:

That we may love You with our whole heart by always thinking of You,

with our whole soul by always desiring You,
with our whole mind by always directing all our intentions to You,
and by seeking Your glory in everything,
with all our whole strength by exerting
all our energies and affections of body and soul
in the service of Your love and of nothing else;
and we may love our neighbor as ourselves
by drawing them all to Your love with our whole strength,
by rejoicing in the good of others as in our own,
by suffering with others at their misfortunes,
and by giving offense to no one.

In our Franciscan lives today, this love must embrace -- God, the Trinity -- the Church -- fraternity -- evangelization -- the poor - if we wish to remain faithful to St. Francis. This charity must be all-inclusive.

We know well that Christ gave us the fundamental test for evaluating our love when He said at the Last Supper (John 14:15): *"If you love me, keep my commandments"*.

Before taking leave of the 25,000 pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square on Nov. 9, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI expressed the hope that the Secular Franciscan's general chapter "will be for all of you an opportunity of renewed apostolic drive when it comes to spreading the Gospel everywhere, following the example of St. Francis of Assisi."

We should take time now to read our SFO Rule, art. 2 & 22 (for later, also check 3, 4, 13, 21, 22, 25)

Q1. Do you have enough love of your SFO fraternity members to be willing to be nominated to service on the fraternity council?

Q2. What keeps SFOs in their love of their fraternity from being willing to serve on their local council? ...to serve the others?

Q3. Is financial support of your fraternity a form of charity as well as duty?

Q4. For a serious meditation, examine each line in the Peace Prayer of St. Francis for how each issue is a call to love. Do you agree with this assessment?

Q5. Are the practices of the 3 basic forms of prayer (vocal, meditative, and contemplative) necessary forms of love? (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2699)

Q6. How does my Baptism call me to love?

Q7. Which apostolic projects by SFO members testify to the practice of this Virtue of Love?

Q8. How are the six SFO Commissions emphasized by NAFRA areas for greater practice of this virtue of charity?

KEY VIRTUES for St. Francis of Assisi
Reflection 8: Holy Obedience

¹⁴Holy Obedience overcomes all personal preferences,
corporal and carnal,
and limits his mortified body
to the obedience of the spirit
and to the obedience of his brother;

¹⁵and he is subject and submissive to all people who are in the world;

¹⁶and not only to people, but also to all the beasts and wild animals,
so that they might do to him whatever they should wish,
as long as it is given to them from the Lord.

Here is the sixth Franciscan virtue, Obedience, highlighted by St. Francis for our efforts to put on Christ.

During the years of his early conversion, during the years he was pursuing knighthood, Francis Bernardone was confronted with the call of the Lord: “Whom is it better to serve, the servant or the master?” Francis quickly realized “The master, of course”. So he was challenged with: “Then why are you serving the servant?” This understanding had a life-long impact on Francis’ spiritual life – and hopefully on ours today.

Obedience is not just a virtue for children, and not just for those who profess religious vows. Obedience needs to be recognized as a virtue to be practiced by everyone of us. We should note that here in this meditation text St. Francis says nothing about “vows”, such as the vow of obedience to a superior. (*Background information: Vows in religious life are not taken to one’s ‘brothers’ nor to ‘creatures’, but to a superior.*)

In the Letter to the Hebrews (10:7-9), the inspired author instructs us:

*“Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll,
behold, I come to do your will, O God.’*

First, he says, “Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offers, you neither desired nor delighted in.” These are offered according to the law.

Then he says, “Behold, I come to do your will.”

Here is the core of the virtue of obedience.

In his Second Letter to the Faithful, Francis writes:

#47: “We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God’s sake.”

#51-53: “We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven; mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example.”

#8-13: “Then He prayed to His Father, saying: Father, if it can be done, let this cup pass from me. And His sweat became as drops of blood falling on the ground. Nevertheless, He placed His will in the will of His Father, saying: Father, let Your will be done; not as I will, but as You will. His Father’s will was such that His blessed and glorious Son, Whom He gave to us and Who was born for us, should offer Himself through His own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross: not for Himself through Whom all things were made, but for our sins, leaving us an example that we might follow His footprints.”

(While St. Francis wrote his Admonitions 2 & 3 for the friars in vows, it reveals his wholehearted embrace of this virtue and might prove to be inspirational to read over.)

Obedience to the Gospel set the tone for St. Francis’ approach to life itself. And it is at the core of the SFO Rule. This obedience acknowledges God’s original Lordship. People who study St. Francis’ writings observe that obedience is the most mentioned virtue.

Such obedience acknowledges and accepts accountability. Your SFO profession is a public promise to be faithful to what is explained in your SFO Rule and its concomitant General Constitutions. Accountability to implement the SFO Rule in our lives is our daily challenge.

Some of the blessings of the spirit of true obedience are to create harmony and teamwork. This is that closeness already revealed by St. Luke in giving us the four marks of the early Christians, as described in Acts 2:42. Hopefully these four marks continue to be fulfilled in our lives today.

Francis speaks of being obedient to: the spirit, to his brother, to all peoples, to all creatures. How is this possible, or even reasonable?

Please take time to read in the SFO Rule, art. 2 & 10 (for later, also check 6, 14, 17, 21, 22, 23). These highlight some of the responsibilities to be fulfilled in the SFO way of life. Like St. Francis do we dare “to put on Christ” with these six virtues?

Q1. Is “*calling people to be accountable to their responsibilities*”

1- a form of domination ...or of love?

2- a form of control or required by the virtue of obedience?

Q2. Is this accountability issue also applicable to our SFO fraternities? ...and to our SFO Rule? How?

Q3. Is “calling to accountability” a part of the role of “servant leaders”?

Q4. Is fidelity still a virtue?

Q5. What is the danger of “legalism”?

Q6. What do I promise to do and live as an SFO?

Q7. How should we take time to pray and reflect to internalize rules and policies?

Q8. What are some of your experienced SFO reactions in recent years to SFO Regional & NAFRA policies?

Q9. How does my Baptism call me to obedience?



In closing:

Q. Now that we have reviewed all six of the Virtues that St. Francis holds before us, am I really committed to work at practicing ALL six?