

ST. FRANCIS, THE LEADER WITH A DIFFERENCE

Rethinking Authority, Resilience, and Interior Freedom for Franciscan Leaders Today

- “Leadership today requires the maturity to understand people, the courage to make decisions, and the humility to keep learning.”



A QUESTION

What happens to people under my leadership?

Do they become more responsible and speak truthfully?

Can they admit a mistake and still belong?

- Today's crises are of trust: abuse of power, clericalism, burnout, institutional self-protection.



- Francis offers a different logic.
- Francis resigned as head of his Order around 1220. The early sources record him handing the family back to God and the ministers.
- He led the movement without owning it.





Franciscan leadership is

- power held lightly,
- strength that has passed through weakness,
- and freedom that comes from owning nothing.

1. **AUTHORITY: "MINISTER," NOT "MASTER"**

- **Leadership that develops willing responsibility**
- Francis deliberately chose the word minister (servant) over prior or superior (Earlier Rule 4–6).
- Admonition 4: those in office should take as much pride in it as if they had been assigned to wash the brothers' feet.
- Rule 6 and the Earlier Rule: a brother should care for his brother **as a mother** cares for her child. Authority is shown as maternal tenderness, not command.



Authority is limited by conscience and the Gospel.

- Later Rule 10: the minister must admonish humbly and charitably, and a brother is not bound to obey an order against his conscience or the Rule.
- **Authority is measured by how it treats failure.** Letter to a Minister: the minister must show mercy so that no brother who has sinned leaves his presence without it.
- **Titles add nothing.**
- Admonition 20: you are what you are before God, and no more.



A. Greenleaf's Servant Leadership "My authority helps others grow."

- effective leadership begins with a **desire to serve**,
- The leader's central concern is the growth, dignity and well-being of the people entrusted to them.
- A leader listens carefully, understands people's difficulties, shares responsibility and develops others' abilities.
- Such leadership also requires clear expectations, correction and difficult decisions.
- **Service combines compassion with responsibility.**
- *Are people becoming more capable and responsible through my leadership?"*





- For a Franciscan leader,
- exercising authority as a ministry within the fraternity.
- Members should experience their leader as approachable, fair and interested in their development.



What Does It Take to Be a Servant?

Mark 10:43–45 (NET)

43 But it is not this way among you. Instead whoever wants to be great
among you must be your servant, 44
and whoever wants to be first
among you must be the slave of all.
45 For even the Son of Man did not
come to be served but to serve, and
to give his life as a ransom for
many."

- **Hubris**
  An inflated belief in one's own judgment or importance.
  Watch for: Treating disagreement as ignorance, disloyalty or lack of faith.

- **Over functioning**
  Doing for others what they could reasonably learn to do themselves.
  Watch for: Taking over whenever someone struggles, gradually creating dependence





B. Edmondson's Psychological Safety

- "Here, I can speak honestly."
- psychological safety as a **shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking**.
- Psychological safety includes accountability.
- Members remain responsible for their conduct, while mistakes and concerns can be discussed openly.
- Deliberate wrongdoing still requires an appropriate response.



- For a Franciscan community, the practical question is whether members can express difficulties—including concerns about leadership—without fearing retaliation.

- **Reflection:** *“What important truth might members be afraid to tell me?”*

C.Keltner’s Power Paradox — “Authority requires continuing humility.”

- **people often gain influence through empathy, generosity and cooperation, yet holding power can weaken those same qualities.**





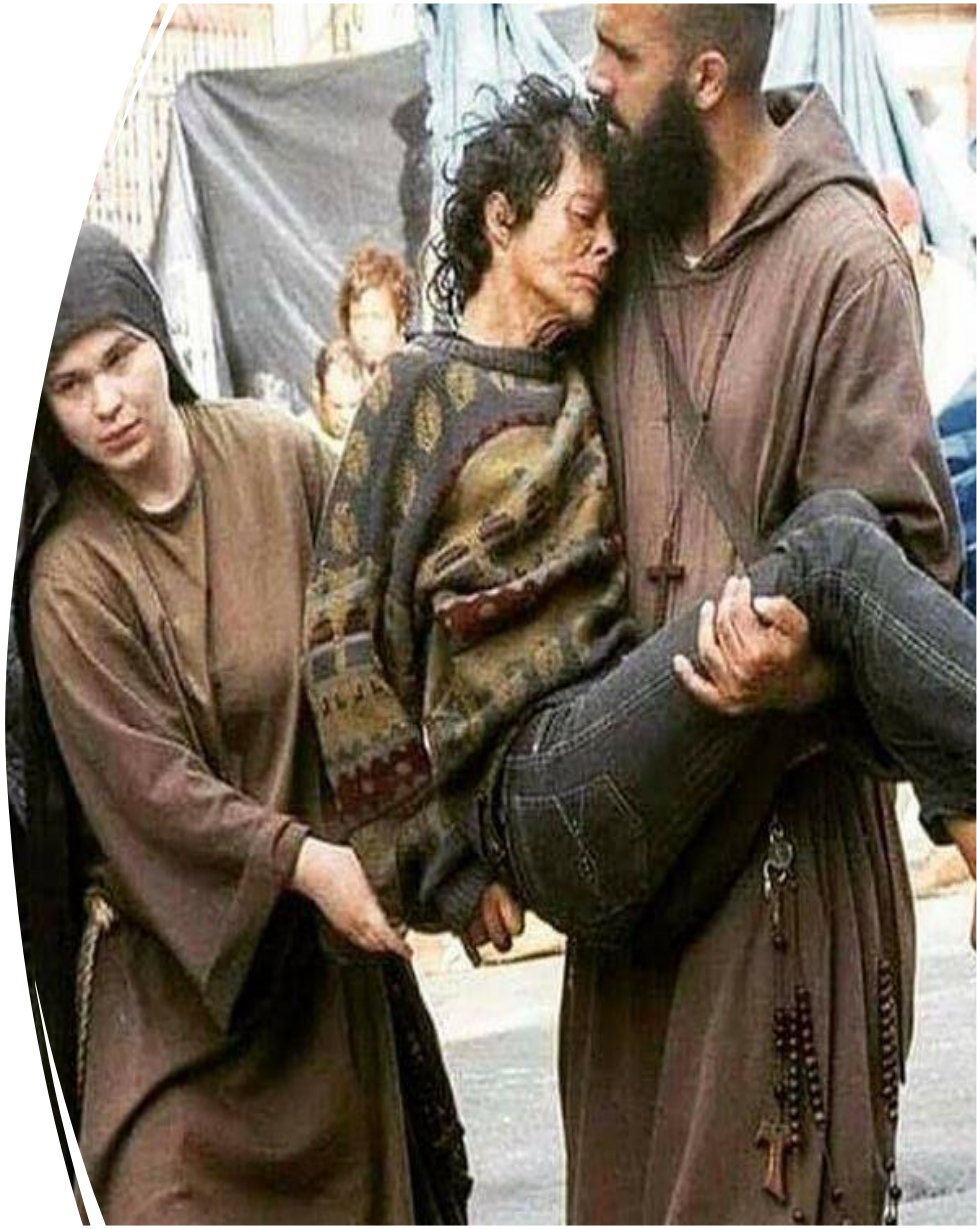
- Force (power) can make people less attentive to others' perspectives and more confident in their own judgments.
- Those around them may also become reluctant to disagree, reducing the corrective feedback they receive.
- These are possible tendencies, rather than inevitable changes in every leader.



- A Franciscan application is to make humility practical through consultation, chapters, shared discernment and opportunities for honest correction. These practices help only when members' contributions can actually influence decisions.
- Reflection: *"When did someone's honest feedback last change my decision?"*

Self-Determination Theory — “I have willingness, capability and connection.”

- Edward Deci and Richard Ryan explain that healthy motivation is supported by **three basic psychological needs**:
- **1. Autonomy:** “I understand and willingly participate in what I do.” This means having a meaningful voice and sense of ownership within shared responsibilities.



- **2. Competence:** “I can develop the skills needed to do this well.” Clear guidance, suitable challenges and constructive feedback strengthen this experience.





3. Relatedness:

- “I belong, and I matter to others.” People need relationships marked by care, respect and mutual connection.

Paraphrase – Geniuness



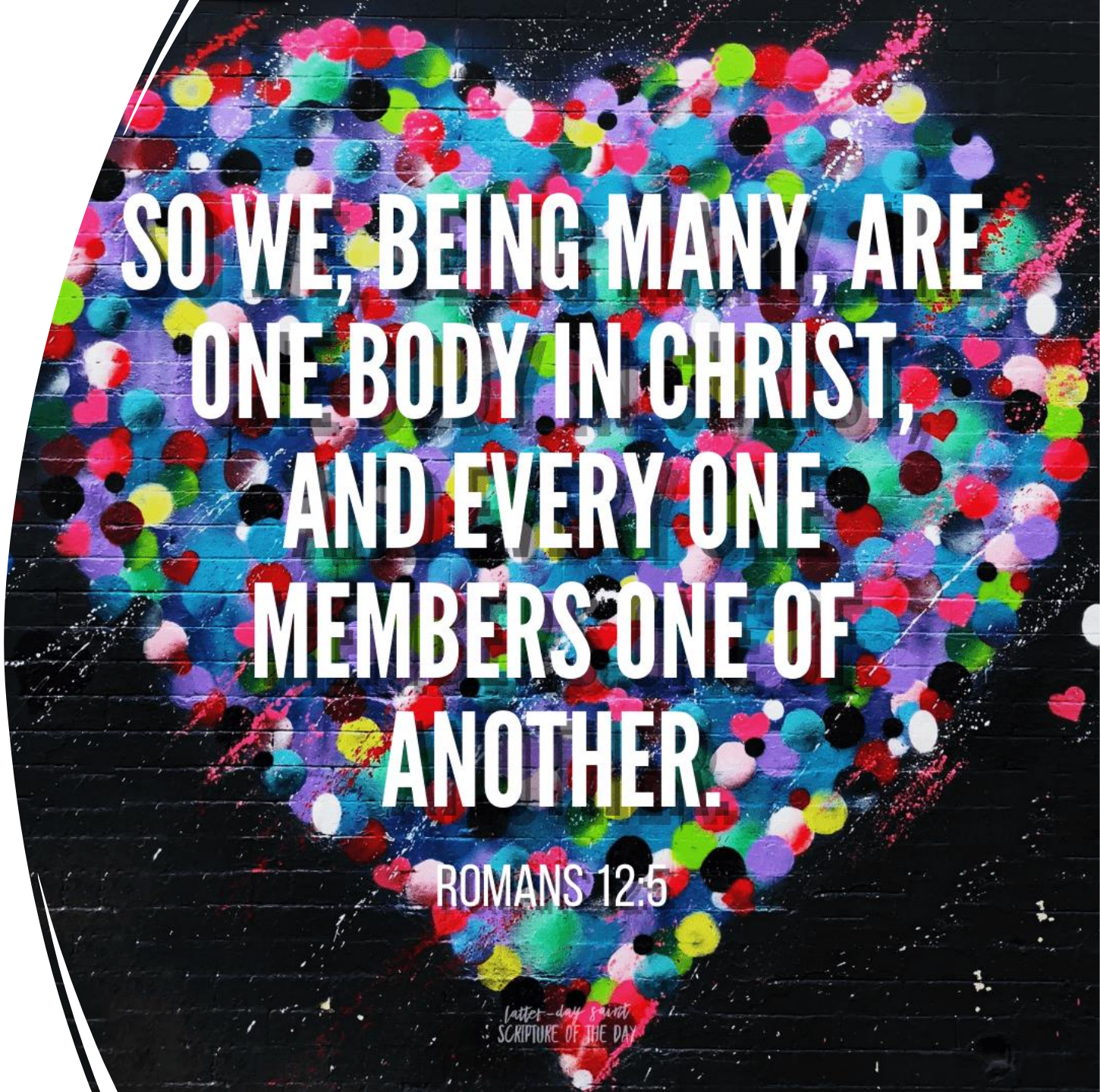


- In religious life, this helps leaders understand how obedience can become personally meaningful.
- Explaining a decision, hearing the member's perspective and providing support can help the person embrace a responsibility with greater willingness.
- **Reflection:** *"Have I provided a meaningful voice, adequate preparation and a sense of belonging?"*

- **Micromanagement**
  Excessive involvement in the details of another person's work.
  Watch for: Delegating a task while retaining control over every small decision.
- **Confirmation bias**
  Giving greater weight to information that supports an existing belief.
  Watch for: Listening mainly to people who confirm your opinion of a member or situation.



Romans 12:5


SO WE, BEING MANY, ARE ONE BODY IN CHRIST, AND EVERY ONE MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER.
ROMANS 12:5
latter-day saint
SCRIPTURE OF THE DAY

UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE



2. Resilience: strength through wounds

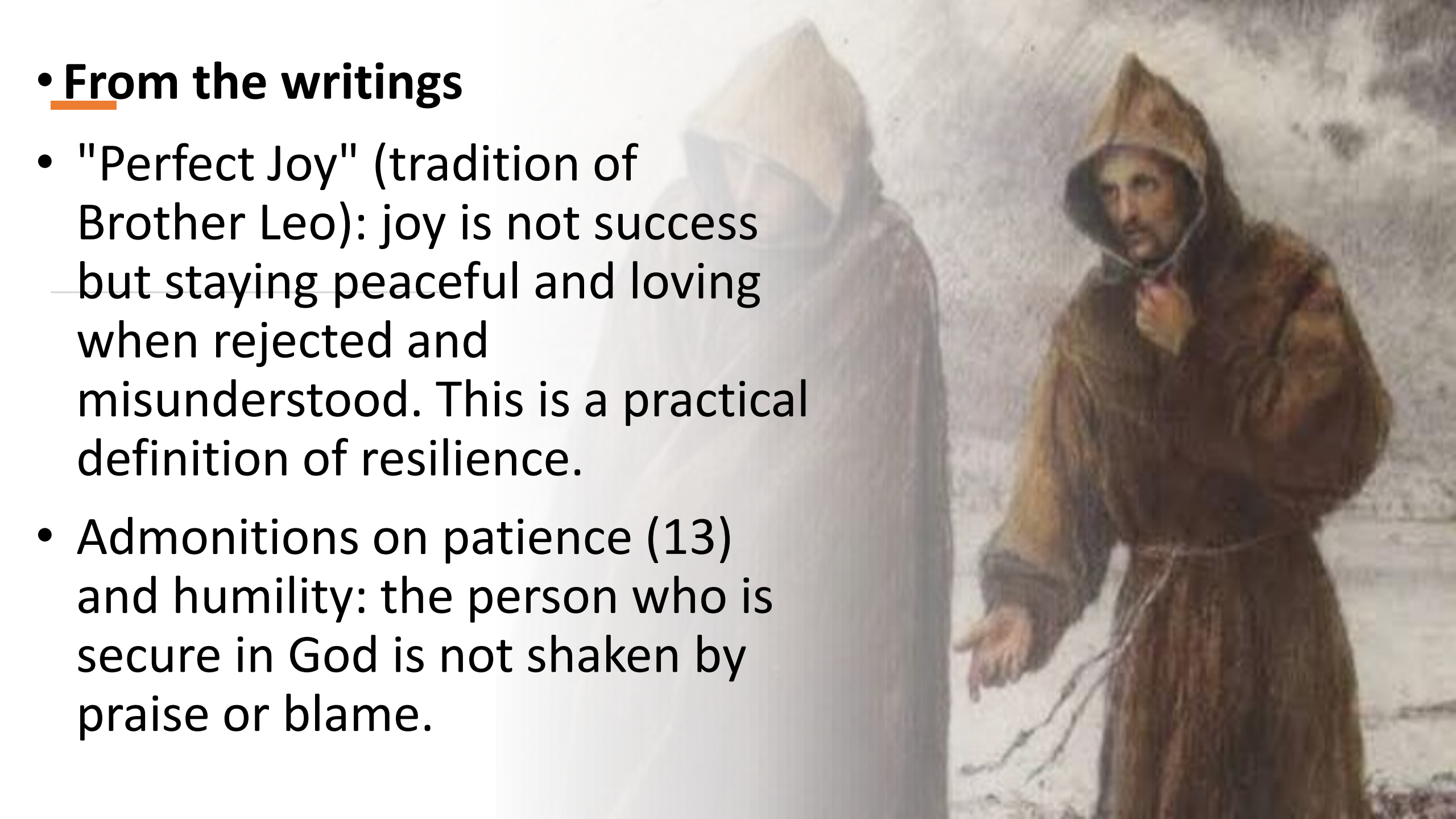
- **Biographical turning points**
- **Failed knighthood,** imprisonment in Perugia, illness, and a crisis of identity.
- **Embracing the leper.** In depth-psychology terms, Francis integrates what he feared and rejected, his shadow. This was the real beginning of his leadership.





- **Rejection by his father**, the stripping before the bishop, ridicule from the crowds.
- **Conflict within the Order** over poverty and structure, a painful loss of control, and the pain of the stigmata.
- The Canticle of Creatures was composed in illness, near-blindness and pain, a clear case of meaning-making under suffering.

- **From the writings**
- "Perfect Joy" (tradition of Brother Leo): joy is not success but staying peaceful and loving when rejected and misunderstood. This is a practical definition of resilience.
- Admonitions on patience (13) and humility: the person who is secure in God is not shaken by praise or blame.





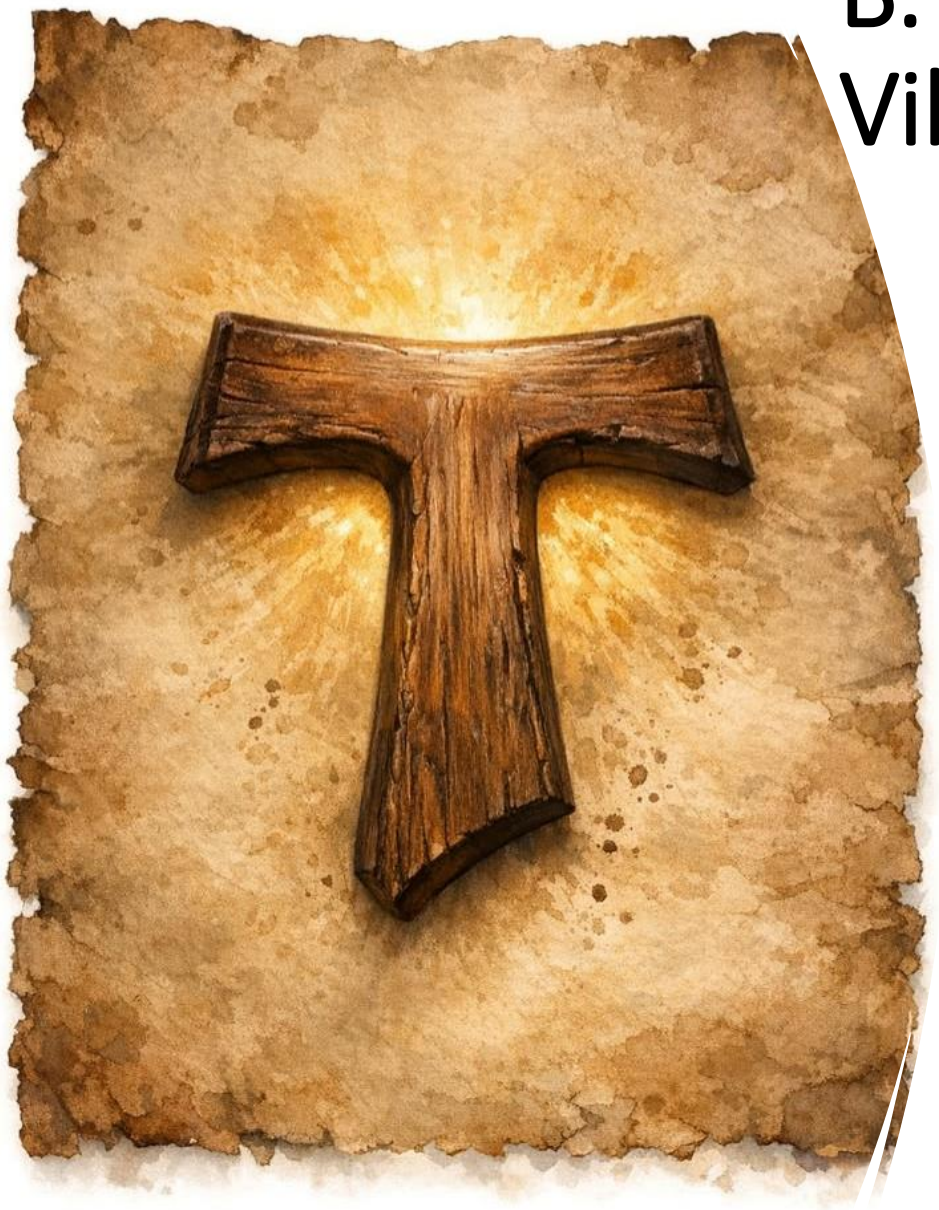
A. Post-traumatic Growth — Tedeschi and Calhoun

- *"Struggling with adversity can sometimes lead to meaningful change."*
- Post-traumatic growth describes positive psychological changes that some people report through their struggle with deeply challenging experiences.
- These may include stronger relationships, greater appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength and spiritual or existential change.



- **For a Franciscan leader:** A painful failure or loss may gradually deepen humility and compassion. First provide safety, care and time; reflection on growth can follow when the person is ready.

- **Reflection:** *“What has this experience changed in what I value and how I relate to others?”*



B. Meaning-centred Resilience — Viktor Frankl

- *“A sense of purpose can help me face what I cannot immediately change.”*
- Frankl’s logotherapy places the search for meaning at the centre of human life. His work provides an existential foundation for understanding resilience, rather than a single formal theory called “meaning-centred resilience.”



Meaning can be found through:

- **Contribution:** What I create, give or accomplish.
- **Encounter:** The love, relationships and experiences I receive.
- **Attitude:** The stance I take towards unavoidable suffering.

- **For a Franciscan leader:** During disappointment, reconnect with the purpose of the ministry: whom does it serve, and which Gospel values can still guide the next step?

- Meaning should also inspire action to change preventable suffering.
- **Reflection:** *“Even within these limits, what meaningful response remains possible?”*



C. Self-compassion — Kristin Neff

- *“I can acknowledge my limitations and respond to myself with care.”*
- Neff describes three elements:
- **Self-kindness:** Responding to difficulty with understanding.
- **Common humanity:** Recognising that imperfection and suffering belong to human experience.
- **Mindfulness:** Seeing painful feelings clearly without becoming overwhelmed by them.
- Self-compassion supports taking responsibility without turning a mistake into a verdict on one’s whole identity.



- **For a Franciscan leader:** After an error, say: *“This is painful. I am capable of mistakes. What must I acknowledge, repair and learn?”*

- **Reflection:** *“Can I offer myself the compassion that I offer a struggling member?”*



D.Burnout — Christina Maslach and colleagues

- *“Sustained demands can exhaust people and weaken their connection to their work.”*
- Maslach’s model identifies three dimensions:
- **Exhaustion:** Feeling emotionally and physically depleted.
- **Cynicism or depersonalisation:** Becoming detached, hardened or impersonal.
- **Reduced professional efficacy:** Feeling less effective or accomplished.



- “Chronic overload without meaning or rest” is a helpful shorthand, but it is incomplete. Burnout also relates to mismatches involving **control, recognition, community, fairness and values**.
- **For a Franciscan leader:** Use the rhythm of contemplation and action as a practical organising principle: protect prayer and rest, distribute responsibilities fairly, provide support and review excessive demands. Retreat alone cannot compensate for an persistently unhealthy workload.
- **Reflection:** *“Does our way of organising ministry allow members to recover and serve sustainably?”*





- **Emotional labour**
  The effort involved in managing outward emotional expression to fulfil a role.
  Watch for: Always appearing calm and reassuring while having no safe place to express personal distress.
- **Decision fatigue**
  Mental tiredness after sustained decision-making, which can make thoughtful choices harder.
  Watch for: Postponing important decisions or making hurried choices simply to finish.

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

ISAIAH 41:10

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Advance Empathy





3. INTERIOR FREEDOM: SINE PROPRIO

- The Franciscan heart of freedom is non-appropriation: nothing is mine, including office, success, reputation, ministry and even the good I do (Admonition 28 on not hiding or claiming God's good)
- Psychologically, this is **differentiation of self** (Bowen, and **Friedman's A Failure of Nerve**): the leader stays connected without being controlled by approval, anxiety or the need to be needed. It also fits Winnicott's true self versus false self.



- Francis's freedom shows in his obedience to the Church while refusing to be absorbed by it, and in the Sultan encounter at Damietta, where he crosses religious and political lines without fear.
- Practical test questions for a leader:
  - Do I need to be thanked?
  - Can I hand over a task and let it be done differently?
  - Can I be corrected without defensiveness?
  - Am I the same in private and in public?
- Spiritual practices that sustain freedom: daily silence, the Liturgy of the Hours, creation-centred prayer, fraternal sharing, and periodic hermitage retreats.

TO KNOW AND TO LOVE





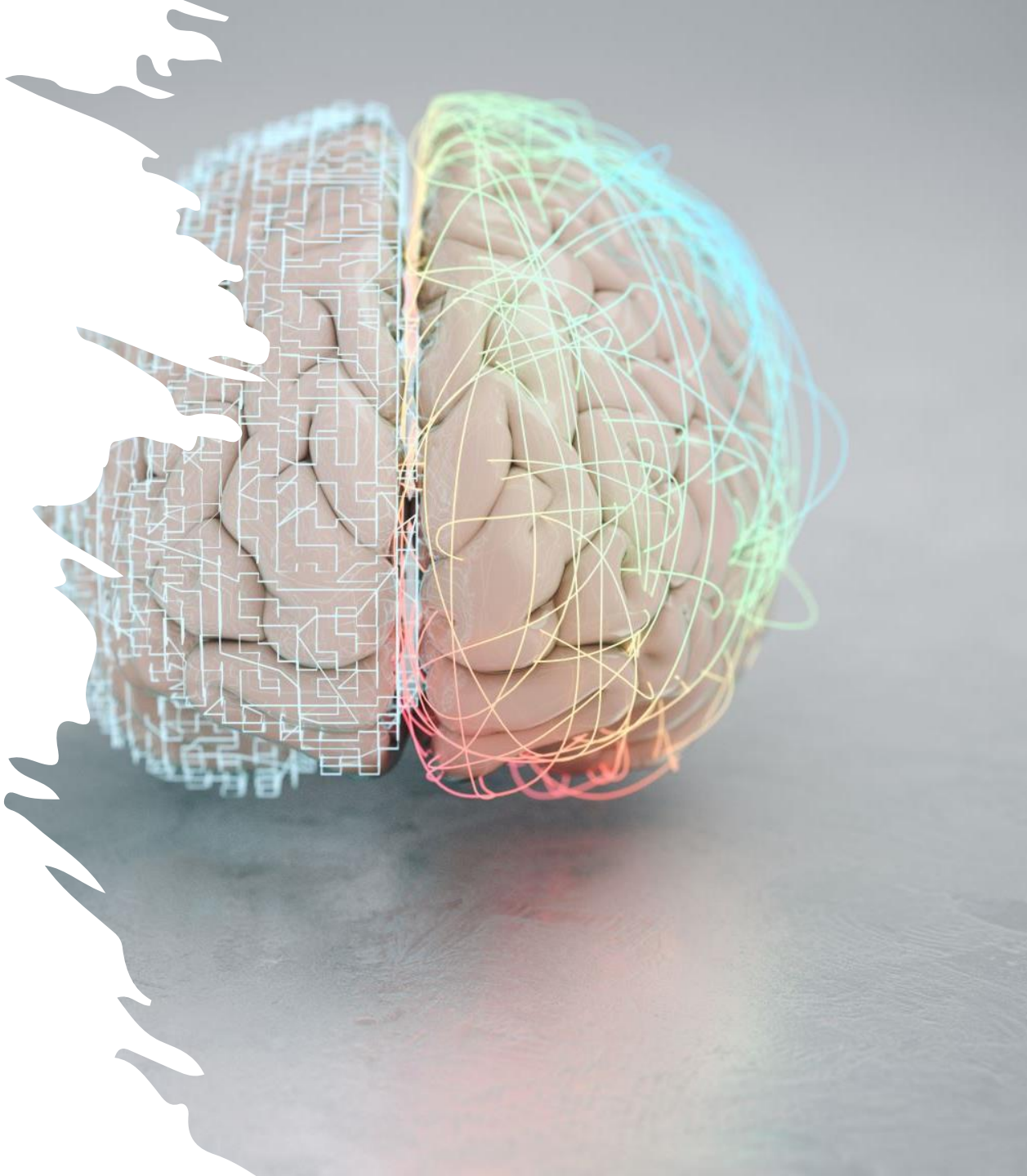
Indian witnesses:

- **St Alphonsa** (Franciscan Clarist), who endured prolonged suffering with serenity.
- **Blessed Rani Maria**, murdered in 1995 in Madhya Pradesh. Her family's reconciliation with her killer, including her sister tying a rakhi on him, is the Letter to a Minister lived out.



CATHARSIS

Brain – pain





Challenges

- **Guru-shishya and hierarchical deference:** honorifics, title-seeking and "Father-as-patriarch" culture versus Francis's refusal of titles and his "lesser brother" language.

- **Clericalism and gender:** priests holding institutional power while sisters lead the majority of apostolic work or looking down on one another
- Clare, the first woman to write a Rule for women, led for decades against papal pressure, and shows a model of strong, consultative, servant governance.



- **Honour, face-saving and silence:** obedience can slide into non-communication. Franciscan fraternal correction requires charity plus truth.
- **Caste, language and region:** South versus North or Northeast, Dalit and Adivasi members, and ageing houses alongside new vocations.
- **Fraternity means every brother and sister is a gift, not a rank.**

ADAPT

Challenges and practical responses

Challenge	Practical response
Generational differences	Mutual mentoring
Digital distraction	Protected times for prayer, meals, rest
Unequal opportunities	Explain criteria, review patterns
Leadership transitions	Prepare handovers

- **Pressure as a minority:** anti-conversion laws, funding scrutiny and communal tension call for the courage of Francis before the Sultan, not defensiveness.

- **Money and institutions:** schools, hospitals and property create the strongest temptation against sine proprio.



Practical takeaways for leaders

- **Serve before being served**
  Listen first, share ordinary tasks and wash feet through practical care.

- **Hold authority as a gift**
  Consult, share decisions and remain open to correction.



- **Address failure with mercy**
  Correct clearly, preserve dignity and support repair and learning.

- **Protect a sustainable rhythm**
  Safeguard silence, prayer and rest; build resilience into community life.



- **Examine and integrate your wounds**
  Recognise personal triggers and seek support so that unresolved pain does not drive leadership.

- **Develop others and release responsibility**
  Prepare successors, share knowledge and plan your handover from day one.



SHAPED

- **Serve before being served**
- **Hold authority as a gift**
- **Address failure with mercy**
- **Protect a sustainable rhythm**
- **Examine and integrate your wounds**
- **Develop others and release responsibility**

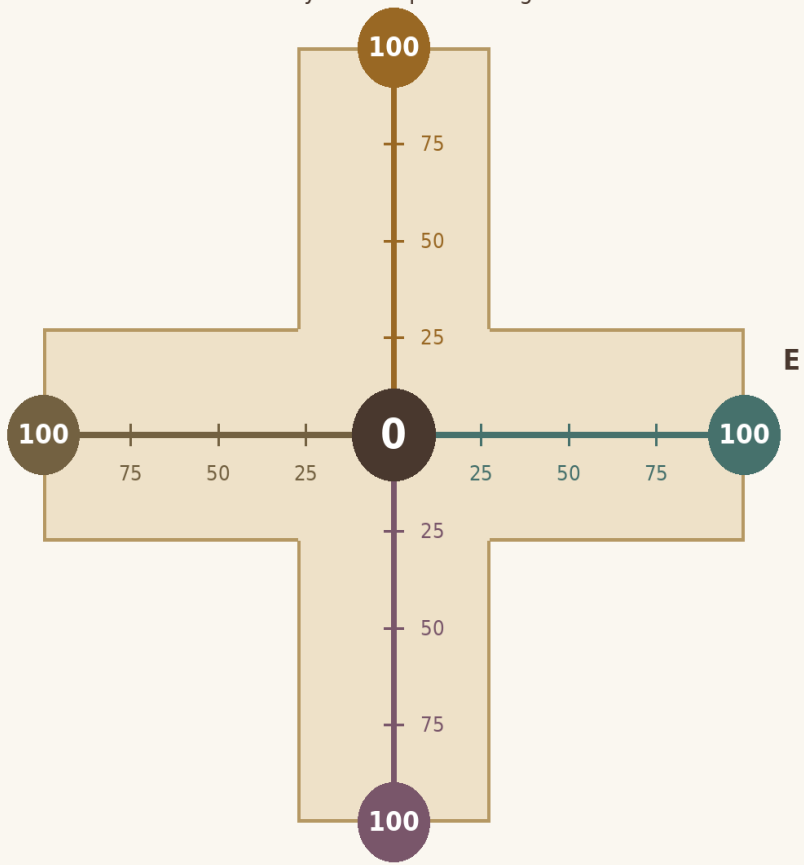


FOUR PILLARS OF FRANCISCAN LEADERSHIP

LEAD • A personal reflection

L — LOVING SERVICE

Authority that helps others grow



D — DETACHED STEWARDSHIP

Freedom to share and let go

E — EMOTIONAL MATURITY

Resilience through vulnerability

A — AUTHENTIC FRATERNITY

Relationships where everyone belongs

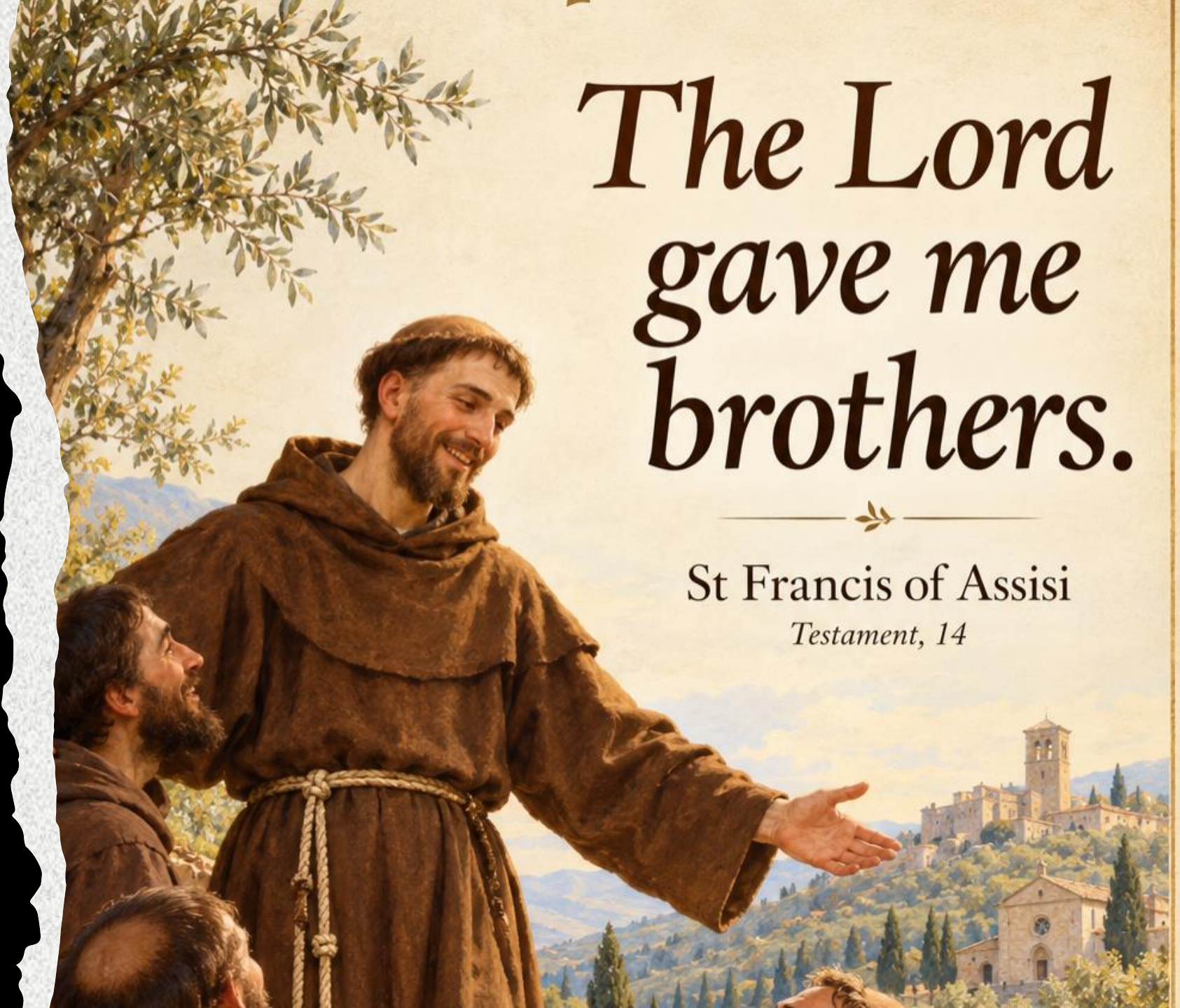
Mark your present experience on each arm: 0 at the centre • 100 at each tip

- *“A Franciscan leader is SHAPED by the Gospel—and helps shape a fraternity where people can grow.”*



- *"Francis did not lead by holding on; he led by letting go, and that is why people still follow him eight hundred years later."*




The Lord gave me brothers.
St Francis of Assisi
Testament, 14

- Lord Jesus, teach me to lead with a servant's heart.
  Give me the simplicity of Francis and the courage of Clare.
  Help me listen with love and speak truth with gentleness.
  Free me to share responsibility and rejoice in others' gifts.
  May my presence nurture peace, belonging, and hope.
  Guide our Franciscan family to walk together in your love.
  Amen.



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