

Notes Concerning the Role of a Spiritual Assistant

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My purpose today is to help you better understand the important relationship that exists between the Third Order Franciscan and the Spiritual Assistant on your formation team and to help you understand the boundaries that exist within that relationship.

The Spiritual Assistant's primary responsibility is to be of ASSISTANCE, not to control but to guide and be a resource person. Also, he or she is a member of the formation team and should participate actively in the formation process.

Regional Formation Director and the Formation Team's Role

The Regional Formation team's primary responsibility is to serve the local formation directors and to provide them with information, inspiration, and training for their ministry.

Role of the Spiritual Assistant

The formation team should include a Spiritual Assistant among its members. Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the OFS.

Article 13.1

The **principal tasks** of the Assistant is to foster a deeper insight into Franciscan spirituality and to **cooperate in the initial and continuing formation**.

Article 13.2

In the Council of the fraternity and in elective and ordinary Chapters, the Assistant will be **respectful of the responsibilities and role of the Secular Franciscans** [*in our case, the formation team*] giving them priority with regard to guidance, coordination, and animation of the fraternity.

Boundaries of the Spiritual Assistant

1. IS NOT normally a professed Secular Franciscan.
2. IS NOT a member of the local fraternity, but is a member of the council.
3. IS NOT in charge is he or she “**the Director**”.
4. DOES NOT impose his or her will or opinions on the fraternity.
5. S NOT a passive person in the fraternity gathering.
6. IS NOT the spokesperson for the fraternity.
7. IS NOT divorced from the life and activity of the fraternity.
8. And if the Spiritual Assistant is a priest, HE DOES NOT only exercise a sacramental role.

FRANCISCAN RENEWAL

THE LIFE OF FRANCIS AND SPECIFIC SPIRITUAL THOUGHTS FROM HIS LIFE.

Outline

The intention of this course:

- You can study the virtues of Francis coming from Franciscan thought, but you can also study specific virtues coming directly from his life
- That’s what I intend to do and what makes this reflection significant (different from a “normal” talk on Franciscan virtues). Look at the life of Francis as defined by arguably the best biography of Francis, and then make some spiritual conclusions from specific moments that can apply to the daily life of a Third Order member.

PRIMARY SOURCE: FRANCIS OF ASSISI: A NEW BIOGRAPHY

Augustine Thompson, O.P.

1. The Franciscan (including all three Orders) must make Francis and his virtues acceptable in twenty-first century living.

- We do not live in the thirteenth century; we do not live in Italy; and we are not saints, but what Francis was and stood for are “**ideals**” and “**interpreted directives**” to a better life here on earth.
- “Christianity squared”.
- It is clear that there are many areas of Franciscan spirituality that are in reality the thought of the “concerned Christian”
- Our spirituality, the Will of God for a Franciscan is this: your life.
- Including 1 -- your own individual holiness.
- Lived according to these Franciscan virtues (and other Franciscan virtues as garnered from Franciscan books and articles and talks).

2. Attempts to detect Historical Francis have uncanny similarities to attempts to reconstruct Historical Jesus.

- Since the Franciscan should “know the Gospels” (more to come on this), the Franciscan should know the basic “agenda” of the individual Gospels.
- Part of our “knowledge fodder” reading should be reading about the Gospels.

I. “WHEN I WAS IN MY SINS” (1181-1205)

3. The Early Life of Francis

- Born 1181/2.
- Early virtues: generosity and courtesy.

Francis thought

Be a generous person.

Be kind in what you do.

Number 1 directive of a Christian and therefore Franciscan: be strong in your beliefs, but be kind in carrying them out.

Military Adventures

Francis's family supported Assisi government, probably had a horse and some Armor.

- Assisi suffered disastrous defeat, Francis imprisoned with aristocratic knights.
- Prison was hard on Francis, released in 1203, health damaged.
- 1204 Assisi's military situation changed, city now swore allegiance to Papacy.
- 1205 Francis was a broken veteran; condition showing symptoms commonly found in soldiers who have survived horrible experiences during war (PTSD).
- Spring, 1205 – Francis broke out of depression, and began to prepare for a new military venture, decided to go to war with some others.

Francis thought

Christian and therefore a Franciscan will work with his/her life with God's help, perhaps human help, keep trying to determine what is best for himself/herself.

Francis realized that he had to follow the "lord" but not good spiritual motivation.

Francis had a very unsettled mind.

Went to Foligno (18 or so miles), sold his finery and arms and horse.

Francis thought

The Franciscan will have a negative feeling about “war”, “battle”, “conquering”, “killing”.

Thought spreads to troops, drones, war machines, etc.

In general, a Franciscan should be against war, going to war.

Therefore to be in our country, world’s most aggressive, most powerful because of weaponry, and to believe in peace is a challenge.

Solution: without “broadcasting” it: be against what our country is doing with regard to military aggression and when push comes to shove, take a personal stand, if necessary.

eg, be a “conscientious objector”, approve working as medical person perhaps.

A footnote: the Franciscan will be against the death penalty.

No killing at all.

4. Francis in Crisis

- Francis not his old self, although moved in the same circle.
- Francis may have been suffering from self-loathing and guilt, performed traditional works of penance: alms giving, prayer, bodily mortification, sought spiritual relief by going on pilgrimage to Rome.

Francis thought

As a Christian and therefore Franciscan, there will be traditional works of penance.

Alms giving: giving of what we have, 10%?

Prayer: more on that later.

Bodily mortification (fasting): more a denial of things rather than any “taking it out on the body”.

As a Franciscan, there can be physical punishment, but always with guidance of spiritual person/director.

Otherwise it can be nothing more than pride:

Luke 18:9.

- Coming back to A, went to Bishop Guido.
- Francis was racked with demonic fears and perhaps hallucinations.
- Prayed at San Damiano, took up residence there in late 1205.

5. Francis leaves the world

- Pietro, a loving father deeply wounded by his son's agony, strove to help him; Francis hid from him, Pietro took him home, locked him up.
- Pica let him out, went back to San Damiano.
- Pietro came back, thought Francis was out of his mind, Pietro made one last attempt; Francis did not truly grasp what was at stake.

Francis thought

A Franciscan will sever ties with family in some sense.

For Francis, I believe this was one of the defining moments of conversion in the life of Francis.

Had a good relationship with his family.

Felt the love of father and mother, and wanted to work it so he would be on good terms with his family, but he could not do it.

For the Christian and therefore Franciscan, working out a good relationship with family is necessary because it is part of Christian living now (part of our spirituality as mentioned before).

Before: (in Jesus' times and difficult times in history, for example in Francis's life) there may have been reason to break with family when things were not acceptable.

There must be the understanding for the Franciscan that God is always more important than family.

Francis beaten by robbers, taken into a monastery, went back to Assisi.

LEPER EXPERIENCE - The core of his religious conversion.

Francis thought

Francis forced himself to greet the leper because he understood that he had to address some personal feelings and sinful inklings in his life.

Embracing what once was repulsive, he learned to question himself about what direction his life had to take, about how he should think, and why he was acting the way he was.

The Christian and therefore Franciscan must work with those most in need of help in our society (money/volunteer).

Also the Christian and therefore the Franciscan must be willing to spend serious time in prayer and carefully study his or her direction with a willingness to change if need be.

David Knight's idea of prayer

“To reflect on the Word of God is prayer—on one condition: that we do it with the intention of calling our own life into question. Just to think about God’s Word in the abstract is academic speculation. But to reflect on God’s Word with the intention of continuing to reflect until we come to decisions that change our lives that is to meet the mind of God in prayer.”

- That is “confirmatory” prayer.
- Then Francis began to work with lepers.
- Francis sensed himself, by God’s grace and no power of his own, remade into a different man. Just as suddenly, the sins that had been tormenting him seemed to melt away.

II. THE PENITENT FROM ASSISI (1206-1209)

6. Francis at San Damiano

- Francis decided to adopt an external sign of his choice of penance.
- Dressed in plain subdued tunic typical of a **brother of penance**.
- No “habit” as such.
- Had some money, bought stones and other supplies, then begged.

Francis thought

Francis’s idea of a “brother of penance” is captured in the first two chapters of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order.

A Christian and therefore Franciscan will be very much concerned about the possibility of sin in his/her life.

Therefore a Franciscan will work with the Sacrament of Penance on an average of once every two months or so.

7. God Sends Francis Followers

- Francis stayed as a hermit and a person who “hung around church” for 2 years.
- Then Bernard and Peter followed him.
- They wanted to imitate Francis in the practice of penance.
- They found a parish priest (one F trusted) and they opened the Bible at random a practice of lay piety.

Francis thought

The Gospel must be the primary prayer (and cause for prayer) of the Christian and therefore Franciscan.

A) WE MUST READ THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS

- And not only read them, but read them with the idea of trying to get into the mind of Jesus Christ.
- (We are speaking of the spiritual approach to the reading of the Gospels).
- We have to know the Gospels correctly (but do not be obsessed with what is historical or not).

B) AND WE HAVE TO TAKE THE TIME TO THINK ABOUT THE GOSPELS

- We will not be able to assimilate what Jesus said, unless we give ourselves time.
- Here we are saying, find some daily time to read what Jesus said and did, and think carefully about it in light of where I am right now in my life, 10-15 minutes half that is 12 minutes: THE 12 MINUTE DAILY.

8. The Penitents Go to Rome.

- Stayed this way for perhaps a year.
- But Francis was worried about the risk of delusion: the identification of one's own desires, possibly selfish or deluded, with divine commands.
- Francis, an obedient Catholic wanted the Church's approval.
- He, and the three others headed for Rome.

Francis Thought

Respect for the Church and the Church's authority.

When we completely disagree with Church and/or some ministers.

Never in a mean way, always respectful.

There should be no open semi-public articles/talk in criticism of the Church or authorities in the Church.

Exception: theologians, people set up to discuss.

"I respectfully disagree...." should be our language.

Colonna had them tonsured, official preachers then.

Francis was reduced to spiritual agony over how to combine the solitary aspects of penance and prayer with the public work of preaching.

But, Francis did not immediately go into preaching.

9. The Fraternity of Brothers.

- Francis made the decision to take up a more ordered and structured way of life.
- First place, 2 miles outside of A Rivo Torto.
- There about 3 months, working probably with lepers.

Francis thought

A Franciscan should have a simple dress style.

10. Francis at the Porziuncula.

- Francis realized that he needed a “church” since they were “tonsured” and should recite the Divine Office.
- No one would give him a church but the Benedictine monks gave him Santa Maria degli Angeli in the district known as the Porziuncula, the “Little Portion”.
- Fixed up the churches in Assisi.
- More brothers arrived probably much to surprise of Francis.