

EXPERIENCING THE GOODNESS OF GOD THROUGH FRANCISCAN VALUES
FRANCISCAN POVERTY OF SPIRIT

Topic: Poverty of Spirit

Goal: Using a series of readings and reflective questions, an individual or a group, would deepen their understanding of Franciscan poverty of spirit in a new way.

Level: Intermediate knowledge of Franciscanism

Time: 1½ hours

Opening Prayer:

Reflective questions:

How would you define poverty?

How do you think Francis defined poverty?

Leader: Francis, the son of a well-to-do cloth merchant, was already twenty-five years old when, in the church of San Damiano, he received the call to repair the ruined house of God. Before the famous Crucifix, now preserved in the church of St. Clare at Assisi, he answered the Lord in the following prayer.

Together:

Most high and glorious God,
Lighten the darkness of my heart
And give me sound faith,
Firm hope
And perfect love.
Let me, Lord, have the right feelings and knowledge,
Properly to carry out
The task you have given me. (2 Celano 10)

Leader: Francis often spoke of how, when he got married, he would choose the most beautiful and worthy bride to be his wife. At the time, no one knew that in his madness he was referring to his love of Lady Poverty. Once he had embraced Lady Poverty as his bride, St. Francis of Assisi was alone, living off the land and seeking God in the simple beauty of the world around him.

Leader: Come, let us climb the mountain of the Lord and the dwelling of Lady Poverty that she might teach us her ways and we might walk in her paths.

Reading: (a personal reflection)

Who is this Lady Poverty that Francis was searching for? The story begins in the Garden of Eden. As children we were taught that Adam and Eve wanted to be like God (sin of pride) and that was why they were thrown out of the Garden of Paradise.

What about looking at what happened from a different perspective? What did they deny? They denied their humanity—who they were. As human beings they were finite and they were poor. But they declared: “We are not finite; we have power, we are independent, and we own the world. We are in control.”

With this denial, they severed their relationship with God and were sent into the world to find their humanity—to learn who they really were. However, God did not sever the relationship with them, so they were left with a deep desire for the peace, for the union, for the love they had lost.

Consciously or unconsciously all of us as human beings desire to restore that original relationship with God that has existed since the beginning of time. Our search takes us in many directions.

Francis began his search with parties and living it up. His father was rich so he had everything and was not lacking material things. Then he tried the military life. But the search continued until he stopped and listened to God. At first he got the message wrong and he started to rebuild a church. That did not satisfy that desire that was deep within him.

And then he met the leper. He embraced the leper. Suddenly he had embraced his own humanity—broken, bruised and poor. He discovered Lady Poverty. He had met and embraced the Incarnate Word. Lady Poverty became his spouse throughout his life. The desire deep within his heart for union with God was enflamed never to be lost again.

Personal reflection:

Are you busy “rebuilding a church”?

Have you met the leper along the way---the leper within yourself?

Have you embraced that leper?

Group discussion:

How does this perspective of the Garden of Eden story differ from the other version?

What is your reaction to it?

Reading: One day the saint was carving a bowl out of a piece of wood when suddenly he tossed it into the fire near where he was sitting. He explained to his companions that the wood was interfering with his contemplation of God, for he found himself preoccupied with carving while trying to pray. Not long after that episode Francis accepted a large piece of real estate, Mount Alverno, as a gift from a wealthy count. It may seem odd that person so scrupulous about possessing a wooden bowl would find no objection to acquiring a valuable tract of property. The rationale is that the mountain was one of Francis’ favorite places of hermitage; it was on Mount Alverno that he experienced his most profound contemplative moments. The gift of land was an object that fostered and nourished his sense of God’s presence, whereas the wooden bowl was distraction to his spiritual life.

Personal reflection:

What are the wooden bowls in my life?

What is the Mount Averno’s in my life?

Group discussion:

What is the difference between poverty of spirit and material poverty?

How are they interconnected?

Reading: “At the beginning of his conversion, therefore, blessed Francis, as the savior’s true imitator and disciple, gave himself with all eagerness, all longing, all determination to searching for, finding, and embracing holy poverty. He did so neither wavering under adversity nor fearing injury, neither

shirking effort nor shunning bodily discomfort, in order to achieve his desire: to reach her to whom the Lord had entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven. He eagerly began to go about the streets and plazas of the city, as a curious explorer diligently looking for her whom his soul loved.”

*Early Documents: Volume 1: Francis of Assisi: The Saint
The Sacred Exchange between St. Francis and Lady Poverty;*

Reading: Later Rule of Francis 6:1-4

Let the brothers (and sisters) not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world. This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you...heirs...of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue.

Group discussion:

What common thread or threads did you hear throughout all the readings?

Where do you meet Lady Poverty in everyday life?

What does Scripture tell us about Jesus' attitude or posture toward poverty?

How would he define poverty?

What would he have to say to us about poverty?

What new insight(s) regarding Franciscan poverty have you gleaned?

Closing prayer

Together:

Almighty, eternal,
just and merciful God,
grant us in our misery to do
for your sake alone
what we know you want us to do,
and always to want what pleases you; so that, cleansed
and enlightened within and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,
we may be able to follow in the footsteps
of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
and so make our way to you, Most High,
by your grace alone—
you who live and reign
in perfect Trinity
and simple Unity,
and are gloried,
God almighty,
forever and ever.

With this prayer Francis closes his letter
“To all the Brothers of the Order”

RESOURCES

Following Francis of Assisi; a Spirituality for Daily Living by Patti Normile, a Secular Franciscan
St. Anthony Messenger Press 1996

“Patti Normile invites the reader to follow Jesus in the manner of St. Francis, a manner that she sees revealed in the lives of ordinary people the saints living among us. The holiness of these contemporary ‘Franciscan saints’ is the best proof that St. Francis’ spirituality is alive and well today.”-Murray Bodo, OFM

Journey out of the Garden: St. Francis of Assisi and the Process of Individuation by Susan W. Mc Michaels
Paulist Press 1997

In this fascinating new study of Francis of Assisi, author Susan W. Mc Michaels describes one man’s struggle to become the hero of his own life by following the deepest promptings of his heart. Using the map of Jung’s psychology to follow Francis out of the garden and along the road of his inner and outer quest, Journey out of the Garden offers insight into this remarkable figure and challenges the reader to discover the courage and humility to chart his or her own individual path through life.

Living the Incarnation by Sister Frances Teresa OSC
Franciscan Press 1993

‘Living the Incarnation will appeal to all those who feel dissatisfaction with their day to day living, or who have a deep instinct that the true riches of life have so far eluded them.’ Bishop Vincent Nichols

Poverty of Spirit by Johannes B. Metz
Newman Press 1968

St. Francis and the Foolishness of God by Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Stuart Taylor Orbis Books 1993

“This truly wonderful book introduces you anew to the person of Francis—the ‘truly catholic’ and always contemporary saint. There will be no Christianity as usual for those who read this book.” Richard Rohr, OFM

The Cord: Volume 44 No 11 November 1994 p. 292

“The Prophetic Heart: The Evangelical Form of Religious Life in the Contemporary US”
by Joe Chinnici OFM

The Cord: Volume 48 No 2 March/April 1998 p. 50

“Facing the Christ Incarnate” by Gabriele Uhlein OSF

The Cord: Volume No 47 No 3 May/June 1999 p. 133

“Lady Poverty” by Gerard Thomas Straub

The Cord Volume 52 No 1 January/February 2002 p. 18

“The Sacred Exchange between St. Francis & Lady Poverty: An example of “Vernacular Theology”
by Brett Huebner

The Cord: Volume 52 No 5 September/October 2002 p. 207

“Minority: The Core of Poverty” by Leonard Lehmann OFM Cap

The Cord: Volume 53 No 5 September/October 2003 p226

“St. Francis’ Conversion & His Encounter with the Leper as Related in the Sources”

by Joseph Wood, OFM Conv

The Cord: Volume 55 No 6 November/December 2005 p250

“...Be Happy to Live among the Outcast & Despised...” by Mary Elizabeth Imler OSF

The Sacred Exchange between St. Francis and Lady Poverty;

Early Documents: Volume 1: Francis of Assisi: The Saint

The Way of St. Francis; the Challenge of Franciscan Spirituality for Everyone by Murray Bodo OFM

St. Anthony Messenger Press 1995

Bodo sees Saint Francis’ life and example as a way of reconciling the opposites in ourselves and the world.

DVD

Living Our Evangelical Option: The Logic of the Gift

Joe Chinnici, OFM, Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, Bill Short OFM

www.fsccladto.org (Listen to it read)

Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity perform the sacred reading entitled The Dialogue of St. Francis & Lady Poverty as a Readers’ Theatre adaption of the Sacred Exchange between St. Francis & Lady Poverty