

*The Evangelical Counsels Writ Large:
Reflections of the Writings of St. Francis of Assisi and
How the Franciscan Charism Can Help Rebuild the Church*

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The Franciscan Legacy from the 13th Century to the 21st

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Introduction

In February 2019 Pope Francis convened an unprecedented meeting of bishops from throughout the world to address the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. The meeting noted that such abuses reflect not only the moral failures and criminal behavior of individual offenders but also failures of leadership, including a lack of compassion for victims/survivors, a lack of accountability, and misplaced priorities. Speakers found that more attention needed to be given to the formation of priests and religious to address factors that may have contributed to the crisis, including a culture of clericalism and privilege, inadequate human formation, and a lack of integrity in living the vows, particularly the vow of chastity (http://www.vatican.va/resources/index_en.htm#MEETING_THE_PROTECTION_OF_MINORS_IN_THE_CHURCH).

Creating effective procedures, structures and systems that are more practical, pastoral, transparent and just are essential to addressing the sexual, financial and other scandals that continue to bedevil the Church. As with other crises in the history of the Church, however, these problems also reveal the need for a profound spiritual renewal, both on the personal and corporate level. Responding to the voice he heard at San Damiano, St. Francis of Assisi began a movement to rebuild a 13th Century Church that struggled with scandal, division, and misplaced priorities.

This paper argues that Francis' emphases on humility, fraternity and minority can be the ecclesial expressions of the traditional evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience that he embraced to follow in the footsteps of Christ. These charisms can help to rebuild the Church in the 21st Century.

Method

I write as a friar interested in the life and writings of St. Francis, our Franciscan histories, charisms, spiritualities, and theologies, our Rule and the Capuchin Constitutions. I also have desire to integrate these into my daily life, the life of my community and the Church that St. Francis was called to rebuild.

However, I am not a Franciscan scholar. The formal training and instruction I have received has come through the initial and continuing formation programs of my province. These have been enhanced by my experiences in provincial leadership and in my service on bodies such as the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission of the Capuchin Order, the Board of Directors of Franciscans International, and as a participant at our Capuchin General Chapter in 2012, when we substantially rewrote our Constitutions and also overwhelmingly approved a proposal to address the issue of sexual abuse of minors.

Here I have chosen to limit my sources to the writings of St. Francis, namely:

- *St. Francis' Prayer Before the Crucifix* (1205/1206)
- *1st Version of the Letter to the Faithful (Earlier Exhortation to Brothers and Sisters of Penance, 1209-1215)*
- *2nd Version of the Letter to the Faithful* (1220)
- *Letter to the Clergy (Later Edition, 1220)*
- *First Letter to the Custodians* (1220)
- *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples* (1220)
- *Letter to the Entire Order* (1225-1226)
- *The Testament* (1226)
- *The Admonitions* (undated)

The source and translation that I have used for these reflections is *St. Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Vol. I: The Saint*, edited by Regis Armstrong, OFM Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellmann, OFM Conv., and William J. Short, and published by New City Press in 1999 (hereinafter, *Early Documents I*).

The genius of St. Francis' response to the call of the crucified Lord that he received at San Damiano – "Francis, rebuild my church, which is falling into ruin" – was in recognizing that reform of the Body of Christ ultimately depended on the conversion of its members. Just as St. Paul observed that if one member of the body suffers the rest of the body suffers with it, and if one rejoices the rest share in that joy (1 Corinthians 12:26), Francis saw that personal reform and institutional reform were interdependent. Reformed structures without the conversion of those working within those structures are bound to fail. Personal conversion without the development of a supportive culture and structures that reflect those changes will lead to frustration and discouragement.

The evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience are part of the foundation of religious life, and failure to live them with integrity is also a fundamental cause of the crisis afflicting the church. Lavishing gifts in the process of grooming someone for sexual abuse or exploitation and the pride bred and reinforced by clericalism are failures to live the vow of poverty. Sexual harassment, abuse,

exploitation or involvement with a minor or an adult is an obvious violation of the vow of chastity. Refusal to abide by the rules and boundaries that apply to all other religious and ministers is a form of disobedience. Engaging in acts of cover-up or treating victims as threats rather than wounded brothers and sisters only serves to exacerbate the destructive effects of those transgressions. Wounds are reopened and deepened rather than healed.

St. Francis lived at a time when various forms of corruption and violations of the vows were destroying the Church. Public confidence was at such a low ebb that populist movements like the Cathari and Albigensians flourished. Violence, rather than love and reason, was often relied upon to settle disputes inside and outside the Church.

St. Francis' Prayer Before the Crucifix (1205/1206) [Early Documents I, 40]

Francis begins this prayer by asking God to “enlighten the darkness” of his heart and to give him several gifts, each of which are needed as we confront personal and institutional sin and failure in the Church:

- “True faith” – In God, not in human beings.
- “Certain hope” – In the power of God’s grace to effect deep and lasting change.
- “Perfect charity” – To victims/survivors, offenders, the angry and scandalized faithful, failed leaders, the media, etc.
- “Sense and knowledge” – Regarding the various manifestations of sexual and other forms of abuse, and their causes, effects, remedies. Two generations ago, sexual abuse in the Church was viewed primarily as a moral failure, something that could be addressed with the Sacrament of Penance and spiritual direction. Then it was viewed more as a psychological problem that could be addressed therapeutically. Today it is understood much more comprehensively: as a crime as well as a moral failure; as a problem involving all dimensions of a person (spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical); as an institutional failure as well as a personal failure.

1st Version of the Letter to the Faithful (Earlier Exhortation to Brothers and Sisters of Penance, 1209-1215) [Early Documents I, 41-44]

Echoing what Jesus called the two greatest commandments of the Mosaic Law, Francis urges us to love God with our whole hearts, souls, minds and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. When these commandments are lived authentically, human

relationships are healthy and there is less risk of abuse; and if abuse does occur, the responses are prompt, compassionate and effective.

Francis writes that we should “hate our bodies with their vices and their sins.” This sounds extreme and even unhealthy to our modern ears, but it also reminds us that we are the agents of our actions. When we sin, we are called to take personal responsibility for what we have done. It is not unusual for offenders to blame others or circumstances for their abuses, but justice and healing are greatly aided when they take ownership of what they have done. It is the foundation for producing what Francis describes as “worthy fruits of penance.”

Failure to do such penance, he maintains, is a form of spiritual blindness and a sign that one has been deceived by “the flesh, the world, and the devil. He reminds us that one day we will be held accountable by Christ. At the same time, Christ comes to our aid through the grace of the Eucharist, strengthening and encouraging us on our lifetime pilgrimage of conversion and becoming more and more like him.

2nd Version of the Letter to the Faithful (1220?) [Early Documents I, 45-51]

St. Francis underscores the importance of spiritual practices and disciplines such as confession and the Eucharist (22-24). When priests or religious forget these fundamental dimensions of their lives along with other practices like regular spiritual direction, they become prey to burnout, a lack of self-awareness, and unhealthy or self-destructive ways of dealing with stress like alcohol and other drug abuse, pornography, gambling, etc.

When healthy spiritual practices and disciplines are in place, it will be evident in what Francis identifies as the fruits of penance: love of neighbor as self, rendering judgment with mercy, charity and humility, almsgiving, fasting and abstinence, and reverence for churches and clergy (25-35). These will include an obedience that is accepts authority but is not so absolute that it neglects the demands of a well-formed conscience.

Authority, in turn, will be exercised with virtues like humility, simplicity, mercy, wisdom, prudence (42-45). In the history of the Church’s battle with the menace and scandal of sexual abuse, those virtues have too often been lacking. Humility would have helped bishops and religious superiors to have less concern for avoiding scandal and more concern for the needs of victims/survivors. Simplicity would have enabled them to step through the prestige, power and trappings of their offices to encounter the suffering “little ones” in front of them. A deeper and broader sense of mercy would have helped them to see beyond their own suffering or that of their accused brothers. Greater wisdom and prudence would have given them the vision to see the need for pastoral care before legal advice, financial management or public relations.

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, those lessons of virtue have begun to take hold. In many places, the Church's efforts to prevent and respond to sexual abuse by priests and religious has changed. Those efforts are humbler and more pastoral, comprehensive, and respectful of the needs of victims/survivors. They place a greater emphasis on crisis prevention than crisis management. The lessons that the Church has learned, however, have been costly. They can be measured not only in the billions of dollars that have been spent in judgments, settlements and legal fees but also in empty pews and a loss of public confidence.

Letter to the Clergy (Later Edition, 1220) [*Early Documents I*, 54-55]

At first glance, this letter seems to have little to do with sexual abuse or any other concern beyond the liturgy. Here Francis laments "the great sin and the ignorance some have toward the most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy names and written words that consecrate his Body" (1). In particular, he decries the neglect of the Eucharistic vessels and linens and he observes that the Body of Christ is "left in many dirty places, carried about unbecomingly, received unworthily, and administered to others without discernment" (4, 5). Francis urges that the Body and Blood of Christ as well as the holy books should be moved from where they are neglected to "precious" and "becoming" places, respectively (11).

But here the *Poverello* is not writing as an obsessive liturgist. Instead, he applies what he came to understand about his encounter with the crucified Lord at San Damiano: rebuilding the Lord's Church is first a *spiritual* task, and as Vatican II reminded us, the "source and summit" of the Christian life is the Eucharist (*Lumen Gentium* 11, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1324).

Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi: the law of prayer, is the law of belief, is the law of life. Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets before him, called the people of his time to integrity between their worship inside the temple and synagogue and their behavior outside, especially toward their brothers and sisters who were poor, marginalized and suffering. We cannot treat the Eucharist and other liturgies where we encounter God casually without risking the loss of our sense of the sacred, which will inevitably extend to the people around us. If we treat God with a lack of reverence and even disrespect, what are the chances that we will do likewise with God's children?

In a similar way, if we are abusive and exploitative of other people, we cannot expect to come before God as if it doesn't matter. Performing religious rituals correctly while treating others horribly is at best a form of spiritual schizophrenia and at worst a terrible form of hypocrisy. It is no wonder that sexually abusing or exploiting a child or another vulnerable person in the name of God or behind a cloak of holiness or religious authority is especially damaging. It wounds a member of the Body of Christ down to their soul.

First Letter to the Custodians (1220) [*Early Documents I*, 56-57]

In this letter, St. Francis echoes many of the concerns he raised in the Letter to the Clergy. However, he adds an important admonition: “In every sermon you give, remind people about penance and that no one can be saved unless he receives the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord” (6). I suspect that few Franciscan preachers today are willing or able to follow the saint’s urging! My experiences of priestly ministry over the past 26 years suggest that we much more comfortable proclaiming messages of grace and mercy than of penance and the necessity of receiving the Eucharist for salvation. Consequently, we can sometimes overlook the fact that, as sacraments, Penance and the Eucharist are themselves ways that people can experience that grace and mercy.

A life of penance includes much more than regularly going to confession, but for Catholics and especially for religious and priests, remembering that we are penitents keeps us grounded. I often use the Seven Deadly Sins (pride, anger, gluttony, envy, greed, sloth and lust) for my examination of conscience, but it would probably be even richer if I included my vows.

For example, regarding poverty:

- Does my pride prevent me from recognizing my weaknesses and sins and my need for God?
- Do I become angry when I don’t get what I want or think that I need?
- Am I glutton for work, food, media, or the many other things that can distract me from prayer?
- Do I envy others, forget to consider how richly I am blessed, and thank God for those abundant blessings?
- Am I greedy for more and more of all the good things that I already have – material and immaterial – and fail to be content with the riches that I already possess?
- Am I slow or resistant to taking up things because I feel uncomfortable or fear that I will not do them well?
- Do I remember that chastity is in part a form of fasting and that is intended not to punish me but to free me for service to God and God’s people as well as to realize more fully that I have a “hole in the soul” that only God and God’s love can fill?

Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples (1220) [*Early Documents I*, 58-59]

In this brief letter, St. Francis reminds rulers to not be seduced or overwhelmed by “this world’s cares and preoccupations” (3) and to be mindful that they will die one day and be held to account by the Lord (4-5, 8). He urges them to put aside those things and to “receive the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with fervor in holy remembrance of Him” and to thus set an edifying example for those subject to them (7).

We have witnessed in the past few years that some bishops seemed to be so overwhelmed by worldly cares and preoccupations that they operated more like corporate CEO’s than pastors. They treated victims and survivors like litigants or claimants who needed to be processed rather than wounded brothers and sisters who needed pastoral care. Others were poor stewards of the resources entrusted to them, spending huge amounts of money on their own comforts or to influence or silence others. Pope Francis has pushed through reforms that are designed to make bishops more accountable for misfeasance or malfeasance in office, but they are only starting to be implemented.

Letter to the Entire Order (1225-1226) [*Early Documents I*, 116-121]

This letter was written not long before St. Francis died, and it especially called the friars to obedience and the humility that is its foundation. “Persevere in discipline and holy obedience,” he urges them, “and with a good and firm purpose, fulfill what you have promised Him” (10). Those who study priests, religious and others who have sexually abused minors have observed that they often lack those essential qualities of discipline and obedience. They believe that the rules that govern others do not apply to them. In some cases, they have “authority issues” while in others they are superficially obedient but use their compliance as a screen to prevent closer scrutiny of their behavior.

Continuing a theme from earlier letters, Francis also admonishes priests to celebrate the Eucharist with “purity and reverence,” warning that those who treat it with contempt or indifference will face divine judgment (17-20). He also admonishes them to treat with reverence God’s word and liturgical vessels and objects (34-37).

The Church has long taught that the validity of sacraments is not dependent on the holiness (or lack thereof) of those who administer them. But that does not diminish the responsibility of clergy to strive to conform their lives to better respect and reflect the mysteries they celebrate and the people of God whom they are called to serve.

Celebrating any sacrament, and especially the Eucharist, is a privilege. I have recently had an opportunity to reflect more deeply on this. Over the past year, our

Capuchin community in Chicago has been asked to assist at several parishes in addition to the one we staff. It has not been unusual for me to have four or five Sunday Masses. After the second one, particularly if I am tired, I am sometimes tempted to “just dial in” the next two or three. Those are the times that I must ask myself, “How would you celebrate this Mass if you knew it was the last one you would ever celebrate?”

The point here is not that there is a direct link between sexual abuse and the casual celebration of the sacraments, but rather that the sense of privilege that leads to the careless celebration of “these sacred mysteries” may also manifest itself in one’s relationships in ministry, particularly with those who are most vulnerable. Serving at the altar and serving the people of God are not occasions of privilege. They are invitations to humility.

For Francis, the Eucharist itself was the literal embodiment of the poor and humble Christ and a manifestation not only of the Paschal Mystery but also the Incarnation:

O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,
 so humbles Himself
 that for our salvation
 He hides Himself
 under an ordinary piece of bread!” (27).

In response to Christ’s great humility, the brothers should themselves be humble and generous, holding back nothing of themselves (28-29). They should celebrate one Mass and only one Mass each day wherever they are as a sign of their unity and humility (30-33). This sign of their brotherhood would be a contrast to a multiplication of individual Masses which could emphasize the status and privileges of the brothers who were also clerics.

Francis closes this letter by begging forgiveness for his sins and nonobservance of the Rule (38-39) and offering this extraordinary prayer:

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God,
give us miserable ones
 the grace to do for You alone
 what we know you want us to do
 and always to desire what pleases You.
Inwardly cleansed,
interiorly enlightened

and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,
may we be able to follow
 in the footsteps of Your beloved Son,
 our Lord Jesus Christ,
and by Your grace alone,
may we make our way to You,
Most High,
 Who live and rule
 in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,
 and are glorified
 God almighty,
 forever and ever. Amen (50-52).

The Testament (1226) [*Early Documents I, 124-127*]

Francis wrote his *Testament* three years after the Holy See had given final approval to the Rule and after he had surrendered governance of the Order to others. He wanted to remind them of his vision and to impress upon them his vision of their common life and ministry.

Francis insists that this *Testament* is not “a new Rule,” and it should be read literally and without gloss or any further elaboration or interpretation (35-39). He recalls that that he began to do penance when God led him among lepers, even when it was “bitter” for him to see them, and he “showed mercy” to them (1-2). Conversion is a process of transformation. Bitterness becomes sweetness, and delay is part of the process (3). This is sometimes forgotten when people analyze the history of the Church’s response to the crimes and scandals of sexual abuse. Given the tremendous suffering and other costs involved, that reaction is very understandable.

Conversion, especially the conversion of institutions and cultures, requires time and sustained effort. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly impatient and insistent upon instant or short-term gratification. Our electronic devices – mobile phones, tablets, laptops, etc. – can help inform us and improve our communication, but they can also be distractions. We order things online because we want them more cheaply and without the inconvenience of going to a store. Yet we also want them now or next-to-now. Commitment to institutions and organizations is waning in many parts of the West not only because people are disappointed but also because they do not want to be bothered by the messiness that often comes with working with others.

Coming to embrace the leper who is not only in front of us but also within us is something that few of us will do readily. We would rather avoid it. The Church, particularly our leaders, tried to avoid the leprosy of sexual abuse for many years until a combination of media scrutiny, litigation and public outrage forced us to do so.

In this process, priests and religious have also sometimes become lepers – objects of fear, derision and suspicion. Yet St. Francis had a reverence for priests that was unswerving because of their role in the Eucharist and in proclaiming the word of God. He did not want “to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them” (9). He urged a similar reverence for theologians and ministers of the word because of their role in sharing “spirit and life” (13). At the same time, he continued to express concern about ensuring that the things necessary for the celebration of the Eucharist and the word of God be kept in proper places (10-12).

Was this a form of medieval misdirection or denial? No. Francis was as aware as anyone of the sins and shortcomings of priests, other ministers and religious, including himself and his own brothers. Yet in Francis’ eyes their sacred roles elevated them – not because of who they were but rather *because of who God is* and what God has chosen to do through such imperfect instruments.

As Francis prepares to close his *Testament*, he insists that he received directly from the Lord how he should live “according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (14). This pattern is in a simple and humble life and includes:

- Having few clothes;
- Divestment of personal possessions prior to entering the Order;
- Praying the Office;
- Being “simple and subject to all” (19);
- Honest, manual work – paid or unpaid – with recourse to “the table of the Lord” (begging door-to-door);
- Owning no real property (houses or land); and
- Obedience to the Minister General and guardian (“captive in his hands”).

These remain the pattern for religious life today, including in my own Capuchin Order. They help to foster the virtues of humility and self-sacrifice and to foster the itinerancy and freedom that are necessary to give ourselves to the Lord and his mission. They involve a surrendering of control, including the control of others that can lead to abuses of power.

The Admonitions (undated), [Early Documents I, 128-137]

Francis’ *Admonitions*, like his *Testament*, contain a variety of themes that summarize rather than synthesize the elements of his life of penance that so captured the hearts and imaginations of the thousands of men and women who followed him in following Christ. Many of these are applicable to the crisis facing the Church today and our need for reform.

Disobedience, the sin of Adam, is rebellion against God and his will and will/should be punished (II:1-5). We all need to be accountable to others in order to keep our own wills in check, and accountability is a form of obedience. This is true regarding one's religious superiors, e.g. a provincial minister or bishop, but it is equally true regarding many of the newer systems and bodies that have emerged in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. While review boards, for example, are generally considered advisory, to be most effective they need to be vested with a strong degree of authority and their recommendations granted a high degree of deference, particularly because of their expertise.

Obedience is a form of evangelical renunciation. One should be obedient to a prelate in all things, Francis maintains, unless he cannot do so in conscience. In that case, for the sake of the unity of the fraternity, he should be willing to accept persecution or punishment. One must avoid using conscience as a pretext for self-will (III:1-10). This admonition applies where there is a finding that an allegation against a cleric or religious is deemed credible and/or substantiated and the accused maintains his innocence and/or refuses to accept the decision and its consequences. While it is important to safeguard the rights of individuals in the Church, such resistance can sometimes lead to grave divisions in a diocese or religious community and undermine its pastoral activities.

The model of leadership that Francis chooses is Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (IV: 1-3, see John 13:1-20). Whatever power that I have as a priest or religious is invested, delegated or derivative. In other words, it is not really mine and I am called to exercise it in a spirit of stewardship and service. Sexual abuse is, among other things, fundamentally an abuse of power.

Because nothing we have, even our gifts and talents, belongs to us, we can boast in nothing except our weakness and carrying the cross of Christ each day (V:1-8). When God does something good through a true servant, he should not exalt himself but rather grow in humility (XII:1-3). The Good Shepherd bore the cross to save his sheep (the saints), and they followed his example. It is shameful, Francis observes, that we merely glory in recounting what the saints have done rather than following their example and, ultimately, the example of Jesus (VI:1-8).

Following the letter of the law, Francis insists, is not enough. It must be integrated with and elevated by the Spirit, which gives life to the letter (VII:1-4). Following laws, regulations, charters, norms and codes of conduct and observing the bottom line is good, but we are called to something greater and deeper. Changing our behavior is important in our efforts to protect and be just to the vulnerable, but it is only a beginning. We need to change our attitudes and how we view ourselves and our roles. Many commentators, including and especially Pope Francis, have found clericalism at the heart of the sexual abuse crisis. Until we are ready to address this and

other cultural issues in the Church, it will be hard to make the changes that are necessary to avoid further prolonging the crisis or, God forbid, allowing it to reemerge.

Francis insists that envy of the good that a brother does or says through the grace of God is to commit the sin of blasphemy against the Spirit of God that is the source of those good things (VIII:1-3). Envy is a particular problem for those with narcissistic tendencies. They insist that they must be the center of attention and power and believe that any affirmation that others receive is designed to diminish them.

We are called to look past or through injuries done to us by others and instead to pay attention to our own sins. This is especially strong when directed to those who are sick, vulnerable and can't reciprocate (IX: 1-4, XXIV, XXV). We should not grow disturbed or angry at another because of their sins but instead treat them with charity (XI:1-4).

One of my regrets as a provincial leader was that I sometimes allowed my own anger, shame or secondary trauma to overwhelm me when confronting and disciplining brothers who had committed sexual misconduct. While they needed to be held accountable for what they did, I needed to be more sensitive to their suffering and loss.

We can master the enemy, Francis maintains, by minding and taking responsibility for what we do with our own bodies (X:1-4). There seems to be a fairly strong correlation between sexual misconduct by clergy and a lack of self-care, including overwork, alcohol and drug abuse, and a sense of entitlement.

True peacemakers preserve peace of mind and body out of love for Christ even in times of suffering (XV:1-2). It is difficult to stay grounded and focused in times of crisis. There are so many ways that one can be distracted or discouraged. Keeping our eyes and hearts fixed on Jesus and the gospel helps to root us in the Paschal Mystery, where we can recall that even the most excruciating and seemingly final suffering and death are not the end of the story.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, a friar or minister is self-abnegating, generous, and does not allow his ego to be inflated by compliments or exaltation by others. He is willing to step down from positions of authority in a true spirit of service. He is as humble toward those over whom he has authority as toward those who have authority over him. He is willing to confess, express contrition and do penance for his own offenses (XVII:1-2, XIX:1-4, XXIII:1-3).

In the context of the abuse crisis, he is above all *accountable* to himself, to others and to God. He is not only willing to step down from any pedestal that others may have created for him, he is also unwilling to be placed on one while allowing it to decay and collapse from lack of use. He supports others in their weakness, as he would want

to be supported. He returns everything good to God without reservation or holding things back (XVIII:1-2). He chooses his words carefully and will more often reveal God's working in him by his behavior rather than by his words, especially when the latter bring a reward (XXI:1-3).

St. Francis calls blessed those religious who endure accusation, discipline and reprimand with respect, humble submission, and a willingness to make amends. Even when accused falsely or erroneously, they are not too quick to excuse themselves (XXII:1-3). Many priests and religious with good reason feel as if they have the proverbial targets on their backs. Placed on pedestals only a few generations ago, they are now distrusted and, in some places, even mocked.

It seems unfair, but it also appears to be a necessary part of a movement toward greater accountability, particularly to the laity but also to our bishops and religious superiors as well as their brother priests and religious. Over the past year, Pope Francis has also introduced measures to create a higher degree of accountability for bishops who have failed in their responsibilities (see Andrea Torielli, "New Norms in the Church Against Those Who Abuse or Cover Up," *Vatican News*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-05/pope-francis-motu-proprio-sex-abuse-clergy-religious-church.html>).

Having emphasized greater discipline and accountability, St. Francis still insists on honoring the clergy even when they sin, because of the role that they have in the Eucharist (XXVI:1-4). It is a reminder that our worthiness is ultimately rooted in the God in whose image we are created and to whom we will all ultimately render an account of our lives. A good friar, St. Francis, continues, is willing to store the good in his heart rather than reveal it to others for the sake of a mere reward (XXVIII:1-3). While the Church has in many respects made tremendous progress in the protection of minors and responding to sexual abuse, we must also acknowledge that this is also part of a process of conversion. It requires consistent attention and humility.

St. Francis closes his *Admonitions* with what could be a pithy examination of conscience (XXVII:1-6). It is also a reminder that the most effective and lasting way to avoid vice and sin is to cultivate virtue.

Where there is charity and wisdom,
there is neither fear nor ignorance.
Where there is patience and humility,
there is neither anger nor disturbance.
Where there is poverty with joy,
there is neither greed nor avarice.
Where there is rest and meditation,
there is neither anxiety nor restlessness.
Where there is fear of the Lord to guard an entrance,

there the enemy cannot have a place to enter.
Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment,
there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.

Sexual misconduct, like other forms of sin, was part of the human story and the life of the Church long before it burst onto headlines decades ago. Like other forms of sin, it can only be overcome with the grace of God and the human will and effort to cooperate with that grace. The writings of St. Francis do not provide us with a set of policies, procedures and practices. Instead, they provide us with a foundation for personal and corporate conversion.

We call poverty, chastity and obedience evangelical counsels. That is, they are rooted in the gospel of Jesus, which was and remains the fundamental Rule for all members of the Franciscan Family and indeed all Christians. We follow a poor, humble and chaste Christ, and some of us publicly profess vows to do it in a particular way, following the example of Francis and embracing the charisms and virtues of humility, fraternity and minority. But we do so eight centuries later, in a world he could scarcely have conceived when he knelt in the ruins of San Damiano and heard the Lord call him to rebuild his Church.

At some level, Francis seemed to understand this. As he neared death, he told his brothers, "I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you yours" (St. Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of St. Francis*, XIV, in Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents Vol. II: The Founder*, New City Press (1999), at 642).

We pray for the humility and the wisdom to learn, for the grace to change, and for the courage to act.

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