ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To write a book about either Francis of Assisi or Thomas Merton is a daunting task, for each figure has and remains incredibly influential and popular within contemporary Christian circles and so much has already been said about them. What's more, both of these icons of spiritual reflection, peacemaking, and interreligious dialogue find followers outside the boundaries of the Christian community and therefore have spoken and continue to speak to a vastly eclectic audience. To write a book about *both* Francis and Merton might be viewed, therefore, as foolhardy. Nevertheless, I felt that an important part of Merton's story remained untold, and this book is my attempt to tell that story.

Not only was Merton at one time interested in Francis of Assisi, the Franciscan Order, and the Franciscan intellectual tradition, but also these things continued to influence his life, thought, and writing until his death. To show just how and to what extent this is true from biographical, theological, spiritual, and socially oriented viewpoints is the aim of this book. And it couldn't have been written without the support, enthusiasm, and challenge of many friends and colleagues, as well as the opportunity to share some of my research that ultimately contributed to this book in the form of academic presentations, lectures, and published articles.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have delivered several lectures on subjects related to this book at the Washington, DC, New York City, and Chicago chapters of the Thomas Merton Society over the years, as well as to have presented academic papers at a number of the biennial conferences of the International Thomas Merton Society and the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. A 2011 ITMS William Shannon Fellowship also permitted me to work on some research at

the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. I had the honor of being invited to deliver the 2013 Annual Ignatius Brady Memorial Lecture at St. Bonaventure University, the theme of which was related to my research for this book. Additionally, portions of chapters 5 and 6 were first presented at a religious-studies department faculty colloquium at Siena College in the spring of 2011 during my time teaching there. This material later appeared in another form as "Thomas Merton the 'Dunce': Identity, Incarnation, and the Not-So-Subtle Influence of John Duns Scotus" *(Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 47 [2012]). Likewise, an early version of the material in chapter 10 first appeared in my article "'Those Going among the Saracens and Other Nonbelievers': Thomas Merton and Franciscan Interreligious Dialogue" (*Merton Annual* 21 [2008]).

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to a number of individuals with whom I have discussed many of these themes and shared drafts of this project, and without whom I could not have completed such a book. In the Merton world, I am thankful to Paul Pearson, Mark Meade, Anne McCormick, Peggy Fox, Mary Somerville, Patrick O'Connell, Chris Pramuk, Christine Bochen, Bill Apel, Michael Brennan, Raymond Rafferty, Brenda Fitch Fairaday, David Belcastro, Gray Matthews, Kathleen Deignan, and so many others. Special thanks go to Monica Weis, S.S.J., who graciously read and commented on an early version of chapter 7; Patrick O'Connell, whose keen editorial eye caught some easily overlooked discrepancies in the manuscript; and Paul Pearson, who offered some insightful feedback about several passages. At St. Bonaventure University, Paul Spaeth, the director of the Friedsam Memorial Library (and successor to Father Irenaeus Herscher!); Sister Margaret Carney, O.S.F., the university president; and Julianne Wallace, a campus minister and dear friend, have all supported me and this project in various and invaluable ways. Thanks goes to David Golemboski, for his continued support, conversation, and friendship, which itself began when we first

met at a Merton conference in England many years ago. This litany of thanks wouldn't be complete without an expression of gratitude to Jessica Coblentz, one of my closest friends and colleagues, who was gracious enough to read nearly all of this book in its earliest stages and offer insightful comments and questions.

I owe special thanks to Patrick McGowan. In addition to being a longtime supporter of my work and writing, Patrick was the editor who saw this project through from the very beginning until its completion. He went above and beyond the call of duty when, after leaving Ave Maria Press after many years to work for another publisher, he continued working on this project in his spare time with the blessing of the publishers—this on top of moving to a new city and while anticipating the birth of his first child. Patrick is an editorial hero! Thanks also to so many others at Ave Maria Press for their support and skillful work, especially Robert Hamma and Amanda Skofstad.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my parents, Kevin and Ann Marie Horan. I am grateful for their love and support, for their many sacrifices, and for their example of the importance of faith in everybody's lives that made my brothers and me who we are today.

INTRODUCTION

On "Merton's Heart"

Thomas Merton's mind and soul might have been monastic by virtue of his embrace of Cistercian life and prayer, but his heart was undoubtedly Franciscan. It is not at first apparent, and it has long been overlooked, but among the myriad influences that combine to shape and inform the life, thought, and writing of Thomas Merton stands the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition.

It is widely known that Merton first sought to enter the Order of Friars Minor (the Franciscan friars) after discerning a vocation to religious life. Many also know that he was at first accepted into the Franciscan novitiate and shortly thereafter encouraged to withdraw his application under rather mysterious circumstances having to do with his earlier withholding of personal information during the interview process. What is not so widely recognized—in popular perceptions and scholarly studies alike—is the fact that the initial enthusiasm Merton held for St. Francis of Assisi and the way of life the medieval saint inaugurated stayed with him long after his hopes of becoming a friar were dashed.

The theologian Michael Downey—one of the few scholars who has previously noted the Franciscan influence in Merton's thought—has said that Merton's mentor and friend at Columbia University, Dan Walsh, had recognized early on in Merton

a "Franciscan spirit," something of an intuition that naturally emanated from the young convert's personality and outlook.[1] It was at Walsh's recommendation that Merton selected the Franciscans from among the manifold options available to one considering religious life in the late 1930s. But it is usually at this point, Merton's "first-round try" at religious life and subsequent disappointment at being denied access to the Franciscan community, that the well-known story of Merton's Franciscan experience ends.

It is true to say that Merton never became a Franciscan, if by "Franciscan" one means "Franciscan friar" or a member of the Order of Friars Minor. However, it is untrue to say that Merton never became a Franciscan if we understand, in the proper way, "Franciscan" to include anyone professed in one of the *three* Franciscan orders that exist. For although the saga is often told about Merton's unrealized dreams of wearing the brown habit of the friars, what is seldom told is the continuation of Merton's Franciscan story, which includes the future monk's formal entrance into the Third Order of St. Francis—popularly known as the "secular Franciscans"—during his time teaching at St. Bonaventure College (now University).[2] But this is just the beginning of the commonly overlooked thread of influence in the life, thought, and writing of Merton. Beyond the devotional and spiritual life that is usually shaped by one's commitment to the Franciscan community of the Third Order, Merton engaged in deep and passionate study of the Franciscan intellectual tradition during the same time.

Beginning under the tutelage of Walsh, Merton's exposure to and love of the Franciscan intellectual tradition led him to explore the works of St. Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus. While teaching English and literature at St. Bonaventure College, Merton was privileged to study a whole array of the foundational works of the Franciscan intellectual tradition. His journals, notes, and correspondence from that time on campus reveal a telling enthusiasm for this study. The time

during which Merton studied these texts and figures was additionally fortuitous because he "sat at the feet" of one of the twentieth century's greatest Franciscan scholars. Father Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., under whose guidance Merton read Bonaventure, Scotus, and William of Ockham, was on campus to help found the now world-famous Franciscan Institute, which today remains the preeminent center for studying the Franciscan tradition in the English-speaking world. Scholars come from all parts of the world to research, teach, and study at the institute. That Merton studied with Boehner is no small deal or incidental fact. Nearly fifteen years after he first studied the sources with St. Boehner at St. Bonaventure, Merton the monk and author recalled his impressions of Boehner and shared the impact his relationship with the friar had on him in a letter written to the then president of St. Bonaventure University, Father Thomas Plassmann, O.F.M.

> Fr. Philotheus was, I think, one of those for whom no death is "sudden." His unassuming simplicity covered what was a real and deep holiness, I am sure. Like a true Franciscan, he was one who dared to be perfectly himself with our Lord. He helped me to make a crucial decision in my life, and I shall certainly not fail him, if he needs my prayers. I hope that in the meanwhile he will continue to help me now that he is close to God and in a position to gain many graces for us on earth who knew him.
>
> The loss of "Philo" will make itself felt at St. Bonaventure and in scholarly circles everywhere. The Franciscan Institute rested on him as on a cornerstone. But no man is irreplaceable. I hope he will find a successor filled with his own ardent love for St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus—a love which I am thankful he communicated to me. I cannot say that he made me love Ockham because he never made me understand him.
>
> One thing none of us will forget about "Philo" was his truly Franciscan ardor and insight into the creatures of God. He was a true scientist, for whom natural beings

> were only a step on the ladder by which a soul rises to the contemplation of God. And he certainly had an eye for the smallest of God's creatures.[3]

These remarks to Plassmann on the occasion of Boehner's death reveal a profound sense of heartfelt appreciation for the pastoral presence, intellectual formation, and personal attention Merton received from the deceased friar.

As Merton grappled with some of scholasticism's most challenging theological and philosophical treatises, he would have gained a well-grounded knowledge of and appreciation for the Franciscan intellectual tradition. Merton would later write that although he was exposed to it (as all religious students would have been in the early twentieth century), Thomism—the neoscholastic reading of Thomas Aquinas's work that was the standard theological source and model of method at the time—really didn't appeal to him. Unlike so many of his religious peers who would likewise have been steeped in the ways of Thomistic theology, Merton also benefitted from the best possible education in the Franciscan intellectual tradition of his time, thanks to the fact that he happened to study this material at the right time, at the right place, and with the right person. In fact, given the pre–Vatican II state of seminary education in the 1930s and 1940s, which was almost exclusively reliant on the Thomistic theological manuals of the time, had Merton actually entered the Order of Friars Minor when he wanted, he would likely have had *far less* exposure to the cutting-edge Franciscan intellectual scholarship than what he had received. One could say that his not becoming a Franciscan *friar* actually provided the very condition for Merton to ultimately become *more* Franciscan in his outlook! Such a case lends much credence to the saying that "the Spirit works in mysterious ways." It certainly did in Merton's life.

The fervor with which Merton continued to show his interest about the Franciscan tradition is tremendous, even if

from time to time he was expressive about the pain he still felt about the impossibility of becoming a friar. Merton is often critical of the friars collectively in his correspondence and journals during his years teaching at St. Bonaventure but never of the tradition or of individual friars. It is commonplace for Merton to mention Francis of Assisi in his writing, to draw on the saint and his way of life as a model and goal for his own struggle to follow Christ. It is fair to say that Merton took his profession as a secular Franciscan very seriously and understood himself—spiritually at least—in terms of Franciscan life long after he made his commitment to the Third Order.

One might think that the decision to give monastic life a try would squelch Merton's earlier enthusiasm. One might logically assume that his study of the monastic theological and historical tradition as a Trappist novice and beyond would supersede his once obsessive embrace of all things "Franciscan." One might certainly anticipate a decline in the mention of Francis, Bonaventure, Scotus, and other Franciscan icons as time went on in the religious formation of this young monk. But this did not happen.

Even after his entrance into and formal profession of monastic life, Merton's life, thought, and writings continued to be shaped and informed by the Franciscan sources he had come to love. He continued to read the writings of the great Franciscan intellectuals. He continued to pray to and admire Francis of Assisi. He continued to acknowledge the Franciscan feasts that were not present on the Trappist liturgical calendar. He continued to write about the Franciscan theological and spiritual tradition in both overt and more implicit ways. He never stopped *being* a Franciscan, or at the very least, he never stopped being a *Franciscan-hearted person*. This is most notably captured in a 1966 letter Merton wrote to the young Buffalo, New York, journalist Anthony Bannon: "[I] will always feel that I am still in some secret way a son of St. Francis. There is no saint in the Church whom I admire more than St. Francis."[4]

This book aims to shed light on part of the story of Thomas Merton that has been all but entirely overlooked. I will show how Merton's heart became and remained Franciscan from his earliest days at Columbia University, to his entering the Roman Catholic Church, until his dying day on December 10, 1958, in Bangkok, Thailand. There are historical considerations to explore, such as the significance of studying the tradition with Boehner in 1940. There are theological and spiritual considerations to explore as well, such as how the Franciscan theological outlook continually appears in both Merton's published and his private work. This is no small task. The influence runs very deep, and to give it the attention it deserves requires a great deal of effort, the product of which is, I hope, this book.

Source and Location of Merton's Heart

Before I go on to explain the structure and give an overview of the content of this book, I want to add one more note about "Merton's heart." The title of this book is descriptive in that it conveys the deep-seated character of Merton's Franciscan foundations and outlook, but it is also borrowed from the name of an actual place. Overlooking the beautiful and remote campus of my alma mater, St. Bonaventure University in southwestern New York State, stands a clearing on a hillside within the Allegheny Mountains. While the hillside is otherwise covered in lush trees of the deciduous forest of the area, there is a legendary heart-shaped meadow that has affectionately become known as "Merton's Heart" over the years. The meadow was cleared for oil drilling in the early 1920s but had no longer been used for that purpose by the late 1930s when Merton arrived on campus. He was known to take walks along the hills surrounding campus, and it was from this connection that the site earned its name, long after Merton left St. Bonaventure.

A campus landmark pointed out to all visitors on tour even to this day, "Merton's Heart" is just one way the late

Trappist's memory continues to be linked to the Franciscan intellectual world. It is my hope that this book will also serve as a point of reference for those interested in learning more about Merton and what shaped his life, thought, and writing as much as the meadow named "Merton's Heart" continues to serve as a point of reference for the continued association of Merton with St. Bonaventure.

This book is not simply an academic study of the sources for a creative thinker's work. It is, I hope, a way for women and men of all backgrounds to glimpse into the life, mind, and, yes, the *heart* of a man who has inspired so many people over the decades. The Franciscan tradition has remained one of the most influential sources of spiritual guidance of the last eight hundred years, and its effect on Merton and the people he encountered was considerable.

Both Merton and the broader Franciscan tradition have shaped my own intellectual and spiritual outlook as well. I have been especially interested in the intersection of these two worlds: that of the most popular spiritual writer of the twentieth century and that of the medieval Italian saint and the movement he inspired. In taking a look at the particularly Franciscan dimensions of Merton's life, thought, and work, I hope that readers might in turn be inspired, informed, and challenged to see God, the world, and ourselves anew. To help contextualize this intersection between Francis and Merton, and to illustrate a few of the ways that this connection continues to be relevant for us today, this book takes a deliberately informal stride. Rather than offer a straightforward, and likely more boring, historical presentation of the themes and the development of Merton's thought as it was shaped by the Franciscan tradition, I will weave together stories and experiences from my own spiritual and intellectual journey as these two great traditions—the Franciscan movement and the life, thought, and writings of Thomas Merton—have touched my own Franciscan heart.

There is doubtless a deep sense in which people today are searching for the transcendent and hunger for a robust spirituality. In an age marked by constant contact with, and subsequent distraction by, information and communication technologies, the focus of our time is on the immediate and fleeting. Little popular attention is given to the eternal or deep questions of our existence. In their own times and in their own ways, Francis and Merton both struggled to discover the God who lovingly brought each into existence and continued to personally relate to all parts of creation. Our time is different from theirs, and each generation has its own challenges to faith and human flourishing. But the Christian insight of these two spiritual giants offers us a beacon of light and safety in what can often seem to be chaotic darkness. To be clear, it is not that our world is any more precarious or any less connected to God than in either Merton's or Francis's times. Rather, the distractions that vie for our attention, energy, and commitment can at times veil the truth of God's love and immanence in the world.

Merton, certainly more than Francis, was able to experience something akin to our contemporary social and spiritual landscape. His experience of the 1960s in the last decade of his life helped broaden and even redirect his attention from the contemplative and spiritual focus of his monastic vocation to the need the world continually has to hear both the good news and the challenge of Christianity. As a result, Merton began to consider how being a monk might speak to the world. From his place in the monastery he was, as my friend David Golemboski once put it, able to "pitch in" to the project of responding to the signs of the times by "dropping out" of the mainstream culture.[5] He was able to witness the reality of his day from the margins of society and contrast what he witnessed with what he knew to be God's plan for humanity and the rest of creation. He was able to *follow his heart*, inspired by the prophetic witness of Francis of Assisi and the broader Christian tradition to speak truth to power, cry out against injustice, and remind

women and men to recall their divine calling as reflections of God's image and likeness.

What Francis was for Merton, Merton can become for us.

Both continually challenge me to be a better Christian, a better human person. I can say that there have been no greater spiritual influences in my life—apart, of course, from scripture and God in Jesus Christ. Merton doesn't simply serve as a conduit of latent Franciscan spirituality and theology but instead models for me a particular way to approach, appropriate, and live out the saint from Assisi's wisdom and guidance. Merton was also deeply informed and shaped by other Christian and non-Christian spiritual, intellectual, and cultural giants throughout his life. Yet his ability to form a mosaic of Christian inspiration, what some contemporary sociologists call a spiritual *bricolage*,[6] can serve as an example for us today. He was extraordinarily attentive and generous in his reading and correspondence with all sorts of people. Over time, Merton realized that the Holy Spirit speaks to the hearts of women and men in manifold ways, and not simply by means of stereotypically "Christian" forms. His openness to discerning the Spirit in all things anticipated the Second Vatican Council's profound declaration that there is in other religions and in other aspects of the modern world truth that all Christians could discover.

> Other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all [women and men].[7]

As we will see, especially in chapter 9, part of what Merton gleaned from the lived example of Francis of Assisi were tools and ways of approaching the world that allowed him to be

more open, more generous, and more fully human in relationship with others. Merton's ecumenical and interfaith experiences were ahead of his time, yet anticipatory in the way they presciently presaged our universal Christian call toward fuller communion with all women and men.

In our time, Merton's model of Christian living has provided a helpful clue in my own understanding of what it means to follow the holy Gospel of Jesus Christ by following in the footprints of Francis of Assisi. Imperfect as my ongoing and lifelong attempt to do this is, I am encouraged by Merton's own struggles, successes, and journey. May you likewise find inspiration, challenge, and guidance in our deeper exploration of this part of Merton's life, thought, and writings.

Mapping the Way to Merton's Heart

This book is organized into four major parts. The first part offers a brief overview of the lives and contexts of Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton in chapters 1 and 2 respectively. For those who are already fairly familiar with either or both of these figures, it might be more interesting to move directly to part two.

Part two presents a new look at and closer examination of the events in Merton's early life around the time of his conversion to Catholicism and during his initial discernment of a vocation to religious life and the priesthood. This period in Merton's life has been largely misunderstood or reduced to caricature. Few are familiar with the many factors that come together to help illuminate our understanding for what really took place from the time Merton approached the Franciscan friars with a desire to enter the community until he finally entered religious life at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani nearly two years later. Chapter 3 offers the most comprehensive examination of what happened in New York City and at St. Bonaventure University that led to his eventual withdrawal from Franciscan life. Chapter 4 introduces readers to three of

the most significant figures and mentors in Merton's life during this time, each of whom was a Franciscan friar working at St. Bonaventure and all of whom helped guide Merton to what would become the realization of his true monastic vocation. Additionally, during this time, Merton studied and engaged the Franciscan theological, philosophical, and spiritual traditions in a way that indelibly shaped his life, thought, and writing.

Part three is a section dedicated to three of the areas of faith and spirituality in which Merton was most influenced by the Franciscan tradition. In chapter 5, we look anew at what is likely Merton's most famous insight, namely, the "true self." While this concept has inspired and positively challenged women and men for years ever since the publication of *Seeds of Contemplation*, few people are familiar with its explicitly Franciscan roots. Originally, Merton planned this book to be about the thought of the medieval Franciscan John Duns Scotus. While that never panned out in the way initially slated, the influence of Scotus remains the most central aspect of this text. In chapter 6, we look at how Merton's views on the Incarnation were shaped by the Franciscan tradition. Again, the mark of Scotus is found along with the Christocentric worldview of Bonaventure. In chapter 7, the most typically "Franciscan theme" of creation comes to the fore. Merton was especially drawn to the natural world and reflected on creation in ways that mirror several aspects of the Franciscan tradition, particularly its emphasis on humanity's kinship with the rest of the created order and God's presence in and through creation.

Part four focuses on the ways in which the Franciscan tradition helped shape Merton's views of the world. In chapter 8, we look at the theme of prophecy and how St. Francis and Bonaventure both informed Merton's self-understanding of the Christian vocation to be a prophet and how this was reflected in Merton's own life. In chapter 9, we see how St. Francis served as the paradigmatic model of interreligious

dialogue for Merton. Merton's own approach to other faith traditions, something for which he is remembered for today, mirrored the example St. Francis and the tradition that bears his name. In chapter 10, we explore how the Franciscan tradition helped inform Merton's sense of Christian peacemaking and nonviolence. Rather than a vocation or calling for a select few, both St. Francis and Merton recognized this as a central tenet of Christian living for all people.

After a short conclusion, this book closes with an appendix containing a lengthy prayer written by Merton in his journal from 1941.

PART I

Two Kindred Hearts

CHAPTER 1

The Medieval Mendicant: Francis of Assisi

Everybody knows something about Francis of Assisi, or at least everybody *thinks* they know something about him. The popular stories of this medieval saint are fascinating and, at times, unbelievable. In some instances what is told of the *poverello* (little poor man) from Assisi, as he's sometimes called, borders on the absurd.

"He loved animals," people like to say when first asked what they know about Francis. Or, "He loved poverty," which is something I hear a lot from members of other religious communities that understand what makes the Franciscans "different" from their respective religious orders has something to do with this attitude in the world. And both of these responses and the intuitions about who Francis was and what he was about are true—sort of.

Francis of Assisi, we could say, did love animals but not in the same way that we might think of the love for a pet or the way children love a petting zoo. Slowly and over time, he came to have an incredibly capacious understanding of the inherent dignity and value of all of creation. His increasingly

mystical consciousness of our interrelatedness with creation and the ethical implications contained therein reached its zenith with Francis's most famous writing: "The Canticle of the Creatures."[1] But, like his life more broadly, the canticle is often misunderstood or turned into an easily sung caricature. The richness and profundity of this poetic prayer is not generally appreciated for its complexity but seen in a romantic light and with rose-colored glasses. As we'll see later in this book, the way that Francis's view of creation is really presented has tremendous implications. His way of viewing the world has, in part, inspired millions of women and men to shift their understanding of what it means to be a part of and care for the rest of the created order. It certainly influenced Thomas Merton.

As for the issue of poverty, it is true that Francis desired that he and his brothers should live *sine proprio* (without anything of one's own). But he didn't value poverty for its own sake, nor did he hold what most people think of when they hear poverty as a good. Like many modern models of holiness, such as Dorothy Day and Catherine de Heuck Doherty, Francis saw the latent injustices that are perpetuated by economic systems. He detested abject poverty and was moved to action by the dehumanizing effects that this type of poverty and social marginalization has on the poor and voiceless of society. It was, in large part, this ongoing experience and awareness that allowed him to understand better what Jesus' life of itinerancy and evangelical poverty meant for all Christians. Francis would strive to follow in the footprints of Jesus Christ, who said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). Yes, Francis loved poverty but in a way very different than we might initially think and in such a manner that a statement so simple could never adequately portray.

Love of animals and poverty are just two examples of the myriad aspects of Francis's life that need to be examined more closely. To take such simplified characteristics as the whole

picture is to reduce the uniqueness, originality, and inspirational life that has inspired and continues to inspire millions of women and men, Christians and non-Christians, and believers and unbelievers for centuries. To stop at the level of love of animals or poverty, or any other similar descriptor, is to mistake the life of someone who indelibly inspired and shaped the life, thought, and writing of Thomas Merton for a plaster man in a garden birdbath. Such a pallid depiction of Francis lacks the color and life of one of *Time* magazine's ten most important personalities of the last millennium.[2]

In this chapter we'll take an all-too-short look at the life of Francis of Assisi. For those for whom knowledge of Francis's life is old hat, feel free to skip ahead. But for many, the general contours of the *poverello*'s life have been passed over and replaced by caricature and fiction. To understand *what* about this man and the tradition that bears his name centuries later was so influential for Thomas Merton, we need to have some basic understanding of *who* he was.

Neither a Sinner nor a Saint

Toward the end of his life, Francis is remembered to have told the brothers that were caring for him in his illness, "The Lord has shown me what was mine to do, may He show you what is yours to do." The process of coming to discern what God desired for Francis's life, what we might in other terms call his "vocation," begins in a way similar to every other person's journey in life. In so many ways, Francis of Assisi was just like you and me. He entered this world neither a sinner nor a saint but a person created in the image and likeness (*imago Dei*) of a loving God. Like all of us, he sinned and broke relationships, thought of himself at times before thinking of others, and almost surely made decisions throughout his life that he would later regret. Yet, also like all of us, there was something inherently good in Francis that was expressed in his love for family and friends, his chivalrous desire to make his