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Francis of Assisi

Admonitions

(ca. 1220)

Francis of Assisi (1181 or 1182–1226) was one of the best-loved and most influential saints of the medieval Church. The son of an Italian cloth merchant, Francis was a typical youth. He was taught to read and write Latin as a boy, and as he grew up he became a popular figure in his hometown. Not especially religious in his youth, he was briefly a soldier, and a prisoner of war in 1202. In 1205 a vision turned his thoughts to religion and he renounced all of his material possessions, donned a hair shirt, and set out to preach to the unconverted. Francis's charm and magnetic personality quickly drew a large following. After receiving the pope's blessing, Francis became the leader of a new order of monks, the Franciscans. Unlike other monastic orders, the friars, as they were known, had no abbeys or property of any kind. They traveled the highways, first of Italy and later of all of Europe, preaching the gospel and living from the alms of the people. In his later years, Francis received the stigmata, or the imprint of the wounds of Christ, and suffered from a series of painful illnesses. His fame grew, as did his order. He was canonized only two years after his death, a measure of his popularity and holiness.

The *Admonitions* were probably written around the time of the foundation of the Franciscan order. They are a simple prescription for a Christian life, meant for his fellow Franciscans. In these instructions Francis emphasizes the virtues of humility, obedience, and poverty.

The Blessed Sacrament

Our Lord Jesus told his disciples, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me. If you had known me, you would also have known my Father.*

Sacred Scripture tells us that the Father dwells in *light inaccessible* and that *God is spirit*, and St. John adds, *No one at any time has seen God.* Because God is a spirit, he can be seen only in spirit; *It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing.* But God the Son is equal to the Father and so he too can be seen only in the same way as the Father and the Holy Spirit. That is why all

those were condemned who saw our Lord Jesus Christ in his humanity but did not see or believe in spirit in his divinity, that he was the true Son of God. In the same way now, all those are damned who see the sacrament of the Body of Christ which is consecrated on the altar in the form of bread and wine by the words of our Lord in the hands of the priest, and do not see or believe in spirit and in God that this is really the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Most High himself who has told us, *This is my Body and Blood of the new covenant, and, He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life everlasting.*

And so it is really the Spirit of God who dwells in his faithful who receive the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord. Anyone who does not have this Spirit and presumes to receive him *eats and drinks judgement to himself*. And so we may ask in the words of Scripture, *Men of rank, how long will you be dull of heart? Why do you refuse to recognize the truth and believe in the Son of God?* Every day he humbles himself just as he did when he came from his *heavenly throne* into the Virgin's womb; every day he comes to us and lets us see him in abjection, when he descends from the bosom of the Father into the hands of the priest at the altar. He shows himself to us in this sacred bread just as he once appeared to his apostles in real flesh. With their own eyes they saw only his flesh, but they believed that he was God, because they contemplated him with the eyes of the spirit. We, too, with our own eyes, see only bread and wine, but we must see further and firmly believe that this is his most holy Body and Blood, living and true. In this way our Lord remains continually with his followers, as he promised, *Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world*.

Perfect and Imperfect Obedience

Our Lord tells us in the Gospel, *Everyone of you who does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple*, and, *He who would save his life will lose it*. A man takes leave of all that he possesses and loses both his body and his life when he gives himself up completely to obedience in the hands of his superior. Any good that he says or does which he knows is not against the will of his superior is true obedience. A subject may realize that there are many courses of action that would be better and more profitable to his soul than what his superior commands. In that case he should make an offering of his own will to God, and do his best to carry out what the superior has enjoined. This is true and loving obedience which is pleasing to God and one's neighbour.

If a superior commands his subject anything that is against his conscience, the subject should not spurn his authority, even though he cannot obey him. If anyone persecutes him because of

this, he should love him all the more, for God's sake. A religious who prefers to suffer persecution rather than be separated from his confrères certainly perseveres in true obedience, because he lays down his life for his brethren. There are many religious who under the pretext of doing something more perfect than what their superior commands look behind and go back to their own will that they have given up. People like that are murderers, and by their bad example they cause the loss of many souls.

No One Should Claim the Office of Superior as His Own

I did *not come to be served but to serve*, our Lord tells us. Those who are put in charge of others should be no prouder of their office than if they had been appointed to wash the feet of their confrères. They should be no more upset at the loss of their authority than they would be if they were deprived of the task of washing feet. The more they are upset, the greater the risk they incur to their souls.

No One Should Give Way to Pride but Boast Only in the Cross of the Lord

Try to realize the dignity God has conferred on you. He created and formed your body in the image of his beloved Son, and your soul in his own likeness. And yet every creature under heaven serves and acknowledges and obeys its Creator in its own way better than you do. Even the devils were not solely responsible for crucifying him; it was you who crucified him with them and you continue to crucify him by taking pleasure in your vices and sins.

What have you to be proud of? If you were so clever and learned that you knew everything and could speak every language, so that the things of heaven were an open book to you, still you could not boast of that. Any of the devils knew more about the things of heaven, and knows more about the things of earth, than any human being, even one who might have received from God a special revelation of the highest wisdom. If

you were the most handsome and the richest man in the world, and could work wonders and drive out devils, all that would be something extrinsic to you; it would not belong to you and you could not boast of it. But there is one thing of which we can all boast; we can boast of our humiliations and in taking up daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Imitation of Christ

Look at the Good Shepherd, my brothers. To save his sheep he endured the agony of the cross. They followed him in trials and persecutions, in ignominy, hunger, and thirst, in humiliations and temptations, and so on. And for this God rewarded them with eternal life. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves; the saints endured all that, but we who are servants of God try to win honour and glory by recounting and making known what they have done.

Good Works Must Follow Knowledge

St. Paul tells us, *The letter kills, but the spirit gives life.* A man has been killed by the letter when he wants to know quotation only so that people will think he is very learned and he can make money to give to his relatives and friends. A religious has been killed by the letter when he has no desire to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but wants to know what it says only so that he can explain it to others. On the other hand, those have received life from the spirit of Sacred Scripture who, by their words and example, refer to the most high God, to whom belongs all good, all that they know or wish to know, and do not allow their knowledge to become a source of self-complacency.

Beware the Sin of Envy

St. Paul tells us, *No one can say Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit* and, *There is none who does good, no, not even one.* And so when a man envies his brother the good God says or does through him, it is like committing a sin of blasphemy, because

he is really envying God, who is the only source of every good.

Charity

Our Lord says in the Gospel, *Love your enemies.* A man really loves his enemy when he is not offended by the injury done to himself, but for love of God feels burning sorrow for the sin his enemy has brought on his own soul, and proves his love in a practical way.

No One Should Be Scandalized at Another's Fall

Nothing should upset a religious except sin. And even then, no matter what kind of sin has been committed, if he is upset or angry for any other reason except charity, he is only drawing blame upon himself. A religious lives a good life and avoids sin when he is never angry or disturbed at anything. Blessed the man who keeps nothing for himself, but renders *to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*

How to Know the Spirit of God

We can be sure that a man is a true religious and has the spirit of God if his lower nature does not give way to pride when God accomplishes some good through him, and if he seems all the more worthless and inferior to others in his own eyes. Our lower nature is opposed to every good.

Patience

We can never tell how patient or humble a person is when everything is going well with him. But when those who should co-operate with him do the exact opposite, then we can tell. A man has as much patience and humility as he has then, and no more.

Poverty of Spirit

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom

of heaven. There are many people who spend all their time at their prayers and other religious exercises and mortify themselves by long fasts and so on. But if anyone says as much as a word that implies a reflection on their self-esteem or takes something from them, they are immediately up in arms and annoyed. These people are not really poor in spirit. A person is really poor in spirit when he hates himself and loves those who strike him in the face.

The Humble Religious

Blessed the religious who takes no more pride in the good that God says and does through him, than in that which he says and does through someone else. It is wrong for anyone to be anxious to receive more from his neighbour than he himself is willing to give to God.

Compassion for One's Neighbour

Blessed the man who is patient with his neighbour's shortcomings as he would like him to be if he were in a similar position himself.

The Virtuous and Humble Religious

Blessed the religious who has no more regard for himself when people praise him and make much of him than when they despise and revile him and say that he is ignorant. What a man is before God, that he is and no more. Woe to that religious who, after he has been put in a position of authority by others, is not anxious to leave it of his own free will. On the other hand, blessed is that religious who is elected to office against his will but always wants to be subject to others.

The Happy and the Silly Religious

Blessed that religious who finds all his joy and happiness in the words and deeds of our Lord and uses them to make people love God gladly. Woe to the religious who amuses himself with silly gossip, trying to make people laugh.

The Talkative Religious

Blessed that religious who never says anything just for what he can get out of it. He should never be *hasty in his words* or open his heart to everyone, but he should think hard before he speaks. Woe to that religious who does not keep the favours God has given him to himself; people should see them only through his good works, but he wants to tell everybody about them, hoping he will get something out of it. In this way he has received his reward, and it does not do his listeners any good.

True Correction

Blessed that religious who takes blame, accusation, or punishment from another as patiently as if it were coming from himself. Blessed the religious who obeys quietly when he is corrected, confesses his fault humbly and makes atonement cheerfully. Blessed the religious who is in no hurry to make excuses, but accepts the embarrassment and blame for some fault he did not commit.

True Love

Blessed that friar who loves his brother as much when he is sick and can be of no use to him as when he is well and can be of use to him. Blessed that friar who loves and respects his brother as much when he is absent as when he is present and who would not say anything behind his back that he could not say charitably to his face.

Religious Should be Respectful Towards the Clergy

Blessed is that servant of God who has confidence in priests who live according to the laws of the holy Roman Church. Woe to those who despise them. Even if they fall into sin, no one should pass judgement on them, for God has reserved judgement on them to himself. They are in a privileged position because they have

charge of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which they receive and which they alone administer to others, and so anyone who sins against them commits a greater crime than if he sinned against anyone else in the whole world.

Virtue and Vice

Where there is Love and Wisdom,
there is neither Fear nor Ignorance.
Where there is Patience and Humility,

there is neither Anger nor Annoyance.
Where there is Poverty and Joy,
there is neither Cupidity nor Avarice.
Where there is Peace and Contemplation,
there is neither Care nor Restlessness.
Where there is the Fear of God to guard the
dwelling,
there no enemy can enter.
Where there is Mercy and Prudence,
there is neither Excess nor Harshness.

1. Whom do you think St. Francis was addressing in his *Admonitions*? How might his message differ if it were meant for a different audience?
2. What qualities does Francis seem to admire most?
3. What seems to be Francis's opinion about material things?
4. Several of the sections of *Admonitions* deal with relationships between superiors and subordinates. What should these relationships be like?
5. Does Francis give clergymen and monks a special place in society? Are his expectations different for them?

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Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologica

(1266–1273)

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was born in Italy near the town of Aquino from which he took his name. His family were minor nobility, but Thomas was destined for a career in the Church from an early age. He was sent to a monastery to be trained as a monk, but his outstanding intellectual abilities led to further education. Aquinas studied first at the University of Naples and then, after he joined the newly formed Dominican order, at the University of Paris, where he studied philosophy and theology. His special interest was in ancient Greek thought, especially that of Aristotle, which he did much to popularize at the university. His reputation, however, was derived from his the-