

FRANCIS
OF ASSISI
THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS



In His Own Words

TRANSLATED, INTRODUCED, AND ANNOTATED BY
JON M. SWEENEY



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This book is dedicated to

BROTHER MATTHEW

*Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.*

—PSALM 84:4

Thank you for your friendship.

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✿ INTRODUCTION ✿

I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER THE OCCASION IN HIGH school when I first encountered a massive red book about Francis of Assisi in my public library. According to the copyright page it was titled *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*. A mouthful! But the spine—thick as a brick—read simply, “St. Francis of Assisi Omnibus of Sources.” *Omnibus*. I had to investigate to find out just exactly what that meant.

The volume weighed at least a few pounds, with nearly 2,000 pages. I’d never seen a book so large. But having recently read my first biography of St. Francis and immediately fallen in love with the life and charism of such an unusual follower of Christ, I grabbed the *Omnibus* from the shelf. Opening the front cover, I saw that it was published by Franciscan Herald Press—what a perfect name for a publisher of such a book—and on reading the foreword, I was enthralled. Everything that anyone would ever want to know about Francis was apparently inside. Even the strawberry red cover, a design detail perfectly suiting the early 1970s when it was first published, appealed. Checking the *Omnibus* out with my library card, I took it home and read studiously for two weeks the first few hundred pages. I have no memory of whether I actually finished reading the book (I seriously doubt it, in fact), but I’m certain that I made a dent, and the enthusiasm for studying the early Franciscan movement was born in me.

Despite the unlikelihood of reading the 2,000-page *Omnibus* all the way through, it is a challenge to find a copy of that classic work in any of its early editions in which the binding is not seriously cracked. In other words, people really read the book and, in publishing terms, it was a “hit.” Since that time, there has been no shortage of new books on Francis. Still the world’s most popular saint, the stories of his life inspire more people than one can imagine. Since the *Omnibus*, there have been numerous other scholarly renditions of the early biographical writings about him, most notably the now essential three-volume *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, published in 1999–2001.¹ And yet I find that as scholars and serious students have more resources than ever at their disposal, we also live in a

time when fewer and fewer everyday, nonspecialist, spiritually attuned people interested in Francis actually turn to his own words in order to discover him. Most people with an interest in the little poor man (*il poverello*) from Umbria have little firsthand knowledge of his own writings. Sometimes, in fact, they do not realize that he wrote anything at all.

There are many great biographies of St. Francis and those are usually read instead. I have always been most partial to Paul Sabatier's, which I reedited and published more than a decade ago under the title *The Road to Assisi: The Essential Biography of St. Francis* (2003). There are several other excellent ones, too. For instance, I recommend Julien Green's beautifully written *God's Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*, translated from the French (1985), and *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* by Adrian House (2001) is also very good. For a more scholarly treatment, you might turn to the slim, recent, and authoritative *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography*, by the medieval historian Augustine Thompson, OP (2012), and the highly acclaimed *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint* by French scholar Andre Vauchez, recently translated into English (2012). And on the hagiographical side of things, for the most charming collection of tales about the life of St. Francis, you can't do better than Brother Ugolino's *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* (various editions).

Despite all of these great lives of the Poverello, I still wish that people would turn to Francis's own words first, or at least more often. Even his first biographers—the thirteenth-century writers Thomas of Celano, St. Bonaventure, and the first editors of *The Little Flowers*—rarely quoted from his writings. So it surprises many people to discover that Francis wrote numerous letters, religious poems and songs (*laude*), and a few very important treatises and “rules” for religious life.

Nevertheless, Francis was not a man of many words. He was not a scholarly saint like Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. He was never a famous orator-saint like John Chrysostom. In fact, it is impossible to imagine Francis sitting in a library or with a pen in his hand. Francis wasn't even what you might call intellectually curious, like the saints Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila, both of whom wrote a great deal, studied and pondered ideas, and, as a result of their writings, left us with many biographical details about their lives. Some have even accused Francis of being anti-intellectual, and for good reasons: he often warned his brothers against

owning books and excessive reading. He counseled his brothers again and again to study *only if* they could do so without it ruining their spiritual lives. And yet he wrote.

For such a person—focused more on the active than the contemplative or intellectual life—Francis wrote only when a good occasion called for it. One scholar has recently explained this well:

The Poor Man of Assisi, who was lacking in literary skill, did not behave like an author, nor did he give himself over to it with any confidence. He was writing only to deliver a message, but he attached to it the highest importance, inspired as he was by the certitude that the words he was writing or dictating were not from him, or not only from him, to the extent that it was God himself who had inspired them in him.²

This new collection of Francis's writings was created in order to fill a gap. *Francis of Assisi in His Own Words* is intended to be a nonthreatening entry into Francis's thought and spirit, by presenting his own words clearly and succinctly. As a result, the book you have in your hands contains only a fraction of what my old *Omnibus* contained, only the most essential writings of Francis himself. It also contains only those texts that we know with a good amount of certainty were written by the saint.³

THE REAL BROTHER FRANCIS

He began life as Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone and his biography is so familiar that to recount it here seems almost unnecessary. Very briefly, Francis was born in Assisi in 1181, raised in what we would today call an upper-middle-class home. His father, Pietro di Bernardone, traveled back and forth to northern France for his business as a successful cloth merchant. Francis helped in his father's shop and may have also seen some of the world, traveling with Pietro abroad as a boy.

As a young man of twenty-one, Francis went off to war against Perugia, as all of the young men were supposed to do to defend their city, only to end up a prisoner. Two years later, he set off to battle once more, but he returned the following day, making it only as far as Spoleto and having seen

a vision. Francis proved either to be inept at soldiering or he deserted, or both.

He was a merry young man and loved a good party. But in his young twenties, as his conversion began to take hold, Francis repented of sins of pride, luxury, and selfishness in very public fashion, which only served to embarrass his respectable father further. Francis then stole from his father to give to the poor and Pietro imprisoned him in the basement of their home, hoping that his son would snap out of it. When his father had to go away on business, Francis's mother (about whom we know precious little) freed him, and Francis quickly returned to San Damiano, the somewhat remote church in Assisi that he had grown to love.

He first heard the voice of God at San Damiano in 1206, telling him to "Go and rebuild my Church." Soon thereafter, Francis became a mendicant, a deliberately poor wandering preacher of salvation, and slowly but surely gathered followers, almost by accident. He focused on preaching the good news to people, explaining to them how they could find more joy in their lives, and he helped the sick, caring even for lepers, who in those days were literally cast out of the community and forbidden to come in contact with other people. Francis would wash their bodies and spend time with them.

In the spring of 1209, Francis and eleven companions walked to Rome, Francis with a copy of his new Rule in hand (see [pages 17–41](#) below), to ask Pope Innocent III for a blessing. Over the next fifteen years, Francis traveled to Dalmatia, Spain, France, the ancient city of Acre in the northern Galilee region, and Damietta, Egypt, where he later famously met with the Sultan. Probably in the year 1220 or 1221, Francis resigned as spiritual leader of his own order and another friar was appointed vicar. By the end of his life he watched with a measure of sadness as the order grew beyond the boundaries of his original, most simple intentions (see "The Testament" on [pages 95–101](#) below).

He was considered a saint throughout Europe even before his death on October 3, 1226. As he was dying, we know that people were trying to grab pieces of his clothing, because in their worldview—where proximity to a saint meant a little more holiness in one's life—they literally wanted a piece of him. To this day, he is the world's most popular saint in churches, books, paintings, and every other imaginable representation.

Curiously, we never see Francis smile in paintings, which is unfortunate because according to his biographers he was one of the most joyous of men.

He was the leader of a band of brethren who called themselves “God’s jugglers” as they worked, played, sweated, and laughed with men in the fields and towns before they ever preached to them. This sunny disposition also showed itself in the ways Francis located God in some startlingly “new” places according to the thirteenth-century worldview: not just in church, or in men and women who were trying to be faithful, but in lepers and outcasts, ravenous wolves, fish and birds, the sun and the moon, even bodily pain and death. This is a man who rolled in the snow, who stripped naked in order to demonstrate to his father how joyfully he had renounced ownership of things, and who preached in his underwear to show humility. Still, we never see him smile and that’s a shame. Blame it on the iconographers—the artists and painters who have rendered St. Francis’s image since his death in 1226.

There are thousands of paintings of Francis but you might say there is a “top three” list in the history of art. First would have to be the fresco on the wall of the chapel of St. Gregory in the Sacro Speco (“sacred grotto”) in Subiaco, a city in the province of Rome. The Subiaco grotto was made famous centuries earlier by St. Benedict of Nursia, who retreated there and founded the Benedictine order within its walls. St. Francis’s fresco can be seen just to the right of the entrance to the cave and is inscribed as painted during the second year of the pontificate of Pope Gregory IX. That dates the painting to late 1228 or early 1229, making it the earliest surviving image we have of Francis. Many scholars assume that the man you see in that fresco should be as close a depiction as we will ever have of the real Francis. He is wearing the rough habit of his order, a knotted cord about his waist, his hands are pre-stigmata, and he’s barefoot. You will meet that Francis, most of all, in the letters included in this volume.

Second would be Cimabue’s famous portrait that hangs in the right transept of the Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. The Francis you see there appears shorter, swarthier, than the man we see at Sacro Speco. He is showing his stigmatized hands to the painter with downcast, humble eyes. Some biographers prefer this image as the most faithful of the early ones precisely because it seems to show a less idealized man. This feels like the Francis we know from his praises—in this volume, from his “Praises to the Blessed Virgin Mary” and “Praises of the Christian Virtues” (see [pages 49–53](#) below).

And third among the most important paintings of Francis is the one that is most often reproduced: Giotto's famous fresco, also from San Francesco in Assisi, depicting *The Preaching to the Birds*. This is scene fifteen in the narrative cycle located around the nave of the Upper Basilica. You've probably seen it on postcards, coffee mugs, holy medals, in books, films, and on your hotel and tour brochure if you ever visited any town in Umbria. Each of the images from the famous fresco cycles at San Francesco—just like similar cycles in other Franciscan basilicas throughout Italy—depict the notable scenes from the biographies of Francis. Like any good storytelling of a saint, they show Francis on his way of conversion toward heaven. We never find Francis writing about this scene, or almost any other from his life, in these writings. The one exception is “The Testament,” on [pages 95–101](#) below.

There are many other popular images of Francis hanging in museums all over the world. Francisco de Zurbarán's famous *Saint Francis in Meditation* in the National Gallery in London is one example. The severe ascetic of the saint that you see there comes through often in these writings. The seventeenth-century Spanish Catholic painter shows a kneeling friar in closet-like solitude, well cowed, his mouth agape speaking to God, holding a skull in contemplation of death. This is a dark, stark, arresting image, far removed from the juggling and joyous side of Francis—but it too is true to who he was. Zurbarán's countryman El Greco painted similar scenes.

When you actually read Francis's writings, you will meet the sometimes severe saint of El Greco, the joyous friend of all creatures seen in the frescos of the Basilica in Assisi, as well as the solitary man of prayer we meet in the image on the wall of Sacro Speco. All of these are “the real Brother Francis.”

ABOUT THIS BOOK

You will find nineteen different texts in this collection of Francis's writings. Each is most likely from the mind or pen of the saint. Often Francis dictated his words to others, but in some instances, such as short letters, he wrote them himself.

These selections were all written over a period of twenty years, from 1206 to 1226, the year in which Francis died. They are arranged here in

approximate chronological order, and each is prefaced with an editorial explanation of its setting, purpose, and place in the canon. The translations are my own; I aimed for smooth readability while remaining faithful to the tone and spirit of the originals, and compared my work against that of several others. Francis's quotations from Scripture are rendered using the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, unless otherwise indicated. I furnish citations for Scripture quotations in the margins.

¹ Please refer to "For Further Reading" for full bibliographical information on every book mentioned here in the text and cited in the footnotes.

² Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 250.

³ Even so, there are only two extant manuscripts with Francis's own handwriting, and the earliest copy of some of the writings included in this volume are only as old as the sixteenth century.

THE WRITINGS

Prayer Before the Icon Crucifix of San Damiano (1206)

This is the prayer that Francis is said to have prayed on that eventful day when God first spoke to him. He was kneeling in the ruined church of San Damiano wanting desperately to hear a word from God when God said in such a way that Francis could understand: “Go and rebuild my Church.” Francis responded in his usual, literal way: by gathering bricks in town and reconstructing that very church. This prayer later became Francis’s prayer for himself, as well as the spirit of the Franciscan movement. It is textual tradition for it to be laid out as verse, since Francis is widely recognized as one of the first authors of poetry in the Italian vernacular.⁴

The crucifix before which Francis prayed is actually an icon; it is the image of the crucifix painted onto a twelve-centimeters-thick block of wood in the shape of a cross. It hangs in the Basilica of Santa Clara in Assisi to this day.

Most High,
Most glorious God,
Enlighten the darkness of my heart.
Grant me a right and true faith,
A certain hope, and
A perfect charity, feeling, and understanding
Of You,
So that I may be able to accomplish
Your holy and just commands.
Amen.

⁴ See for instance, *Italian Poetry: A Selection from St. Francis of Assisi to Salvatore Quasimodo: In Italian with English Translation*, selected and translated by Luciano Rebay (New York: Dover, 1969), 7.

The First Rule (1209)

Francis founded three religious orders: the Friars Minor (for religiously vowed men), the Poor Clares (for religiously vowed women), and what is usually called simply the Third Order, or Brothers and Sisters of Penance (men and women living “secular” lives but vowed to Franciscan principles and asceticism).

The text that follows is the first version of the Rule Francis wrote for the Friars Minor, of which he was the founding member. In this long document, he lays out most clearly what is expected of a friar. There were later versions of this Rule, but most notable is this one, which Francis wrote in his original fervor and inspiration and personally carried to Rome to seek the approval of Pope Innocent III. Changes were made later in the versions dated 1221 and 1223, and the 1223 version of the Rule is the one still kept by Franciscans today. However, the spirit of Francis comes through most clearly in this earliest edition. That is why it is the one included in this volume.

Headings and chapters—and even sometimes numbered “verses”—were a later editorial addition, used for purposes of organization, clarity, and a sometimes excessive reverence for Francis that is not in keeping with Francis’s own intentions. Only headings and chapters are used here. Also, I have added occasional footnotes to highlight or clarify particular points of interest.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. This is the way of life that I, Brother Francis, offered to Pope Innocent, asking that it be granted as mine to live and confirmed by his Holiness. The Pope has so confirmed it, giving this way to me and my brothers now and for always. Brother Francis, and whoever may in the future be in leadership of this way of life, promises obedience and reverence to our Pope Innocent

and to all of his successors. All of the brothers shall be bound to obey Brother Francis and his successors in leadership.

1. OBEDIENCE, POVERTY, CHASTITY

The rule and life of these brothers is simple: Live in obedience and chastity, without property, and follow the doctrine and footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is he who said:

“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Mt. 19:21

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

Lk. 9:23

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Lk. 14:26

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.”

Mt. 19:29

2. RECEIVING NEW MEMBERS

If anyone is inspired by God to embrace this way of life, let him come to the brothers and be received by them with kindness. If he is determined to undertake our life, the brothers should be careful not to meddle much in his personal affairs; instead, they should present him to their minister as soon as possible. The minister should then receive the candidate with kindness and encouragement while still diligently explaining the nature of our life.

When this is done, if the man is both willing and able, in good conscience and without compunction, he should go and sell all of his worldly goods and begin distributing them to the poor. The brothers and the ministers of the brothers should be careful not to interfere in any of this; they should not receive any of the money, either themselves or through anyone else. If, however, there is something that they really need, the brothers may accept it, as one who is poor, but not ever money. And when the candidate has returned, the minister should give him the habit of probation for one year. This is two tunics without hood, a cord, pants, and a simple chaperon reaching down to the cord.⁵

When the year of probation has finished, the candidate should be received into obedience. From that point on, it will be unlawful for him to leave for another order, or to “wander beyond obedience,” according to the command of the pope and the Gospel, for “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” However, if anyone presents himself who cannot give away his goods without difficulty but has the spiritual will to let them go, that will suffice.

Lk. 9:62

No one may be received in a way that is contrary to the form and practices of the holy Church.

The other brothers who have already promised their obedience may have one tunic with a hood, and, if necessary, another without hood and a cord and pants. The brothers should always be clothed in poor, simple garments, and they may then mend them, lovingly patching them with sackcloth and other pieces, for the Lord says in the Gospel: “Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces.” Even if they are called hypocrites, let them never stop doing good and let them never desire rich clothes in this world, so that instead they may have a garment in the kingdom of heaven.

Lk. 7:25

3. PRAYING THE DIVINE OFFICE AND FASTING

Our Lord says that a certain kind of devil cannot be expunged without fasting and prayer; however, “whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites.”

Mt. 6:16

⁶[So, may all of the brothers, clergy and lay, say the divine office, the praises and prayers, as is required of all. Clergy should say the office for both the living and the dead, according to custom. Also, in case there is a deficiency or negligence among the other brothers, the clergy should also say each day the *Miserere mei* and the *Paternoster*. And let them say the *De profundis* with the *Paternoster* for the deceased brothers.⁷ They may have only the books necessary to fulfill their office. The lay brothers, if they know how to read the Psalter, may also have one; but those who do not, may not. Lay brothers should say the creed and twenty-four *Paternosters* with the *Gloria Patri* for matins. For Lauds, they may say five. For Prime, Terce, Sext, and None, they should say seven each. For Vespers, twelve. For Compline, the creed and seven *Paternosters* with the *Gloria Patri*. For the dead, seven *Paternosters* with *Requiem aeternam*; and for the deficiency and negligence of the other brothers, three *Paternosters* every day.]

All of the brothers also should fast from the Feast of All Saints until the Nativity of Our Lord, and then from Epiphany, when our Lord Jesus Christ began to fast, until Easter. At all other times, they should not be bound to fast according to this life, except on Fridays. They may eat all foods that are placed before them, according to the Gospel.

4. MINISTERS WITHIN OUR ORDER

In the name of the Lord, all the brothers who are appointed as ministers are servants of the other brothers. They are to place their brothers in the provinces or places where they should be located, and to visit them and spiritually encourage them. All of my blessed brothers who are not ministers should diligently obey their ministers in these things, as they look to the salvation of their souls, and when they are not contrary to our life.⁸ Let them all observe what the Lord says: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” and “Whatever you do not wish to be done to you, do not do that to others.” Also, the ministers are servants and must remember that the Lord says that he “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” To them is committed the care of the souls of their brothers, and if any should be lost through their fault or bad example, the ministers will

have to give an account before the Lord Jesus Christ on the Day of Judgment.

Mt. 7:12 and *St. Benedict's Rule*

Mt. 20:28

5. HOW TO CORRECT BROTHERS WHO OFFEND

Take care of your souls and those of your brothers, for “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Heb. 10:31

If, although, any of the ministers and servants⁹ ever commands one of the other brothers to do something contrary to our life or against his soul, that brother is not bound to obey him, because it is not obedience at work when faults or sins are committed. Also, all the brothers who are subject to the ministers and servants should carefully consider the deeds of the same. If they see one of them walking according to the flesh and not according to the spirit, and this continues even after the third admonition, he should be reported to the minister and servant of the whole fraternity at the Chapter of Pentecost, regardless of any obstacle that may stand in the way.

If, also, among the brothers, there should be someone who desires to live according to the flesh and not according the spirit, the other brothers should admonish, instruct, and correct him humbly and diligently. If he will not amend his ways after the third admonition, they should, without delay, make the matter known to his minister and servant and let the minister and servant do with him whatever seems best before God.

All of the brothers, the ministers and servants as well as the others, should take care not to be troubled or angered because of someone else's sin, for the devil loves to corrupt us through the sin of someone else. Instead, all should come to the spiritual aid of one who has sinned, as best they can, for “those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do.”

Mt. 9:12 (NAB)

Moreover, not all of the brothers should have power and authority in these instances, for as the Lord says in the Gospel: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.” No brother should do evil or speak evil against another.

Each one should rather, in the spirit of charity, willingly serve and obey the other. This is the true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mt. 20:25–27

If any brother has turned away from the commandments of God and wandered from obedience, the other brothers know, as the prophet says, that they are cursed out of disobedience as long as they continue to consciously live in sin. Similarly, when brothers persevere in the commandments of the Lord, which they have promised by the holy Gospel and their lives, they should know that they live in true obedience and are blessed by God.

6. PROVIDING FOR BROTHERS WHO CANNOT LIVE THE LIFE

If any brother, no matter where he may be, realizes that he cannot observe our life, he should go as soon as possible to his minister and make this known to him. The minister should then try to treat the brother as he himself would wish to be treated if the situation were reversed. And let no one among us ever be called “Prior”—instead, everyone should be called a lesser brother, a Friar Minor. Each one of us should wash the feet of the others.

7. MORE ABOUT SERVANTHOOD AND WORK

None of the brothers, in any of our places, should be treasurers or managers in the houses of those whom they serve or where they work. They should never accept employment that could cause scandal, or that would ever be harmful to their souls. Instead, they should always be the lesser ones, subject to all who live together in the same house.

All of the brothers who know how to work should do so, and work in whatever trade they understand, as long as it is not contrary to the salvation of their souls and can be done with honesty. As the prophet says: “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.” And so says the apostle: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” and “In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.”

Ps. 128:2

2 Thess. 3:10

For their work the brothers may receive whatever is necessary, except for money. Whenever necessary, they should seek for alms like other poor people. They may also have tools and implements necessary for their work. And they should apply themselves diligently in doing good works, as it is said, “Always be busy in some sort of good work so that the devil will find you busy,” and again, “Idleness is the soul’s enemy.”¹⁰ As such, servants of God should always be involved in some sort of good work.

The brothers should always be careful that, no matter where they are, whether in a hermitage or any other place, not to appropriate any place as their own, or even to possess it instead of another. And whoever may come to them, either friend or foe, even thief or robber, they should receive all with kindness. And no matter where they are, they should spiritually and diligently show reverence and honor toward one another without complaints. And they should always be careful not to appear sad and gloomy on the outside, like hypocrites do, but show themselves to be joyful, cheerful, and gracious to others, in the name of the Lord.

Cf. Mt. 6:1–6; Phil. 4:4

8. DO NOT HANDLE MONEY

Our Lord teaches in the Gospel: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Therefore, none of the brothers, wherever he may be or go, should ever carry or receive, or cause to be carried or received, money or coin—not even for clothing, books, or in payment for some kind of labor, or indeed for any reason—except for the absolute necessity of caring for a sick brother. For we should not consider money or coin to have any more use than stones. The devil, though, wants to blind those who desire or value it more than stones. So let us be careful not to lose the kingdom of heaven for such a trifle.

Lk. 12:15

If a brother even chances across money somewhere, he should give it no more regard than if it were dust trod underfoot, for it is “vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” And then, if by chance, and God forbid, it should ever happen that a brother is found to have actually kept and saved money or coin, except for the previously mentioned purpose of needing to care for the

sick, all of the other brothers should consider him an apostate, thief, robber, like the one who held the purse, unless he becomes truly penitent.¹¹

Eccles. 1:2

Under no circumstances should the brothers receive money when they go out begging, cause it to be received by others, seek it or cause it to be sought, for any house or place. Likewise, they should never go out with any person seeking money or coin for such places. Still, the brothers may perform all other services that are not contrary to our way of life for these needy places, with the blessing of God. They may beg alms specifically for the lepers—but they should always remain wary of money. Every brother heed this: don't go throughout the world seeking filthy gain.

9. BEGGING ALMS

The brothers should all strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, and remember that we deserve nothing else in the whole world except what the apostle says: “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” Similarly, they should rejoice when they have an opportunity to talk with people who are easily despised, with the poor and the weak, with the sick and lepers, and with anyone who begs in the streets.

1 Tim. 6:8

Whenever it is necessary, the brothers should go out begging for alms. They shouldn't be ashamed of doing so, but ought to remember that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living and all-powerful God, once set his face “like flint” and was not ashamed. He was poor and a stranger and lived on alms, both he and the Blessed Virgin, and his disciples. So, if people treat the brothers with contempt and refuse to give them alms, they should still give thanks to God because it is by this sort of shame that they will receive great honor before the mercy seat of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, they should know that the real injury is not to those who suffer insult, but to those who offer it. Alms is an inheritance and a right due to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ purchased for us, and the brothers who work hard to seek it will have a great reward. For all that men leave in this world will soon perish, but the charity and good deeds they have done will receive them a reward from God.

Isa. 50:7

A brother should always make his needs known clearly to others, so that other brothers will know and then have the opportunity to minister to him. The brothers should love and nourish each other as a mother loves and nourishes her son, as God gives them the grace. And “the one who abstains must not pass judgment on the one who eats.” Whenever necessary, it is permissible for all of the brothers, wherever they are, to eat of all food that people can eat, as our Lord said of David, who “ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.” But they should remember what the Lord says: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.” But in times of anxious need, the brothers may do as our Lord has given them grace, because necessity has no law.

Rom. 14:3 (NAB)

Mt. 12:4

Lk. 21:34–35

10. WHEN BROTHERS ARE ILL

If any of the brothers falls ill, wherever he may be, the others shouldn't leave his side, unless one of the brothers, or more if necessary, is chosen to serve him as they would wish to be served themselves. In the most urgent circumstances, they may also bring the sick brother to someone who will do what is needed to treat him.

I¹² ask the sick brother to give thanks to the Creator for all things and to desire to be as God wills him to be, whether sick or well, because everyone whom the Lord has predestined to eternal life is disciplined by torments and afflictions and sicknesses and the spirit of sorrow. As the Lord says: “I reprove and discipline those whom I love.” If, though, he is upset or angry with God or any of his brothers, or if he is overeager for medicine, with a desire to comfort a body that is soon to die and is also an enemy to his soul, all of this comes to him from evil motivations and is of the flesh. At such a moment, he no longer seems to be like one of the brothers, because he loves his body more than his soul.

Rev. 3:19

11. ALWAYS LOVE EACH OTHER

The brothers should always be careful not to slander or argue. Instead, they should aim to maintain silence as long as God gives them the grace. They shouldn't argue among themselves or with others, but instead, should always be ready to humbly say, "We are worthless slaves!" And they shouldn't be angry, for "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Lk. 17:10

Mt. 5:22

Love each other, as the Lord says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." They should show their love through deeds that they do for each other, as the apostle says, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Jn. 15:12

1 Jn. 3:18

"Speak evil of no one." Don't let them grumble or slander others, for it is written that grumblers and slanderers hate God. They should instead "be gentle, and . . . show every courtesy to everyone." They shouldn't judge or condemn, and as the Lord says, they shouldn't pay attention to the small sins of others, but instead, remember their own in the bitterness of their souls. In all, they should strive to "enter through the narrow gate," as the Lord says, "for the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Titus 3:2a

Rom. 1:29–30

Titus 3:2b

Isa. 38:15

Mt. 7:13–14

12. AVOID THE COMPANY OF WOMEN¹³

The brothers should always, wherever they are or wherever they may go, carefully avoid looking at and being in the company of women. They should not ever share conversation or food, or travel with them alone. Priests who speak with women should do so honestly, giving them penance or appropriate spiritual counsel. A woman should never be received into

obedience by any brother; if spiritual counsel has to be given to her, she may then go and do penance wherever she desires. We should all carefully watch over ourselves and hold each other accountable, for the Lord says: “Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” And the apostle says: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”

Mt. 5:28

1 Cor. 6:19

[13. FORNICATORS WILL BE PUNISHED¹⁴

If, at the devil’s urging, a brother ever commits fornication, he should be deprived of his habit and know that he has lost it because of his own sin; he should put the habit aside completely and be expelled from our order. After this is done, he should do penance for his sins.]

14. HOW THE BROTHERS SHOULD GO ABOUT THE WORLD

When the brothers travel about the world, they should, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money.” Then, “Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!” And, “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide.”

Lk. 9:3

Lk. 10:5, 7

“Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” And “from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”

Mt. 5:39

Lk. 6:29–30

15. ANIMALS AND RIDING

I¹⁵ command all of the brothers, both clergy and laity, when they travel about the world, or reside in various places, that they never have animals with them, or entrust an animal to the care of others, or in any other way keep one. They should also never ride on horseback unless they absolutely must do so for reasons of sickness or some other great necessity.

[16. GOING AMONG THE MUSLIMS¹⁶

The Lord says: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” If any of the brothers wish, by divine inspiration, to go among the Muslims and other unbelievers, they should go with the permission of their minister and servant. If the minister gives him permission to go, and sees that he is fit for the journey, he will be held accountable to the Lord if he has not exercised due discernment in this and other decisions.

Mt. 10:16

The brother who goes, then, should conduct himself among unbelievers in these two ways. First, do not create arguments or contentiousness, but instead, “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution,” while still confessing yourself to be Christian. Second, when you see that it is pleasing to God, announce God’s Word, so that they might come to believe in almighty God: the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, the creator of all, our Lord the redeemer and savior, and so that they might be baptized and become Christians because “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

1 Pet. 2:13

Jn. 3:5

These and other things they should say, pleasing God, for the Lord says in the Gospel: “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven,” and “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

Mt. 10:32

Lk. 9:26

All the brothers, wherever they may be, should remember that they have given themselves, forgoing their own personal safety, to our Lord Jesus Christ. For his love they should be willing to stand before enemies both visible and invisible, for the Lord says: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.” “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.” “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more.” “See that you are not alarmed,” for “by your endurance you will gain your souls,” and “anyone who endures to the end will be saved.”]

Lk. 9:24

Mt. 5:10

Jn. 15:20

Mt. 10:23

Mt. 5:11–12

Lk. 12:4

Mt. 24:6

Lk. 21:19

Mt. 24:13

17. PREACHING

None of the brothers should preach contrary to the rites and institutions of the Church or without the permission of his minister servant. And his minister should always take care to be sure that he doesn’t grant this permission easily or to everyone. Every brother, however, should preach by his deeds.

Neither minister nor brother should ever make a ministry of the office of preaching such that cannot be easily given up when necessary, or when it is asked of him. I ask all of my brothers, in the love of God, whether they preach, or pray, or labor, whether they are clergy or lay, to study and humble themselves in all things, never to boast or rejoice or inwardly exalt

themselves on account of their good words and deeds, or even due to any good that God may sometimes say or do and operate in or through them, as the Lord says: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” We can know with certainty that nothing truly belongs to us except for our vice and sin. We should have joy, instead, when we encounter various temptations and when we are asked to carry afflictions or distresses of the soul or body in this world, for the sake of eternal life.

Lk. 10:20

All of us, then, brothers, should avoid pride and boastfulness. Let’s steer clear from the wisdom of this world and the thinking of the flesh, for the spirit of the world tends to be all talk and no action; it cares little about spirituality and interior holiness, and desires only a spirituality and holiness that shows off to other people. These are the people of whom the Lord says: “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”

Mt. 6:2

The spirit of the Lord desires for our flesh to be humiliated, lower, denied, considered by us as less worthy. The spirit of the Lord desires humility and patience, pure simplicity and peace of mind. It desires, above all, righteous fear, holy wisdom, and the divine love of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

We should all refer every good thing to the almighty Lord God most high, acknowledging that all good belongs to him, and thanking him from whom all good comes. May God, the most high and supreme only true God, possess, and be given, and receive all honor and reverence, all praise and blessing, all thanks and glory. It is to God whom all good belongs, and who alone is all good. And when we see or hear evil, or God blasphemed, we should respond by blessing and thanking and praising the Lord God who is indeed blessed forever. Amen.¹⁷

⁵ This “chaperon” needs explanation. Some translators have rendered this as “cape” or “hood,” which is confusing since, earlier in the sentence, Francis prescribes that the new friars’ tunics are to be *without* hoods. A chaperon (not *chaperone*, the word for an adult who accompanies a minor) was a distinctive piece of medieval headgear, used most often in colder weather. They are pictured in Jan van Eyck paintings as a sort of fancy hat, and that is the wrong impression for early Franciscan use. Instead, one might imagine medieval manuscript illuminations of pilgrims along their way with chaperons, or capes/hoods, pulled back off the head, bunched around the neck, for warmth. Charles

Perrault's original French edition of the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* was titled *Le Petit Chaperon rouge*.

⁶ This long paragraph is placed in brackets because some scholars contend that it was not present in this form in the earliest version of this Rule. Much of this language was most likely added at the general chapter meeting (gathering of all friars to discuss issues and business of the entire Order) of 1221, by a hand other than Francis's, by which time there were divisions such as those described between lay and ordained friars. See Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 65, n. b.

⁷ *Miserere mei* means "Have mercy on me, O God" (Ps. 51:1). *Paternoster* means "Our Father" (Mt. 6:9-13). *De profundis* means "Out of the depths" (Ps. 130:1).

⁸ An interesting inclusion by Francis, suggesting that a friar is entitled to disobey an order from his superior if that order is believed to be contrary to the spirit of the Order. See n. 6, below, as well.

⁹ Note that Francis uses the phrase "minister and servant" to denote those in leadership. To Francis, a minister is always, by definition, also a servant. This passage is also noteworthy for the way in which Francis builds in the possibility to disobey an order that is deemed unfaithful or unholy.

¹⁰ Neither of these quotations is from Scripture. The first is a maxim variously attributed to St. Jerome and St. Gregory the Great. The second is a familiar line from St. Benedict's Rule (Terrence G. Kardong, OSB, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996], 48.1, 382).

¹¹ This reference—"like the one who held the purse"—is to Judas Iscariot. See John 12:4–6.

¹² This is the first moment in this long document where Francis's teaching becomes personal advice, using the first person, as from his own direct experience caring for other brothers.

¹³ A curious chapter for the simple reason that, at times, it does not seem to match the spirit in which Francis accepted Clare as the first female Franciscan in March 1212.

¹⁴ Some scholars suggest that this chapter was added later, for example, sometime after November 1220. See Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 1:73, n. a.

¹⁵ For only the second time in this long document, Francis uses the first personal singular pronoun "I" to emphasize his point.

¹⁶ This is another chapter that was surely added after 1209. It was not until 1219 that Francis traveled to Egypt and met with the Sultan, al-Kamil (1180–1238), although he first attempted to reach Muslim-controlled lands as early as 1212.

Notice the progression in the first paragraph of the chapter: Francis didn't want ministers sending friars into harm's way upon the old monastic principle of unquestioning obedience to one's superior. The impulse had to start with God, then the friar, then be confirmed by a minister/servant.

¹⁷ In some manuscripts and in some editions of "The First Rule," there are seven additional chapters, but it seems most likely that this is where Francis concluded the earliest version of this document. For that reason, the additional chapters are not included here.

The First Rule of the Third Order (1210)

Scholars more often than not have questioned the authenticity of “The First Rule of the Third Order,” believing that it was composed by a hand other than Francis’s. The editors of the *Omnibus* wrote: “Undoubtedly, Francis very early drew up some kind of short Rule of life for these people who could not leave the world yet wanted to strive after perfection as he was striving after perfection. Quite likely, he did this as early as 1209 or 1210, but certainly before 1221. In 1221, however, Cardinal Ugolino, the Protector of the Franciscan Order and Francis’ close friend, took Francis’ original short Rule and set it up in more legal form. This Rule, then, was approved orally in that year by Pope Honorius III.”¹⁸ For this reason, what follows is a simplified reconstruction of the principles of this important text, without the late medieval legalese. I hope that readers will not make too much of the originality of this particular version; it is not intended to be a scholarly reconstruction of a missing original document. My aim has been simply to highlight what were likely the founding principles Francis had in mind for all lay disciples. As a result, no headings are used in what follows, in contrast to “The First Rule” for the friars, above.

Brother Bernard and Brother Peter Catani were the first men to follow Francis, in the spring of 1209, and become friars. Within a year, so many people throughout Italy wanted to join him in his work that it became problematic as to how to encourage them without disrupting too many families (depriving mothers of more than one son or daughter, leaving spouses without support or care). Francis needed to encourage the people’s desire for virtue, repentance, and holy living, to offer them clear ways to respond positively to the preaching of the new friars, and to show them how it was possible to follow Christ with passion and intention while remaining in marital relationships, jobs, and in the towns where they lived. For that purpose, he wrote these basic guidelines for a Christian Franciscan life.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

AS TO CLOTHING: The men and women belonging to this brotherhood should dress humbly, wearing simple clothing.

AS TO EATING: All should abstain from eating meat except on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, on account of illness or weakness, and on special feast days. When there is no fasting, they may eat cheese and eggs. And when they are with religious in their convent homes, they may eat whatever is served to them. Let all be temperate whenever they eat and drink.

AS TO PRAYER BEFORE MEALS: Before lunch and dinner all should say the Lord's Prayer. Likewise after the meal.

AS TO THE DAILY OFFICE: All should daily say the seven hours of the daily office, that is: Matins, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. If they are sick, they do not have to say the hours, unless they wish.

AS TO THE SACRAMENTS: All should make a confession of their sins three times a year and receive Communion at Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. They should be reconciled with their neighbors and restore what belongs to others.

AS TO NONVIOLENCE: All should refrain from taking up lethal weapons or bearing them against anybody.

AS TO OATHS: All should refrain from taking formal oaths unless necessity compels it. In ordinary conversation be careful to avoid oaths, swearing thoughtlessly, and slips of the tongue. This happens when there is too much talking. If it does happen, one should, before evening that same day, think carefully over what he has done and say three Our Fathers as penance.

AS TO MASS TOGETHER: All the brothers and sisters of every city and place are to gather every month and participate in Mass. There, every member should give the treasurer one simple coin; this collection being for the poorest brothers and sisters, especially the sick.

AS TO AID TO THE SICK AND THE DYING: Whenever a brother or sister falls ill, the ministers will visit him or her once a week, remind him or her of penance, and perhaps offer financial help from the treasury.

IF ANYONE SHOULD DIE: Let this news be published to the other brothers and sisters so that they may come for the funeral. And after the body is buried, within eight days, let each of us say for the soul of the deceased a Mass (if a priest), fifty psalms (if one knows the Psalter), or fifty Our Fathers with the *Requiem aeternam* at the end of each.¹⁹

¹⁸ As a result, the *Omnibus* editors place the longer, Ugolino-inspired version of the text in the appendix following their collection of the most authentic writings by Francis. This quote appears on page 167 of the *Omnibus*.

¹⁹ *Requiem aeternam* means “eternal rest” and comes from the ancient, familiar introit (“entrance,” or beginning) of what is usually called the Requiem Mass, or Mass for the Dead. So, following Francis’s instruction, the most common prayer for a friend who has died would be the Our Father followed by *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*—“Grant them eternal rest, O Lord”—fifty times over.

Praises to the Blessed Virgin Mary (1210–1220)

Francis's devotion to the Blessed Virgin was legendary. In this respect, he followed in the august tradition of the saints who looked to Mary as the prime exemplar of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In this brief litany, Francis offers accolades that summarize the way in which the Blessed Virgin was set apart by God for a unique role in the history of salvation as the Mother of God.

Long ago, there were tunes that the early Franciscans used to sing these verses—tunes that probably originated with Francis himself. This is the first of three such songs included in this collection of Francis's writings. See also the ones to follow: "Praises of the Christian Virtues," as well as the most popular, "Canticle of the Creatures." There are some Franciscans, and others today, who are composing new tunes with which to sing these *laude*.

Praise the holy Lady,
The most holy Queen,
Mary, only Mother of God.

She is forever Virgin,
Heavenly chosen of the Father,
And consecrated by the beloved Son with
the Holy Ghost the Paraclete.

They three descended in you,
And remaining there still,
For grace's fullness and every goodness.

Praise God's Palace
Praise God's Tabernacle

Praise God's Robe
Praise God's Servant
Praise God's Mother!

Praises of the Christian Virtues (1210–1220)

In most manuscripts, a few lines are added to the end of the previous writing, “Praises to the Virgin Mary,” also praising the holy virtues that are “poured into the hearts of the faithful” who desire to be the servants of God. This is surely because “Praises to the Virgin Mary” was indelibly linked to “Praises of the Christian Virtues” in the early manuscript tradition, and also then presumably in the mind and heart of Francis himself.

Francis begins his “Praises of the Christian Virtues” by addressing again, at the start, the Blessed Virgin Mary (“Queen Wisdom”). The reason for this is simple: Mary is the exemplar of all virtue and was the first follower of Christ. And then Francis shows his passion for—even love of—the virtues, as he personifies them.

Praise, Queen Wisdom!
May “the Lord bless you and
keep you” with your sister holy pure
simplicity.
Lady holy poverty, may the Lord keep
you with your sister holy humility.
Lady holy charity, may the Lord keep
you with your sister holy obedience.
All of the most holy virtues, may the Lord,
from whom you proceed and come,
save you!

Num. 6:24

There is absolutely no one in the world
who can truly possess one of you before death.
Whoever possesses one virtue without offending the
others, possesses them all.

But whoever offends just one, possesses none of
them, and offends all of them.
Every virtue confounds vices and sins.

Holy wisdom confounds Satan and all of his
wickedness.
Pure holy simplicity confounds all the “wisdom of
this age” and the wisdom of the flesh.
Holy poverty confounds the cares of the world and
the desire for riches.

1 Cor. 2:6

Holy humility confounds pride and all the people
of this world, and all that is in it.
Holy charity confounds all evil and carnal
temptations, and all carnal fears.
Holy obedience confounds all bodily and fleshly
desires, keeping the body mortified to the
obedience of the Spirit, and one’s brother.
That way, each person is subject to every creature
in this world, not only to people,
but to every beast and animal too,
so all may do whatever they will,
as if “it had been given you from above”
by the Lord.

Jn. 19:11

My First Recommendation to the Faithful (1213)

The writings of Francis are usually assigned titles by the editor of a volume such as this one. It can be tricky to appropriately title each piece of writing that was most likely originally composed without thought for such things; who, after all, titles one's letters or prayers? It is in that context that I have deliberately titled this occasional piece with a self-referential, personal pronoun—because that is the nature of the message being delivered.

“My First Recommendation to the Faithful” was most likely written early in Francis's movement, when men and women were coming to join in his gospel work, asking of him, “What should I do?” Francis's answer is quite clear and was based upon his understanding of Jesus's call to the disciples. The final five paragraphs are a good example of how Francis is far more complex than the nature-loving saint he is usually understood to be today. He feared for people's souls and understood hell and its dangers to be both real and imminent.

As for the dating of the letter, we are following the wise recommendation of Augustine Thompson, OP, in his biography of Francis, setting its composition later than was once assumed, “because [the way it is written] implies that Francis had already gained some reputation as a spiritual guide.”²⁰

Today, this text often appears as the prologue to editions of the Rule for Secular Franciscans.

In the name of Our Lord.

To those who do penance, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” Despise the sin and vice of your body, especially when you are to

receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, and always strive to be fruitful as a result of your penance.

Mt. 22:37, 39

How happy and blessed people are when they do these things, and keep doing them! The Spirit of God will rest on them and make its home among them. They are children of our Father in heaven, whose work they do, and they are spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus. We are spouses to Christ when our souls are joined in faith to him. We are brothers to Christ when we do the will of our Father in heaven. We are mothers when we carry Christ in our hearts and bodies with a love that is godly and a conscience that is earnest, and when we give birth to Christ through our spiritual practice, as a shining example before all people.

Cf. Isa. 11:2; Jn. 14:23

Cf. Mt. 12:50

How marvelous it is to have our holy Father in heaven! How holy and comforting it is to have such a beautiful spouse! How humbling, loving, and gratifying it is to have a brother and Son, our Lord Jesus, the one who offered his life for the lives of his sheep. He prayed to the Father, saying:

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”

Jn. 17:6–8

“I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world.”

Jn. 17:9a

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also,

whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Jn. 17:17–24

Amen.

To those who do not do penance, who don't receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, who allow themselves to sin and walk after their evil desires and concupiscence, who don't practice what they have promised to Christ, and who serve the concerns of the world and are most interested in the cares of this life, they are in the devil's grip. It is the devil's work that they do.

They are blind. They are unable to see the true light, our Lord Jesus. They live without any spiritual wisdom because they don't have the Son of God or the true wisdom that comes only from the Father. It is said of such people that their wisdom has been swallowed up, “accursed [are the] ones, who wander from your commandments.” They see and recognize, they understand and do wrong, and they knowingly lose their souls.

Ps. 119:21

See, you are blind and deceived, your enemies are the flesh, the world, and the devil, because the body sins and feels sweet doing so, and it can feel bitter to serve God, but “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come,” as our Lord says in the Gospel. You have nothing in this world and nothing in the next. You believe that you will gain this world's vain prizes, but you are deceived because the day will come when death comes, and even though you may not give this a moment's thought, you will die a death most bitter-tasting. Wherever, whenever, and however a person dies in the guilt of sin without penance, the devil snatches his soul from his body, and the anguish you feel cannot be described except by one to whom it has happened.

Mk. 7:21

Every talent and skill and knowledge that they think they have will be taken from them. They leave their wealth behind to friends and family, who take it only to say, “His soul should be cursed because he could have given me more.” Their bodies are devoured by worms, and so nothing remains of it—or the soul—as they die from this world, heading to hell where they will only find eternal torment.

We beg all of you, with the love that comes only from God, to hear these words, offered by Jesus Christ in the Gospel, and allow them to reach

you with their love and gentleness. If someone cannot read for himself, may someone else read this to him often. “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Keep and observe them,²¹ together with active spiritual practice, to the end. Whoever has not done these things will be accountable before Jesus Christ, for “I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account.”

Jn. 6:63

Mt. 12:36

²⁰ Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 34.

²¹ Francis understood “keep and observe them” a bit differently than we might today. As will be seen later, in other writings, Francis held a reverence for sacred writing, particularly the words of Scripture, that extended to every piece of parchment or paper upon which such writing might be found. Some scholars have surmised, probably correctly, that this was because of the corporeality of these words—they are physical expressions of the eternal Word, similar to how the Eucharistic host is Christ himself. (See Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 228–29.)

A Rule for Hermitages (1217)

This simple writing demonstrates the essence of early Franciscan spirituality and liturgical practice, with careful specificity as to how to foster both.

Any among us who desire to stay in religious hermitages should do so in numbers of three or, at the most, four. Two of these brothers should be “the mother” and two, or at least one, “the sons.” The two who are mothers should follow the life of Martha, and the sons should follow the life of Mary.²² Each has his own cell where he can pray in solitude and go to sleep.

Lk. 10:39–42

They should all recite Compline each day right after sunset and then, diligently remaining silent, recite their hours, rise for Matins, and “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” They should also recite Prime at the proper hour and then end their silence after Terce, when the sons can once again go to their mothers.

Mt. 6:33 (NAB)

Then, if necessary, beg alms as poor little ones who desire nothing but the love of God. And be sure to recite Sext, None, and at the right hour, Vespers.

Hermitage brothers may not allow anyone to enter or eat within their enclosures. The brothers who are mothers should aim to stay far away from others and to protect their sons from all, so that they are never spoken to. And the brothers who are sons should not talk with anyone but their mothers, and with the minister or custodian of our order, whom they may visit whenever they need to.

Now, “sons” may occasionally take on the role of “mothers,” as brothers take turns in these spiritual roles by mutual agreement. And at all times, everyone should aim to eagerly follow the details mentioned here.

²² In the Gospel account, Martha busied herself to prepare their home for Jesus's visit, while Mary "sat at the Lord's feet" (Lk. 10:39).

Letter to Those Who Rule over People (1220)

Francis most often preached with his actions, rather than his words. He famously wrote in the seventeenth and final chapter of “The First Rule,” above, that not every friar is meant to preach, and that preaching is never supposed to become fulltime or all-consuming work; however, “Every brother . . . should preach by his deeds.”

Still, there were many times when Francis saw fit to exhort others through preaching, and he was known to speak eloquently, spontaneously, and often frankly with the powerful. This letter is one of those moments, and a pivotal document in the early history of the Franciscan order, which has for more than eight hundred years played a prophetic role in the Church and the world.

I am Brother Francis, your small, humble servant of God. I wish you good health and peace, all of you who are mayors, councilmen, magistrates, and governors throughout the world—and any others who also may somehow come to hear these words of mine in the future.

We should all reflect and understand that our day of death is coming soon. I plead with you: do not ever forget the Lord our God, even though the cares of the world and its many concerns preoccupy your attention. We should never turn from God’s commandments. For if anyone leaves him, and turns from his commandments, he will be cursed and “in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die.” When that day of death comes, all that you believe is yours will be taken away from you. The punishments of hell are greater for those who were the most powerful and world-wise in this life.

Ezek. 33:13; cf. Ps. 119:21

Therefore, I desperately plead with you, my worldly superiors, take time to set aside the cares and preoccupations that consume your attention, and receive the holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with passion, remembering him and his holiness. Then, may you foster this same honor to

the Lord among the people who are entrusted to your care. Every night you could announce, via messenger or some other simple sign, that your subjects might take time to offer their prayers and thanksgivings to the one, all-powerful God.

If you fail to do this, please know that “on the day of judgment you will have to give an account” before your Lord God Jesus Christ.

Mt. 12:36

All of those who keep this letter with them, and observe what it says, will surely be blessed by the Lord God.

Cf. Deut. 17:18–19

Letter to a Minister (1221)

Scholars have attempted unsuccessfully for centuries to identify the recipient of this letter, which is most often labeled in the oldest manuscripts “A letter of St. Francis to an unknown minister.” Other early manuscript copies make it “To Brother Elias, a minister”—a minister, indeed, with whom Francis had many dealings and not all of them pleasant; however, that seems both convenient and unlikely. We know from other sources how forthrightly Francis often spoke to his old friend Elias, and there would have been no need for secrecy or subtlety were Elias the recipient. No, rather, the addressee of this letter must have been a person who was not in Francis’s normal circle of acquaintances and yet, clearly, a leader of other Franciscans, perhaps in a new outlying province. I believe that Francis never intended for the recipient’s name to be known. And, of course, Francis never intended that his writings would be preserved in a book such as this.

To my brother, a minister, may “the Lord bless you and keep you.”

Num. 6:24

I communicate this to you, to the best of my ability, out of concern for the state of your soul. You should realize that anything that keeps you from loving the Lord God, and anyone who has personally kept you from the same, whether it be a brother or someone else, even if they have laid hands upon you, all of this happens to you as grace. And, may you desire it to be so and not otherwise. For this will be your true obedience to the Lord God and to myself, because I know for sure that it is right and true.

Love those who do these things to you. And don’t wish for something else from them, unless it is a desire that the Lord has given to you. Love them, and don’t even wish that they would be better Christians. This will be more than a hermitage to you.²³

If you do this and show your love for the Lord as well as myself, for I am his servant and yours, you will show by your love that there is no friar

in the world who has sinned—regardless of how much he has, in reality, sinned—because once he has looked into your eyes he will see only mercy—that is, if he is seeking mercy. And if he is not seeking mercy, you would ask him if he wants mercy. He could sin a thousand times before your eyes and yet you would love him more than me, so that you might draw him to the Lord.

You are always to show mercy to such ones. And you should explain all of this to the guardians, when you can, so that they will understand why you are acting in this way.

At the Chapter at Pentecost, with God’s help and after consulting with all of the friars, we will make a new chapter such as this, summarizing the work of our Rule:

If one of the friars at the instigation of the enemy has committed a mortal sin, he is bound by obedience to his guardian for aid and support. All of the other friars who know that he has sinned may not bring shame upon him or utter any slander about him; they must show great mercy and keep private the sin of their brother because “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” do. Similarly, they are bound by obedience to send him to his guardian with a companion. And the guardian should care for him mercifully, just as he himself would want to be cared for, if he were in the same place. Then, if that brother falls into any venial sin, he should confess to his priest, and if there is no priest there, he should simply confess to another brother until a priest is available, to canonically absolve him, as it has been said. And let it be said that none of the friars should have the power to ask any more penance than this: “Go and . . . do not sin anymore.”²⁴

Mt. 9:12

Jn. 8:11 (NAB)

Now, please keep this document with you until Pentecost, when you will be there with the other friars, and we review it. I hope that you, with the help of our Lord God, help us to care for this issue and every other that is not yet clear in our Rule.

²³ How helpful it would be if we possessed the letter that Francis received from this unknown minister, to which Francis is responding, here. From this unusual, abrupt line, we can surmise that the minister may have been asking Francis for permission to take himself back to a remote hermitage where he might simply pray—and no longer have to deal with the people mentioned in this letter. Francis is saying no, you cannot, for your obedience to God and to others in these ways will be of far more spiritual good to you than will silence and prayer.

²⁴ There have been historians, such as Paul Sabatier (see *The Road to Assisi*), who have pointed to Francis as a forerunner of what became the Protestant Reformation due to the subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways that Francis taught a return to the words of Jesus over the teachings of the Church. This is an instance of that principle at work.

Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua
(1224)

This short and simple message from Francis to one of his most beloved and famous followers is instructive both in terms of what it says and what it doesn't say. Notice that Francis does not trouble himself with any details or subtleties of theology or the methods of teaching it. And notice the one most important instruction that he emphasizes to his young, more brilliant brother.

It was in Bologna where the Franciscans first opened a house for theological study, and this occurred after Francis resigned as the spiritual leader of the Order. Refer back to the words of the original document of Franciscan principles, "The First Rule" of 1209, and you will be reminded of Francis's concerns about book learning. It seems that the occasion for this letter from Francis to Anthony was that the latter was asked to be the instructor of this new theological institute, and despite Francis's diminished official status within the Order, Anthony nevertheless wanted the founder's permission.

I, Brother Francis, send greetings to you, Brother Anthony, my theological superior.

I am pleased that you are now teaching sacred theology to our brothers providing one thing:

As it says in our Rule, please see that you do not squelch the spirit of prayer and devotion in them as they undertake studies of this kind.

Praises to God and The Blessing of Brother Leo (1224–1225)

The three closest friends to Brother Francis were Rufino, Angelo, and Leo. They are known as the “Three Companions.” All three were buried under the high altar of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, beside their brother, the saint. We know more about Leo than the other two. Leo was perhaps Francis’s closest friend, his confidant, companion, secretary, and confessor.

These two writings are presented together because they physically exist together on the same piece of parchment. That parchment is, in fact, one of only two extant writings we possess with the handwriting of Francis himself.

On one side is the no longer legible handwriting of Francis praising God after receiving the stigmata (according to the testimony of Brother Leo). Francis composed these “Praises to God” while descending Mount La Verna, returning from the famous forty-day Lenten fast when he received the world’s first stigmata. Some have compared this simple text of Francis to the ancient liturgical hymn of the Church known as *Te Deum*, saying, “It is typical of that wholeheartedness and exuberance which characterize his writings.”²⁵

The *Te Deum* is commonly prayed each day at the end of Matins, or morning prayer. It begins, *Te Deum laudamus* (“Thee, O God, we praise”). As a testimony to Francis’s simple approach to prayer and theology, notice the beauty of his occasional repetitions in these praises to God.

Francis’s first biographer, Thomas of Celano, tells the story of the writing of these two texts in chapter 49 of his *Second Life* of Francis. Briefly, Brother Leo was facing some sort of serious temptation in his life and desired from Francis a word of encouragement. Yet, for whatever reason, Leo was hesitant to ask his friend—perhaps because of the solemnity of the moment upon La Verna. Nevertheless, Francis intuitively Leo’s

need and asks Leo to bring him some paper and ink, and he writes these praises of God, followed by a special encouragement to Leo himself.

PRAISES TO GOD (1224)

You are holy, Lord, the only God.

You do wondrous things.

You are strong.

You are great.

You are the most high.

You are the almighty king, holy Father, king of heaven and earth.

You are three and you are one, the Lord God of gods.

You are good, every good, the highest good, Lord God, living and true.

You are love.

You are wisdom.

You are humility.

You are patience.

You are beauty.

You are meekness.

You are a stronghold.

You are rest.

You are joy.

You are hope.

You are justice.

You are all our needs.

You are all the riches we require.

You are beauty.

You are meekness.

You are strength.

You are refreshment.

You are hope.

You are our faith.

You are our only love.

You are all our sweetness.

You are our eternal life.
Great and wonderful Lord,
God almighty, merciful Savior.

On the other side of this rough piece of parchment, preserved today in Assisi, is the utterly simple, also handwritten note from Francis known to us as “The Blessing of Brother Leo.” It appears certain that Francis wrote his good friend this blessing while they were together upon La Verna, and to do so, Francis simply repeated the beautiful priestly blessing from the Hebrew Scriptures, adding his friend’s name at the end.

THE BLESSING OF BROTHER LEO (1225)

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.
May God bless you, Brother Leo.

Num. 6:24–26

²⁵ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi: Omnibus*, 1914.

Letter to All the Friars (1225)

As the early Franciscan scholar Paschal Robinson prefaced this text more than a century ago: “It was at the end of his days when he was ill, that St. Francis wrote this letter to the Minister General and to all the Friars. In it he confesses all his sins to God, to the Saints and to the Friars, and in weighty words urges once again what was ever uppermost in his mind and heart: reverence toward the Blessed Sacrament, observance of the Rule and the Divine Office. The same desires and counsels contained in this letter may also be found in the *Testament*, and there is little doubt that both works were composed about the same time.”²⁶

The “Letter to All the Friars” is indeed a most personal document. In fact, it is important to keep in mind the sadness in Francis’s mind at the time he wrote this letter: he was no longer the minister-general by this time, and many of his friends were straying from the original principles of personal poverty and evangelical witness that Francis had first established. It is in this context that we understand plaintive words such as these: “Listen to me, my brothers and sons, ‘listen to what I say.’ ‘Incline your ear’ and your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God.”

In the name of the holy Unity and highest Trinity, the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.

To all of my devout and much beloved brothers, to Brother Elias,²⁷ the minister-general of the Order of Friars Minor, its superior, and all of the ministers-general who will come after him, and to all of the ministers, guardians, and priests of this same brotherhood, humble in Christ, simple and obedient brothers, the first and the last:

I, Brother Francis, a worthless and sinful man, your little servant, bring you greetings in the name of him who has redeemed and washed us in his precious blood. When you hear his name, adore it with fear and reverence,

prostrate on the ground, for he is the Lord Jesus Christ, “Son of the Most High,” blessed forever!

Lk. 1:32

Listen to me, my brothers and sons, “listen to what I say.” “Incline your ear” and your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God. Keep his commandments with your whole heart and fulfill his counsels with a perfect mind. Praise him for he is good and exalt him in your good works; for it is to do good works that he has sent you into the world—may you bear witness to the Word by your words and deeds and make known to everyone that there is no other who is almighty and powerful, other than him. Stand strong in your discipline and obedience, with good and firm purpose, fulfilling what you have promised to him. The Lord God offers himself to all of us as his very children.

Acts 2:14

Isa. 55:3

Cf. Gal. 3:26

With all the love I am able to offer, kissing your very feet, I therefore beg you: please show every reverence and honor to the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom everything that is in heaven and that is on earth are given peace and harmony in almighty God.

I also beg all of my brothers who are priests, or will one day be priests, or desire to be priests of the Most High, in the name of the Lord, whenever they desire to celebrate Mass, they should offer the true sacrifice of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with purity and reverence, with a holy and blameless intention, never for any earthly reason, or from fear or love of any human being, as if to please someone. Instead, each of them should, as far as the grace of the almighty assists them, be directed to God alone, desiring to please the Most High Lord himself, because he alone does that work as he pleases, as he says: “Do this in remembrance of me.” If anyone acts otherwise, he becomes like Judas the traitor and “will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord”!

Lk. 22:19

1 Cor. 11:27

My priestly brothers, remember what is written in the Law of Moses about how those who sin against the material elements died without mercy, at God’s command. “How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of

the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?" For, as the apostle says, a man despises, defiles, and tramples on the Lamb of God when, not discerning and distinguishing the holy bread of Christ from other foods or doings, he eats it unworthily or, even if he is worthy, he eats it disrespectfully, since the Lord says through the prophet: "Accursed is the one who is slack in doing the work of the Lord." Our Lord condemns priests who show little desire to take this to heart, saying: "I will curse your blessings."

Cf. Heb. 10:28–29

Jer. 48:10

Mal. 2:2

Listen,²⁸ my brothers: If the Blessed Virgin Mary is honored to the degree to which is right, as the one who bore God in her most holy womb; if the blessed Baptist trembled and did not dare to touch the holy forehead of God;²⁹ if the tomb in which Christ lay for a time is venerated, how holy, just, and worthy should a man be who is to touch with his hands, receive with his heart and his mouth, and offer to others to be received the One who cannot die, but will triumph in glory for eternity—"things into which angels long to look!"

1 Pet. 1:12

You should understand, my brothers, that you are dignified as priests only because God is holy. The Lord God has honored you above all others through his mystery, but even so, you should show love, reverence, and honor to him to the utmost. It is a terribly miserable thing, and a deplorable weakness, if you ever have God present before you while you are caring for anything else in the whole world!

We should all be seized with fear, the whole world should tremble, all the heavens exult, when Christ, the Son of the living God, is on the altar in the hands of a priest! How lofty and exalted, what sublime humility! What humble sublimity that the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself for our salvation that he hides himself within a simple piece of bread! Look at the humility of our God, brothers, and "pour out your hearts before him." Be humbled so that you are then able to be raised up by God. Don't keep anything back for yourselves from the One who gives everything to you. He, then, will be able to receive all of you!

Ps. 62:8

I urge and encourage you in the Lord, therefore, wherever you dwell, brothers, to celebrate one Mass per day and no more, according to the rite of the holy Church. If there happens to be more than one priest in a place, the other one should be content, through the love of charity, to hear the celebration of his brother priest, for our Lord Jesus Christ replenishes all who are worthy and are present and absent. Christ is present simultaneously everywhere, but nevertheless, he remains undivided and without change; and, being One everywhere, he works as it pleases him, with the Lord God the Father and the Holy Ghost the Paraclete forever and eternity. Amen.

Since “whoever is from God hears the words of God,” we who have been given the special responsibility for divine tasks should not only hear and do what God says, but also, in order to impress upon ourselves the greatness of our creator and our subjection to him, take great care of the vessels and other objects that contain his holy words. Because of this, I warn all of my brothers, and I lift them up in Christ, that they should always and everywhere revere the divinely written words, so far as they are able, wherever they find them.³⁰ If they are not preserved well, or if they are carelessly scattered around, the brothers should collect and preserve them, honoring in those words the Lord who has spoken them, because this should concern them. Many things are made holy by the words of God, and it is by the power of the words of Christ that the sacrament of the altar is celebrated.

Jn. 8:47

In addition, I confess³¹ all my sins to God the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, and to the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints in heaven and on earth, and to Brother Elias, the ministergeneral of our order, as to my venerable lord, and to all the priests of our order and to all my other blessed brothers. I have offended God in many ways through my serious faults, especially when I have not observed the Rule that I promised to the Lord, and when I have not said the divine office as the Rule prescribes, either because I was lazy or from some other weakness, or because I am just ignorant and simple.

Therefore, I beg you, Brother Elias, my superior, the minister-general, by all means possible, to have the Rule observed without fail by all of us and ensure that the priests among us say the divine office with devotion before God—not focusing on the beauty of their voices but on the harmony of their intentions, so that the voice may be in harmony with the intention,

and in true harmony with God—so that in their purity of heart they will please God and not simply please the ears of the people.

As for me, I promise to keep these rules carefully, as the Lord gives me grace to do so, and I leave them to the brothers who are with me to be observed in the divine office and in the other appointed principles of the Rule. Whoever does not observe these rules, I consider neither a Catholic nor my brother, and I don't wish to see them or speak with them until they have done penance. I say this also about those who have set aside the discipline of the Rule and are wandering about, for our Lord Jesus Christ gave his life so that he would not be disobedient to his most holy Father.³²

I, Brother Francis, a useless man and an unworthy creature of God, speak by our Lord Jesus Christ to Brother Elias, the minister-general of our entire order, and to all the ministers-general who will come after him, to other custodians and guardians of the brothers, whoever they are or shall be, so that they will have this writing before them, carefully preserving it, and put it into practice. I beg them to guard this writing jealously and to see that these things are carefully observed according to the good pleasure of almighty God now and forever, until the end of this world.

You are blessed by the Lord if you do these things and may he be with you forever. Amen.

Almighty, eternal, just, and merciful God, give us scoundrels your grace to do for you what we know you want from us, and always to do that which is pleasing to you. May we be inwardly purified, interiorly illumined, and kindled by the fire of the Holy Ghost, so that we are able to follow in the footsteps of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and by your grace alone make our way to you, the Most High, who live and reign in perfect Trinity and simple unity and glory, God almighty forever and ever. Amen.

²⁶ *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paschal Robinson (Philadelphia: The Dolphin Press, 1905), 109.

²⁷ Brother Peter Catani, the first minister-general of the Franciscans, had died in March 1221, after serving for less than a year. Brother Elias was elected to replace him and was the controversial minister-general until more than a decade after Francis's death.

²⁸ In some respects, this letter has more characteristics of a speech than of an actual written letter. It probably had its origins in talks that Francis gave at general chapter meetings of the Order.

²⁹ This was an occasional theme in medieval monastic writings, building upon John's statement in Luke 3:16 that John developed such reverence for Jesus that by the time of his baptism he would not touch Jesus, as he touched others who came to him, in baptizing him.

³⁰ Francis is talking here about the importance of taking care of liturgical books, but also, any instance where the Lord's words appeared on a page. In those days, neither laity nor friars owned personal Bibles; if they possessed any religious books it would have been prayer books for saying the divine office, or copies of the Gospels, and other writings that contained the words of Christ. These various books were, according to Francis, to be safe-housed with deliberate care. He must have felt the need to say these things based upon some experiences with friars or other priests who paid less than respect to the written word.

³¹ What a beautiful, honest confession this paragraph is—an example of Francis's simplicity and holy example.

³² In this last sentence, Francis is picking up a theme from the Benedictine Rule, in which St. Benedict vilifies "gyrovagues," a pejorative name given to early medieval spiritual itinerants who were unwilling to be settled within a monastery or under the authority of an abbot or rule. The Council of Chalcedon also condemned this practice, in 451.

Canticle of the Creatures (1225)

This is undoubtedly Francis's most recognized writing, keeping in mind that the popular prayer repeated and reprinted every day all over the world as "The Prayer of Saint Francis," beginning with the line, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," wasn't written by Francis but originated from an anonymous hand about a century ago.

Francis composed the "Canticle of the Creatures" in the Umbrian dialect of vernacular Italian when he was nearly blind, one year before his death. The circumstances are so similar to those in the Bible surrounding the "Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 31–32 that it seems that Francis must have been inspired by the life of Moses and this earlier poem.³³ However, the content and tone of the two poems couldn't be more different.

He was living in a small hut outside the walls of San Damiano in a place that Clare had prepared for him among the gardens. There, she cared for him. He grew blinder by the day. After sixty days at San Damiano, he was unable to see at all. But in this song, he expresses his wonder and belief in the wildness and expectancies of nature as part of God's plan for human life. This marked the true dividing point—the first real signpost—for what has become the modern understanding of how earth and heaven join together. This text is why St. Francis has long been the patron saint of environmentalists, of any and all who care about creatures and creation.

It is important to clarify that Francis did not "love nature" in any abstract sense. He never lived, spoke, or wrote in that manner. Instead, Francis loved creatures—one by one, easily and often. As one contemporary author has put it: "The *Canticle* signifies that the whole creation is a cosmic Incarnation—earth, air, water, sun, moon, stars—all are related to Brother Sun who is the splendor and radiance of the Most High. We might read Francis' *Canticle* as foreshadowing the new creation, when we will find ourselves related to all things in the spirit of reconciliation and peace."³⁴

Francis begins by integrating the natural and the spiritual in a way that deliberately honored those creatures and aspects of creation that we normally either forget or despise.

Most high, almighty, good Lord God,
to you belong all praise, glory, honor, and blessing!
Praised be you, O my Lord and God, with all your
creatures,
and especially our Brother Sun,
who brings us the day and who brings us the light.
He is fair and shines with a very great splendor:
O Lord, he signifies you to us!
Praised be you, O my Lord, for our Brother Wind,
and for air and cloud, calms and all weather
by whom you uphold life in all creatures.
Praise the Lord for our Sister Water,
who is very useful to us and humble
and precious and clean.
Praise the Lord for our Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the darkness.
He is bright and pleasant and very mighty and
strong.
Praise the Lord for our Mother Earth,
who sustains us and keeps us,
and brings forth the grass and all
of the fruits and flowers of many colors.

This was the beginning of the Canticle, which Francis then taught to his companions, asking them to sing it. Then, he needed to add another verse when the bishop of Assisi was arguing with a local governor so fiercely that the bishop excommunicated the governor and the governor forbade any citizen to enter into any contract with the bishop.

The Mirror of Perfection tells us that Francis was grieved when he heard of their bickering, but “most of all he was grieved that no one had gotten between them to try and make peace.”³⁵ So Francis wrote this additional verse for his song, speaking to the need for mediating justice and peace among the powers of the world.

Praised be you, O my Lord, for all who show
forgiveness and
pardon one another for your sake,
and who endure weakness and tribulation.
Blessed are they who peaceably endure,
For you, Most High, shall give them a crown.

Last, at the very end of his life, Francis made room for death in his hymn. He could hardly open his eyes, and any sunlight was painful to him. “Brother Ass” he had once called his own body, comparing it to the beast of burden that never does all that its master requires of it. But Francis transformed his discomfort into praise for those parts of earthly existence that most challenged him. Once he was told by his doctors and companions that his infirmities were beyond healing, the time had come to look forward to death, and he did. He asked for Leo and Angelo to come to his side and sing to him of Sister Death. Francis had written the last verse.

Praise to you, O my Lord, for our Sister Death
and the death of the body from whom no one
may escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin,
but blessed are they who are found walking by
your most holy will,
For the second death
shall have no power to do them any harm.
Praise to you, O my Lord, and all blessing.
We give you thanks and serve you with great
humility.

³³ See Deut. 31:14–22, which begins with God telling Moses, “Your time to die is near,” and ends with: “That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites.” Then, the Song of Moses itself appears in Deut. 32:1–43.

³⁴ Delio, *Franciscan Prayer*, 136.

³⁵ *The Mirror of Perfection* was written anonymously in about 1318, and first published in 1898 in a French edition by Paul Sabatier. Today it is available in many English language editions including in the third volume of Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, and in Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi: Omnibus*. The short translation quoted above is from tale 101 in *The Mirror*, in my own translation.

Canticle for the Women of San Damiano (1225)

As the twelfth century turned into the thirteenth and the conversion of Francis was beginning to ferment, San Damiano was falling into ruins. It was a nearly abandoned church in Assisi where Francis first heard God speaking to him.

According to Francis's biography, rebuilding that lonely church was his first act of divine obedience. It was later given to him by the Benedictines for his growing movement and became the home of the first community of the second order of Franciscans: the Order of Poor Ladies, or Poor Clares.

A decade later, while Francis was at the convent of San Damiano recuperating, composing his famous "Canticle of the Creatures," he was being nursed daily by Clare and some of the other sisters. With this simpler song (he was still in the singing mode, writing in Umbrian), he wanted to encourage them and ask them not to worry about his fate.

Listen, all little poor ones who are called by God,
who have come to this place from many other
places far and wide:
Live truthfully;
die in holy obedience.
Look away from the life outside,
for the life of the Spirit is so much better.
Please, in love, I ask,
use prayerfully what God has given to you.
And if you are ever weighed down by illness,
or the sickness of another,
give and take care peacefully.
That weariness and weight will soon be expensively
sold
And you all will be crowned as queen in heaven

with the blessed Virgin Mary.

The Testament (1226)

This is the last text to come from Francis's mind, if not from his pen. It was surely dictated by him while on his deathbed, most likely at the Portiuncula chapel near Assisi, and to more than one of the friars who were there with him constantly. The word *testament* can mean many things, including a will, a tribute, and an expression of conviction. But in this case, Francis surely had the biblical meaning of the word in mind, as well: testament as covenant—the covenant between God and the Franciscans. He wrote this document while he was dying.

As many scholars have noted over the centuries, this is the only one of his writings to tell us anything at all about his life.³⁶ We can surmise from some of the others, based on what we know of the saint's biography, but in "The Testament" Francis offers some direct details himself. For that reason alone, it is probably the most valuable writing we possess.

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, the ability to do penance in the following way: When I was in sin,³⁷ even the sight of lepers was like acid to me. But the Lord himself led me among them, and I worked mercy with them, and helped them. When I left, all that had been so acidic to me was turned into sweetness in my soul and my body. And shortly afterward, I got up and left the world.

The Lord gave me a faith in churches so that I would pray simply, saying, "I adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, with all your churches throughout the world. We bless you because you have redeemed the world through your holy cross." Then, the Lord gave me and still gives me such a faith in priests who live according to the Roman Church rite that, even if they were to persecute me, I would still run back to them.³⁸ Also, if I had all the wisdom of Solomon and came upon some poor priests in other parts of the world, I would preach in their parishes only if they invited me. I want to

respect, love, and honor all of them as my superiors. I don't even want to think about there being any sin in them, because I see the Son of God in them and they are my superiors. I do this because I can plainly see, here in this world, the Son of God only in his most holy Body and Blood, which the priests alone receive and administer to others. I want this holy mystery to be honored and venerated above all other things, kept in secure, reserved containers. And whenever I find his holy names or written words in improper places I pick them up and ask that they be collected and stored somewhere more becoming. We should also honor all of our theologians, as well as those who minister the holy divine word, respecting them as ones who administer to us "spirit and life."

Jn. 6:63

Then God gave me brothers. No one else showed me what I was supposed to do; but the Most High revealed to me that I should live according to the ways of the Gospel.³⁹ I had this summarized simply, with some few words, and then the pope confirmed it for me. Those who came to receive life gave all that they had to the poor and were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and some trousers. We were simple and didn't wish for more. Those of us who were clerics said the divine office, and the lay brothers said the Our Father. We were happy to stay in churches. We were simple and subject to each other.

I worked with my hands, then, and I still desire to do so. I desperately want every one of my brothers to work at some honest job. Those who don't know how to work should learn, not because they want to receive wages but as an example and to avoid laziness. In fact, when we are not paid for our work, we should return to the Lord's table, begging alms from door to door. The Lord revealed to me a greeting that we should use: "May the Lord of peace himself give you peace."

2 Thess. 3:16

The brothers should always be careful not to accept any churches, poor dwellings, or anything else constructed for them unless those buildings reflect the holy poverty that we have promised to live by in the Rule. We should always live in such places as strangers and pilgrims. I strictly command all of the brothers, in obedience to me, that wherever they are, they should never presume to ask, either directly or indirectly through an intermediary, for any letter or grant from the Roman court to secure a church or any other place, whether it be for the sake of their preaching, or

for safety, to prevent persecution of their bodies. Instead, wherever they are not received, they should flee elsewhere to another land and do penance with the blessing of God.

Cf. Mt. 10:23

I always want to obey the minister-general of this brotherhood and any other guardian that the minister should want to give me. I want to be such a captive in his hands that I cannot go anywhere or do anything without his desire and permission, because he is my superior. Although I am simple and sick, I always want to have a member of the clergy who can perform the divine office for me, as the Rule states. All the other brothers should also be bound to obey their guardians and perform the office according to the Rule. If someone is ever found who does not wish to perform the divine office according to the Rule, or wants to change it, or who is not Catholic in his beliefs, then the other brothers wherever they may be are bound by obedience to turn such people over to the custodian nearest the place where they found them. The custodian in turn is bound by obedience to guard him strongly, day and night, like a man in chains, so that he cannot possibly escape until he personally places him in the hands of his minister. The minister is then bound by obedience to place him in the care of brothers who will guard him night and day like a man in chains until they turn him over to the Bishop of Ostia, who is the lord, protector, and corrector of this whole brotherhood.

And the brothers must not say, “This is another rule.” This is a remembrance, admonition, exhortation, and my personal testament which I, your little Brother Francis, make for you, my brothers, so that we may all observe the Rule we have promised to God in a more Catholic way. The minister-general and all other ministers and custodians are bound by obedience not to add or subtract from these words. They must always have this writing with them in addition to the Rule. And in all chapter meetings held by them, when they read the Rule, they should also read these words.

I firmly command⁴⁰ my brothers, both clergy and lay, never to place glosses over the Rule or to say, “This should be seen like this.” But just as the Lord gave me the power to compose and write both the Rule and these words simply and purely, you should understand them simply and without any gloss, observing them by holy action until the end.⁴¹

Whoever observes all of these things will be blessed in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father and on earth he will be filled with the

blessing of his Beloved Son, with the Holy Ghost the Comforter and all the powers of heaven and all the saints. And I, Brother Francis, your servant both in soul and body, confirm this for you with a holy blessing.

Cf. Mt. 5:3

³⁶ Most recently, Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 250.

³⁷ As usual, Francis writes most beautifully when he is the most literal. This phrase “when I was in sin” evokes the Prodigal Son wallowing in the pigsty; it literally refers to that time before his conversion had begun, when his entire self/soul/life was plunked down in everything that wasn’t God. At the end of the paragraph, he explains simply, “shortly afterward, I got up and left the world,” as if he left that sty to return to his Father.

³⁸ The Roman Church was the only option that Francis knew from firsthand experience. But he would have known of Eastern rite churches, as well, and is apparently expressing unfamiliarity with them.

³⁹ In this late text, Francis provides important spiritually autobiographic, chronological detail about his life, as he marks the progression of his conversion from (a) doing penance/touching lepers, to (b) renewed faith in churches, to (c) renewed faith in priests and sacraments, to (d) patterning his life after the teachings in the Gospel. In the next paragraph comes his discovery that he was to work with his hands.

⁴⁰ Notice that Francis alternates between using the language of simplicity and obedience to him as the founder of a large religious order.

⁴¹ At the end of Francis’s life, he had already watched as leaders of his order began to interpret “The First Rule” and then deviate from Francis’s original intentions in it. Knowing this, these final words of his take on a special poignancy. One biographer summarized this a century ago: “Francis had now taken care of the future as well as he could. In the Middle Ages even a Papal bull was not always certain of obedience, and Francis perhaps had not any great confidence in the obedience which the Brethren would give to his last will. But his conscience was quiet—he could do no more.” See Johannes Jorgensen, *St. Francis of Assisi: A Biography*, trans. T. O’Conor Sloane (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1913), 328.

Letter to Brother Leo (1226)

This letter has a mysterious provenance. After the death of both Francis and Leo, it somehow ended up in the safekeeping of the Poor Clares in Assisi, who apparently shared it with no one until the year 1604. That is when its existence was first recorded. Then it disappeared from sight for almost three more centuries, until 1895, when we see it in the hands of Pope Leo XIII and manuscript experts who were called in to determine whether or not it was truly from the hand of St. Francis. This debate is ongoing.⁴²

The letter was written in Latin, and crudely, showing Francis's poor education.

There is an instance in this document that demonstrates the close friendship between Brother Leo and Francis—so close that it's likely that here we witness the only textual example of the use of Francis's nickname. In the opening line of the Latin original, he refers to himself as *Francissco*, a misspelling of his name in any language. Francis in Italian is *Francesco*. In Latin it is *Franciscus*, meaning "French." It seems that Francis is offering himself to Leo, using his name playfully, combining Latin with perhaps his own nickname, "Sco"!⁴³

Brother Leo, peace and good health from your Brother Francis-Sco!

I am speaking to you, now, as a mother would, because all of the words we passed between us on the road together I am summarizing in this message and bit of advice. If you ever feel the need for my counsel, I suggest that you turn to this letter.

My advice is this: In whatever way you feel called to serve the Lord, and to make him happy, to follow his footprint and his poverty, do that, and do that with my blessing and with the blessing of the Lord God.

And if you ever want to come and see me, Leo, for the sake of your soul or for any other reason, come, by all means, come back to me.

⁴² See Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 1:122–23.

⁴³ Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 1:122, n. c.

Prayer for the Conclusion of the Offices

(DATE UNKNOWN)

This little prayer was used by the earliest Franciscans every day as they concluded praying each hour of the daily office. For that reason, we may assume that it began as a teaching of Francis.

It was usually prefaced by a series of Bible verses, most of them from the Book of Revelation, which seem to have been used as inspiration before praying the hours. These included “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great” (Rev. 19:5); “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8); and “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12). Then came this prayer, immediately following each hour.

I have organized the prayer as a “concrete poem” (not a term in use in Francis’s day), arranging the words so as to convey and reinforce the message conveyed by the words themselves.

Most powerful,
holy, lofty,
supreme God:
You are good, most good, the supreme good!
You alone we give praise, glory,
Thanks, honor, and all good!
Amen.
Amen!
So be it.
So be it!

The Lord's Prayer: Francis's Extended Version

(DATE UNKNOWN)

In recent decades, some experts have called the authenticity of this teaching prayer into question, saying that we do not have enough direct evidence that it comes from Francis himself. However, we know from the early biographical sources that Francis often prescribed saying the Our Father to combat idleness and gossip and to keep the mind and soul busy during physical work. We also know that the Lord's Prayer was precious to him and that Francis often sought to teach his friars how to pray and how to pray more effectively. It seems likely that this formulation began as an oral teaching, part of Francis's catechetical instruction for his followers, and may have been written down for the first time in the generations after his death.

Our Father,

Most Holy, our Creator and Redeemer, our Savior and our Comforter.

Who art in heaven,

Together with the angels and the saints, giving them light so that they may have knowledge of you, because you, Lord, are Light; inflaming them so that they may love, because you, Lord, are Love; living continually in them and filling them so that they may be happy, because you, Lord, are the supreme good, the eternal good, and it is from you that all good comes, and without you there is no good.

Hallowed be thy name.

May our knowledge of you become ever clearer, so that we may realize the width and breadth of your blessings, the steadfastness of your promises, the sublimity of your majesty, and the depth of your judgments.

Thy kingdom come,

So that you may reign in us by your grace and bring us to your kingdom, where we will see you clearly, love you perfectly, be blessed in your presence, and enjoy you forever.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven:

So that we may love you with our whole heart by always thinking of you; directing our whole intention with our whole mind toward you and seeking your glory in everything; spending all our powers and affections of soul and body with all our strength in the service of your love alone. May we also love our neighbors as ourselves, encouraging them to love you as best we can, rejoicing at the good fortune of others, just as if it were our own, and sympathizing with their misfortunes, giving offense to no one.

Give us this day our daily bread,

Your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, so to remind us of the love he showed for us and to help us understand and appreciate it and everything that he did or said or suffered.

And forgive us our trespasses,

In your infinite mercy, and by the power of the passion of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the merits and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all your saints.

As we forgive those who trespass against us,

And if we do not forgive perfectly, Lord, make us do so, so that we may indeed love our enemies out of our love for you, and pray fervently to you for them, never returning evil for evil, anxious only to serve everybody in you.

And lead us not into temptation.

Neither hidden or obvious, sudden or unforeseen.

But deliver us from evil—

Present, past, or to come. Amen.

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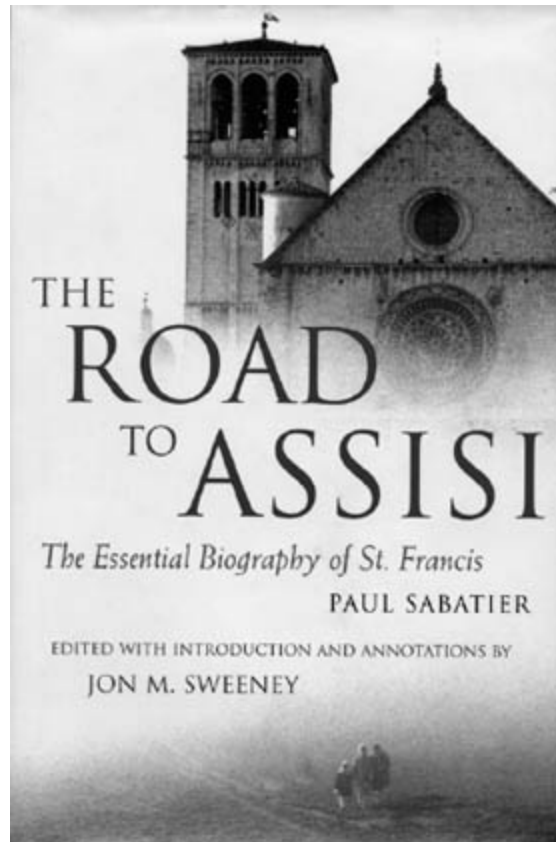
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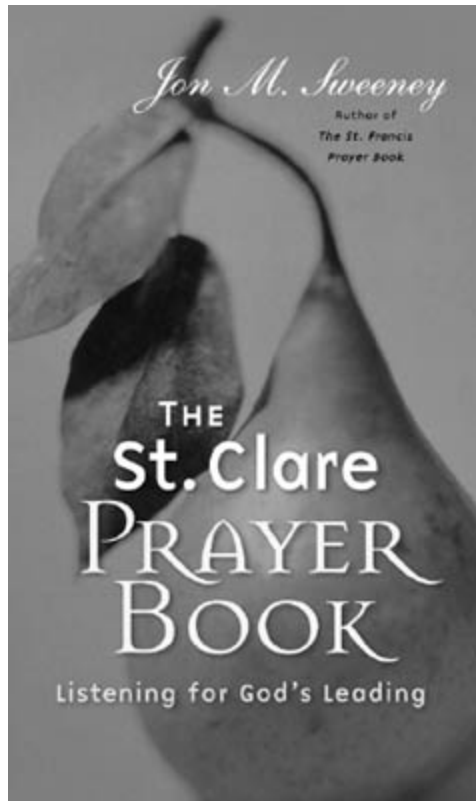
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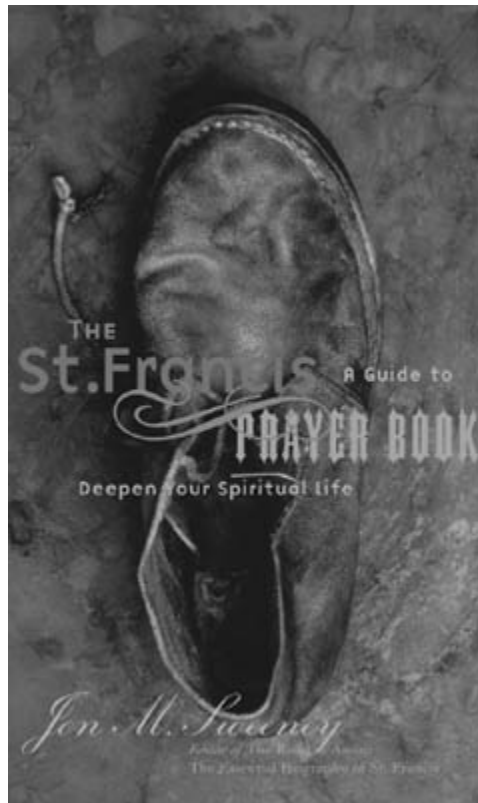
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