# AFFI
## National Assembly

**23 – 25 October 2026**

Venue: St. John's Medical College Annexure, Bengaluru

# *Let us Begin Anew...*

***Returning to Our Franciscan Roots,***
***Renewing the Charism, Living the Gospel Today***

A National Gathering of Franciscan Major Superiors of India
Commemorating the 800th Anniversary of the Transitus of St. Francis of Assisi
(1226–2026)




1226 — 2026

**Franciscus 800**

*Years of* Franciscan Grace



AFFI NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

# PANEL DISCUSSION

ORGANISATION GUIDE

# Many Charisms, One Francis

*Franciscans of India in Conversation*

- What makes us Franciscan?
- Francis and the Gospel
- What is distinctively Franciscan?
- Threats to identity
- Many families, one Francis

# The Gospel in Our Hands

## Practical Choices for Franciscan Leaders Today in Personal Life, Community, and Congregation

**800th Anniversary of the Transitus of St. Francis**
**1226 – 2026**

For Franciscan Ministers, India



3 OCTOBER 1226 · THE PORTIUNCULA

# A dying man on the bare earth. Stripped. Owning nothing. Even his habit was lent. And his empty hands... blessed.

He died as he had lived: in obedience, with empty hands. He blessed the brothers around him, and those who were absent.



# THE GOSPEL READ AT HIS SIDE

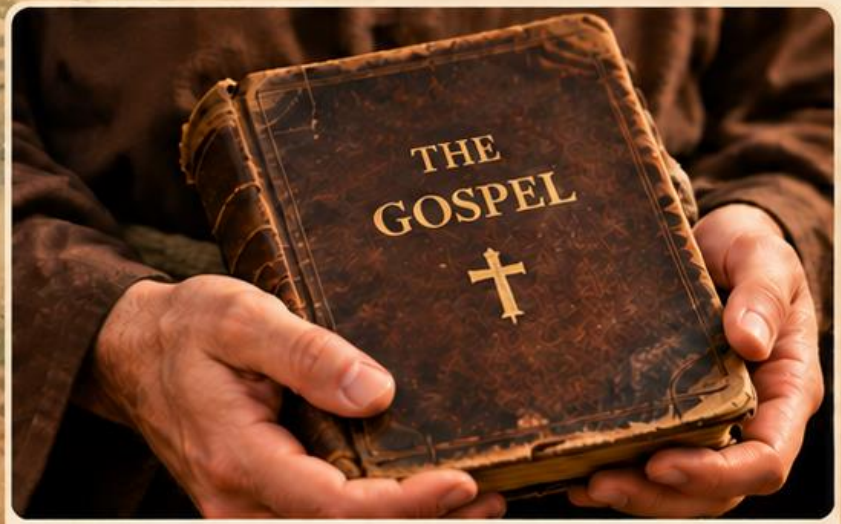
*“Jesus, knowing that his hour had come, rose from supper, took a towel, and began to wash the disciples’ feet.’*

**John 13**



**Hands** that have let go of everything, and a **Gospel** of towel and basin.
These two images are the title of this talk:
The Gospel in Our Hands.

# A hand can do three things with the Gospel




## HOLD it

As a possession:
we are the Gospel people,
the heirs of Francis,
we have the charism.

**As Gospel is life.**



## GRIP it

As a defence: our institutions, properties, positions and “the way we have always done it” — and we call it fidelity.

**As Lesser brothers/Sisters.**



## OPEN it

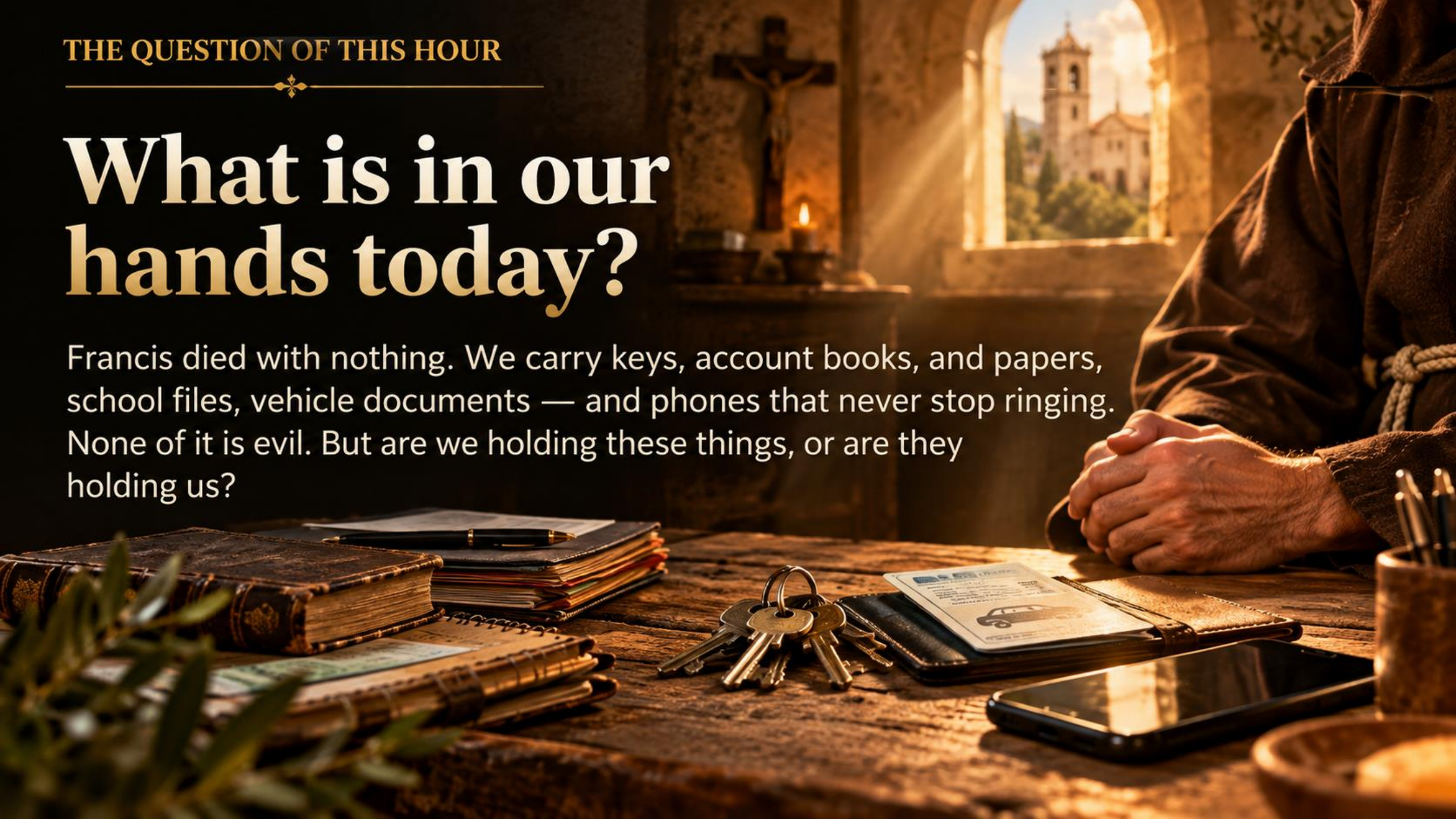
And give it away:
take the towel,
kneel, and wash feet.

**As Living Witness.**

THE QUESTION OF THIS HOUR

# What is in our hands today?

Francis died with nothing. We carry keys, account books, and papers, school files, vehicle documents — and phones that never stop ringing. None of it is evil. But are we holding these things, or are they holding us?



THE SENTENCE WE KEEP RETURNING TO

> *“I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours.*

## The sentence we keep returning to today

A gift and a burden at the same time. He did his part. The rest is ours: not the founder, not Rome, not the next general chapter will do it for us. And you are the ones who hold the keys.



# Not “superior”: minister

## MINISTER
## = servant

*A minister is the one who holds the towel.*

### THE RULE OF 1221

*“Let no one be called prior; let all be called lesser brothers, and let one wash the feet of the other.”*

Four movements: where we stand, personal life, community, congregation.
Not ideas: choices.



I. Where We Stand

# Where We Stand

The Transitus was not a serene ending after a triumph. It was a death in the middle of a crisis.



# 1226: a crisis, not a triumph

## 1220

**Francis resigns** as head of the Order: “From now on I am dead to you.” He watches from the margins what becomes of what he began.



## 1226

**The Testament:** the voice of a man who senses his brothers may soften the Gospel into something more comfortable.



## 3 Oct 1226

**The Transitus:** on the bare earth, entrusting the Order: “May Christ teach you what is yours.”



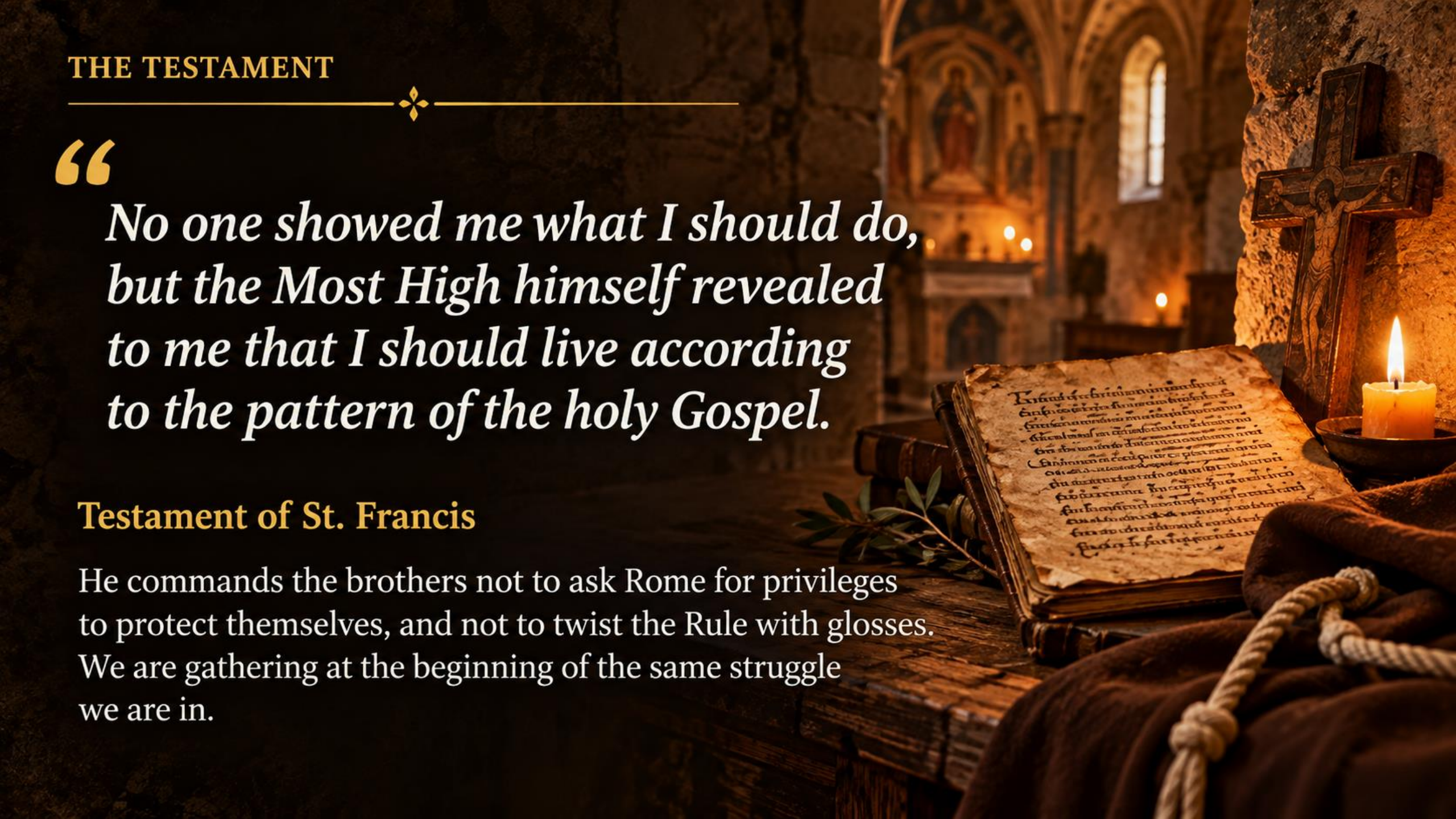
The Order had grown to thousands, and was already straining: houses of study, privileges from Rome, arguments over the Rule.

## THE TESTAMENT

*“No one showed me what I should do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel.*

### Testament of St. Francis

He commands the brothers not to ask Rome for privileges to protect themselves, and not to twist the Rule with glosses. We are gathering at the beginning of the same struggle we are in.



# Our situation in India: four crises




## Vocations

Fewer candidates, smaller novitiates, an ageing membership, and some who leave a few years after vows.



## Fraternal life

We live next to each other more than with each other. Conflicts managed by silence, transfers or gossip.



## Mission

Works built for a time with more people and resources. A small minority, in places a vulnerable one.

**This means:**
we are few in number and sometimes serve in remote, poor or socially marginalized areas, where people are more vulnerable and in greater need.



## Leadership

Fewer people, more regulations, more accountability, and your own tiredness.

# Three temptations of an institution in crisis



## Nostalgia

We measure the present against the golden years of numbers. Francis: “Let us begin again, for until now we have done little.”



## Management

Better systems, audits, plans, software. But a congregation that only manages its decline has become a firm, not a fraternity.



## Survival

Protecting our properties, names, position. Exactly what Francis forbade: seeking the protection of the powerful.

The question we ask is not:
“ How can we **protect** everything we have? ”
But: “ What are we willing to **relinquish** so that we can remain faithful to our mission?”

THE CLAIM OF THIS TALK

# Our crisis is not first of all a crisis of numbers. It is a crisis of what is in our hands.

Which choice, made this year, would let go of something and open our hands again?
Let us begin where Francis began:
with ourselves.




II
Personal Life
The minister who holds
the Gospel

## BEGIN WITH OURSELVES

# A leader cannot give a community what she or he does not hold in their own hands.

Francis did not begin by reforming the Church.
**He began by kneeling, kissing the leper, and asking:**
*“Lord, what do you want me to do?”*



# 1 Put the Gospel before the agenda



THE RULE, CHAPTER 1

*The life of the brothers is to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Francis wrote no programme. He wrote:
*"The Most High himself revealed that I should live according to the pattern of the holy Gospel."* (Testament 14)



**If the Gospel is the source, the agenda can only serve it. How many of us open the Gospel first?**

## PRACTICAL CHOICE

- Twenty minutes daily with the Gospel of the day: **read**, **pause**, **pray**, **act**.
- Sit with one verse until it **asks something of you**.
- Open every chapter and council **with the Word**, not only a prayer.
- Before each decision ask: **what would the Gospel say here?**
- The leader who does this has something to say in the chapter hall; the leader who does not **has only opinions**.

# 2 Be a minister, not a manager





**ADMONITION 4**

*Glory in office only as much as if you were given the task of washing the brothers' feet. If you are more upset to lose the office than to lose that task, you are storing up treasure at the peril of your soul.*

Read it again slowly. It is a test, and a severe one.

**PRACTICAL CHOICE**

- If removed tomorrow, what would I grieve: the people, or the position?
- Visit with the towel, not the audit file: listen, eat, pray, ask "How are you?" and wait
- Drop "my province, my sisters, my men." They were given to you: "The Lord gave me brothers"

# 3 Live a poverty the community can see



THE RULE

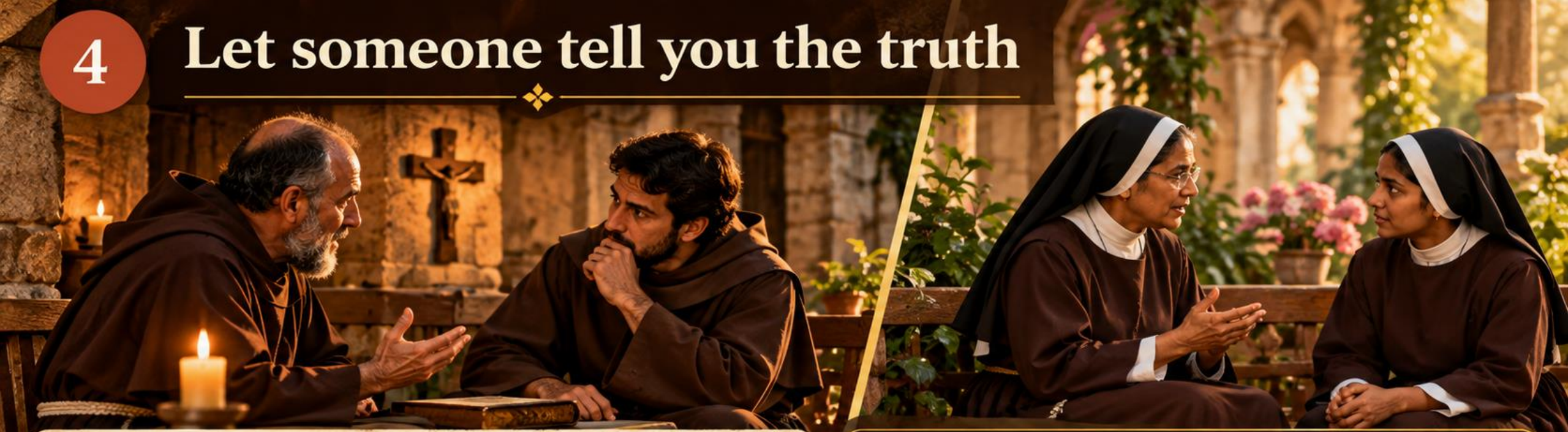
***Appropriate nothing. Live in the world as pilgrims and strangers.***

Poverty is not only about what the congregation owns. It is a way of standing in the world with open hands. Francis wanted the brothers glad to live *"among people considered of little value"* (Earlier Rule 9). Poverty is credible when the poor can recognise it in how we live.

PRACTICAL CHOICE

- Keep the community's accounts simple, open and explained to every member.
- Ask of every house: would the poorest person who walks in feel welcome?
- Before major spending, ask: could we explain this to the least among us?
- Choose one simplicity our neighbours can see, and review each year what we could share.

# 4 Let someone tell you the truth



**BROTHER LEO**

*Francis had Brother Leo, his confessor and "little lamb of God", and gave him leave to say: "That is not right."*

Power isolates. After a few years in office, most leaders are surrounded by people who agree with them.

**PRACTICAL CHOICE**

- Name one person, outside your council and not dependent on you, with the right to tell you the truth about how you lead
- Meet them regularly
- Go to confession in the full sense, not as a formality

# 5 Accept the difficult brother/Sister as your road



### LETTER TO A MINISTER (PARAPHRASED)

*Whatever hinders you from loving the Lord, and whoever hinders you, even if they strike you, take it as a grace. Do not wish them other than they are. Let no brother who has sinned leave your presence without mercy. If he sins a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me.*

The one who exhausts you is not an obstacle to your holiness. They are your path to it.

### PRACTICAL CHOICE

- Write down the name of the one you find hardest
- Ask: “What is the Lord asking me to give to this person?”
- Do one concrete thing this month

MERCY AND TRUTH WALK TOGETHER

# Mercy toward the offender never replaces justice for the victim.

The leper came first for Francis. Begin with the wounded, especially a child or a vulnerable adult. A minister who covers up has stopped being a minister.



# 6 Keep silence, and prepare to leave

## RULE FOR HERMITAGES

*Two brothers live as ‘mothers’, in silence and prayer; two as ‘sons’, who serve them. Then they exchange. Action without contemplation consumes us; contemplation without service becomes selfish.*

1220: Francis handed over leadership while still alive. A leader who cannot imagine leaving has not understood the towel.

## PRACTICAL CHOICE

- A day each month and a week each year not available for meetings
- Know your end date. Prepare two or three successors
- Do not become indispensable: make yourself unnecessary

# Six personal choices

1. The Gospel before the agenda
2. A minister, not a manager
3. A poverty the community can see
4. Someone who tells you the truth
5. The difficult brother as your road
6. Silence, and an end date

III

# Community

The fraternity as the Gospel made visible



THE TESTAMENT

# “The Lord gave me brothers.”

Not recruited. Not chosen. Given, often not the gift he would have chosen. Francis did not found a movement of preachers: the brothers themselves were the Gospel’s first sermon.

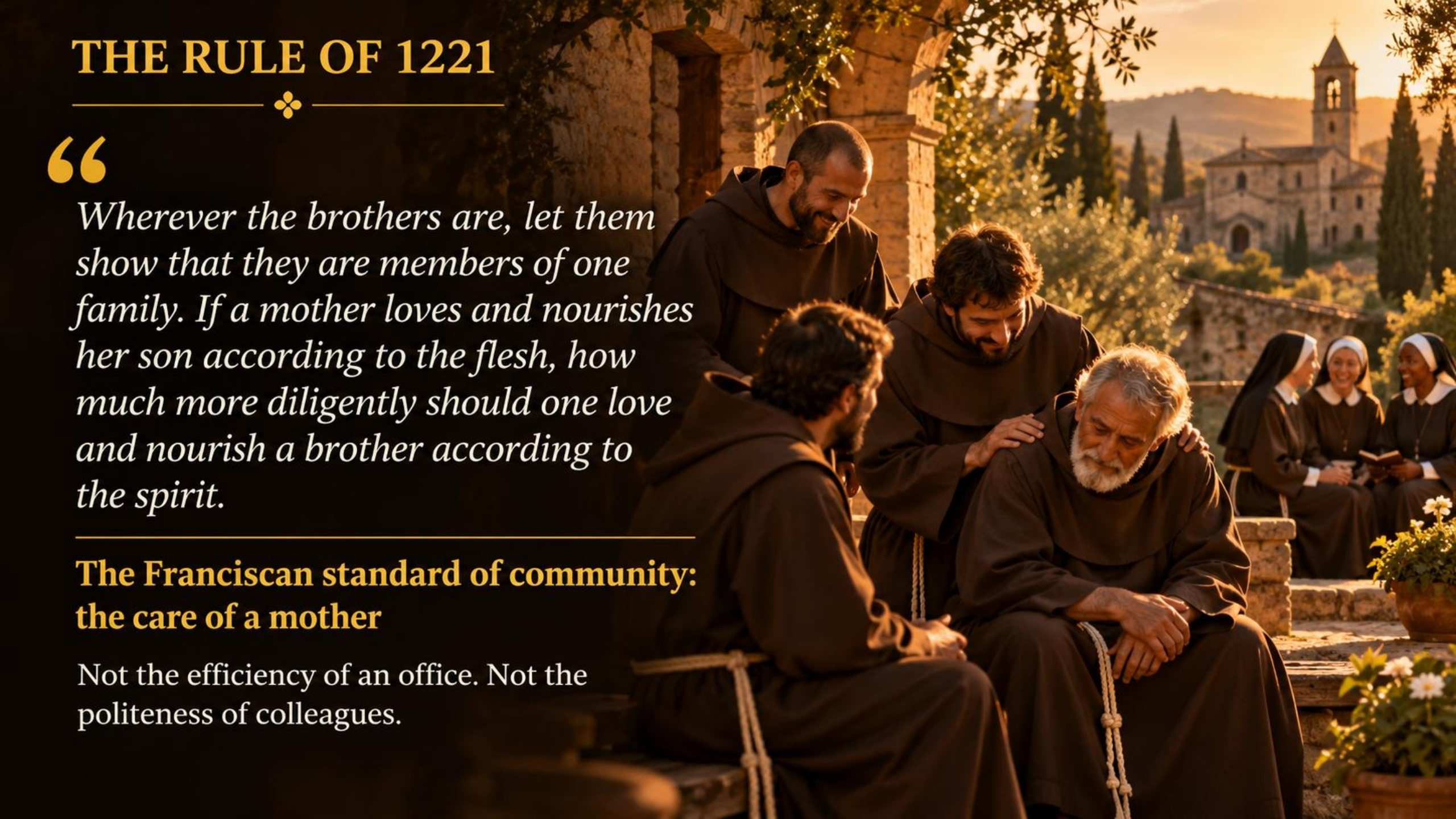


# THE RULE OF 1221

*Wherever the brothers are, let them show that they are members of one family. If a mother loves and nourishes her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently should one love and nourish a brother according to the spirit.*

## The Franciscan standard of community: the care of a mother

Not the efficiency of an office. Not the politeness of colleagues.



FRATERNITY AND VOCATIONS

# No one joins a community that nobody would want to live in.

**Francis never recruited.** *"The Lord gave me brothers"* (Testament 14). Bernard watched him pray through a night. Giles simply came and asked.

Today a young visitor may find an empty chapel at community prayer, a superior no one trusts, or a cold silence over an old quarrel. No brochure answers what they have seen.

**Vocation promotion begins with the quality of our common life.**





# 1 Shared prayer and a shared table



**THE TEST**

*A community that does not pray together and eat together is a lodging, not a fraternity.*

We know the school hours, the hospital shifts, the parish duties. Still. The first believers devoted themselves to ***"the breaking of bread and the prayers"*** (Acts 2:42).

**Ministry fills our days, but it cannot make us brothers. Only a shared prayer and a shared table do.**

**PRACTICAL CHOICE**

- With each house, define a protected minimum: **two common prayers** and **two common meals** every day.
- No exceptions for ministry except a real emergency, and agree who decides what counts.
- Make absence noticed: an empty chair at prayer or table is never ignored.
- On your visits, keep to it yourself: a minister who skips the table teaches the opposite of the Rule.

# 2 The mother's care: the old and the sick



## ADMONITIONS



*Blessed is the servant who loves his/her brother/sister as much when s/he is sick and cannot help as when s/he is well and can serve.*

**"I was sick and you visited me." Our communities are ageing: not a problem to manage but the Gospel's test.**

## PRACTICAL CHOICE

- No brother or sister left alone in a hospital ward or a room
- Give the elderly a mission that fits: prayer, listening, accompanying the young, the memory of the congregation
- Arrange care before the crisis, not after
- The young are watching how they will be treated

# 3 Name conflict, and deal with it with mercy



**ADMONITIONS 11 AND 27**

*Anger and disturbance, even at another's sin, are an obstacle to love. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance.*

**Sometimes, we manage conflict by avoiding it: transfers, cold politeness, talking about the person to someone else. None of this is Franciscan.**

**PRACTICAL CHOICE**

- Name tension in a community meeting in good time: speak of your own experience, not another's faults.
- Offer reconciliation before correction: no one leaves your presence without mercy.
- Serious conflict: a trained facilitator early, not after years of damage.
- A transfer is a solution only after the truth has been spoken.

# 4 Dissolve the walls of region, language, caste and age



## THE RULE OF 1221

*No one is to be called prior; all are to be called lesser brothers/sisters.*

In an Order of a merchant's son, noble knights, peasants and men of learning, this was the destruction of rank within the family. Our walls: region, language, caste, age, degrees, "important" ministries. We rarely name them.

## PRACTICAL CHOICE

- Mix communities deliberately across language, region and background
- Examine appointments: who is chosen for leadership, for studies, for travel?
- Public zero tolerance for discrimination in the house: caste, colour, language, class
- "You are all brothers/sisters" (Mt 23:8)
- Any division is a poison that destroys the soul of the community/congregation





# 5 Reclaim the *perfect joy* of Francis

**THE LITTLE FLOWERS**

*Francis and Leo walk in winter, cold, wet and hungry. Turned away and abused at the friary door by the porter, they bear it with patience and without disturbance. That, says Francis, is perfect joy.*

We want a perfect community. Francis shows us how to love an imperfect one.

**PRACTICAL CHOICE**

- On your next visit ask each member: “What gives you joy in this house?”
- Then ask: “What would help you live joyfully here?”
- Act on what you hear.



# 6 Put the phone down

ADMONITION 27

*Where there is quiet and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor dissipation.*

Our communities are fragmented by devices. Young candidates, more connected than we are, notice when we are not truly present.

PRACTICAL CHOICE

- Agree community norms for phones and screens: at prayer, at table, at recreation
- Discuss and agree them; do not impose them from above
- The leader goes first

# Six community choices



1 Shared prayer and a shared table



2 The mother’s care for the old and sick



3 Name conflict, deal with it with mercy



4 Dissolve the walls of region, language, caste, age



5 Perfect joy in an imperfect community



6 Put the phone down

# IV

# Order/Congregation



Vocations, mission and leadership: what are we holding, and what must we release?

# Receiving candidates: Francis' way, today's care

## 1 Receive kindly

*Encourage, and explain the life.*

- Meet the candidate and the family together; speak plainly about celibacy, poverty, obedience and ministry.
- Show the real daily life of the house, not only the vocation brochure.



## 2 Examine carefully

*On the Catholic faith and the sacraments.*

- Baptism, confirmation and the others' testimony.
- Health and maturity, assessed with a qualified counsellor.
- Character references and safeguarding screening.



## 3 Ask for real letting go

*Go and sell what you have; give to the poor.*

- Ask honestly about debts, property and family duties, and who will care for dependent parents.
- Test motives gently: the call, or education, security or a way abroad?



## 4 A year of probation

*Then reception into obedience.*

- Plan the year: shared prayer, service of the poor, community life, regular accompanimient.
- Review at set points. Let a candidate leave or wait without shame. Decide with the council.



# Kindness and examination



### All examination, no welcome

The candidate is a problem to be filtered.

### All welcome, no examination

Any willing person accepted because we need the numbers, a teacher, a priest.



**The quiet pressure:** a candidate may come because the congregation offers education, security and status. A vocation that begins in need can grow into a true one. But filling houses without discerning stores up pain for the person and the community.

**We pray for vocations, but we must not manufacture them. We can make ourselves worthy of receiving them.**



# Five choices for vocations

1. **Put your best people into formation**
   Not the ones you can spare: release a gifted person to form novices.

2. **Raise the bar, and be honest about motives**
   Trained spiritual and psychological accompaniment. Never accept a candidate to fill a vacancy.

3. **Invest in the first ten years after vows**
   Most losses come after the novitiate. Give each a mentor and a real fraternity.

4. **Be generous with those who leave**
   A brother or sister on another road. How we treat them tells the young what awaits them.

5. **Pray, and say it plainly**
   “Lord, give us brothers and sisters, and make us worthy to receive them.”



# B. Mission: two ways among the "other"

## FIRST WAY: PRESENCE

No arguments or disputes. Be subject to every human creature for God's sake, and bear witness that we are Christians.

**IN INDIA TODAY**

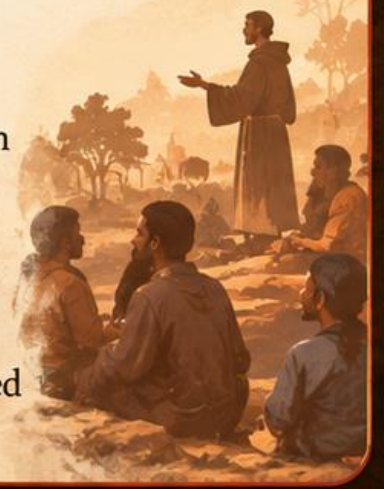
- Be a good neighbour: join the joys and sorrows of our neighbours.
- Serve everyone.
- Be minor: learn the local language, respect local customs, and never argue to win.

## SECOND WAY: WORD

Proclaim the word of God when it pleases the Lord, that they may believe.

**IN INDIA TODAY**

- Speak of Jesus when asked, giving the reason for our hope with gentleness (1 Pet 3:15).
- Let our joy, simplicity and fraternity raise the question, then answers.
- Let the word rise from prayer and be backed by a life people have seen.



Rule of 1221, chapter 16. Presence first; word when the Lord opens the door.
Our living witness is the first sermon.

# A MISSION THEOLOGY FOR INDIA

**Neither silence nor aggression: live among people as sisters, serve them, be subject to them in humility, and let the Gospel show itself in the life.**







**Damietta, 1219:** Francis went to the Sultan unarmed, as a guest. He came back not with a victory but with a changed way of seeing.

# THE TESTAMENT

*When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter to see lepers. The Lord led me among them, and what seemed bitter was turned into sweetness of soul and body.*



**Franciscan mission begins with the place that frightens us.**

# The question we avoid: why are we there?

## Among the poor?

**Is it among the poor and the small, as Francis lived among the lepers?**

- Count who we serve: how many are poor, how many cannot pay?
- Would the poorest family in the area feel at home here?



## Fraternal?

**Can the community live fraternally while doing it?**

- Do we still pray and eat together on working days?
- Is the work shared, or carried by two exhausted members?



## Sustainable?

**Can we sustain it with the people we have?**

- Count the members we will have in ten years, and their health.
- Would it survive without one strong person or one big donor?



## Service or power?

**Would Francis see a service, or a position of prestige?**

- Who gains most: the people served, or our name and comfort?
- Could we hand it over, or close it, for the poor's sake?



**Discern together: renew, hand over, or begin anew.**

# Mission choices (1 of 2)



1

## Carry out a mission audit of every work

Put the four questions openly to the members, and listen.



2

## Be willing to begin anew

To laypeople, a diocese, another congregation. A congregation that cannot let go of anything will lose everything.



3

## Choose one new presence at the edge

Migrant workers, tribal and very poor rural areas, people on the street, the elderly poor, survivors of trafficking, mental illness, addiction. A small mixed-age team: brothers and sisters, not rescuers.



# Mission choices (2 of 2)

4

## Do not seek protection from power

The Testament forbids letters of protection. Our security is the poor who know us and the neighbours who have eaten with us.



5

## Let our institutions serve the poor

Review fees, admissions and staffing. You may keep an institution, but decide it consciously and honestly.



6

## Take creation seriously

The Canticle sings Brother Sun and Sister Water; our country knows floods, heat and polluted rivers. Live it first on our own kitchens, farms and campuses.



# One Franciscan family: join forces

## Formation

Share formation programmes where possible.



## Communities

Open shared communities across branches.



## Mission

Collaborate in missions among the poor.



**First Order brothers and Third Order Regular brothers and sisters:** we compete for the same young people, ministries and resources. A divided Franciscan family does not witness to brotherhood/Sisterhood

# C. LEADERSHIP: THE RULE, CHAPTER 10

> *Let the brothers have recourse to their ministers, and let the ministers receive them so kindly that the brothers can speak and act toward them as masters do toward servants.*



**Authority turned upside down: Francis governed by chapter, not by decree**

And the minister must be willing to give up office. A leader who clings to office, or treats a mandate as a career, damages the community.

# Leadership choices (1 of 2)



## 1 Make your chapters and councils real

Give the members the real figures, including finances. Listen to disagreement. If the chapter only ratifies, it has stopped being Franciscan.

## 2 Be transparent about money and misconduct



Published accounts, independent audits, trusted safeguarding procedures with real accountability. Where there has been harm, begin with the victim.

## 3 Build teams and train successors



A council of different gifts; two or three younger people prepared for leadership. Francis resigned while the Order still needed him.

# Leadership choices (2 of 2)



4

## Decide the hard things in time

Evaluate the ministries- witness value. Postponing adds the pain of the weak to the pain of the strong. Consult, explain with honesty, carry out with mercy.



5

## Set a Gospel-shaped, measurable plan

Every community prays and eats together daily; every candidate has a trained formator; two works handed over; one new presence among the poor; every member has had a real visit from the minister.



# A Fraternity of gifts



In the sources, Francis describes the ideal friar by the gifts of the first companions. Not one hero.

## Bernard

Faith and poverty



## Leo

Simplicity



## Angelo

Courtesy



## Giles

Contemplation



## Juniper

Patience



**Effective Franciscan leadership: put these gifts together, and then get out of their way.**

# The congregation in sixteen choices

## Vocations

- Best people to formation
- Raise the bar
- First ten years after vows
- Generous with those who leave
- Pray honestly



## Mission

- Mission audit
- Close or hand over
- A new presence at the edge
- No protection from power
- Institutions serve the poor
- Creation



## Leadership

- Real chapters and councils
- Transparency, victims first
- Teams and successors
- Hard decisions in time
- A measurable plan



## THE GOSPEL IN OUR HANDS - Closing

**It is a small thing. A towel. A piece of bread. A brother, a sister, a leper at the door, a young person who has come to see.**

It is easy to lose when we carry too much. It is easy to find when we put down what we cannot carry. Francis did not die so that we may join our hands in veneration. He died so that we would open our hands.



WITH THE DYING FRANCIS

# Let us begin again, for until now we have done little.



And may the Lord give each of us the grace to do what is ours to do.

# Pax et bonum

The Gospel in Our Hands · Transitus 1226–2026

