THE FRANCISCAN TRADITION
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Preface

The worldwide explosion of interest in “spirituality” has sent inquirers in several directions. One of the more fruitful is toward the traditional spiritualities that have enriched and nurtured the church for many hundreds of years. Among the oldest Christian spiritualities are those connected to particular foundations, charisms, or individuals. This series of spiritualities in history focuses on five distinct traditions within the history of the church, those now known as Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican, Franciscan, and Ignatian.

Each volume in the series seeks to present the given spiritual tradition through an anthology of writings by or about persons who have lived it, along with brief biographical introductions of those persons. Each volume is edited by an expert or experts in the tradition at hand.

The present volume of Franciscan spirituality has been coedited by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., and Ingrid J. Peterson, O.S.F., both experts in Franciscan spirituality. Fr. Armstrong is the John and Gertrude Hubbard Professor of Religious Studies in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America. He is the acknowledged world expert on the writings of Clare and Francis and has written or edited nine books and countless articles on Franciscan spirituality. His books include Francis and Clare: The Complete Works (Paulist Press, 1986), Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (New City Press, 1999–2001), and Clare of Assisi: The Lady (New City Press, 2006). Sr. Ingrid served as an adjunct professor at the Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University and author of several works on Franciscan spirituality, including Clare of Assisi: A Biographical Study (Franciscan Press, 1993).

Their compact presentation of the essentials of the Franciscan Tradition traces the living out of Francis’s charism chronologically within the three parts of his family—the First Order, the Second Order, and the
Third Order—through the eight centuries since he laid down his belongings and went out of Assisi to rebuild the church.

The lives and writings of the Franciscan men and women in this volume demonstrate the adaptability of Francis’s vision across cultures and throughout history. Each entry underscores the poverty at the crystal center of Francis’s spirituality. If nothing material matters, then only the immaterial—the spirit living within each and every one of us—is what must be most revered and revered. Then and only then will the promise of Franciscan spirituality—universal brotherhood and peace—be recognized and received.

My own work on this book and for this series has continued with the able assistance of librarians, particularly the reference and interlibrary loan staff of Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, who have tirelessly met so many of my research needs. I am grateful as well for the congenial staff of Liturgical Press, and especially for the professional support and encouragement of Colleen Stiller, Ann Blattner, Hans Christoffersen, and Peter Dwyer.

Phyllis Zagano
June 13, 2009
Feast of St. Anthony of Padua
Introduction

"Interpreters of that reality that begins with Baptism": this phrase of Pope Benedict XVI comes to mind when introducing someone to the Franciscan Tradition. With a penetrating simplicity, the Spirit of the Lord that enters the Christian soul at baptism seems the only explanation for the universality, the all-embracing character, and the joy Francis and his tradition brought to the religious life of the church. The Spirit, the Spirit alone, was needed by the thirteenth-century saint, perhaps the most popular saint in the church’s two millennia history.

While the young Francis of Assisi began his journey of conversion encountering and embracing a leper, his formation in the spiritual life took place in the school of poverty where he learned he had nothing that he could call his own beyond his sin and his vice. In reading his life, it becomes clear how his biographers saw material poverty taking him by the hand and leading him through the world where he learned to call God’s creatures brothers and sisters and that they—like him—groaned until set free by the firstfruits of the Spirit. In reading his writings chronologically, the Spirit’s role becomes ever more influential, drawing him into the very inner life of the triune God. As the apostle Paul before him, Francis seemed overwhelmed at the meaning of his baptismal life, so much so that the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans with its vision of a Christian’s trinitarian life might appear as a blueprint for his vision of life.

What is it that makes Francis of Assisi such a popular figure, perhaps the most attractive saint of Christian living? The vast, ever-growing literature about him written in so many languages is as powerful a witness as the countless number of pilgrims who continue to come to Assisi. His is a universal language that all peoples seem to understand: therein seems to be the symbol that best expresses his appeal as the Spirit of
Pentecost draws people to him, bringing with it the promise of peace and universal brotherhood. In that light, Francis’s repeated call becomes more intelligible: the call to desire only the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity, the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion, the Spirit that unites us as brothers and sisters centered on the firstborn Son, Jesus, and the Spirit that impels us to see and proclaim all things through and in him. As he came to appreciate this, Francis realized that little else—nothing else—was needed. As he grew less and less dependent on things, he came to depend ever more on the Spirit and, understandably, the Spirit came to depend on him to bring about a new pentecost.

In that school of poverty created by those lonely years of repairing the churches of San Damiano, San Pietro, and Our Lady of the Portiuncula, Francis certainly had time to reflect on what God was asking of him. According to an insight provided by Clare of Assisi, he did have something of a prophetic intuition that San Damiano would become a “monastery for holy ladies.” Beyond that, however, there is little evidence that he had any intention of founding a new religious group. Only when his first followers came did he struggle with that phenomenon and resolved it through the Lord “revealing” to him that he had to live the holy Gospel. When Clare and other women after her came to him, he provided them an extremely simple Gospel way of life that was to be lived, as he did, in poverty. And when other men and women came who were married or obliged in other ways, he offered them a similar pattern. The accounts of men and women who appear in this volume will do so in these three categories or orders, as the term emerged early in the tradition, and will do so with the appropriate ancient rule that forms that order. The Rule of the Third Order Regular religious communities that was approved by Pope John Paul II in 1982, a collaborative effort of Franciscan religious women and men in the Third Order tradition, will conclude this volume as it emerges from the resurgence of interest in the writings of Francis and Clare after the Second Vatican Council. A major challenge in preparing this volume was that of choosing those who would represent the multifaceted tradition begun by Francis of Assisi (c. 1182–1226).

The First Order obviously needed to consider Anthony of Padua (+1231) and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (+1274), two of the outstanding early followers of Francis. There was a number of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century figures who could easily have appeared: John Duns Scotus (+1308), Bernardine of Siena (+1444), John of Capistrano (+1456), or James of the Marches (+1476). The Capuchin lay brother Felix of
Cantalice (+1587), however, represented a saint coming after the division of the First Order and the emergence of the reform movements of the sixteenth century. Junípero Serra (+1784) bridged the European and American worlds, especially Mexico and the United States, and reflected the strong influence of the Observant Friars. Maximilian Mary Kolbe (+1941) dramatically portrays the Conventual Friars in the most tragic period of the world history, and Solanus Casey (+1957) depicts the Capuchins in the twentieth-century United States. There were so many others who could have been included: a spiritual director of Teresa of Avila, Peter of Alcantara (+1562), Fidelis of Sigmaringen (+1622), Joseph of Cupertino (+1663), the mystic Padre Pio of Pietrelcina (+1968), the biblicist Gabriele Allegra (+1976), or the missionary Zenon Zebrowski (+1982).

One of the second-generation biographies of Francis, The Legend of the Three Companions, prompts imagining that, while rebuilding San Damiano, he was struck with his first inspiration to make it a “monastery of ladies through whose fame and life our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout the church.”1 Clare of Assisi (+1253) fulfilled Francis’s prophecy and became his first female follower. Her Form of Life, the first written by a woman, envisions a hidden life devoted to the contemplative embrace of Christ, her beloved. Following a more monastic paradigm of stability, however, the tradition of the Second Order contains a variety of expressions that strive to follow the inspirations of both Francis and Clare. In addition to Clare, Colette of Corbie (+1447) remains a dominant figure who struggled to rekindle the love of the Form of Life written by Clare in 1253 and approved by Pope Innocent IV; she did this in France by accentuating the simplicity that was being lost in the tumultuous fourteenth century. At the same time in Italy, Catherine of Bologna (+1463) was attempting to do the same in the tradition emerging from Clare’s inspiration by means of the Rule approved by Pope Urban IV in 1263; her means of reform was that of accentuating remembrance of Christ’s passion. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moreover, Veronica Giuliani (+1727) became a model for those Sisters of Saint Clare trying to live Clare’s vision of the Franciscan gospel in the spirit of the Capuchin reform. As with Francis’s followers in the First Order, there are so many women in the Second Order who have been overlooked: Clare’s own sister, Agnes of Assisi (+1253); the sister of St. King Louis IX of France, Isabelle (+1270); Agnes of Prague (+1282) with whom Clare corresponded; Beatrice de Silva (+ c.1492); Josephine Leroux (+1794), a martyr of the French Revolution; Mary Maddalena Bentivoglio (+1905).
who brought the Poor Clares to the United States in 1875; Mary Francis of Roswell (+2006); and Veronica Namoyo of Lusaka.

Yet another insight comes from Thomas of Celano’s *Life of Francis* when he writes of those “people of all ages and both sexes [who] hurried to behold the wonders which the Lord worked anew in the world through his servant. . . . To all,” Thomas continues, “he gave a norm of life and to those of every rank he sincerely pointed out the way of salvation.”2 This became the Third Order composed of what we now call the Brothers and Sisters of Penance or the Secular Franciscans and the Third Order Regular, those who have embraced a religious way of life as priests, sisters, or brothers. Choosing representatives of this vast number of Francis’s followers proved even more daunting as they came from exactly what Thomas of Celano suggests: “every rank” of society and, as his family grew, from all parts of the world. It seems appropriate to begin with Angela of Foligno (+1309) who leads the way among the countless women who embraced the Gospel vision of life of both Francis and Clare throughout the centuries. In a sense Angela is her own category as she could be considered representative of the entire penitential movement, both the secular and the regular.

Whom to choose from the litany of Third Order Regular religious women became more difficult, however. Angeline of Montegiove (+1435), the foundress of the first Third Order Regular community for women; Mary Alfred Moes (+1899), foundress of American foundations and a world-famous hospital; and Lurana White, cofoundress with Paul Francis Watson of the Franciscan Sisters of Atonement: all of these religious heroines would have been worthy subjects. For various reasons, the following women seem appropriate to highlight as both expressed different dimensions of that vision: Mary of the Passion (+1904) and Marianne Cope (1918).

Whom to choose from the Secular Franciscan Tradition was equally difficult. Elizabeth of Hungary (+1231) and Louis IX of France (+1270), patrons of the Secular Franciscans, typify in extraordinary ways the ideals of the Secular Franciscans, as does Thomas More (+1535). The unheralded Japanese Secular Franciscans and their literal “cojourners” (+1597) seem ideal subjects in their ability to express the evangelizing witness to the Franciscan vision of the Gospel: twenty-six Christians—six friars of whom four were Spanish, one Mexican, one Portuguese-Indian; three Japanese Jesuits, two of whom had been received into the Society a few days before; fourteen laymen, members of the Third Order or associates of the Franciscans; three young boys who were fourteen, thirteen, and
twelve years old. Two final representatives of the Secular Franciscans, moreover, seemed at first out of place. On further reflection they both offer wonderful expressions of the hidden yet transparent Franciscan paradox: the diocesan priest Jean-Marie Vianney (+1859) and the layman Matt Talbot (+1925), both men whose examples are timeless in their relevancy.

The energy of the Spirit of the Lord that Francis and Clare encouraged his followers to have invigorated them after the Second Vatican Council and, prompted by the Decree on Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis), inspired them to examine their lives in light of Francis’s writings. Surprisingly the writings of both Francis and Clare were relatively unknown before then. The friars of the First Order and the sisters of the Second have since been wonderfully enriched by the vitality of the Franciscan Traditions. The Second Vatican Council, however, brought to the fore challenges for all Christians—for Franciscans as well: the recovery of tradition. In 1978, Pope Paul VI promulgated a new rule for the Secular Franciscans that now begins with the norm of life Francis left for them at the beginning. Four years later, Pope John Paul II promulgated a new rule for the Third Order Regular women and men, one that they struggled to compose in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council’s encouragement to retrieve the charism of their founder.

We wish to give special thanks for the initiative, assistance, and patience of Phyllis Zagano, the series editor, and for all those men and women who have helped us with finding, translating, and affirming this introductory overview of the Franciscan Tradition especially John Ford, C.S.C.; Matthew Foley, O.F.M. Conv.; Anthony M. Lajato, O.F.M. Conv.; William J. Short, O.F.M.; the friars and staff of San Lorenzo Friary and Mission Santa Barbara; Alma Dufault, F.M.M.; Mary Laurence Hanley, O.S.F.; Iowans Shannon McAllister and Justin White; and, as usual, Noel Riggs.
The Franciscan Tradition

The Franciscan Tradition has its origins in the young man from Assisi, Francis, who was born in 1182 and died in 1226. From his writings, it might be concluded that he simply wanted to live the fullness of life he received at his baptism, but in a short period of time men and women began to follow his vision of a poor and simple trinitarian life. As does Jesus, so too his follower Francis continues to draw vast numbers of followers.

The Turbulent World of Francis

The history of Assisi at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries shows how its geographical location was the envy of those lusting for power. This could not have been lost on the son of a cloth merchant whose business would have been dependent on access to the Via Franca, the principal highway linking Assisi with cities—and markets—to its north and south. Perched as it is on Monte Subasio, Assisi became increasingly strategic and, therefore, vulnerable. Its citizens were ever attentive to any threat to this vital artery and warded off any attempts to master them.

In 1198, when Francis was sixteen, the members of the Commune of Assisi attacked the Rocca Maggiore, the fortress of the feudal nobility, where only a year or so earlier Frederick II, the future emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had been born. This was essentially an act of civil war that pitted members of Assisi’s nobility against the newly powerful members of the rising merchant class. Ironically, the two sides represented not only Francis, son of the ambitious merchant Pietro di Bernardone, but also Clare di Favarone, the young daughter of an aristocratic family whose ancestry could be traced to Charlemagne himself. Buoyed by this act of defiance, the Assisiani looked beyond their city walls, so that
The ebb and flow of war touched almost every family. In 1202, however, things changed. The Battle of Collestrada was an engagement of two ancient rivals, the Assisiani and their archenemies, the hated men of Perugia. As the Perugians overwhelmed their ambitious neighbors in what became the region’s bloodiest skirmish, the Assisiani were literally beaten into the ground or dragged off to prison.

While there is no record of Francis’s involvement in the uprising of 1198, we can easily imagine the sixteen-year-old joining in the destruction of the Rocca, that symbol of feudal tyranny, and in the beginning of a new social order. But there is some knowledge of the young man’s role in the Battle of Collestrada; that is, his biographers write that he was one of those imprisoned in Perugia. At his release, Francis returned to Assisi in broken health. But dreams of military glory continued to fill his imagination so that the drudgery of working in his father’s business made him increasingly restless.

Although there is little information of where the clergy of Assisi were on these issues, they may well have been suffering from the same turmoil as the clergy of the institutional church throughout Europe. Whether indifferent or ill-prepared, the clergy of the time came across as insensitive to the yearning of many Christians for the simplicity of Gospel living. Throughout Europe new expressions of lay spirituality and of consecrated life were emerging; so too, however, were those of the dualist approach of third-century Manichaeism promoted by the Cathars and Albigensians. Under the guise of freeing themselves from anything material, they rejected a sacramental approach to the spiritual life and, in its place, embraced a radical “other-worldly” asceticism. Confronted with an apathetic and poorly formed clergy, the laity of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries left the institutional church in ever-growing numbers.

The Foundations of Francis’s Vision of Life

In the conflicting currents of this Umbrian town, Francis encountered the presence of God who, in his own words, “led him to begin to do penance” by encountering a leper. The remainder of his life would be a journey of an intense spirituality in which the gift of baptism, the Spirit of the Lord, would be the dynamism of his life, uniting him to the Father and to all creatures with the Son. His search to understand the mystery of baptismal life inspired him to live the unending pursuit to be like the perfect Son, Jesus, in order to remain in communion with the Father. Each
day, therefore, brought a new dimension of entering more profoundly into Gospel life and, consequently, the challenge of a life of penance.

When he and his small group of brothers went to Pope Innocent III for approval of their simple proposal of Gospel life, the formula of the vows somehow made its way into the document. Francis obviously had no difficulty with that formula particularly when the pope himself in 1198 had interpreted the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as expressing the essential elements of religious life. Years later, however, the memories of his youth seem to have prompted him to revisit his thoughts of the life of penance he had embraced and, as he attempted to encourage his followers in their own embrace of it, influenced his Second Admonition. This ever-so-simple writing expresses his understanding of human nature as he sees it burdened with the ravages of original sin:

The Lord said to Adam: *Eat of every tree; you may not eat, however, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* [cf. Gen 2:16,17].

He was able to eat of every tree of paradise because, as long as he did not go against obedience, he did not sin. For that person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good who makes his will his own and, in this way, exalts himself over the good things the Lord says and does in him. And so, through the suggestion of the devil and the transgression of the command, it became the apple of the knowledge of evil. Therefore it is fitting that he suffers the punishment.2

While Adam had received everything from the Creator, he turned from the only restriction given to him as a reminder of his dependency on the divine generosity. In that one act of disobedience, Francis perceived the two enduring tendencies of the human nature: to make its will its own and to exalt itself over that which really belongs to God. What he had experienced in his early years—and undoubtedly throughout his life—were the grasping and ambitious ways of sinful human beings who, like Adam, tended to be so easily deceived by passing pleasure. His program of holiness became quite simply that of following the poverty, humility, and consequent patient endurance of Jesus. Paradoxically, toward the end of his life the nearly blind, vulnerable Francis saw clearly that everything was pure gift as “The Lord gave me and gives me still . . .” became the refrain of his dying recollections.

The Franciscan Family

“The Lord gave me brothers,” Francis wrote, “and no one showed me how to live but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should
live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel.” Not only were those who came to him personal gifts from God, learning how he was to live with them was also a gift. The words are reminiscent of John’s gospel: “You gave me those who follow me . . . and I gave them the words you gave to me.” For Francis life in brotherhood became fleshed out for him in the dimensions of the Gospel life: to grow in the one was to grow in the other. Therein lies the breath and variety of the Franciscan Gospel life, one that became quickly divided into three families or Orders.

The First Order, the Order of Friars Minor or Lesser Brothers, was from the beginning composed entirely of men—priests and lay—whose primary goal was to live the Gospel as brothers aiming to be the least of Christ’s disciples. Even while he was alive, however, two strains emerged among his followers: one that tended to more itinerant or eremitical patterns of living, the other that was comfortable with more stability or urban life. These two currents gradually assumed characteristics that have endured to present time. The itinerant or eremitical expressions tended to encourage the brothers to bond according to their desired inspirations or emphases—itinerant preaching or missionary endeavors, hermitages—while those favoring stability or a more common way of life established conventi (convents or friaries) among the poor. The early centuries of Franciscan history are filled with attempts to bring these two strands together. Eventually a decree of Pope Leo X in 1517 officially recognized the two: the Order of “Observants”—into which some of the smaller clusters were brought—and the Order of “Conventuals.” In this decisive period of the Reformation, the Capuchins emerged from the Observant strain in 1528 advocating a return to the dynamics of an authentic form of Gospel life. In 1897, Pope Leo XIII consolidated the smaller groups such as the Observants and the Reformers, into the Order of Friars Minor of the Leonine Union, while the Conventuals and Capuchins remained autonomous as they are today.

The Second Order is composed of women committed to living as poor, monastic contemplatives. It began when the eighteen-year-young Clare of Assisi came to Francis for advice about the Gospel life, embraced a contemplative life at San Damiano, the first church he rebuilt, and began to attract her own followers. In the beginning Francis provided them a simple way of life whose contours were fundamentally trinitarian: “Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most high King, the heav-
enly Father, and taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the Gospel." Before his death, he asked and counseled them “to live this most holy life and poverty . . . and to never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.” In 1219 the pope’s legate, Cardinal Hugolino dei Conti di Segni, gave her a form of life based on the Benedictine Rule that mitigated their observance of a life without anything of their own and set the stage for a struggle that was to continue until shortly before her death: the approval of a form of life based on the Gospel vision lived in poverty that she received through Francis. At her death, the Poor Ladies—as they were known—now spread throughout Europe were living three different patterns of life: that of Clare approved on the day before her death, that of Hugolino given in 1219, and that of Pope Innocent IV given and later rescinded in 1246. In 1264 Pope Urban IV, desiring to bring some uniformity, wrote yet another rule that permitted common ownership of property. Only those who wished to observe the “primitive rule” of Clare were obliged until the early fifteenth century when St. Colette of Corbie revived its observance. With the exception of the “Colettines,” the Rule of St. Clare was overlooked until after the Second Vatican Council.

To those laywomen and laymen eager to follow him, Francis gave a simple form of life, An Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, which became their foundational document. Lay movements such as this had their beginnings in the earliest days of religious life; in fact, religious life may be seen as evolving from those women and men who, in their eagerness to follow the example of Jesus, went into the desert where they discovered the need for spiritual guides. Benedictine monasteries had oblates: laypersons wanting to live the monastic spirit who chose not to be formally professed but to be officially associated with a monastery of their choice. The landscape of the twelfth century is populated with such figures: the Canons Regular of Premontré and the Cistercians developed their own categories giving rise—among the men—to lay brothers; itinerant preachers attracted followers, among them the Waldensians or Vaudois of Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant who chose to live as a poor beggar. The Humiliati were at this time a group of noblemen who were captured by Emperor Henry V (1081–1125) and brought to Germany where, some say, they “humiliated” themselves by doing penance. On the advice of Bernard of Clairvaux, many of them, with the consent of their wives, withdrew into a monastery founded at Milan and later adopted the Benedictine Rule tailored to their needs. This group
spread rapidly and gave rise to two new branches, a “second order” composed of women, and a “third order” composed of priests. Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) initially censured this “third order” but eventually provided it with a juridical structure. In 1221 Pope Honorius III provided a similar juridical structure for those men and women who followed Francis, one that has been revised and renewed by a number of popes from Gregory IX to Pope Paul VI.

While many of these “tertiaries” remained living and working in secular pursuits, others left their homes to live in hermitages or in fraternities united by the religious vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity following Honorius III’s rule as revised in 1289 by Nicholas IV. During the fourteenth century, confraternities of female penitents that had been absorbed into the Third Order began to recruit new members to assist them with their apostolic works. In 1324 Pope John XXII officially recognized the community of Angelina Montegiove. Hers was the first women’s congregation with a magistra general overseeing many houses of vowed religious women. As the years passed the Third Order “Regular” continued to become increasingly regularized or even semi-cloistered. In doing so, these women and men fell back on a distinction that had its origins in the eleventh century: between the “secular” and the “regular.” In 1521 Pope Leo X issued a rule specifically for vowed members and again, in 1927 Pope Pius X issued yet another.

In light of the profound changes in the theology of consecrated life after the Second Vatican Council and a new wave of scholarship in the Franciscan family, the women and men of this Third Order tradition proposed two new rules, one approved for the Secular Franciscans by Pope Paul VI in 1978, the other for the Third Order Regular Franciscans by Pope John Paul II in 1982.

The Franciscan Vision

At the very heart of Francis’s understanding of his call and that of his followers is an awareness of “the Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity.” The Spirit is that which he perceives as receiving the primary attention in all activity: in shaping the contours of a Gospel life that is profoundly trinitarian, contemplative in its perception of reality, passionate in proclaiming Jesus as Lord, and reverent in embracing all creation. Since he possessed a poetic spirit, however, Francis was attentive to the Spirit’s presence in the word, especially in the words spoken by the Word. As a result his life became a continuous process
of allowing the words of the Gospel to enter profoundly into every fiber of his being: their sound, articulation, imagery, and meaning. Not surprisingly, he sees prayer not as an enterprise of the “Spirit of holy prayer and devotion” but also teaches that everything “must contribute to it.” Early on, his followers, in addition to establishing the rhythm of each day through the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, established two periods of intense mental prayer: one hour in the morning when they would listen to the Lord speaking to their hearts, another in the evening when they would reflect on how the Lord had revealed his presence in those they encountered who brought that word to life during the day. He was described as “praying so much that he became prayer,” which might easily be interpreted as his entire life being transparent with the Spirit’s activity of inspiring us to live as children of a loving God.

Franciscan spirituality has interpreted Francis’s *Canticle of Brother Sun* as supremely characteristic of his Gospel vision, as a key to his inner self, or as revelatory of his entire personality. His followers provide the details of the tempestuous circumstances in which the dying poet at three different moments spontaneously sang God’s praises: the first coming from his own struggle of faith, the second from the political struggles of Assisi, and the third from his struggle with his imminent death. If it is true that poets are people who surrender themselves to the inner journey, then they are indeed indispensable to society. In this light, no better text than Francis’s *Canticle* reveals his vision of life.

This is the song of a man who is losing his sight, whose eyes burn at the sight of light, and whose body and spirit ache with fatigue and the discouragement that comes with it. In the middle of the night he twists and turns as at times everyone does, and the next morning he tells his companions what had been taking place.

Feeling sorry for himself, he said: “Lord, help me in my infirmities so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently!” He then heard: “Tell me, brother: if, in compensation for your suffering and tribulations you were given an immense and precious treasure: the whole mass of the earth changed into pure gold, pebbles into precious stones, and the water of the rivers into perfume, would you not regard the pebbles and the waters as nothing compared to such a treasure? Would you not rejoice?” “Lord,” he replied, “it would be a very great, very precious, and inestimable treasure beyond all that one can love and desire!” “Well, brother,” the voice said, “be glad and joyful in the midst of your infirmities and tribulations. As of now, live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom.”
With that Francis burst into song as if, as Carl Jung once wrote of true genius, “to a temporal world out of a world eternal.” His song is an echo of “the message of penance and peace” he proclaimed to the world after hearing the missionary mandate of the Gospel:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing,
to You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light,
and He is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them bright and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.
Praise and bless my Lord
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.11

The Franciscan vision flows ultimately from the realization that, in the words of the Jewish Scriptures, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The “most high, all-powerful, Lord” is above all “good”: this is what Francis never tires of reiterating. It is this that liberates him from the petty moments of life, enabling him to rise above human frailty and to trust in God alone. It is this that impels him to struggle with his all too human temptation to reach out for what in reality belongs only to God: praise, glory, honor, and blessing. It is this that prompts the poet Francis to be focused on God’s presence in the creation that enfolds him.
Without uttering a word the poetry of God’s creation reminds him of his own poor performance and of his need for penance to reenter into its beauty and radiance. “No human is worthy to mention your name.” The words introduce a shadow that hovers over him as a reminder of the indictment and punishment of the first inhabitants of paradise.

Immediately, however, the cloud passes. The brilliance of the sun, of the day resumes the hymn of praise gently reminding him of the words of the psalmist: “in your light we see light.” The God who is beauty shines radiantly on all his creatures evoking from them nothing but praise, a praise that is his as well as theirs: “Praise be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures.” The words seem to echo those of Paul: the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the children of God. In the meanwhile, the poet Francis recognizes the Spirit’s presence in creation as it sings by its sheer wonder the praises of the One who breathed upon it. What follows then is a paradoxically unified hymn of opposites in which the Creative Spirit and created being, the heavens and earth, the masculine and feminine join in one stanza after another. What is precious, playful, serene, radiant, humble takes on qualities enshrined in beauty itself prompting nothing but praise for goodness of the most high, all-powerful, good Lord of all. If it is true that the source of poetic genius is the deepest inner self, then this section of Francis’s Canticle reflects the trinitarian traces of his spiritual life: the Father whom elsewhere he describes dwelling “in inaccessible light,” the Son and the saints—precious, clear, and beautiful—shining like the moon and the stars in the night of sin, and the Spirit stirring the air and the clouds, bringing life humbly and without cost like water, burning with warmth and light like fire. Here too the Canticle suggests the Marian underpinnings of Francis’s vision of the church—as does Assisi’s cathedral, San Rufino, originally a Roman temple called “Mother Earth”—sustaining, governing, and producing fruit as “the virgin-made church” of whom he sings in his Salutation to her.

The Tranquility of Love

Acrimony prompted the second section of the Canticle: hostility that was probably brooding for a long while between Assisi’s ecclesial and civil leaders. When he learned that it had erupted, Francis’s companions tell us that he told them to go to Assisi, to sing the verses he had just composed, and to add these:

Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love, and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.\textsuperscript{12}

There is no evidence that the bishop, podestà (mayor), and the people had heard the first section of the \textit{Canticle} before this, nor is there any indication that Francis had asked his brothers to read any other message of peace to them. The combination of both segments, however, may well have sufficed to bring the two men to peace as it did. For with these verses Francis envisions the human person now gently and unassumingly entering into the hymn of the universe. Those who give pardon out of love, bear infirmity and tribulation, and endure in peace are those who take on the qualities of the Word made flesh. They bring to the pursuit of peace more than “the tranquility of order” reflected in the first segment of the \textit{Canticle}; they bring “the tranquility of love,” as Bonaventure would later refine Augustine’s concept of peace, the love shown by Jesus.

\textit{The Blessed Hope}

Just before his death, Francis asked the brothers to sing once again the \textit{Canticle} and the two segments he had already composed. Now, however, he added yet another:

\begin{verbatim}
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{verbatim}

The canticle of creation and of reconciliation now becomes one of hope, of the certain hope for which he prayed from the earliest years of his conversion. Living a life without anything of one’s own, that is, a life of radical poverty, instills profound hope as time after time it teaches the poor one that God is never outdone in generosity.

More than anything else, however, these verses chant the praises of the Gospel call Francis envisions: that of the baptized life. It is baptism that enables one to welcome bodily death as a sister, not as something to be dreaded but as part of life and as one whose embrace can be longed for as that of one’s family. There is perhaps sadness in the failure not to have discouraged others from what prevents that warm embrace and causes death to be feared: greeting it mired in sin. At the same time, there is an echo of how simply Francis sees the demands of baptism. “Now
that we have left the world,” he encourages, “we have nothing else to do but to follow the will of the Lord and to please Him.” Baptism, the first death, frees one to love without fear and to be assured in hope.

The Wisdom of Simplicity

The earliest manuscript of Francis’s Canticle comes from the mid-thirteenth century; all others follow it almost exactly. None of them, however, indicates whether Francis intended the following refrain to be sung after each verse or after each section. It appears without any directions at the very end but, in so many ways, summarizes the entire Canticle, each of its sections, as well as of its verses. Indeed, it captures the depths of the Franciscan spirit:

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.

In the wisdom of his simple Gospel vision, the lesser brother saw these as the operative verbs of his life: praise, blessing, giving thanks, and serving the Lord. It is as if the Franciscan vision sees these as the only ones that matter as they can only come from one who knows that everything comes from God and that all his brothers and sisters serve God better. To be a poor, humble, vulnerable brother—to be a lesser brother—that is the baptismal call of the Gospel.

A wonderful eucharistic mysticism took hold of Francis in the last days of his life. Consciousness of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord—the concrete, down-to-earth way in which he writes of the Eucharist—is present even in his earlier writings. Something prompted the deepening of this awareness in his First Admonition, an undated writing that clearly shows a maturing of his thought, and, above all, in his Letter to the Entire Order, which was written more than likely after the first two segments of the Canticle. Could it be that in the Eucharist Francis saw God choosing each day to use the gifts of creation to make present the love of His Son? “Daily” becomes a frequent refrain, as does the Lord’s embrace of poverty, humility, and patient endurance as the Most High defines what it means to be a lesser one and shows the way to true brotherhood.

If this were so, Francis’s Canticle may be understood as the quintessential expression of the tradition that bears his name and, if this were so, the culmination of the baptismal life that he strove to live with such intensity, one that leads to and learns from the daily self-giving of the Eucharist.
Francis of Assisi (c. 1182–1226)

It might well be argued that no saint in history has drawn more interest or so fired up the Christian imagination than he who was born in a small town in the Umbrian Valley of central Italy, Francis of Assisi. Not only has his appeal spanned eight centuries, it has also encompassed almost every corner of the globe. Ironically, the relatively few writings left to posterity were neglected by his followers until recently, possibly because they are so very simple and transparent. Thomas of Celano wrote Francis’s first biography, *The Life of Saint Francis*, at the time of his canonization within two years of his death. Twenty years later Francis’s followers commissioned him to write another, which Thomas called *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, and, three years later, yet another devoted solely to his miracles. Francis’s followers then turned to their newly elected leader, the Parisian theologian Bonaventure, to compile these portraits of Thomas into two companion portraits, in which Francis’s life is described as an unfolding of grace. Unwittingly, Bonaventure may have unleashed a wave of later biographies of Francis as the restless imagination of his followers attempted to build on the comparatively sparse facts of his life.

Toward the end of his life, Francis wrote of how the Lord had worked in his life: “a remembrance, admonition, and exhortation,” he described it, “[his] testament.” He begins the document quite simply with a description of how the Lord guided him to begin to do penance and provided insights that led to what was the decisive moment in his life: overcoming himself by embracing a leper and, in doing so, finding God. In order to appreciate the depths of that seemingly impulsive moment, however, it is helpful to reflect upon what sort of life he lived prior to it.

The role of Pietro di Bernardone, Francis’s father, overshadows those early years of the young man’s life. It was Pietro, a clothier who regularly
made business trips between Assisi and France, who dubbed his newly born son Francesco, the “Frenchman.” Like every proud father, he undoubtedly dreamed of the day when his son would inherit his business, was unconcerned when he neglected his studies, and accepted his impulsiveness when he joined his adolescent friends in enjoying life. When his son dreamed of achieving glory as a knight and fought with his townsmen against neighboring Perugia, Pietro supported him; when the dream unraveled by his capture and imprisonment, Pietro probably interpreted this turn of events as a simple confirmation that his son was destined to follow in his footsteps.

A leper intervened, however, when Pietro’s unsettled, still-recovering son encountered this most scorned piece of humanity whose ravaging sickness signified a divine curse. Francis’s initial response may have been one of revulsion but he overcame it and, in his own words, “showed him misericordiam [a heart sensitive to misery].” Years later he saw that as the decisive moment of grace, the Lord’s gift. It was the beginning of a series of events that led him into the abandoned church in which he heard the crucified Lord call him to rebuild it, set about using what he had at hand—his father’s goods—to do so, and, understandably, incurred his father’s wrath.

In a manner similar to the leper, Pietro became God’s instrument causing Francis to confront his interior struggles. When he dragged his young son before the civil and then the ecclesiastical authorities, he set him free as the naked Francis dramatically placed his clothing—all his belongings—at the feet of Pietro and declared: “You, Pietro Bernardone, are no longer my father! No, my father is ‘Our Father Who art in heaven!’” It was this far-reaching assertion that paradoxically gifted Francis with the freedom to trust completely in God’s providence and the constraint of following his heavenly Father’s will in ways he never imagined. Since that momentous day in Assisi’s Piazza Vescovile, spiritual writers and historians have attempted to define the inner drive of Francis in the hope of expressing it anew. While the embrace of penance and poverty may well have ignited the flame, it was undoubtedly the gift of baptism, the gift of the Spirit, that set the process in motion. With nothing else to claim as his own, Francis disciplined his spirit to be guided by the Spirit of Christ, the Son, in order to follow the heavenly Father’s will and to please him alone. Poverty freed him to live out his baptismal call just as it gifted him with a transparency that drew others—women as well as men—to follow his lead. “The Lord gave me brothers,” Francis wrote at the end of his life, “and no one showed me what to do. The Most High revealed
to me that I should live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel.”

A few years after that day in Assisi, Francis found himself with brothers. Together they set off to seek approbation from the pope for a simple Gospel life without anything of their own. Paradox again entered the life of the young man as he was ushered into the presence of the charismatic Pope Innocent III who, in some ways, was the apogee of the hierarchical church of the Middle Ages. Once it was granted, the small group of twelve returned to Assisi from where they embarked on living the Gospel life and mission and, like that earlier group of twelve, experienced the Spirit’s power in adding more to their number. Among those drawn to his example was the beautiful woman, Clare, who was twelve years his younger.

In 1215 Innocent III convened the Fourth Lateran Council and set in motion two initiatives: the renewal of the church and the freeing of the Holy Land. While it is uncertain that he was present at the council, Francis certainly imbibed its spirit as he encouraged his brothers to renew their catholicity, reach out to the followers of Islam and nonbelievers, and to place the Eucharist at the heart of their lives. The council also deepened his own desire to lay down his life after the example of the beloved Son, whom he was always trying to emulate, by embarking on a mission of peace to the Islamic world.

Francis had set out twice before finally reaching Egypt in 1221. While the Christian forces of the Fifth Crusade had captured and occupied Damietta since 1219, by August 1221 the Muslim army had regrouped and surrounded a city that was strategic for controlling the Nile. The ever peace-minded Francis crossed the enemy lines eager to speak with the Islamic leaders. Captured, insulted, and beaten, he was eventually escorted into the presence of the Sultan Malil al-Kamil who was impressed with his courage and perhaps more by his trust in God that inspired his poverty. It was an amazing encounter during which two men, one comfortably surrounded by his powerful army and the other armed intrepidly with his faith, dialogued about the God of Abraham that united them both. Some forty years later, Bonaventure would write: “When [Francis] saw he was making no progress in converting these people and that he could not achieve his purpose, namely martyrdom, he returned to the land of the faithful.”

God had other things in mind for him among which was the need for him to articulate clearly the Gospel life God has revealed to and through him to his followers.

After being away from his brothers for a while, Francis returned to find them in chaos. Those whom he left in charge during his absence
had imposed practices taken from the religious rules of St. Augustine and St. Benedict or the Cistercian reform. In front of the church’s representative, Cardinal Hugolino, Francis responded: “My brothers! My brothers! God has called me by way of simplicity and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want you to mention to me any rule, whether of Saint Augustine, or of Saint Bernard, or of Saint Benedict. The Lord has told me what He wanted! He wanted me to be a new fool in the world. God did not wish to lead us by any other than this knowledge.”

In this simple statement, Francis may well have provided what he intuitively understood as being a Lesser Brother or a Friar Minor: to be simply a brother to those whom the Lord gave to him and to consider himself always lesser than them.

Shortly thereafter, however, Francis began rewriting the description of life that he had presented to Pope Innocent III in 1209—basically a simple collection of gospel passages to which he added and clarified as the circumstances in which he and his brothers found themselves between then and 1223 demanded. Thanks to the help of the cardinal and one or two of his brothers who may have been knowledgeable in ecclesiastical law and Latinists, the result was a more abbreviated and concise document. “The rule and life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to live the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

At its very heart was a simple statement: “let them pay attention to what they must desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity.” In their simplicity these two statements have challenged the Lesser Brothers throughout the centuries to a profound experiential mystagogy in which they simply live out their baptismal commitment.

As if by way of confirming the blessings to which their way of life would lead, shortly afterward the Lord granted Francis two extraordinary mystical experiences. The first was at the midnight celebration of Christmas at Greccio when the Infant appeared in Francis’s arms; the second was when the Crucified appeared to him on LaVerna and left the imprint of his passion on his hands, feet, and side. It was after this last experience that Francis left to posterity the first two sections of what some see as one of the greatest hymns of the mystical experience, the Canticle of Brother Sun, the conclusion of which he composed just before his death.

Surrounded by his brothers and laying naked on the ground, Francis passed on the evening of October 3. In less than two years, his friend and confidant, Pope Gregory IX, whom Francis knew as Cardinal Hugolino, canonized him. In doing so, he undoubtedly acclaimed one
of the most trinitarian of all saints whose secret of holiness was as simple as clinging only to the gift of every Christian, that of baptismal life.

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The trinitarian imprint of the writings of Francis may be most clearly recognized in this twenty-second chapter of his *Earlier Rule*. There is a temptation to read over the Scripture passages—especially those from the parable of the sower and the seed and those from the Prayer at the Last Supper—without recognizing the nuances Francis adds to them, nuances that flow from his memorization of these passages and the ease with which they flow from his heart.

**From Earlier Rule**

Now that we have left the world, however, we have nothing else to do but to follow the will of the Lord and to please Him. Let us be careful that we are not earth along the wayside, or that which is rocky or full of thorns, in keeping with what the Lord says in the Gospel: *The word of God is a seed. What fell along the wayside and was trampled underfoot, however, are those who hear the word and do not understand it. The devil comes immediately and snatches what was planted in their hearts and takes the word from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved. What fell on rocky ground, however, are those who, as soon as they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. But when tribulation and persecution come because of the word, they immediately fall away. These have no roots in them; they last only for a time, because they believe only for a time and fall away in time of trial. What fell among thorns, however, are those who hear the word of God and the anxiety and worries of this world, the lure of riches, and other inordinate desires intrude and choke the word and they remain without fruit. But what was sown in good soil are those who hear the word with a good and excellent heart, understand and preserve it and bear fruit in patience. Therefore, as the Lord says, brothers, let us let the dead bury their own dead.* . . .

But, in the holy love which is God, I beg all my brothers, both the ministers and the others, after overcoming every impediment and putting aside every care and anxiety, to serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind in whatever way they are best able to do so, for that is what He wants above all else.
Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who says: Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man. When you stand to pray say: Our Father in heaven. And let us adore Him with a pure heart, because it is necessary to pray always and not lose heart; for the Father seeks such people who adore Him. God is Spirit and those who adore Him must adore Him in Spirit and truth. Let us have recourse to Him as to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, Who says: “I am the Good Shepherd Who feeds My sheep and I lay down My life for my sheep.”

All of you are brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not call yourselves teachers; you have but one Teacher in heaven. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Behold I am with you until the end of the world. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Let us, therefore, hold onto the words, the life, the teaching and the Holy Gospel of Him Who humbled Himself to beg His Father for us and to make His name known saying:

Father, glorify Your name and glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify You. Father, I have made Your name known to those whom You have given me. The words You gave to me I have given to them, and they have accepted them and truly have known that I came from You and they have believed that You sent me. I pray for them, not for the world, but for those You have given me, because they are Yours and everything of mine is Yours. Holy Father, keep in Your name those You have given me that they may be one as We are. I say this while in the world that they may have joy completely. I gave them Your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world as I do not belong to the world. I do not ask you to take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. Glorify them in truth. Your word is truth. As You sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I sanctify myself for them that they also may be sanctified in truth. I ask not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through them, that they may be brought to perfection as one, and the world may know that You have sent me and loved them as You loved me. I shall make known to them Your name, that the love with which You loved me may be in them and I in them. Father, I wish that those whom You have given me may be where I am that they may see Your glory in Your kingdom.
In light of this biblical spirituality, this letter of Francis to a struggling unknown brother called to minister to his all too human confreres expresses wonderfully the depths of his awareness of misericordia (a heart sensitive to misery).

**From A Letter to a Minister**

To Brother N., minister: May the Lord bless you.

I speak to you, as best I can, about the state of your soul. You must consider as grace all that deters you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. May you want it to be this way and not otherwise. Let this be for you the true obedience of the Lord God and my true obedience, for I know with certitude that it is true obedience. Love those who do those things to you and do not expect anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you. Love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. Let this be more than a hermitage for you.

And in this way I wish to know that you love the Lord and me, His servant and yours, if you do this: may there not be any brother in the world who has sinned—however much he could have sinned—who, after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy, if he is looking for a heart sensitive to misery. And if he is not looking for a heart sensitive to misery, ask him if he wants mercy. And if he sins a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me that you may draw him to the Lord; and always be merciful with brothers such as these. You may announce this to the guardians, when you can that, for your part, you are resolved to act in this way.

With the help of God and the advice of our brothers during the Chapter of Pentecost, we shall make one chapter such as this from all the chapters of the Rule that treat of mortal sin:

If any one of the brothers, at the instigation of the enemy, shall have sinned mortally, let him be bound by obedience to have recourse to his guardian. Let all the brothers who know that he has sinned not bring shame upon him or slander him; let them, instead, show great mercy to him and keep the sin of their brother very secret because those who are well do not need a physician,
but the sick do. Let them be bound by obedience, likewise, to send him to his custodian with a companion. And let that custodian provide for him with a heart full of mercy as he would wish to be provided for were he in a similar position. If he falls into some venial sin, let him confess to his brother who is a priest. If there is no priest there, let him confess to his brother until he has a priest who may canonically absolve him, as it is said. And let them not have the power to impose any other penance on them except this: *Go and sin no more.*