

Human Nature Is As Fragile As Bread: Some Observations on Human Behavior from Francis of Assisi¹

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“Ein Mensch is so gerbrechlich wie Brot: Einige Notizen zum
Menschenbild von Franziskus von Assisi”

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In front of a school in Canada stands the statue of a young lad carrying his crippled little brother on his back. Every day this young man carried the little crippled boy on his back from his home to the school, and from the school back to his house. One day he was asked: “Isn’t he too heavy for you to carry him on your back to and from school?” The young lad answered: “He isn’t heavy; he’s my brother.”

Francis of Assisi made use of the word ‘fragility’ in several places. He used this word and others when he spoke about how the word of the heavenly Father caused the Son to become a human being.² Francis noted that Jesus actually assumed real human flesh. The only close resemblance of Christ’s humanity to our’s lies in our fragility. This word tells plainly just what we are. Fragility expresses something about our human nature.

Fragility also predicates something about our mutual human relations. As Francis put it: “Blessed is the person who bears with his neighbor in his weakness to the degree that he would wish to be sustained by him if he were in a similar situation.”³ In this *Admonition*, Francis paraphrased the golden rule: “What you do not wish others to do to you, do not inflict that on others.” He formulated this in a positive manner. He made a bold and clear statement in this sentence, not prescribing how to carry someone in any particular way or to take total responsibility for him, but in a way we would want if we were in the same condition. A person does not assume more responsibility for his neighbor than is needed for that moment. Of course, we return this responsibility to him at the right time. Eventually, says Francis, everyone gets the enemy, namely the body, under control.⁴ Here and elsewhere Francis showed great knowledge of human nature. He showed himself as the spiritual leader of the brothers whom the Lord had given him.

I would like to comment on this text by making some observations that Francis made about human behavior. In doing so, I would like to follow

three paths: 1) The path of needfulness, 2) the path of the senses, and 3) the path of the human body. Finally I shall try to bring these three paths together and return once more to 'fragility'.

1. Needfulness

We mortals are not self-sufficient. In order to stay alive, we must eat and drink. To protect ourselves against changes in the weather, we need clothing. In cold or warm areas we need coverage in order to survive. In short, our surroundings dictate our well-being. In order to remain alive, we learn these lessons from other created beings around us. Our needfulness is shown to us through these necessities.

We human beings in this world are in our own element, as fish are in water. From its beginning, a human being does not stand in opposition to the world. In the space designed for us (which is generously overflowing), we can enjoy it to the full. We enjoy everything else as the basic reason for our existence. We can satisfy all our desires in a land that is extensive and good, that is flowing with milk and honey.⁵

In the very beginning we are involved in innocent enjoyment, which grows and develops all around us. That is not the result of a choice of action. We all experience this phenomenon when we reach the age of reason.

Humans are obliged to go to work. We must be involved with the world. We exert our energies to produce something, and in this way contribute to our environment. Out of wood you can make a chair or table; out of clay you can make bricks, and out of bricks, a house; out of grain you can bake bread. The world all around us constantly changes. In the exchange and barter with these things, we become human.

In this endeavor to satisfy our needs, a person feels in himself/herself a desire that is insatiable and inadequate; it will not go away. All the while, our endeavors produce constantly more things, and more purposeful things. There exists something in us something that makes us uncomfortable and unsettled, and which prompts us always to continue to go further. No matter how greedy we become in the course of our dealing with things material, there is still a dissatisfaction with all of these things. Adam found no helpmate suitable for him, who had been promised.⁶

These unqualified desires, this tender inner longing, takes on more color and content whenever another person like ourself enters our life, for example a man in need, a poor man, a beggar, a stranger. This latter person has no place in our world and cannot find a place for himself. He is quite different from people whose needs are just for material things. He cannot be statistically counted, he cannot be touched, he cannot be identified, he cannot be worn out. He has eyes that can look at us and a voice that can

speak to us. He begs from us in his fragility. The world of people is changing; we must respond to it; we become burdened with responsibility toward these people. When they are hungry, we can share our bread with the one who is holding out his hand toward us. We can divide our bread and empathize with him to quiet the hunger of the needy.

In their needfulness, people do not depend only on material things, nor are material things their primary objective. Rather, we depend on another person. Our interdependence stimulates this unique relationship and keeps it alive. When a man in need makes contact with someone who relates to this fulfillment of his desire, he then keeps this desire alive. In the interchange of things among people, in the mutual service offered each other, we have an indication of the concern and the love we have for each other.

What I have said above is a description of a man in great need, and it is an accurate description. Other descriptions are also possible, and indeed such exist. The writings of Francis can shed light upon and verify the words I have written.

In his *Rule*, Francis points this out to his brothers in the following words: "Remember that we should have nothing else in the whole world except, as the Apostle says, 'Having something to eat and something to wear, be content with these.'"⁷ This deals with needfulness and the concern of the brothers. The brothers work as day laborers;⁸ they do not concern themselves about tomorrow.⁹ In that way they are concerned about their support and the support of their brothers. Whatever is necessary to sustain life, this they receive from nature. When they do not receive the reward for their work, they may go and seek alms.¹⁰

The issue of shelter will not be treated here. That will very likely be treated adequately in the counterpart of the *Later Rule*, which we have cited: "The brothers shall not acquire anything as their own, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all."¹¹ Houses and dwelling places are considered apart from nourishment and clothing. The brothers who sell everything that they need and distribute the profit to the poor¹² now no longer have a place in this world. According to the social values of the Middle Ages, there was no longer a place for the brothers in this world. They themselves made this clear, since they no longer owned houses or property. In this way they lived without a home, as pilgrims and strangers.¹³ As such, they accepted hospitality from others. Their shelter was exactly the same as that of the people who extended food and clothing to them.

The Friars Minor did not hoard the necessities of life; they did not make excessive use of them. They merely received from others what they needed to sustain their life. In doing so, they exemplified clearly that they did not depend on material things but upon their fellowman.

They wanted expressly to be regarded as needy and lesser brothers. As is stated in the *Rule*: "They must rejoice when they live among people [who are considered to be] of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside."¹⁴ These are the people who resemble the Samaritan, as they prompted him into action. They find themselves on the wayside, a reminder of the Man from Nazareth who called Himself The Way, and who also was called The Way.¹⁵ Jesus was the one on whom the brothers patterned themselves: "He was a poor man and a transient and lived on alms."¹⁶ From this we learn something about the nature of a man in need; Francis lived the same way. Whoever does not live as a poor man, whoever does not consider and receive his life's sustenance as a gift, lives as a thief and a robber. He acts as an administrator of the countinghouse.¹⁷ He eats and drinks judgment unto himself.¹⁸

At the beginning of his *Testament*, Francis himself shares with us how he came to this knowledge (or better, this life): "The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them."¹⁹

Before his conversion, Francis appears in his biography as a jolly brother, a man with an expensive taste, a carnival prince.²⁰ In Assisi he was in his element, as a fish in water. On the other hand, he was friendly and generous, and no poor person ever left him without some alms. Then he changed into a moody, uncomfortable and restless person. He was in search of the most beautiful bride. Then suddenly came the collapse: The leper changed his whole life around.

In Francis's conversion, his life of penance confronted his "living in sin." A spiritual leader may not tolerate sin. However, there is something else to consider. Francis was a man who could give himself completely to pleasure, who could enjoy free-flowing gifts without any thought of the future. Can one say that such a person is living in sin? Such a life can become sinful only when another person enters into his life and world – a man in need, a beggar, a stranger, a leper. Only in that meeting can fault arise. Only in that meeting can one's personal desire be turned into responsibility. Only then will their eyes meet, and one must say to the other: "I have eaten too much." Then it will be clear that his earlier life was sinful. "I have brought this upon myself. I wanted to bring the whole world to myself and devour it. I constantly stood in the center of it all. In this way I brought harm to you and myself." The point I am making here concerns an ideological criticism, and not some casual, quick-witted theory. It refers to a concrete situation. The other person – the one who is rejected – is the spoiler in the game people play with their democratic rights and human rights. The leper was the spoiler in the game that Francis played.

The surprising unrest, the uncertainty, the desire – all blend into one and the same picture. The suffering neighbor stands in the center. He receives the bread that I deny my own mouth. I am directed to concern myself with another. I direct my life toward others. I am aroused, and I am awakened from my dream, as were Adam, and Samuel in the temple.²¹ The other person has awakened my soul within me. My life will never be the same. I am free. The other person announces to me a happy message. Francis dismounted from his horse, and he received a kiss of peace from the leper.

Thus spoke the first biographers about the meeting between Francis and the leper. Who is receiving whom in this meeting? Who invites whom? Here something new comes into existence: community. Francis then recognized what had always been missing: another person, who also had no place in this world. Francis left the world behind him.²² He had already become a stranger to the world. Now he strayed away even further from home, through this stranger who has been entrusted to him. The path he took did not return him back home, as in the *Odyssey*. With Abraham, he continued on his journey.²³ About this journey, one can speak only in paradoxes, as did Francis. In your need, you become completely confident. In this way there is room for your desire. If the other person helps along in this need, your desire is immediately nurtured and helped. You will not immediately be at home in a hut, built of wood and clay, or in a building of stone, but you will have each other, like nomads in the desert.²⁴

In the *Later Rule*, Francis makes these pertinent remarks: "Wherever the brothers may be together or meet [other] brothers, let them give witness that they are members of one family. And let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for, if a mother has such care and love for her son born according to the flesh, should not someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit even more diligently?"²⁵ In like manner the brothers should accompany one another. That is the way it was originally – men accompanied one another with outstretched hands and begged. In this way they were at home, considering themselves as the rejected people on the wayside.

Don't you consider it touching and surprising how Francis, an Italian, spoke about his motherhood toward his brethren? In his *Letter to Brother Leo*, Francis calls himself mother.²⁶ He did this same thing again in the parable of the poor lady in the desert, which he recounted to Pope Innocent when he visited the pope in 1210, begging permission and approval of his life according to the Gospel.²⁷ According to the words of Francis, the brothers can be mothers for each other, insofar as their fragility will allow.²⁸ Mary bore the Word of the Father in her womb, and from her womb He took on the actual flesh and frailty of our humanity. We read this in his *Letter to the Faithful*.²⁹ For Francis, this is the responsibility that he accepted, that they bear each other like a mother who carries and gives

birth to the child.³⁰ We are not only brothers and sisters to each other; we can allow ourselves mutually to be born again. We can let ourselves be brought into this world as children of the one Father in heaven.³¹

This also throws a new light on other passages in the writings of Francis. In the fifth *Admonition*, the Lord Jesus is the pattern of what people will be asked to bear: "We can glory in our infirmities and bearing daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."³² In this way a person can strain himself, but in the Gospel Jesus says: "Come to me, all you who are troubled and burdened, for my yoke is sweet and my burden is light."³³ There you can also read about gentleness and humility. Do not the Beatitudes concern themselves about bearing these burdens – about gentleness and humility, about the strength we have in gentleness and weakness? Isn't this perhaps a more accurate interpretation of the fragility of human nature?

In the *Earlier Rule*, virtue stands in opposition to personal possessions,³⁴ and power (or weaknesses – Is there any difference?) which rule the world. Perhaps the Lord Jesus is not only the model for people carrying a cross; He is also the message for our sister – mother earth – who nourishes and leads us and brings a variety of fruits and beautiful flowers and also weeds.³⁵

When we use the word 'support', it is we might be surprised how often Francis makes use of the first syllable 'sub': submissive, subservient, subjugated.³⁶ In the *Salutation of the Virtues* – here we are talking about virtues – Francis says this about the scope of obedience: "[The person who possesses her] is subject and submissive to all persons in the world, and not to man only, but even to all beasts and wild animals."³⁷

This leads me to the question whether it is merely by chance that the word 'subject' (which at the same time serves to indicate a person) stems from the Latin verb *subjicere* ("to put down"); and whether it is by chance that the fourth case, called the 'accusative' case, originated from the Latin word *accusare* ("to blame"). Is this a complement to all we have said above about our self-sufficient existence?

Another observation ... In the fourth *Admonition*, the person who washes the feet is a model for superiors.³⁸ Don't the feet carry the body? And didn't Jesus wash the feet of his friends at the Last Supper?³⁹ In the nineteenth *Admonition* there is even a discussion of the desire to be the person who washes the feet of their subjects⁴⁰ – like Jesus! Like mother earth!

That is the way to bear responsibility. Apparently, responsibility expresses itself, according to Francis's view, primarily in suffering, in difficulty, in patience and humility in the life of lesser persons and lesser brothers.⁴¹ In other words, we see a parallel between the life of the victim and the life of a man who has a profession, who is allowed to lock out the lepers and the scum of society who are barred from the world.

In an interpersonal relationship, such as when one breaks bread for

another, both the thing that is done and the person who does it are changed. Both become a sign of concern, of love, of conscious attention, of one person for another. Yes, they become brothers and sisters! The person for whom something is done and the person who does it both receive a name and a face, revealing a mutual relationship that is an act of creation: "The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal His sons. It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose; it was made so by God. But creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now, the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth."⁴²

In our need for material things we are directed toward things and toward one another. In this way the world changes into a new heaven and a new earth, or into paradise.⁴³ The description of Francis, and of many of the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, bear testimony to this – how the world changed wherever Francis went.⁴⁴ Could it be an accident that "material" seemed to respond to something that resembled "motherliness"?

The first *Admonition* of Francis sheds a special light on the way in which we can survive with our needs and our longings. It deals with the choice: either to gorge ourselves (thus drawing all things to ourselves), or to decide to remain alive. It deals with the nourishment of our desires, about the question of how we can preserve our desire to be healthy. It speaks of consumption along the way, to remind us that we have been invited to a banquet.⁴⁵

2. The Senses

The skin is the most precise boundary between us and the world around us. Physical contact with the outer world takes place through the skin. Countless impressions come in through the skin. There are several areas where these things are concentrated: the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the fingertips. In complete isolation of the senses, people go to pieces or become insane.

The skin (that is, the senses) tells us how very well we are adjusted to the outer world, and how very much we are influenced by our surroundings. We live by them. Through the eyes and ears, things always seem more distant than they really are. Through the sense of touch, the outside world enters through the skin. Affectionate touching is the most effective means of contact with people, especially if it happens between people close by.

The senses offer the opportunity for pleasure. But skin and senses are also so frail that they can all too easily be damaged. To avoid pain, a person can surround himself with armor. In the time of Francis, the rider sat on a horse in armored uniform. In our modern times, the wearing of a crash

helmet and safety belt are a matter of law for the driver. We are not far removed from the rider of the Middle Ages. Technology continues its progress, and now we are still just as fragile as we were in the Middle Ages.

In a certain sense it is very fortunate that we now have many ways to protect ourselves from pain and to repress painful feelings. This holds good for pain caused both by things as well as by other people. However, such protection and umbrage can also turn against us. If we now feel pain no longer, by the same token we cannot feel any joy anymore.

A person can also attempt to repress the pain of a suffering fellowman, but end up repressing him until he becomes a thing. The reason is that we are not prepared to resign ourselves to the inevitable, as fish must in water. That need not happen anymore, because our first encounter with a neighbor in need is no longer undiluted enjoyment.

What we have said above can shed light on our opinion; we can strengthen our case by citing St. Francis. His words will give our opinion more meaning. We quote from his *Testament*: "When I left them [the lepers], that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body."⁴⁶ Here Francis is speaking of physical sense-perception. Bitter and sweet imply eating and drinking. In his biography it is related how Francis turned away his head whenever he came near a leper, and how he held his nose in their presence. He could endure neither their smell nor their sight.⁴⁷ In those days, lepers were required to use a rattle to warn others that they were in their vicinity. Lepers had to be cut off from society and kept physically apart. Contact with lepers was to be avoided at all cost.

For a leper, a tender touch represented exactly the opposite of what it meant to someone else. It was considered possible that this dreaded sickness might be inflicted on his fellow citizens. Lepers were therefore banned and isolated from society. This was apartheid in its most violent form.

After his conversion, Francis did not turn away from the lepers, but he turned to them. He dismounted and touched the hand of the leper. Then he received from the leper the kiss of peace. A complete conversion took place: The one who touched was being embraced.⁴⁸ The transformation that went on in Francis was also expressed in the language of the sense of touch, and of nearness of the body. Francis now no longer protected himself from misery, and in return he felt genuine and complete joy in soul and body.

The clothing that Francis wore from then on, and the way he conducted himself, indicated that the time for shielding himself had passed. Francis showed that he was impressionable even because of the weather. Then he composed the *Canticle of Brother Sun*. He no longer repulsed the suffering and pain inflicted by others, and he endured his own pain and suffering, sometimes in the most violent manner. Brother Ass, as he called his body,

sometimes had to endure very much.⁴⁹ Francis was open and agreeable to all signals that could show him the way. Through his senses he received the invitation to leave the world and steer himself on the road homeward.

The best way for a person to ward off all influences is through nakedness. Just as we read about an old tradition among the monks, so too it is said of Francis that naked he wanted to follow the naked Christ.⁵⁰ Christ suffering in the crib and on the cross impressed him very keenly. He had a sentimental feeling about the submission of the divine Christ who came naked into the world in the stall in Bethlehem: "They wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger."⁵¹ He felt the same about the Suffering Servant on the cross, who was covered with merely one cloth.

At the beginning of his life of penance, Francis gave everything back to his father, and he stood naked before the bishop, who covered him with a mantle.⁵² At the end of his life he begged a brother to lay him naked on the naked earth.⁵³ Shortly before his death, he begged the brothers to read the Gospel of the washing of the feet of the Apostles: "He stood up after the meal, laid aside his outer garment, took a linen cloth, and put it on."⁵⁴ Again this cloth around the naked body! Is it by accident that the children of Israel, in their exodus out of Egypt, carried with them the unleavened bread in cloths? "The people took their dough, before it was thoroughly leavened. They carried their bread dough wrapped in cloths and carried them over their shoulders."⁵⁵

Nakedness reminds us of the childlike innocence in paradise: "I am afraid, because I am naked, and I hid myself," said Adam after he had eaten of the tree of knowledge.⁵⁶

Ancient stories about Francis, like the knight at Satriano, and the wolf of Gubbio, bear witness to this: how resignation disarms power, and disarms the armored, and can establish peace.⁵⁷

The biographies about Francis point to a special relationship between the body and the heart, somewhat similar to the Dutch expression: "The eye is the mirror of the soul." The biographers mention the time when the crucified Savior spoke to Francis. It was their opinion that the image of the crucified Savior was impressed at that moment on the heart of Francis. Later in his life it was through this image that these wounds would be traced upon his body.⁵⁸

As a matter of fact, something similar to this happened in the meeting of Francis with the leper. The leper, because of his sickness, was touched unashamedly on his skin; and so Francis discovered how he himself and the world in which he lived, until that moment with a heart corrupted by sin, became alive and touched in heart.⁵⁹ Thus the stigmatized Francis emerged as the antithesis of the Francis who had embraced the leper. Skin and heart again paved the way. A new path was cut by this complete inner transformation by this inner turnaround. Francis, a student and follower of

the true Way, came near to the fulfillment of his deepest desires. Then, finally, he saw the Lord, whom he followed; and in a manner of speaking, as the Son Himself says, he was like the Father.⁶⁰

Francis responded to the signal from the Father until the end. He set out to tread the same path of those who live in unapproachable light, and to discover for others the treasure buried in the field. How in God's name is that possible for us humans of flesh and blood – to see the invisible? That is the question that Francis provokes. It is clearly recognized in the first *Admonition*.⁶¹

It really doesn't matter that a person displays himself/herself in a certain manner on high. A wonderful trip can end in a psychosis, and grandiose schemes can end up with in failure; they succeed only as a hallucination. A person must vigorously pursue the road as a man of flesh and blood and acknowledge the Lord of heaven and earth. Living among others who suffer, we must hear the voice of the Lord and walk further down the well-trodden road. In the Rule and Testament Francis gives us in detail his own viewpoints and the thoughts of his brothers, which cover all of life. In various other texts, he opens up for us beacon lights and signals, wherewith we can recognize the way. This viewpoint is one side of the coin. In his first *Admonition*, he speaks about the difference between seeing and believing, between an objective, disinterested look at things and submission of the heart. This does not depend on human effort alone, but also, at the same time, on the soul as the seat of desires, and on the Spirit of the Lord, who resides in His faithful believers.⁶² A Friar Minor has no place in organized society, and no roof that he can call his own. He is at home with his brethren and with the poorest of the poor in spirit; they share their home in common. This Spirit lives in his heart and has a tent set up beforehand, so a place has been prepared for him.⁶³ To put it another way, we have had our fill, because nothing else is left; we permit our deepest desires to be awakened and dare to take them seriously – "What does it profit a man if he wins the whole world but suffers the loss of his immortal soul?" What kind of a life is it if a person with many possessions can see only the reproduction of the species? What kind of a life is it if the history of other people's freedom means nothing to me, but only my own history concerns me? If, when others have something new to report, we can only answer: "I'm not interested in that; I don't know anything about that."? What kind of a life is it when a person constantly flies about within the confines of his self-constructed golden cage? Francis tasted sweetness when he met the leper, and little by little, by virtue of that experience, he generated another manner of life and assumed that life for himself.

However, was that really possible – for Francis to call such a life his own – without any protection, and without being surrounded by material things? The Friars Minor found a new home, but what kind of protection

did such a home offer them? *Admonition 27*, a song of praise of virtue, contains a noteworthy verse: "Where there is fear of the Lord to guard the house, there the enemy cannot gain entry."⁶⁴ This verse draws attention to a few verses of the Evangelist Luke: "So long as a strong man fully armed guards his own place, his goods are undisturbed; but when someone stronger than he is, attacks and defeats him, the stronger man takes away all the weapons he relied on and shares out his spoils."⁶⁵ At first glance this is more understandable, and it leads us back to the varieties of protection and shielding that we spoke of above. The limits of these protections may be ever so powerful, but there will always be someone more powerful, be it only defeat by sickness, old age, disability and death. A person dies just as naked as when he is born. After that, there is no more protection.

The verse from *Admonition 27* has a noteworthy contrast in the verses about the love of God. In his own handwriting, shortly after his stigmatization, Francis sketched some of these for Brother Leo, who had lapsed into a deep depression: "You are the protector, you are our guardian and defender, you are strength."⁶⁶ Here we are apparently dealing with the protection, the mantle, the shelter discovered by Francis in this new world so that he might discover the fear of the Lord, which will protect His people.

At times, "Fear not" seems to be a pivotal verse in the Gospel. The angels mentioned it to the shepherds. Jesus mentioned it to His Disciples in the boat during the storm: "Fear not. It is I!"⁶⁷ Yet He Himself sweat blood on Mount Olivet, and He shed tears in the Garden. The fear of the Lord is a huge mystery. The Lord draws Himself back into hiding, to allow people some room and freedom. The Seraph, in the vision of Francis during the stigmatization, draped the body of the crucified Savior with his wings.⁶⁸ The psalms speak about the protection of the most high God in terms of the wings of the angel. And Francis wrote in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*: "Blessed are those whom death will find in your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm."⁶⁹ Francis had discovered something deep within his heart that could not be lost: a yearning and a power that can change mankind and the world.⁷⁰ We can concur with Francis's insights if we assume our own responsibility, by carrying our neighbor with all his frailty, by sheltering the eyes of a dying man with the mantle of love, by accepting the invitation to respond to his deep-seated desires. In vessels of clay lies a hidden buried treasure.

3. The Human Body

Everyone has a body. People are made of flesh and blood. Through a reflection on this physical body I would like to pursue the third path, to

find out what it was that Francis called fragile and frail, and in this way understand something about the human dimension of Francis.

The body – Brother Ass – seems to be in ill repute. He seems to be a man of discipline, a staunch ascetic, someone who renounces the world whenever it deals with his own body. When someone speaks this way about his own body, can this agree with the same Francis who sang the *Canticle of Brother Sun*? Today some increasingly loud voices are saying that a person can follow Francis in many different ways, and that such talk is interesting but, of course, it is not the way we see ourselves in our own flesh. Sometimes these dual characteristics receive so much attention that we may not ignore them.⁷¹ We see Francis walking in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. I should like to make a few comments on this.

Francis did not lead an angelic life. When biographers project an image of Francis patterned on the first monks, and when they subsequently present his life as angelic, they are on the wrong path. Sentences such as this from Thomas a Kempis's *Following of Christ* would have been impossible out of the mouth of Francis: "Oh, if only it were so, that we were not in need of eating."⁷² The life of Francis took place in cheap taverns and caves. He preferred working with his hands as a day laborer, without concern for the morrow. There still remains the question about how the brothers kept busy, what were their interests, and how they should obtain their food, clothing and lodging.⁷³

Perhaps modern living in the rich west is more angelic than was that of Francis. When it grows dark, we press a button; when it becomes cold, we simply adjust our thermostat a little higher. When we are in pain, we take medication. Definitely we can say that in certain circles people scarcely know what the sweat of one's brow means, as the word is used in the effort to earn our daily bread. To a large extent our existence is spiritualized and made easier. Should we still call Francis a dualist?

The Bible has a familiar expression: The spirit is willing; the flesh is weak.⁷⁴ To our human existence there adheres a definite laziness, a definite resistance, an obstinacy. We must make the same observation about the world in which we live. Material things are obstinate; they set themselves in opposition to our will and do not let anything bend them. We are people made of flesh and blood, and we live in time and space. Between a decision and its execution, there always exists a time-lapse. Sometimes the execution never really follows. In some way or another, the traits of laziness and stubbornness play a role, along with our body. Some things we simply have to let rest for a while; then they pass like a rainstorm. Other things a person must take to heart, like Mary who preserved all things and bore them in her heart; otherwise nothing will come of them. After meeting the leper, Francis tarried for a while.⁷⁵

We are imperfect, we are lazy, we are temporal beings. We are not yet

fully ourselves – all we might be, all we would like to be. That is not a trivial side-issue, but a compelling inner restlessness that stimulates and drives us forward, a dynamo of desire and of guilt. That indicates a positive stress that starts us on our way. It is my opinion that Francis is referring to contemplation and discipline whenever he speaks about taking up the reins with which one must guide Brother Ass.⁷⁶

Sometimes the body is a burden; it will not relent. However, without a body there is no enjoyment, no caressing, no kiss of peace. Without a body, bread could not be broken and shared with others. God's creation is completed with the formation of frail and fragile humanity. A buried treasure becomes visible in human nature. Here we begin to touch upon the great mystery of the Word made flesh, the Incarnation.⁷⁷

One of the basic tenets in the life of Francis is that whatever he discovered he always accepted without hesitation. After an inner conversion, there always followed full acceptance. For him, spirit was impossible without form. He carried out his desire to its completion. His desire became earthen, it became material, it took on the form of flesh and blood.

The life of Francis was a continuing departure, ever crossing over boundaries. He possessed a wonderful attention to tangible and concrete things. From a distance, from their clothing, his brothers must be recognizable for what they were. They must be recognized by what they were doing and by their conduct. For Francis, after all, words were hollow and empty. The Lord Himself spoke simply; He kept His words on earth short.⁷⁸

Not only the clothing and conduct of the brothers had real significance. In Francis's life, material things too were mingled in, because they gave an indication of the mutual love of people, and they became expressions of their inner desires. Bread became desire made flesh and sweat and tears. These material things became footpaths and signs, just as Francis himself, in his entire body, became a sign of Him whom he followed.⁷⁹ Francis's commission to "Go and restore my house" was concerned not only with the reconstruction of a tottering little church, but also with the fragile body that houses the soul. It was concerned with the world, which is the monastery of the Friars Minor. It revealed Lady Poverty at the end of the mystery play: *The Sacred Romance of Blessed Francis with Lady Poverty*.⁸⁰

People are sluggish. Their desires reach beyond their existence, as the hind longs for the pool of water. People like to imitate; people follow. In the *Earlier Rule*, Francis rewrote the life of the brothers as the following of the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸¹ Following means separation and motion, which are the dynamics of desire.

Francis himself followed the Lord, whom he dearly loved, as literally as possible. In this way the spirit that the words engendered came to life. In

the seventh and eighth chapters of the *Earlier Rule*, Francis and his brothers showed the consequence of following the teaching and the footsteps of the Lord and provided an answer to the question of how they should obtain food, clothing and shelter. Thus they lived in accordance with the teaching of the Gospel, and thereby they discovered the deep truths that lay hidden therein. There is further discussion about this in the ninth chapter. Francis and his brothers considered themselves as Disciples of Jesus. Instructions were given for sending them abroad in various directions. The confreres learned by imitating those who preceded them.

Doesn't this resemble what Jesus Himself said? "The Father makes clear everything that the Son Himself is performing. And whatever the Father wishes, that the Son does in like manner."⁸² Jesus pointed directly to the Father, whose traces he saw in the humblest of beings as well as in all of creation. In speaking, Jesus resembled the Father;⁸³ and in the life of Francis, the Son is speaking.

Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Francis, relates that Francis died while Psalm 142 was being sung, indeed during the sixth verse, which speaks of delivering his soul from its prison.⁸⁴

Does the dualism of Francis surface again here at the end of his life? The soul as being a prisoner of the body? Or are we speaking here about the last wall (the skin) that separated Francis from the Just One, from the Supreme Truth, the Suffering Servant, who already two years earlier had compelled Francis in his body to resemble Him outwardly? Is not the desire fulfilled about which the first *Admonition* speaks? M. Vasalis, a Dutch poet, also speaks about this desire in her poem:⁸⁵

Sometimes When You Are Silent

Sometimes when you are silent and look out of the window
your beauty touches me with despair
despair too great to be consoled
by speaking or by embracing
as great and as ancient as my being

That I must look at you and cannot be you
separated from you by my very eyes
that there you sit born outside me
pains me like a birthing

When you are silent and look out of the window
sometimes the wind comes and moves your hair
lying over your forehead
like reeds over still water
sometimes a cloud passes slowly over the heavens
I see shadows passing over your eyes

Then it seems to me that you are eternal
and I may live near you but one moment
as though my mortality divides me from you
then you turn your head I see you laugh

Francis's eyes failed him. He gave himself back completely. He went home to his Father, to the Father whose fear guarded his property. He will be found in the will of the Most High. After he had rested naked on the naked earth, he was covered with the mantle of love.⁸⁶ With great respect we speak about this intimate mystery. The twenty-eighth and last *Admonition* of Francis ends with these words: "Blessed is the servant who keeps the secrets of the Lord in his heart,"⁸⁷ and we give our nod to those who observe this with all their fragility.

4. Fragility

The first three *Admonitions* of Francis speak about eating. The first *Admonition* has this very direct message. It deals with eating bread, and the reception of the Body of the Lord. In the second *Admonition* the thought is about the fruit of understanding. In the third, the terminology returns to food. In one verse it speaks about the elimination of one's own will.⁸⁸ The beginning of the *Testament* speaks in terms of testing, and taste, with the words "bitter" and "sweet."⁸⁹ The taste of Francis now changes.

What kind of changes do we meet? On one hand, we deal with less and less: less eating, less greediness, less involvement, less hoarding. For the person who is accustomed to eat much and to want to know everything, everything is really a sacrifice, an annoyance, or pure nonsense. Why should he be satisfied with less?

On the other hand, there is more to life than being satisfied with that which is immediately obtainable, with that which mere appearance proposes as objective, and with that which financial facts and promises seem to offer. That deals with restlessness that always accompanies insatiable greed, with the feeling of never having enough. Francis dared to go a few steps further. He took the sadness and despair⁹⁰ seriously, as did those who recognized these longings but who considered them unobtainable. Francis took these longings seriously and made them the mainspring of his life.

From that alienation, along with its awareness in people's minds, arose something new – an ability to be a brother to every person and every creature. In the Eucharist, which is the celebration of the breaking of Bread and its distribution, that on-going human need will be incorporated; it will be constantly kept in mind, nurtured, and acted on. The Body of the Lord will be assimilated, and we will allow ourselves to be assimilated into that

Body. We will liberate ourselves from our human needs and limitations as we heed the voice of our Shepherd and allow our own will to rest in His.

To revert to renunciation of our own will indicates that we have again received too much – that we have appropriated and assimilated too much for ourselves. That leads to drunkenness and evil actions. Francis posed this question: How can we maintain our life, how can we build on our existence? What is the very purpose of life?

Compassion toward a leper clearly shows us how to dedicate ourselves to others so that we might live our own life in the service of others, and how other people evoke that desire in us that keeps us alive. This desire is different from that of people who have a need to hoard things; rather, it is outgoing, moving us to relinquish our own restricted little world, leading us out of our prison of self-righteousness. All this is expressed in very worldly terms of eating and drinking, testing and tasting, in terms of breaking and sharing.

Also, our senses direct us to things and to one another. They furnish us an access to and an entry for pain and joy. Francis questions us about what we are thinking and in what direction our heart's desires are inclined. He invites us to strive with heart and soul for the birth of a new humanity and a new world. He invites us to strive to follow the Lord Jesus Christ according to the observance of the Gospel.⁹¹ Francis invites us to tear down the protective walls that hem us in; to trust the gentle power of Him who pronounced us blessed; to trust the gentle fear of the Lord, who in His great mercy for us showed that He was gentle of heart.

When we find a niche for ourselves, or when we meet a friend, nothing can threaten us. Then the red-hot iron [used to cauterize Francis's brow – editor] becomes a welcome fire. Then bodily death becomes a brother.⁹² Might and power can break people, but the bent reed will not be broken, and the smouldering wick will not be extinguished.⁹³ Eyesight, if lost, will be compensated for by the mantle of the love of brothers and sisters near us. Or, as the Indian writer Craig Strete expresses it: "When all else fails, apply the whip. Let him have a good cry and go to sleep."⁹⁴ In the song *Susanne*, the American singer Leonard Cohan sings about Jesus: *When His Body Was Broken on the Cross*. The relationship between our human nature and our fragility rests in human hands.

At the beginning of this study we posed the question whether *fragility* with Francis meant *weakness* or *frailty*. Most of the time it is translated as *fragile*, or sometimes *vulnerable*, which conforms more to popular usage. Originally the word *vulnerable* must have had the same meaning as the theme of this essay, but today everyone uses that word with a variety of meanings. In the *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, Francis wrote a few sentences about Jesus becoming man. Then he spoke about the breaking of the bread at the Last Supper: "This [bread] is my body."⁹⁵

Francis used the word *frangere* ("to break"), from which the word *fragilis* ("frail") is formed. For Francis, human beings are as frail as bread. The Son of Man was born in Bethlehem, the "House of Bread." For Francis, we were created in the likeness of the Son.⁶ If we ask about the human likeness of Francis, we also must ask who Jesus was for him – the Way, the Truth, and the Life.⁷ Francis directs our attention to Jesus, and from Him to the Father, and then to our desires, our appetite for things around us, and to people.

People are frail as bread, although they themselves deny this out of charity for others. In their frailty, they carry their neighbor, their weakness, their daily cross. "He's not heavy; he is my brother." The Suffering Servant of the Lord, the washer of feet, is the Word and the Bread that is broken and distributed. In the plan of Francis, this is not about one isolated man – about a self-sufficient man standing alone, but about community. The body of the Lord is also the community of believers, in which every individual can become a member. We can also turn around and come home.

Fragilis – frailty. It is one of the doors to an anthropology by Francis. In this presentation I have explored a few points of this anthropology.

Notes

1. [This article appeared originally in Dutch: "Een mens is zo breekbaar als Brod. De actualiteit van het mensbeeld van Franciscus," in *Franciskus: wegwijzer naar de ware vrijheid* (Haarlem, 1983):127–45, and was translated into German for *Franziskanische Studien* by Eugène Plouvier, O.F.M. – Editor]. Again and again I find it very surprising how very closely the basic pattern of the Rule of Francis agrees with the modern French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In this essay I allowed myself to be influenced by the strongest impressions of Francis and Levinas. This is true especially in the chapter "Sensibilité et proximité," *Autrement qu'ê ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague, 1978), pp. 77–124.
2. 2EpFid 4.
3. *Adm* XVIII 1.
4. *Ibid.*, X 2.
5. Exod. 3:8.
6. Gen. 2:20.
7. *RegNB* IX 1. See 1 Tim. 6:8.
8. *The Writings of St. Francis* (Werl in Wesphalia, 1980), p. 214, no. 8.
9. Matt. 6:34.
10. *RegNB* IX 3.
11. *RegB* VI 1.
12. *Test* 16.
13. *RegB* VI 2. See *Test* 24.
14. *RegNB* IX 2.
15. John 14:6. See *Adm* I 1; Acts 9:1.
16. *RegNB* IX 5.
17. John 12:6. See *RegNB* VIII 7; *Adm* IV.
18. 1 Cor. 11:29. See *Adm* I 13.

19. *Test* 1-2.
20. *1Cel* 1-2; *L3S* II 3, 7.
21. Gen. 3:9; 1 Sam. 3.
22. *Test* 3.
23. Gen. 12.
24. *2Cel* 57-58; *Assisi Compilation* (ed. Bigaroni) 56; *LP* 11.
25. *RegNB* VI 7-8. See 1 Thes. 2:7.
26. *EpLeo* 2.
27. *AnPer* 35; *L3S* 49; *2Cel* 16.
28. *RegNB* IX 11; *Adm* XVIII.
29. *2EpFid* 4.
30. See *1EpFid* 1, 10; *2EpFid* 53.
31. See nos. 11-12, and n. 55.
32. *Adm* V 8.
33. Matt. 11:29-30.
34. *RegNB* VI 4.
35. *CantSol* 9.
36. See Theo Zweerman, O.F.M., "Reddere et sustinere," in *FSien* 63 (1981):89-90.
37. *SalVirt* 16-17.
38. *Adm* IV.
39. John 13:3-16.
40. *Adm* XIX 4.
41. See *Adm* XIII, XV; *AnPer* 38; *L3S* 58; *2Cel* 148; *Assisi Compilation* 49.
42. Rom. 8:19-22.
43. Rev. 21.
44. E.g. *2Cel* 52, 166.
45. *Adm* I.
46. *Test* 3.
47. *2Cel* 9; *L3S* 11.
48. *L3S* 11 is the only place that reports this in detail.
49. *L3S* 14. See *2Cel* 116, 129.
50. See M. Bernards, "Nudus nudum Christi sequi," in *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 14 (1951):148-51, and the countless reprimands there.
51. Luke 2:7; *1Cel* 84-87; *2Cel* 199-200, 203.
52. *1Cel* 15; *L3S* 19.
53. *2Cel* 214.
54. *1Cel* 110; John 13:4.
55. Exod. 12:34. Here the motive of carrying returns. See n. 31 above. Bethlehem means "House of Bread."
56. Gen. 3:10.
57. *2Cel* 77; *Fioretti* 21.
58. *L3S* 14; *2Cel* 10; *LMaior* XIII 10.
59. See *RegNB* XXII 5-8.
60. John 4:26. These elements were both interior and exterior. By tracing both, we might come up with an exact picture of the human dimension of Francis. We shall let this suffice for other possible references, namely, that when Francis spoke about the clothing of the brothers, he said that it may be patched inside and out (*Test* 16); and that if, because of his sickness, he had to wear the pelt of a fox inside his habit, he wanted to wear one also on the outside of his habit (*2Cel* 130). At the end of his Testament, he offered a blessing "both within and without" (no. 41).
61. *Adm* I 3.
62. *Ibid.*, I 12.

63. Ibid., I 12; *RegNB* XVII 14-16, 22, 27; *2EpFid* 48.
64. *Adm* XVII 5. See Theo Zweerman, O.F.M., "Timor Domini," in *FSien*, 60 (1978):202-23.
65. Luke 11:21-22.
66. *LaudDei* 5.
67. Luke 2:10; 8:22-25.
68. *1Cel* 94.
69. *CantSol* 13.
70. This deals with the answer to the question: What is the source in human nature from which this power stems - a power that surfaces through the power of the will? "That which we think we shall never lose" becomes "That which cannot be disturbed." Francis Kafka speaks of this in his *Diaries*.
71. See Paul Sabatier, *Vie de St. François* (Paris, 1931), éd déf, p. 46, no. 2; Kajetan Esser, "Franziskus von Assisi und die Katharer seiner Zeit," in *AFH*, 51 (1958):249; A. Mockler, *Francis of Assisi: The Wandering years* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 35-50; J. Green, *Frère François* (Paris, 1983), pp. 129, 300.
72. Bk. 1, chap. 25.
73. See D. Flood, *Frère François et le mouvement franciscain* (Paris, 1983), chap. 1.
74. Matt. 25:41.
75. Luke 2:51. *Test* 3.
76. See *2Cel* 129. See also n. 49 above.
77. *AnPer* 16b, 19b; *L3S* 37.
78. *RegNB* IX 4.
79. The meaning of these words allows of all sorts of interpretations. Words do not always express every shade of meaning. Both the poet and the prophet must study their material, just as the sculptor and the carpenter. For more about the picturesque language of Francis, see Hans Sevenhoven, *Verslag van een ontdekkingsreis naar Franciscus*. Enkele patronen uit het denkweefsel van een geestelijk leider (Haarlem, 1979).
80. *L3S* 13, 1; *2Cel* 10; *SC* 63.
81. *RegNB* I 1.
82. John 5:19-20.
83. John 4:26.
84. *RegNB* VI 5 cites the same verse.
85. Amsterdam, 1975, p. 7.
86. *Adm* XXVII; *CantSol* 13; *2Cel* 217.
87. *Adm* XXVIII; Luke 2:19, 51.
88. *Adm* III 10.
89. *Test* 1, 3.
90. The words used here are a reference to Kierkegaard, the Father of Existentialism. The word *Ekel*, used also by Sartre, means "disgust." They use it improperly.
91. *RegNB* I 1, XII 4.
92. *2Cel* 166; *Assisi Compilation* 86, 100; *LP* 48, 65.; *CantSol* 12.
93. Isaiah 42:3.
94. This is the title of his first *Erzählungen* (Haarlem, 1976).
95. *2EpFid* 6.
96. *Adm* V 1.
97. John 14:6; *Adm* I 1.
98. *Adm* V 8; Rev. 7:8, 15:13.