

Keeping our focus on Francis

AN SFO REVIEW - Fr. John Sullivan, ofm

FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

C1

have on hand: SFO Rule, Bible, Handbook for Spiritual Assistance

Our Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you helped our seraphic father Francis reflect the image of Christ through a life of poverty and humility.

May we follow your Son by walking in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi and by imitating his joyful love. AMEN.

Our SFO Rule reminds us, “The spirituality of the Secular Franciscan is a plan of life centered on the person and on the following of Christ...”(SFO Rule, Art.9) In Article 8 of the SFO Constitutions: “The Secular Franciscans commit themselves by their profession to live the Gospel according to Franciscan spirituality in their secular condition.”

“In brief, the ideal of the spiritual life peculiar to St. Francis consisted in a striving to imitate Christ perfectly, the center of all creation; in an imitation of thought, sentiments, and actions carried, as completely as possible, to the point of identification. This ideal, which could be condensed into the most abject poverty and an all-embracing charity, was born of a personal and passionate love for Christ crucified. This love took its rise in the habitual contemplation of the mystery of the Cross.”
from I Know Christ- p.58, Gratien Badin, OFM Cap.(1988)

Francis, in his fifth Admonition begins: “Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His likeness according to the Spirit.”

St. John’s Gospel (chap.1:vs.1,3,14,16) expresses the setting for Francis’ spirituality. “In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God... Through him all things came into being, and apart from him nothing came to be. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,.. Of his fullness we have all had a share – love following upon love.” (*See also Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20*)

Let the participants take turns reading aloud from:

SFO General Constitutions: Art. 1 - 3 - 8 - 9 - 10 (in the Handbook, pp.251-254).

If there is time, they can also read from the SFO Rule: Art. -1, -2, -3, -4, -5, -6, -7, -8

Friar Bill Short writes in his book, The Franciscans, on p.112:

“Spirituality of Christ as Center:

Wherever one turns in Franciscan spirituality, one finds Christ. He functions as the center of devotion, of ministry, of life together, of authority, of charity. It is a truism to say that such a spirituality is Christocentric. The word, so technical in appearance, in fact breathes and moves beneath every authentically Franciscan text and life.

“Christ becomes the answer to the philosophical question, “Why is there something and not nothing?” The answer is, “Because of Christ.” From the atom to the universe, and including every level and phase of life and love within that compass, the radiating life and presence of Christ hold all things together, as he vivifies and completes them.

“While Christ must always be central to the faith of any Christian, there is a way in which we can

speak of a special insistence on that centrality in the Franciscan tradition. We can speak of a “radical Christocentrism,” which willingly sees Christ within human psychology, social life, mathematics and physics, music and drama. Wherever something or someone *is*, there is Christ. He is the inescapable, though often unrecognized, meaning behind all things.”

And further, friar Bill Short offers this insight (p.114):

“Francis’ deep appreciation of the centrality of Christ within the work of creation found its most eloquent theological expression in the works of [friar] Bonaventure. [Friar] Zachary Hayes has explained that in the growth of Bonaventure’s theology Christ becomes more and more the central concern. In Hayes’ words, “The core of the Christological mystery is the fact that in Jesus the center of all reality has become incarnate and has been made historically visible.”

“The doctrine of Christ as center can already be found in Francis’ own writings, and has been developed by outstanding theologians, especially by [friars] Alexander of Hales and his student Bonaventure. Later it takes on even greater importance in the teaching of [friar] John Duns Scotus.” (friar Bill Short quote, p.113)

This is the great vision and spirit behind being an SFO member. Let us not go off on tangents or sidestep the spirit that guides us all. Spiritual reading, as it is called, is key to help us develop such a rich life.

Q1. Have I been developing and nurturing my Franciscan Spirituality? Or have I been developing and practicing another style and approach?

Q2. What have I been doing recently to develop my franciscan spirituality? Is this what I have been doing during the past few months? Have my religious activities been heavily “routine” without much spirit?

Q3. Have I been “gaining inspiration from the example and the writings of St. Francis”(Art.12,Gen.Constit.)? How?

Q4. Do I try to adopt Francis’ approach to my God, to my neighbor, to myself, to the Church, to all creation, as he did? - such as we see in Francis’ “three loves”?

Q5. Have I read a good franciscan book lately, or do I avoid them in favor of fiction and other popular books?

Alternatively, did you know that there are nine “third orders” in the Catholic Church? (see.P.165:Lester Bach’s book “Called to Rebuild the Church”)

There is no way to capture the rich franciscan charism in just a few lines, or in just one reflection. We have to give it time to permeate our being and outlook on life.

Here are some further references for reading:

The Franciscans, William J. Short,ofm (1989), Michael Glazier,Inc.

I Know Christ-p.58, Gratien Badin,OFMCap.(1988), Franciscan Institute,NY

Called to Rebuild the Church,(1996) Lester Bach,ofmCap; Franciscan Press,Quincy,IL

Gospel Living, Francis of Assisi Yesterday and Today,(1994), The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure,NY.

The Hidden Center,(1981), Zachary Hayes,ofm The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY

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REVERENCE FOR THE CHURCH CHRIST FOUNDED

C2

have on hand: SFO Rule

To start, let us pray together:

**God our Father,
from living stones, your chosen people,
you built an eternal temple to your glory.
Increase the spiritual gifts you have given to your Church,
so that your faithful people may continue to grow
into the new and eternal Jerusalem. AMEN.**

These words of Christ have echoed down the centuries.

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my church.”

We ask the participants to take turns reading from our SFO Rule, art.1 - 5 - 6b - 8b.

Already as SFO candidates we were to focus on several areas of spiritual growth. We find this mentioned in our SFO-Gen.Constitutions., art.40,2:

“The candidates are guided to read and meditate on Sacred Scripture, to come to know the person and writings of St. Francis and of Franciscan spirituality, and to study the Rule and Constitutions. They are trained in a love for the Church and acceptance of her teaching. The laity practice living their secular commitment in the world in an evangelical way.”

We know that Francis had a very high regard for all bishops, esp. his own Bishop Guido of Assisi, and all priests, and had a close friendship with the Popes: Innocent III, Honorius, and Gregory IX (read at length FA-1 pp.418-420.)

Francis strongly promoted the sacramental life of the Church - Sacraments of reconciliation, Eucharist, the Mass, etc.

Earlier Rule, ch.19: [That the Brothers Live as Catholics]

“Let all the brothers be, live, and speak as Catholics.

“If someone has strayed in word or in deed from Catholic faith and life and has not amended his ways, let him be expelled from our brotherhood.

“Let us consider all clerics and religious as our masters in all that pertains to the salvation of our soul and does not deviate from our religion, and let us respect their order, office, and administration in the Lord.” (FA-1,p.77)

Earlier Rule, ch.23:par.7:(FA-1,p83)

“And all of us lesser brothers, useless servants, humbly ask and beg all those who wish to serve the Lord God within the holy, catholic, and apostolic church,that all of us may persevere in the true faith and in penance, for otherwise no one will be saved.”

In his Later Rule (1223) we find the following:

ch.1,2: “Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to our Lord Pope Honorius and his successors canonically elected and to the Roman Church.”

ch.2,2: “Let the ministers examine them [applicants] carefully concerning the Catholic faith and the sacraments of the Church....”

ch.3,1: “Let the clerical [brothers] recite the Divine Office according to the rite of the holy Roman

Church...”

ch9,1: “The brothers may not preach in the diocese of any bishop when he has opposed their doing so.”

In his Testament Francis writes (1226),#6: “Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them.”

In his 26th Admonition we read: “Blessed is the servant who has faith in the clergy who live uprightly according to the rite of the Roman Church. Woe to those who look down upon them...”

Friar Thomas of Celano writes in his First Book (#62) (p.238,FA-1):

“He put the faith of the Holy Roman Church above and beyond all things, preserving, honoring and following it, since the salvation of all who would be saved was found in it alone. He honored priests and affectionately embraced every ecclesiastical order.”

In Celano’s Second Book, we find (chap.5,#100;FA-1,p.270):

“At that time St. Francis approached the lord Pope Honorius, who was then the head of the Roman Church, humbly asking him to appoint the lord Hugolino, bishop of Ostia, as father and lord for him and his brothers. The lord Pope bowed to the holy man’s request, and kindly agreeing, entrusted to the bishop his authority over the Order of the brothers. ... The holy father [Francis] for this reason subjected himself to him in every way and venerated him with wonderful and reverent affection.”

Such attitudes are found again and again in the early writings about Francis and his behavior.

Q1. Do I actively respect the teaching Church as Francis did? Or do I disagree with what she has been teaching us?

Q2. Do I believe the Holy Spirit speaks through the Church today? Give examples....

Q3. Which do I prefer and choose, a) or b), namely:

a) what the Church teaches, or

b) what individuals prefer to teach and hold, contrary to the Church?

c) Do I take out time to figure out this difference? Which would Francis choose?

Q4. Pope John Paul II once again (Nov.26,2000) appealed to the laity to read and practice the teachings of the Vatican Council II. Do we follow his fatherly advice and request?

Q5. Do I do any reading in the Catechism of the Catholic Church?

Q6. Do I have enough reverence for the Church to read and reflect on her teaching documents? (why else were they written and published?) Have I chosen to ignore them?

Q7. Do I agree with Pope John Paul II and the special council in 1985 who said: “The Second Vatican Council was the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit in the 20th century”?

Q8. Do I know Catholics (even franciscans?) who ignore her documents? (What would Francis be doing?)

FA-1 = Francis of Assisi,vol.I, (1999), Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University,NY

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ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

C3

have on hand: SFO Rule, the Catechism of the Cath.Church.

Let's join together in our opening prayer:

Lord, Our God, all things are of your making, all times and seasons obey your laws. But you chose to create man in your own image, setting him over the whole world in all its wonder. You made man the steward of creation, to praise you day by day for the marvels of your wisdom and power. Help us to appreciate our role and responsibilities in the use of the creation you have put here for us to be co-creators with you. Bless our efforts, through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

(Sunday Preface V)

Invite someone now to read aloud

articles 11 and 18, SFO Rule.

Now listen to the example of St. Francis, telling us how all things in creation are to be treasured....

Friar Thomas of Celano says of Francis:

“The saint’s love for creatures animate and inanimate:

This happy traveler, hurrying to leave the world as the exile of pilgrimage, was helped, and not just a little, by what is in the world.

Toward the princes of darkness, he certainly used it as a field of battle.

“Toward God, however, he used it as the clearest mirror of goodness.”

He embraces all things with an intensity of unheard devotion, speaking to them about the Lord and exhorting them to praise Him.

When the brothers are cutting wood he forbids them to cut down the whole tree, so that it might have hope of sprouting again.

He commands the gardener to leave the edges of the garden undisturbed, so that in their season the green of herbs and the beauty of flowers may proclaim the beautiful Father of all. He even orders that within the garden a small garden should be set aside for aromatic and flowering herbs so that those who see them may recall the memory of eternal savor.

He picks up little worms from the road so they will not be trampled underfoot. That the bees not perish of hunger in the icy winter, he commands that honey and the finest wine should be set out for them.

He calls all animals by a fraternal name, although, among all kinds of beasts, he especially loves the meek. Who is capable of describing all of this?

Truly, that fountain-like goodness, which will be all in all, already shone clearly in all for this saint. ...

All creatures, therefore,

strive to return the saint’s love,

and to respond to his kindness with their gratitude.

They smile at his caress, his requests they grant, they obey his commands....

It is no wonder that other creatures revere the greatest lover of the Creator. (FA-2, found on pp. 353 & 354, and 356.)

St. John offers us this insight.(1Jn.3:17-18)

“I ask you, how can God’s love survive in a man who has enough of this world’s goods yet closes his

heart to his brother when he sees him in need? Little children, let us love in deed and not merely talk about it.”

Ecology and environmental issues are the talk of our day. It is so well presented in our SFO Rule, art.11: “Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children”.

Many important messages are proclaimed here: “According to the gospel” (..pause..) we are “stewards” (..caretakers..).

While as Catholics we believe in the right of private ownership, yet even more important is the reality about God placing this whole planet with its contents, its possibilities, its resources, its operation for the benefit of all! Not just for the few who amass more of their world’s resources at the detriment of their neighbor. Our gospel values tell us that this world’s resources must be shared. They were given for all - God did it!

This does not mean political socialism, as we have come to know it in this past century. But it does mean an essential sharing of resources that all can be cared for. Economic systems must also include care for the people deprived by the exigencies of nature, various tragedies, droughts, calamities, etc.

Q1. What is the result when some individuals accumulate large amounts of wealth created from this world’s resources put at our disposal, when at the same time there are other humans suffering basic deprivation of the means to live humanely?

Q2. What balance is required in order to be franciscan in ecology issues?

Q3. Are all creatures of equal value – the inanimate, the plants, animals, human? How does the Church prioritize them?

Q4. In SFO Rule, art.18, what is meant by “the Franciscan concept of universal kinship”?

Q5. What means do I use to show reverence for all creation?

Q6. What is the moral error in the economic principle that indicates the price of an item should be set by “what the market will bear”? (See, C.C.Church,#2424)

For useful background to understanding our Catholic Faith today in this area, check the Catechism of the Catholic Church especially #2402 to 2406, and 2414 to 2420, and 2424-2425.

Q7. What do you think of these statements, in the light of our franciscan heritage?

“Man is always and everywhere a blight on the landscape.”

- John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club.

“Human beings, as a species, have no more value than slugs.” - John Davis, Editor of Earth First! Journal.

“I do not believe that a human being has a right to life...I would rather have medical experiments done on children than on animals.” -Edwin Locke, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

“I got the impression that instead of going out to shoot birds, I should go out and shoot the kids who shoot birds.” - Paul Watson, Founder of Greenpeace & Sea Shepherd.

“Christianity is our foe. If animal rights is to succeed, we must destroy the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.” - Peter Singer, the “Father of Animal Rights”.

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MARY - OUR MOTHER

C4

have on hand: SFO Rule, Bible, Handbook (for General Constitutions), Catechism of Catholic Church.

Friar Thomas of Celano writes (FA-2, p.374 & #198 in Omnibus, p.521):

“He [Francis] embraced the Mother of Jesus with inexpressible love, since she made the Lord of Majesty a brother to us. He honored her with his own **Praises**, poured out prayers to her, and offered her his love in a way that no human tongue can express. But what gives us greatest joy is that he appointed her the Advocate of the Order, and placed under her wings the sons to be left behind, that she might protect and cherish them to the end.

O Advocate of the Poor!

Fulfill towards us your duty as protectress until the time set by the Father!”

Let us as a group begin with Francis’ tribute to Mary:

Hail, O Lady, holy Queen,

Mary, holy Mother of God;

you are the virgin made church

and the one chosen by the most holy Father in heaven,

whom He consecrated

with His most holy beloved Son

and with the Holy Spirit the Paraclete, in whom

there was and is all the fullness of grace and every good.

Hail, His Palace! - - Hail, His Tabernacle! - -

Hail, His Home! - - Hail, His Robe! - -

Hail, His Servant! - - Hail, His Mother!

And, (hail) all you holy virtues which through the grace and light of the Holy Spirit are poured into the hearts of the faithful

so that from their faithless state you may make them faithful to God.

Let’s listen to someone read for us the SFO Rule: art. 9.

Now would someone read our General Constitutions: Art.16,1,2.

Friar Bonaventure writes of Francis’ love for Mary in his Major Legend:

When he finally completed this church [San Damiano], he came to a place called the Portiuncula where there stood a church of the most Blessed Virgin Mother of God, built in ancient times but now deserted and no one was taking care of it. When the man of God saw it so abandoned, he began to stay there regularly in order to repair it, moved by the warm devotion he had toward the Lady of the world. Sensing that angels often visited there, according to the name of that church, which from ancient times was called Saint Mary of the Angels, he stayed there out of his reverence for the angels and his special love for the mother of Christ.” (see FA-2, p.540)

Francis, from studying and praying with the Gospels, which is our franciscan way of life (that which we are to “live”), Francis learned everything he could. In this way he learned much from and about Mary, namely: her total surrender to the Father (the handmaid of the Lord), her style, her humility, her patience in trial, her long-suffering (Our Lady of Sorrows), her openness to the Holy Spirit, her trust, the woman of virtues.

Francis was always searching to partake of the richness of God’s love manifested in the Scriptures: He meditated on Mary’s many messages: e.g., the Magnificat (in Luke 1:46-55). How well he

recalled her last recorded words to us (at Cana, John 2:5): “Do whatever he tells you”. (He learned, as she did, that obedience leads to blessings.)

Honoring Mary was not difficult to do - for if it was appropriate for God to honor Mary in so many ways, and it was; surely it is proper for us today - her brothers and sisters - to honor her as well. Francis deeply appreciated having such a Mother as model and guardian and advocate. He treasured those dedicatory words of Jesus on the cross to her and to us all (read John 19:25-27).

We are encouraged that in the fullness of his prayers, Francis not only spoke to Mary, but also with Mary. When Francis contemplated Jesus, there was Mary with Him. In his three loves (with Jesus as the center of all three - crib, cross, Eucharist) Francis also saw Mary there - at the crib, at the cross, and there at the Eucharist (her Son, God given flesh in her womb, now alive in His Church). Reflecting on Mary’s critical and essential role in the development of salvation history helps us see her awesome dignity, worthy of our honor and tribute.

There are two paintings over the altar in the very small Portiuncula chapel down in the valley outside Assisi (now overpowered by the dimensions of the basilica). The lower picture shows the annunciation, with the angel waiting pensively for Mary’s response. Above this is another painting, of Mary sitting next to and facing her Son, as the two sit in the realms of heaven. (Both become great meditation themes for anyone who loves Mary.)

We pause now to join with Francis and the early franciscans in praying the antiphon adopted for the daily office:

“Holy Virgin Mary, among women, there is no one like you born into the world:
you are the daughter and the servant of the most high and supreme King and Father of Heaven,
you are the mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the spouse of the Holy Spirit.

Pray for us, with Saint Michael the Archangel and all the powers of the heavens and all the saints to your most holy beloved Son, the Lord and Master.”

Now [if there is time] we can personally benefit much from the instructions the Church gives us in her Catechism: #973-975, 2617-2622, 2679, 2708.

Q1. What would Francis have meant by “you are the virgin made church” (in our opening prayer on the first page)?

Q2. What kind of prayer is expressed about Mary by the scripture text (of Luke 2:19 & 2:51): “She kept all these things in her heart”?

Q3. How well do we follow Francis in listening to our Mother Mary when she tells us: “Do whatever he tells you”?

Q4. How much time do we spend with trying to enter into the heart of Mary by reflecting and meditating on her prayerful messages in her Magnificat? Do I take time to make these sentiments my own?

Q5. What struck you in your reading of article #2708 in the Catechism?

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GOD IS EVERYTHING

have on hand: SFO Rule, Catechism of Catholic Church

C5

In the *Little Flowers*(par.2) we read: “Bernard of Quintavalle chose to learn more about Francis who had withstood for two years the abuse and insults of the townspeople toward him in his conversion.

“Now the Lord Bernard of Assisi, who was one of the richest and wisest noblemen in the whole city, whose judgment everyone respected, wisely began to think over St. Francis’ utter contempt for the world and his great patience when he was insulted and the fact that although he had been scorned and despised by everybody for two years, he always appeared more serene and patient. He began to think and to say to himself: “This Francis certainly must have great graces from God.”

“So inspired by the Lord, he invited St. Francis to have supper with him one evening. The Saint humbly accepted and ate supper with him that evening. “...Then he invited him to stay for the night.

“Therefore St. Francis, who faithfully concealed the secrets of God, when he thought that the Lord Bernard was fast asleep, during the first part of the night, got out of bed and began to pray. Looking up to Heaven and raising his hands, he prayed with intense fervor and devotion, saying: “My God and my all!” And he sobbed out those words with so many tears and kept repeating them with such devout persistence that until matins he said nothing but “My God and my all!” “Now the Lord Bernard saw the very inspiring actions of St. Francis by the light of the lamp burning there. And while he was attentively meditating on the words which the Saint was saying and carefully observing his devotion, he was touched by the Holy Spirit in the depths of his heart and felt inspired to change his life. Omnibus of Sources - p.1302. [author’s comment: Bernard became Francis’ first follower.]

This simple prayer of Francis is a good example of **contemplative prayer** – not the words themselves, but the fact that Francis is sharing his love with God in true intimacy.

Francis marvels, he admires, he begs, he appreciates the God that has given him all things, and in fact Francis realizes He is all that is needed or wanted. And in so doing Francis places himself before God in the spirit of true humility and affection. Francis shares his heart with the Crucified. He realizes that God is his “everything”. I encourage you in your time of praying to pray “My God and My All”, relishing each word for its rich meaning and content.

Now we listen to a reading from our SFO Rule, Art.8.

Q1. Do I ever use this prayer myself, as a franciscan, as a basis for my meditation and contemplation? Might it be a good start into contemplation for me also? What other prayers of Francis might I start with?

One writer (friar Thomas of Celano) (FA-1,p.283) tries to tell us that Francis was the consummate contemplator.

He says: “The Brothers who lived with him know that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips, sweet and pleasant conversations about Him, kind words full of love.

Out of the fullness of the heart his mouth spoke. So the spring of radiant love that filled his heart within gushed forth. He was always with Jesus: Jesus in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, he bore Jesus always in his whole body.

“...in rapture of spirit, he contemplated in unspeakable and incomprehensible glory the One sitting “at the right hand of the Father....” .

St. Bonaventure approaches contemplation this way:

It is necessary that a person “enter through the blood of the Lamb as through a door” ... “as a man of desires.”

Such desires are enkindled in us in two ways: by an outcry of prayer that make us call aloud in the groaning of our heart (Ps.38:9) and by the flash of insight by which the mind turns most directly and intently toward the rays of light.

First, therefore, I invite the reader to the groans of prayer through Christ crucified, through whose blood we are cleansed from the filth of vice – so that he not believe that reading is sufficient without unction,

speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety,

knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom.”

(Prologue, “Itinerarium Mentis in Deum”) p.56, W.Spir. text.

All through his text Bonaventure makes clear that we “enter through the center” - who is Christ (who is also at the center of the seraphic vision!).

Here are some of the words with which Bonaventure concludes his text on contemplation:

But if you wish to know how these things come about, ask grace not instruction,

desire not understanding, the groaning of prayer not diligent reading,

the Spouse not the teacher, God not man,

darkness not clarity, not light but the fire

that totally inflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctious and burning affections. This fire is God, and his furnace is in Jerusalem; and Christ enkindles it in the heat of his burning passion, which only he truly perceives who says: “My soul chooses hanging and my bones death.”....

...Let us rejoice with David saying:

My flesh and my heart have grown faint;

You are the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion forever....”

Contemplation is heart-to-heart sharing with God.

We recall the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In #2708 they remind us that Christian prayer should include contemplation. And in #2716 they remind us: Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the “Yes” of the Son become servant and the *Fiat* of God’s lowly handmaid.

To be faithful to our franciscan calling, we really should seriously read and absorb the Church’s messages in #2708 to 2724.

Q2. As franciscans we professed to enter contemplative prayer in our own SFO Rule (art.8) . As a franciscan have I been doing this? Could I do more?

Q3. If there is time, why not become acquainted with the suggested passages in the Catechism?

*W.Spir. text = Bonaventure, The Classics of Western Spirituality,
ed:Ewert Cousins,(1978),Paulist Press,NY.

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Ask someone to read the SFO Rule, art.5.

Friar Bonaventure writes of Francis: Whenever he read the Sacred Books, and something struck his mind he imprinted it tenaciously on his memory, because he did not grasp in vain what his attentive mind heard, for he would mull over it with affection and constant devotion.”

When asked about friars studying Sacred Scripture, he replied: “I am indeed pleased, as long as, after the example of Christ, of whom we read that he prayed more than he read, they do not neglect zeal for prayer, and, as long as they study, not to know what they should say, but to practice what they have heard and, once they have put it into practice, propose it to others.”

”I want my brothers,” he said, “to be Gospel disciples and so progress in knowledge of the truth that they increase in pure simplicity without separating the simplicity of the dove from the wisdom of the serpent which our eminent Teacher joined together in a statement from his own blessed lips.” (found on p.612-3 in FA-2)

An exchange between Francis and his minister indicates the depths of Francis’ absorption of the Scriptures, which set the tenor of his way of life:

“On another occasion, at the time of his eye disease, he endured such pain that one day a minister said to him: “Brother, why don’t you have one of your companions read to you from the prophets or other passages of Scripture? In that way, your spirit will rejoice in the Lord and receive great consolation.” He knew that he rejoiced greatly in the Lord whenever he heard the divine Scriptures read to him.

“Brother,” he answered him, “every day I find so much sweetness and consolation in my memory from meditating on the humility of the footprints of the Son of God that, if I were to live till the end of the world, I’d have no great need to hear or meditate on other passages of Scripture.” (FA-2, p.181, #79).

We know, of course, that as he was dying, Francis asked for the reading of the scripture passage from John’s Gospel about Jesus gathering with his disciples at the Last Supper.

Francis prayed and meditated with the Sacred Scriptures to learn more about God - about reality, about priorities in life, about love - his church, God Himself.

He was totally “God-centered” and respected all the ways that God has tried to communicate with us - the scriptures, the Church, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ himself. He knew Christ to be the model, the teacher (Word), the lover sent by the Father - and Francis found Him in the Scriptures.

Q1. How do I use the Scriptures in my daily life?

Q2. Have I read the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (presented to us at Vatican Council-II)?

Q3. Have we come to know the differences of Catholic interpretation of the Bible and Christians of other faith traditions? What are the differences?

Francis ends his Admonition VII with the words:

“And those people are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every

letter they know, or wish to know, to the body but, by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs.”

To St. Anthony [of Padua] Francis wrote:

“Brother Francis sends greetings to Brother Anthony, my Bishop. I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers providing that, as is contained in the Rule, you “do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion” during study of this kind.” (FA-1, p. 107)

In Francis’ *Letter to the Entire Order* he wrote:

“Because whoever belongs to God hears the words of God, we who are more especially charged with divine responsibilities must not only listen to and do what the Lord says but also care for the vessels and other liturgical objects that contain His holy words in order to impress on ourselves the sublimity of our Creator and our subjection to Him. I, therefore, admonish all my brothers and encourage them in Christ to venerate, as best as they can, the divine written words wherever they find them.....” FA-1-p.119 (34 & 35)

In his Testament Francis wrote:

“Wherever I find our Lord’s most holy names and written words in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place. And we must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life.

And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.” (in FA-1, p.125, lines 12-13-14)

Q4. What is the difference between Divine Revelation and Sacred Scripture?

It is hard for us to grasp the seriousness contained in the statement which the Church quotes from St. Jerome:

“Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

How well did Francis live this declaration!

Q5. What do these blunt, even embarrassing words, tell us about our personal SFO search to draw closer to Christ? Did Francis set us an example to follow here? Have I been doing anything about it? How many Catholics (and franciscans) in the U.S. today do you think follow up on this challenge?

Q6. Have I ever taken time to read and study the instructions printed in the beginning of my Catholic Bible (e.g., the St. Joseph edition, and others)?

Q7. How does speaking in tongues fit into scripture reading?

Did Francis do this? (Read and meditate on St. Paul’s letter to the 1Corinthians, ch.14.) As you will see there, Paul explains that the gift of tongues is for non-believers; prophecy (speaking for God) is what we should yearn for and prefer, and is more important for us.

For further reflection, you might benefit from reading in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, at least see #65-67, 96-100, and 134-141.