

# The Admonitions of St. Francis: Implications for Servant and Transformational Leaders

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Saint Francis of Assisi, a Catholic monk whose admiration extends beyond Catholicism, is credited with founding three Franciscan orders, including the Order of Friars Minor, the Poor Clares, and the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (House, 2001). In addition to rules for these orders, St. Francis is also known for penning other guidelines at various times in his life that have been compiled and are referred to as Admonitions (Karris, 1999). This paper seeks to examine four of the Admonitions using argumentative content analysis and then comparing them with servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and transformation leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990) for application by organizational leaders. To understand better the writings of Saint Francis, it is important to gain an overview of his life and some of the core values that helped shape his views of God, the Church, and individuals' responsibilities to the world around them.

## Who was Saint Francis?

Saint Francis was born in 1182 to a mercantile family in Assisi, located in central Italy (House, 2001). He spent much of his youth seeking adventure and spending his father's money prior to experiencing an encounter with God when kneeling before a crucifix at San Damiano Church outside of Assisi (House, 2001). House (2001) notes "when Francis began to pray he heard a voice speaking tenderly to him. 'Francis, don't you see that my house has collapsed? Go and repair it for me.'" (p. 64). Believing this to be the voice of God, Francis prayed, "Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command" (Armstrong, Hellmann, & Short, 1999, p. 40). Taking the voice's command literally, Francis began to make physical repairs to the church at San Damiano. It was not until later that Francis discerned his calling was to help restore the spiritual condition of the Catholic Church instead of the physical disrepair of church buildings (House, 2001).

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Much like his literal interpretation of the voice's command to San Damiano, Francis utilized this same method in his approach to scripture. He once heard a priest deliver a homily and recite Christ's command to his disciples "as you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff....As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it..." (Mat. 10:7-13, NIV). Upon hearing these words, Francis, accepting them as commands still requires of Christ's followers and "immediately gave away his second cloak, his hat, his staff, his sandals, and exchanged his leather belt for a length of rope" (House, 2001, p. 77). This same simplicity of faith influences Francis's fervency for holiness, virtue, and poverty that guided his ministry and his desire for his followers, as reflected in his Admonitions.

Francis exemplified a life of faith and depended upon God to provide for his needs through the compassion of others while he ministered among the poor and lepers, with whom he felt called to live (House, 2001). His passion was to fulfill God's call to rebuild the Church, and he worked to this end until his death in 1226 at age 44 (House, 2001). Two years later he was canonized expeditiously as a saint in the Catholic Church (House, 2001).

#### Importance of the Admonitions

The Admonitions are a written record resembling closely the life of St. Francis. In a very practical sense, the Admonitions are an outflow of his life and calling that offer instruction to his followers. He was primarily a servant, both of God and others. However, because of his example and teaching, St. Francis served a transformational role within the early Christian Church. Even today, almost 800 years after his death, his Franciscan orders continue to actively minister throughout the world as transformational servants. The Admonitions, which were written throughout St. Francis's life, were meant as exhortations to encourage and guide the Franciscan brothers in their vocation (Francis, n.d./1976, ¶1), but since have become well-received beyond the Franciscan orders. They outline the way in which St. Francis perceived followers of Christ should live and serve the world around them. In addition, by reflecting on the Admonitions within an organizational leadership context, they provide helpful insight, specifically concerning servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990), to help leaders and followers become more effective in the organizational process.

#### Argumentative analysis

An argumentative content analysis is one method of socio-rhetorical criticism. Robbins (1996) notes that "ancient rhetoricians observed that stories as well as speeches used argumentative devices to persuade the reader to think and act in one way rather than another" (p. 21). According to Robbins, this was accomplished by identifying reasons, opposites, and citing from respected written testimony. When studying the Admonitions of St. Francis using argumentative texture analysis, it is evident that the aforementioned characteristics were utilized by St. Francis, whether knowingly or not. For example, Armstrong and Brady (1982) note "many of [Francis's writings] simply echo the teaching

of the Church, particularly the Fourth Lateran Council, and the reflections that emerged from his gatherings with the brothers” (p. 7).

This qualitative approach provides new evidence as the text continues. For example, each Admonition tends to begin with a scriptural reference or the citation of a respected written testimony of the Catholic Church, which would have been known by learned individuals within Catholicism during that time period. In doing so, St. Francis seeks to build a strong foundation as the basis for his argument concerning the logical nature for the Admonition. In addition, Robbins (1996) explains argumentative texture “gives reasons for events to happen as they do. In some instances, the reasons are so explicit that a reader perceives them to be logical. In other instances, the reasons are implicit, part of the innate qualities of people, circumstances, and images that persuade people to accept their plausibility” (p. 29).

#### *Argument for following Christ's example*

Karris (1999) proposes that St. Francis begins his first Admonition by acknowledging the supremacy of Christ and that the other Admonitions flow from this premise as a means to help others exemplify Christ in their own life. Therefore, an argumentative analysis of the Admonitions as a whole suggests:

**Major premise:** The life of Jesus Christ provides the example which His followers are to emulate in continuing the work which He began when He was on the earth. It is only through Him that His followers are able to live godly and obtain eternal life.

**Minor premise:** The words of Christ are referenced to acknowledge that Christ's teaching: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6, NIV).

**Conclusion:** Therefore, St. Francis admonishes that Christ is the supreme example by which His followers should model His characteristics in their own life and actions, especially by serving others, receiving correction, avoiding envy, discerning between true and false religious devotion and practice, and reflecting humility, love, patience, obedience, and purity.

#### *Lessons for contemporary leaders*

In addition, the Admonitions can be analyzed argumentatively on an individual basis concerning their congruency with a given leadership style. The Admonitions provide an almost equal number of examples of the servant and transformational leadership approaches, both of which seek to develop followers as leaders. While it is presumptuous to suggest that these are the only two leadership approaches present in the Admonitions, they are exemplified in the writings and explanations provided by St. Francis. In addition, it can be argued that in some cases St. Francis even moves beyond these two leadership styles. Nonetheless, the Admonitions can be modified to provide beneficial advice for contemporary organizational leaders.

*Servant leadership.* Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) focuses on what is best for the follower, regardless of whether or not it is in the best interest of the organization. Greenleaf (1977) proposes that servant leaders are individuals who first realize their desire to serve and then choose to

lead. St. Francis's lifestyle is congruent with this example, and his servant leadership is evident in several of his Admonitions. For example, Admonitions 4 and 22 provide examples of how individuals can serve others, both openly and through inward reflection. Specifically, Admonition 22 emphasizes the importance of receiving correction, which can lead to increased humility and inwardly serving others, even if the correction is unmerited.

Admonition # 4: That no one should appropriate to himself the office of superior

"I did not come "to be ministered unto, but to minister" (cf. Mt 20:28), says the Lord. Let those, who are set up over others, glory as much because of that office of superior, as if they had been appointed to the office of washing the feet of the brothers. And in as much as they are more disturbed because of having lost their office of superior than because of (having lost) the office regarding feet, so much more do they assemble purses for themselves to the danger of their souls (cf. John 12:6)" (Francis, n.d./1976, ¶8).

**Major Premise:** Individuals in superior positions should regard that position with equal importance as if they were serving others by washing their feet.

**Minor Premise:** Christ came to serve, not to be served (Mat. 20:28).

**Conclusion:** St. Francis admonishes that one is not following Christ's example as a servant if he or she is more concerned with losing a position and the potential income connected with that position than being concerned with losing an opportunity to serve others.

Admonition #22: On correction

"Blessed (is) the servant who would endure discipline, accusations and rebuke as patiently from another as from his very self. Blessed (is) the servant, who having been rebuked, acquiesces kindly, submits meekly, confesses humbly and makes satisfaction freely. Blessed (is) the servant, who is not swift to excuse himself and humbly endures shame and rebuke because of a sin, where he has not committed (any) fault" (Francis, n.d./1976, ¶26).

**Major Premise:** Christ, when condemned unjustly, refused to retaliate or defend Himself, but He was willing to endure persecution and rebuke in His example as a servant.

**Minor Premise:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Conclusion:** Therefore, a true servant is one who is concerned more with serving others than being defended when receiving correction, whether or not he or she is deserving of reproof.

*Transformational leadership.* Transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990), focuses on the way in which leaders and followers work together to reach goals in a manner that encourages the reciprocal development of both leaders and followers, but not at the expense of failing to meet organizational goals. This is accomplished specifically by (a) leaders' idealized influence (or charisma attributed to them by followers), (b) leaders' individual consideration of followers (including provision of direct assistance as needed), (c) intellectual stimulation in considering new approaches to attain

goals and complete tasks, and (d) inspirational motivation to continue one's work and advancement in fulfilling goals.

St. Francis's depicts qualities of a transformational leader by his interactions with his followers, especially by entering into community with them and focusing on the reciprocal nature of fulfilling their mission together. For example, Admonition 5 offers a new way of looking at good works manifest in the life of an individual, while Admonition 9 reinforces the idea that loving forgiveness should replace feelings of vengeance.

Admonition #5: That no one should be proud, but rather glory in the Cross of the Lord

“Be attentive, oh man, to how many excellent things the Lord God has placed in you, since He created and formed you “to the image” of His own Beloved Son according to the body “and to (His) likeness” according to the spirit (cf. Gen 1:26). And all the creatures, which are under heaven, after you serve, know and obey their Creator better than you. And even the demons did not crucify Him, but you with them have crucified Him and even now you crucify (Him) by delighting in vices and sins. Whence therefore can you glory? For if you were so subtle and wise that you had “all knowledge” (cf. 1 Cor 13:2) and knew how to interpret every “kind of tongue” (cf. 1 Cor 12:28) and to search subtly after celestial things, in all these things you cannot glory; since one demon knew of celestial things and now knows of earthly things more than all men, (even) granted that there has been someone, who received from the Lord a special understanding of the highest wisdom. Similarly even if you were more handsome and wealthy than all and even if you were working miracles, as would put demons to flight, all those things are injurious to you and nothing (about them) pertains to you and you can glory in them not at all. But in this we can glory, “in” our “infirmities” (cf. 2 Cor 12:5) and bearing each day the Holy Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Lk 14:27)” (Francis, n.d./1976, ¶9).

**Major Premise:** Through Christ's suffering on the Cross and subsequent resurrection from the dead, His power provides the supernatural work while individuals are only the channels through which His power is manifested.

**Minor Premise:** Individuals are not to glory in knowledge, spiritual gifting, or social status.

Rather, they are to glory in their suffering and persecution as an extension of Christ's ministry.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, St. Francis provides a new way of understanding the use of spiritual gifts by admonishing that no individual has the right to boast because of any level of knowledge or spiritual works that are performed through their ministry because those works are performed by God and made possible through the work of Christ on the Cross. Instead, individuals should understand their role is to live as Christ lived, which is often unrewarding and filled with some form of suffering or persecution.

Admonition #9: On love

“The Lord says: “Love our enemies; [do good to those who hate you, and pray on behalf of those who are persecuting and calumniating you]” (Mt 5:44). For he truly love his enemy, who does not grieve because of the injury, which he did to him, but, concerning the sin against his own soul, burns for the sake of the love of God. And he shows love for him from (his) works” (Francis, n.d./1976, ¶13).

**Major Premise:** Individuals have a choice whether or not they will be offended by others’ actions against them.

**Minor Premise:** Christ commanded His followers to “love your enemies” (Mat. 5:44).

**Conclusion:** St. Francis promotes the idea of individual consideration by admonishing his followers to serve others by refusing to be offended and, instead, love them with deeds. Forgiveness, then, becomes a tool to transform one’s own self and that of another.

Conclusion

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