

## **Letter to All the Faithful – by St. Francis of Assisi**

- format and translation presentation by Fr. John Sullivan, ofm  
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### **OUR FIRST LESSON:**

#### **Orientation and First Reflection:**

As is clear from his introductory sentence, St. Francis is addressing “Christians everywhere”. Various opinions are given by the scholars to identify the year when Francis wrote this letter, which we cannot settle here. At any rate, we can find a wealth of material about Francis’ convictions about living the Catholic Faith and what is involved in living the Holy Gospel – the truly Holy Good News that Jesus Christ has given to us, which is at the core of his Rules. Surely Secular Franciscans can find significant nourishment and support in these words of advice from Francis. Francis also uses the words “be Catholics”[v.32] to clearly assure fidelity, and to warn us not to follow the contradictory religious theories and practices in vogue by some in his day (e.g., the Waldensians and the Albigensians). These serious heresies were confusing the people in great numbers, leading to personal and social turmoil. It is in this context that St. Francis is writing.

St. Francis himself did not divide up his letter into sections with titles as listed here. But for the purposes of this series of our reflections I have chosen the following themes for the 88 verses:

- a- His Introduction – 1 to 3
- b- Some Foundations of our Catholic Faith – 4 to 24
- c- Admonitions and Advice – 25 to 48
- d- Our Relationship with God and the Benefits – 49 to 62
- e- Those Who Go Astray & Lose Everything – 63 to 71
- f- A Pitiful Warning – Those Who Choose to Waste their Lives – 72 to 85
- g- In Closing – 86 to 88

Let us begin. First of all, I encourage you to read through the whole text St. Francis wrote, to get a flavor of the variety of topics he wants to cover in his letter. Then return and start with the first sentence of the “Introduction”..

## **Letter to All the Faithful – by St. Francis of Assisi**

[a- HIS INTRODUCTION – 1 to 3]

- 1- In the name of the Lord, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.  
To Christians everywhere: to religious, clerics, and laics, men and women, to all who dwell in the whole world, brother Francis, their servant and subject, sends deference with reverence, true peace from heaven and heartfelt charity in the Lord.

2- Since I am the servant of all, I am bound to serve all of them and to extend to them the pleasing words of my Lord. 3- Reflecting on the fact that since I cannot personally visit with each one of you because of the sickness and health limitations of my body, I have decided to send you by these letters and messages the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Word of the Father, and to offer you the words of the Holy Spirit, which are spirit and life.

SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 1):

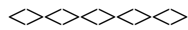
Qa1. How does Francis see himself in this introduction?

Qa2. What does St. Francis explain as the principal purpose for this letter?

Qa3. What persons are listed as “clerics” in the Catholic Church?

Qa4. How does St. Francis bring the three Persons of the Trinity into his introduction?  
What purposes are their roles in his letter?

*Activity:* I recommend that you use a highlighter to mark all Sacred Scripture quotes that St. Francis uses in the text of this letter.



### **OUR SECOND LESSON:**

[b- SOME FOUNDATIONS OF OUR CATHOLIC FAITH – 4 to 24]

4- The most high Father made known from heaven through His holy angel Gabriel this Word of the Father – so worthy, so holy and glorious – in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb He received the flesh of our humanity and frailty. 5- Though He was rich, He wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else.

6- And as His passion approached, he celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples and taking the bread he gave thanks and blessed and broke it saying: “Take and eat, this is my Body.” 7- And taking the chalice he said: “This is my Blood of the new testament, which for you and for many is poured out for the remission of sins.” 8- Then he prayed to His Father, saying: Father, if it can be done, let this cup pass from me. 9- And His sweat became as drops of blood falling on the ground. 10- Nevertheless, He placed His will in the will of His Father, saying: Father, let Your will be done; not as I will, but as You will. 11- His Father’s will was such that His blessed and glorious Son, Whom He gave to us and Who was born for us, should offer Himself through His own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross; 12- not for Himself, through Whom all things were made, but for our sins, 13- leaving us an example that we might follow His footsteps.”

14- And he wished that all be saved through him and that we might receive him with a pure heart and with a chaste body. 15- But there are few, who wish to receive him and be saved through him, even though his yoke is sweet and his burden is light. 16- Those who prefer not to partake, though the Lord is sweet, and they are desirous of the darkness more than the light, preferring not to carry out the commands of the Lord, are declared evil; 17- about whom it is spoken through the prophet: Condemned are those who reject his commands.

18- But, how happy and blessed are those who love God and do as the Lord Himself says in the Gospel: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. 19- Let us love God, therefore, and adore Him with a pure heart and a pure mind, because He Who seeks this above all things has said: True adorers adore the Father in Spirit and Truth. 20- For all who adore Him must adore Him in the Spirit of truth. 21- And we should speak with him with praises and prayers day and night by praying: 'Our Father, who art in heaven', because it is appropriate for us to always pray and not grow weary.

22- In a similar way we must confess all our sins to the priest; and we must receive the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ from him. 23- Who does not eat his Flesh and does not drink his Blood, cannot enter the kingdom of God. 24- Let us eat and drink worthily, because whoever eats and drinks unworthily brings down judgment on himself, not distinguishing the Body of the Lord, that is, he does not acknowledge it.

#### SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 2):

Qb1. What attitudes toward and practices about the Sacrament of the Eucharist is St. Francis expressing here?

Qb2. Could it be appropriately said that the Son (the Word) became the "channel" for Francis in developing his spiritual life? How do you see this?

Qb3. How does Francis express the "teamwork" efforts of the three Persons of the Trinity? (check vs. 3 to 24 and 48 to 53.)

Qb4. Can you find any clues to Francis' Trinitarian attitude and outlook?

Qb5. Overall, how would you summarize what Francis is trying to relay to us in this section of this letter?

Qb6. What bonds does Francis describe between us and God in this section?

Qb7. How does v.5 express Francis' view on poverty?

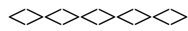
Qb8. Why does it seem hard for Catholics in our U.S.A. today to accept poverty as a virtue?

Qb9. How does St. Francis show his respect and appreciation for the Eucharistic Sacrifice and Reception of the Eucharist?

Qb10. How seriously does Francis consider the need to partake of the Eucharist? [v.14-17]? How do v.23-24 express his deep concern in the matter?

Qb11. Do we usually view the cross as an “altar” [v.11]?

Qb12. How does this compare to the focus of the SFO Rule, art.8?



### **OUR THIRD LESSON:**

[c- ADMONITIONS AND ADVICE – 25 to 48]

25- Furthermore, let us produce wholesome fruits of penance. 26- And let us care for our neighbors as for ourselves. 27- And if anyone does not wish to love others as himself, at least do not heap evil upon them, but rather perform good deeds.

28- Whoever has received the authority of judging others, should exercise judgment with mercy, just as they wish to receive mercy from the Lord.

29- For judgment without mercy will be for those who have not practiced mercy.

30- We are to practice charity and humility; and to give alms, because that cleanses souls from the grime of our sins. 31- For people really keep everything which they have given up in this world; for they carry the treasure of charity and alms, which they have shared, for which they will receive from the Lord a reward and worthwhile remuneration.

32- We must also fast and abstain from vices and sins and from superfluity of food and drink and be Catholics.

33- We must also frequently visit churches and venerate and show reverence to the clerics, not so much for themselves, if they should be sinners, but because of their position and the administration of the most holy Body and Blood of Christ, which they sacrifice on the altar and receive and administer to others.

34- And we confidently know that no one can be saved except through the holy words and the Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which the clerics declare, announce to us and administer. 35- And they alone must offer this ministry and no others.

36- In a special way, however, the religious, who have renounced the world, are bound to do more and greater things, but not disregard all these points.

37- We must hate our bodies with their vices and sins because the Lord says in the Gospel: All evils, vices and sins come from the heart.

38- Our enemies who do us harm we must love and do good to .

39- We must observe the precepts and counsels of the Our Lord Jesus Christ.

40- We must also deny our very selves and submit our bodies to the yoke of servitude and of holy obedience, as each one of us has made promise to the Lord. 41- And no person is bound under obedience to obey anyone else in anything, when a crime or sin would be committed. 42- The person to whom obedience has been committed and who is the superior, should be like the lesser and the servant of all the other brothers. 43- And to each of his brothers he should show and have mercy, as he would wish shown to himself, if he were in a similar situation. 44- Nor should he be irritated/disturbed at a brother by the failure of his brother, but with all patience and humility he should advise and support him with kindness.

45- We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh, but even more we must be simple, humble and pure. 46- And we should consider our bodies with disdain and of low-value, because all of us through our own failure are miserable and foul, fetid and worms, just as the Lord says through the prophet: I am a worm and no man, a burden for men and rejected by the people.

47- We must never desire to be above others, but, instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake.

48- And all men and women, when they have carried out such things and have persevered to the end, the Spirit of the Lord will rest with them and make its dwelling and mansion in them.

SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 3):

Qc1. How do you see St. Francis' words in this letter comparing to the very succinct statement in the SFO Rule, art.4: "to observe the Gospel"?

Qc2. Besides "doing penance", Francis here in v.25 admonishes us to "produce wholesome fruits of penance". What does this mean? What makes them "wholesome"?

Qc3. How would you describe this "wisdom of the flesh" mentioned in v.45? Contrast this to what he writes in v.67.

Qc4. If you have time for making comparisons, how do these admonitions compare with any of St. Francis' 28 Admonitions?

Qc5. Do you know what Waldensians stood for? ...and what the Albigensians stood for?

Qc6. Two times St. Francis uses the term "hate" [in 37 and 46]. Scripturally, would you consider Francis identifying with St. John in his Gospel: 12:25 where he wrote: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life"? (Check also St. Paul who wrote Romans 8:5-8.)

Qc7. What specifically are we to "hate"? How does this compare to the spirit of Francis in his attitude to creation in the Canticle of the Sun?

Qc8. How does Francis emphasize the sharing of goods of this world?

Qc9. Reflecting on vs. 21, 29, & 43 on mercy, would you say this also includes “forgiveness”?

Qc10. What is Francis trying to explain in vs. 31?

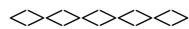
Qc11. Overall, how would you summarize what Francis is trying to relay to us in this section of this letter?

Qc12. Since Francis addresses his letter also to religious (v.1), he adds specific comments to them especially in vs.36 & 39 to 44. How are they appropriate for religious?

Qc13. Does this advice have meaning for us today? How? Why?

Qc14. In this writing what evidence exists that Francis reverences the Catholic Church? What did he say?

Qc15. In v.32 Francis uses the words “be Catholics” to counteract what movements in his day?



### **OUR FOURTH LESSON:**

[d- OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD & ITS BENEFITS - 49 to 62]

49- And they will be *sons* of the heavenly Father, whose works they do.

50- And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

51- We are *spouses* when the faithful person is united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

52- We are *brothers*, moreover, when we do the will of His Father who is in heaven; 53- *mothers* when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through holy activity, which must shine before others by example.

54- O how glorious and holy and great to have a Father in heaven!

55- O to have a spouse – so holy, a comforter, so beautiful and admirable.

56- O how holy and how delectable, pleasing, humble, a maker of peace, sweet and loveable and above everything else desirable to have such a brother and son, who gave up his life for his sheep and prayed to the Father for us saying: Holy Father, in your name protect those whom you have given me.

57- Father, all those whom you have given me in the world, they have been yours, and you have given them to me. 58- And the words which you have given to me, I have given to them; and these have accepted and really understood, that I have come from You and they have believed, that you have sent me; I pray for them and not for the world; bless and sanctify them. 59- And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they might be sanctified into one as we are one.

60- And I wish, Father, that where I am they also may be with me, so that they might see my glory in your kingdom. 61- And to the person who carries out such things for us, and does all good things and perseveres into the future, every creature, which is in the heavens, on earth, in the sea and in the depths renders praise, glory, honor and blessing to God, 62- For he alone is our power and strength, who alone is good, alone the most high, alone all-powerful, admirable, glorious and alone holy, praiseworthy and blessed for ages upon ages. Amen.

SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 4):

Qd1. How does Francis express the “teamwork” efforts of the three Persons of the Trinity? (check vs. 3 to 24 and 48 to 53.) [Check your answer to Qb3.]

Qd2. Do we let the Holy Spirit work in us this way?

Qd3. How do vs. 49-to-53 [similar to the Prologue to the SFO Rule] compare with Matthew’s Gospel, 12:46-50?

Qd4. Can we take time to prayerfully relish St. Francis’ spiritual feelings and attitudes about God as expressed in vs. 54-55-56-&-62? Might these expressions form a whole “litany” of descriptions for our individual meditations?

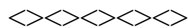
Qd5. How do our lessons three and four become helps for SFOs in “striving for perfection” as expected in Canon 303?

Qd6. Can you find Francis’ four loves – crib – cross – Eucharist – Church in this letter?

Qd7. Can you find and identify in this letter the 6 Key Virtues Francis lists and honors in his “Salutation of the Virtues” (wisdom-simplicity-poverty-humility-charity-obedience)?

Qd8. Overall, how would you summarize what Francis is trying to relay to us in this section of this letter?

Qd9. List some of the benefits from being children of God.



### **OUR FIFTH LESSON:**

[e- THOSE WHO GO ASTRAY & LOSE EVERYTHING – 63 to 71]

63- All those, however, who are not living in penance, who do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, 64- who practice vice and sin and walk after evil concupiscence and wicked desires, who do not observe what they have promised,

65- and who serve the world with their bodies, the desires of the flesh, the cares and anxieties of this world, and the preoccupations of this life 66- [all these] are deceived by the devil whose children they are and whose works they do. They are blind because they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ.

67- They do not have spiritual wisdom because they do not possess the Son of God, the true wisdom of the Father, within them. It is said of them: Their wisdom has been swallowed up. 68- They look at, they acknowledge, they know and they do evil things; and knowingly they destroy their souls.

69- Open your eyes, blind ones, deceived by our enemies – namely by the flesh, the world, and the devil – because it is pleasing to the body to commit sin and bitter to serve God, for all evils, vices and sins come from and proceed from the human heart, just as the Lord says in the Gospel.

70- And you possess nothing in this world nor in the next.

71- You think you possess these worldly vanities, but you are being deceived, because the day and the hour will come, which you will not recognize, do not know and are unconscious of.

SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 5):

Qe1. How would you summarize what Francis is trying to relay to us in this section of this letter?

Qe2. Who are our enemies? Are these included among the “enemies” we pray about in Zechariah’s Canticle at Morning Prayer?

Qe3. How does this compare with Christ’s words: “You cannot serve both God and mammon”?

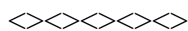
Qe4. How fragile is human life?

Qe5. What are “worldly vanities”?

Qe6. What are the spiritual consequences of honestly realizing what it is you can “take with you”?

Qe7. How can we help ourselves and others to avoid these traps of this section? Was Christ always successful? Was St. Francis always successful?

Qe8. How many times in this letter does Francis mention the Eucharist?



### **OUR SIXTH LESSON:**

[f- A WARNING – THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO WASTE THEIR LIVES -72 to 85]

72- The body becomes sick, death approaches, neighbors and friends come and say: Express your will regarding your possessions. 73- Behold, his wife and his sons and neighbors and friends give the impression of crying/grieving.

74- And looking around he sees them crying, and he conjures up an immoral solution; thinking within himself he says: Look, I place in your hands my soul and my body and all that I have. 75- Certainly, such a person is cursed, who confides and hands over his soul and body and all his possessions to such

hands; 76- To this the Lord says through the prophet: Cursed is the person who trusts in man.

77- And immediately they proceed to bring the priest. The priest says to him: "Do you wish to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation for all your sins?"  
78- He responds: "I do wish to." "Do you wish to make satisfaction for your sins and for the times you committed fraud and cheated people so that you could have their possessions?"  
79- He responds: "No". And the priest says: "Why not?"  
80- "Because I have already disposed of everything I possess into the hands of my neighbors and friends."  
81- And this miserable person begins to lose his voice and so he dies.

82- But let everyone know that wherever and under any circumstances a person should die in mortal sin without making satisfaction and has the ability to make satisfaction but has not done so, the devil rips his soul from his body with such anguish and violence, that no one can appreciate except the person going through it.

83- And all the skills and power and knowledge, which he thought he had, are taken away from him. 84- And he surrenders to his neighbors and friends and they take all of it away and divide up his possessions and they afterwards say: "Cursed be his soul, because he could have given more to us and acquired even more than he did." 85- The worms consume his body; and so he loses his body and soul in this brief time in the world and goes to hell, where he is tortured without end.

#### SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 6):

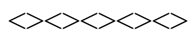
Qf1. How does Francis stress that there is a need for everyone to live in penance?

Qf2. Why do you think Francis spends so much of his letter (about one-sixth) on persons going astray and wasting their lives? Does this reflect Francis' concern and compassion for sinners to change their ways and be saved? Is this concern Christ-like? Is this Gospel-based?

Qf3. How does this section (vs.63-85) give emphasis to what Francis wrote in vs. 15-17.?

Qf4. Review how graphic Francis is about the destiny of evildoers as in vs. 82-to-85.

Qf5. How would you summarize what Francis is trying to relay to us in this section of this letter?



**OUR SEVENTH LESSON:**

[g- IN CLOSING.... – 86 to 88]

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

87- I, brother Francis, your lowly servant, beg and beseech you in charity, which is God himself, and with the desire to kiss your feet, that you might receive these words and other messages of our Lord Jesus Christ and put them into practice and observe them.

88- And all men and women, who graciously receive these Words, let them understand them and hand them on to others, and if they shall have persevered in them unto the end, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit will bless them. Amen

SHARING QUESTIONS (for lesson 7):

Qg1. What words does Francis use to describe himself at the opening and closing of his letter?

Qg2. Have you found any parallel ideas between this letter and the Prologue to the SFO Rule? What are they?

Qg3. Is writing a letter an effective way for Francis to “preach penance/conversion”? And, have you yourself ever tried doing this?

Qg4. Thaddée Matura, ofm, wrote on p. 13 in his Francis of Assisi, Writer and Spiritual Master: “Among Francis’ writing, this letter is the one that comes closest to being an organic treatise of the spiritual life.”

Having read and reflected on this letter, do you sense this also? What observations would you make?

Qg5. How many of the blessings and helps from God that St. Francis lists in this letter do many non-Catholics, our brothers and sisters, deprive themselves of? Should we pray that they might benefit from them? (Is this part of ecumenism?)

Qg6. How does this letter compare to the SFO Rule, art. 7 – 10 – 11?

Qg7. What are we readers asked by St. Francis to do with this letter?

*Feel free to print as many copies as you wish – not for sale.*

Regretably, Francis has to refers to (v.16-17; 23-24)