

Saint Francis

and the Problem of Possessions

Other volumes for this series:

Saint Francis and the Way of Lent

Saint Francis and How We Relate to Fellow Creatures

Saint Francis and the Big, Wide, Lay-led Church

Saint Francis

and the Problem of Possessions

Primary Sources from
Francis of Assisi: Early Documents
for Devotional Use

Jon M. Sweeney
series editor

Francis of Assisi Spiritual Practices series

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General Introduction

The *Francis of Assisi Spiritual Practices* series utilizes the texts and translations of New City's groundbreaking and now complete *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volumes 1-4* (1999-2020) to offer readers of all backgrounds inspiring, encouraging, and challenging entry-points to the essential issues of a Christian life in the twenty-first century. Each book in the series should appeal particularly to readers who desire to walk the Way of Saint Francis with relevance to his life, writings, and legacy. We created the series with the conviction that the Way of Francis is as relevant today as it was eight hundred years ago.

The first four volumes have been planned. The one you are holding, *Saint Francis and the Problem of Possessions*, is the second. These are the other three:

- *Saint Francis and the Way of Lent* (already available)
- *Saint Francis and How We Relate to Fellow Creatures*
and
- *Saint Francis and the Big, Wide, Lay-led Church*

Each book stands on its own, presenting one important aspect of the spirituality of the world's most popular saint.

A four-week format is designed for both individual and group use. Each week, or chapter, focuses the reader on a theme that is central to that volume's overall theme. Short introductions are written by the editor and designed to preface selections from the primary texts from the *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* volumes, and these are each followed by questions for discussion or reflection. There are six readings for each week, followed by final prayers of intention and spiritual practice suggestions for that week on that theme.

We would love to hear from you, as to how you are using these books, and how to improve them for future editions. Also, our hope is to continue this series with additional titles, as demand and time and God permits. Your feedback will be an important step along the way for us to do that well. Please write to us at newseries@newcitypress.com. *Pace e bene.*

Jon M. Sweeney
Series Editor

Introduction to this Volume

One of the first things people seem to know about Saint Francis is that he lived in solidarity with the poor. He grew up in a wealthy home—his father was a merchant of fancy silks—but he gave this up in young adulthood to identify with Jesus, who Francis believed with all his heart was literally and intentionally poor. Francis was then a follower of the God who became a human being in the person of a poor man and lived a poor life, among poor people, despite the fact that many of those people expected him, as their savior, to be powerful, royal, and even wealthy.

The list of saints who have been inspired by Francis’s particular poverty is also noteworthy. It is a long and important list that includes, even in the twentieth century, Charles de Foucauld, Dorothy Day, and Mother Teresa.

Living among the “poorest of the poor” in the slums of Calcutta, Mother Teresa took a vow of poverty that resembled closely Francis’s life and teachings, and deliberately so. Referring to his example, she often insisted that she and her fellow Missionaries of Charity eat as the poor of Calcutta eat and wear clothing that is like what they wear. She would quote Francis in this regard, referring to his teaching to own few clothes and to patch them frequently.¹

1. See *Teresa of Calcutta: Active Love, Dark Night*, by Jon M. Sweeney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022), see chapter 3.

But these teachings did not originate with Francis. He always believed that what he was doing was simply an imitation of what Jesus did and taught his followers to do. So, what did Jesus say about poverty that gave Francis such passion for living this way?

To his disciples, most of whom were already poor, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (Lk 6:20-21)

And, before they could even join Jesus as his disciples, he told them:

If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. (Mt 19:21)

That was the starting point for following the will of God. Which is why the title of this study in the spirituality of Francis of Assisi makes sense only if we agree that possessions, in and of themselves, are often a hindrance to following Christ and living a Christian life.

Still, the matter is not so simple, and the chapter titles of this book—as they are, divided into “Weeks” in the manner of a devotional that one might use over the span of a month or so—are intended to reflect this

complexity. There is the matter of stuff. Then there is the issue of money, meaning coins and bills in Francis's day, as well as credit and assets in our own time. These very practical approaches are then concluded with the more general principles found in Weeks Three and Four as we look at "Reimagining a Vow of Poverty" in our lives today, and the meaning of "Living Poor for Others"—because, after all, our spirituality is not for ourselves, but for others.

In his message to would-be Franciscans living otherwise secular lives, Pope Leo XIII in 1888 said, "The Third Order was born fitted to a multitude and thus it proclaims the monuments and reality of the just, integral, and religious morals of a superior age, as much as this is possible."² That is what we set out to investigate in this book of texts from the life and teachings of Saint Francis: how much is this possible?

2. Pope Leo XIII, *Misericors Dei Filius*, "Constitution On the Law of the Franciscan Third Order Secular," May 30, 1888.

Week One

The Problem with Stuff

Many obstacles stand in the way of people who desire to live by Jesus's teaching, not the least of which is that we are separated from the milieu of those who heard Jesus preach in first century Palestine. Those listening to Jesus were Jews, and Jews were a sometimes protected, sometimes persecuted minority in an outlying district of the vast Roman Empire. The people lived largely separate from Roman life, in Jewish villages, attending Jewish schools, in communities ruled by laws interpreted by Jewish magistrates.³

But maybe we make too much of these differences. Two thousand years ago, in Palestine, there were those who had much, and those who had much less. So when Jesus began to talk about being poor, and the blessedness of the poor, his teaching was countercultural in a way that was true then, remains so today, and will remain so until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness.

Jesus taught that in poverty we know God, identify with God in Christ, and do our duty as people of faith. First, what about all our material possessions—our

3. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 20-21.

“stuff”? What should we do with it? Does it somehow stand in the way of knowing and following God in this way? It certainly stands in the way of modeling our lives after the Way of Saint Francis.

Francis famously gave all his stuff away, and instructed anyone who wanted to follow him in his way of life to do similarly. In the most memorable scenes, rarely shown in the movies or told in the books about Francis, the first friars disposed of their stuff as Francis waited nearby to be sure that they’ve done it.

Is that what we are supposed to do, still, today? When Jesus told the young man the first step to discovering the will of God—“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mt 19:21)—he did so with the disciples in earshot. The following verse is one of the saddest in the Gospels: “When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Mt 19:22).

Jesus then turned to the disciples. The account goes like this:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them

and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” (Mt 19:23-26)

So, again, where does this leave us?

A student of early Franciscan history and theology knows that in the century after Francis’s death this issue—the ownership of property, stuff—became a divisive point, pitting friars against each other. This even led to Pope John XXII to oppose Francis’s teaching on poverty and rule, supposedly conclusively, in a papal bull of 1323, that stated it was heretical to say that Christ and the apostles owned nothing, carried no money, and other teachings that Francis had earlier made explicit.⁴

So ordinary pilgrims of the twenty-first century, as well as Franciscans from way back, have difficulty figuring out how to live by these Gospel principles!

4. See David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 274-77.

Reading 1

Let's set the scene: He has stripped himself in front of the bishop of Assisi, his father, and the whole town. He has been set upon by bandits and rolled in the snow; he has rebuilt the church of San Damiano; he has begun to preach penance in Assisi; and he still is all alone with God. Then come others wanting to join him.

The first is Bernard, older than Francis, well-respected in town, with wealth. Bernard spies on Francis as Francis stays overnight in Bernard's house, and witnesses the younger man in genuine prayer, and then decides the next morning to become his first follower.

The Life of Saint Francis
Thomas of Celano

*Chapter 10: His Preaching the Gospel and Announcing
Peace and the Conversion of the First Six Brothers*⁵

He then began to preach penance to all with a fervent spirit and joyful attitude. He inspired his listeners with words that were simple and a heart that was heroic. His word was like a blazing fire, reaching the deepest parts of the heart, and filling the souls of all with wonder. He seemed entirely different from what he had been, and looking up to heaven he refused to look down upon

5. *Early Documents: Vol. 1 (The Saint)*, 202-203.

earth. It is truly amazing that he first began to preach where he had learned to read as a little boy, and where at first he was reverently buried.

In all of his preaching, before he presented the word of God to the assembly, he prayed for peace saying, "May the Lord give you peace." He always proclaimed this to men and women, to those he met and to those who met him. Accordingly, many who hated peace along with salvation, with the Lord's help wholeheartedly embraced peace. They became themselves children of peace, now rivals for eternal salvation.

Among these there was a man from Assisi with a holy and simple character, who was the first to follow devoutly the man of God.

After him, brother Bernard, embracing the delegation of peace, eagerly ran after the holy man of God to gain the kingdom of heaven. He had often received the blessed father as a guest, had observed and tested his life and conduct. Refreshed by the fragrance of his holiness, he conceived fear and gave birth to the spirit of salvation. He used to see him praying all night long, sleeping rarely, praising God and the glorious Virgin, His mother. He was amazed and said, "This man truly is from God." So he hurried to sell all he had and distributed it to the poor, not to his relatives. Grasping the title of a more perfect way, he fulfilled the counsel of the holy gospel: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he had done this, he joined the holy man, Francis, in the same life and habit,

and was always with him, until the brothers increased in number and he, with the obedience of his devoted father, was sent to other regions.

Reflect or Discuss

1. What evidence does Bernard seem to require, before deciding to turn his life upside down by following Francis?
2. What's the first thing Bernard does, before presuming to join Francis? (The implication is that he had heard from Francis that this is what was asked of anyone who desired to follow Christ.)
3. Early in this reading, the narrator relates: "It is truly amazing that he first began to preach where he had learned to read as a little boy." Why is this amazing?
4. Go to a Bible and read this verse in its original context: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). Was Francis right to expect the same of himself, and his followers, 1,200 years later?