Pandemic Reflections:

St. Francis and the Lepers Catch Up with COVID

Edited by

Geoffrey Karabin

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Dedications

This book is dedicated to four individuals without whom this project would have never begun, let alone come to fruition.

To my loving and beautiful wife Kristin, whose sacrifices and commitment have made this work and my career possible. To my father Gregory, whose conviction, courage, and willingness to engage in debate has helped shape my teaching and spurred my academic development. I would also like to thank two academic mentors and friends. William Desmond was a critical source of wisdom and encouragement during my master's and then doctoral journey. Thomas Busch, whose classes, conversations, and dissertation direction, helped to develop not only my thinking but my character.

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This specific project developed in consultation with others, and I would be remiss not to mention my debt of gratitude to them. Whether it be in the form of encouragement, critical analysis, further insight, or providing opportunities to share the project, I would like to extend a sincere thanks to the following members of the Neumann University community: John Mizzoni, Philip Pegan, Joseph Glass, Alfred Mueller, Sister Mary Ann McCarthy, Sister Kathleen Moffatt, and Sister Suzanne Mayer. I would also like to thank Debi Haug and the AFCU Franciscan Fridays series. Finally, I would like to extend a special thanks to Sister Patricia Hutchison for her help in exploring Franciscan resources relevant to the project and for Sister Diane Tomkinson whose editorial insights and reservoir of knowledge were indispensable.

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Editor's Introduction

Geoffrey Karabin

Genesis and Scope of the Project

As an Ethics professor at Neumann University—a small Franciscan school located just outside of Philadelphia—the story of St. Francis and the lepers' embrace took on sudden pertinence in early 2020. At that moment, we embarked on a shared and fractious journey through the COVID-19 pandemic. In the classroom, Francis and the lepers' embrace took on living relevance as we explored questions such as: What is one to make of an individual whose iconic act was to embrace those with a deadly and infectious disease? Is he a model to be followed and, if so, what would that mean in the time of COVID-19? Does his example reveal something misguided in our reaction to the virus or does Francis offer a cautionary tale to be avoided? In the bluntest of terms, should we view Francis as a religious fanatic and/or was our reaction to COVID-19 fanatical?

Such questions speak to the fecundity and perplexity of following Francis and taking his actions seriously. They also speak to the animating principle of this collection—to bring Francis and the lepers' embrace (what I will hereafter refer to as "the embrace") into conversation with the COVID-19 pandemic. The impetus for such a conversation is twofold. The pandemic provides an occasion to reconsider the meaning and legacy of Francis, while the example of Francis allows one to reflect upon the meaning and legacy of the contemporary response to the pandemic. Underlying both considerations is the question of how one ought to live and evaluate life during a time of disease and death.

The pertinence of the conversation begins with Francis' renown as a rare figure who transcends religious and social silos. The religious historian Mary Heimann echoes a common assessment of Francis: "The poor man of

Assisi has come to seem universal: a saint for all times and places."[1] John Elliot Ross writes that "Francis of Assisi was such an outstanding figure and such a lovable character, that he has been canonized not only by the Catholic Church but, as it were, by the popular acclaim of the whole world."[2] Francis' charismatic personality and remarkable life's journey generate his broad-based appeal and serve as a source of his enduring influence. In continuing to impact both contemporary Christianity and the world at large, Francis stands out as a relevant and important source of reflection in confronting the viral crisis that engulfed our present age.

A second reason for bringing Francis into conversation with the COVID-19 pandemic is the way in which Francis' ministry was intertwined with an epidemic. As fellow contributor Brenda Abbott notes:

> Despite the considerable differences in their nature, there are several possible points of comparison between the leprosy epidemic of the Middle Ages and the current COVID-19 pandemic: fear of a virulent disease, isolation, lack of care, fear of death, mental anguish, physical and mental abuse, and marginalization faced by people the world over.[3]

Having lived in an era when leprosy menaced his society and with a ministry that was intertwined with service to and a life shared with lepers, Francis provides an example of how to live in the presence of a communicable and lethal pathogen. While a number of contributing authors note, as does Abbott, the importance of attending to historical differences between the ages,[4] it is fair to conclude that the "saint for all

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[1] Mary Heimann, "The Secularisation of St. Francis of Assisi," British Catholic History 33, no. 3 (2017): 402.

[2] John Elliot Ross, C.S.P., *Francis of Assisi: Saint and Social Reformer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1943).

[3] All quotes taken directly from contributor essays to this volume will be marked with block quotes or quotation marks, but there will be no additional citation/footnoting.

[4] After the initial quote, Abbott goes on: "To ask how Francis would have responded to our present-day situation is, of course, anachronistic and in that sense impossible to answer, but that does not make reflection on the matter futile." In Heidi Giebel's chapter, she writes that "our early fear of COVID-19 was much like Francis' fear of leprosy. First and most obviously, both illnesses are communicable and potentially deadly. Second…victims of both were subject to government-enforced quarantines. One obvious

times and places" is worthy of special attention in this time and place. Fellow contributor Maureen Day puts the point well:

> A global twenty-first century pandemic that costs countless lives, stalls economies, and isolates households. A medieval son of a merchant who offers mercy to a leper near Assisi. Although these two stories share some obvious similarities (e.g., disease) and differences (e.g., socio-historical context), there is untapped wisdom in Francis' story that should inform our reflection and response not only to this pandemic, but also our relationship with one another on the interpersonal and global scale.

Given the gravity of the pandemic experience and the social fractures associated with it, a personality as provocative and yet simultaneously conciliatory as Francis is one with whom our present society ought to be in dialogue. It is also a personality which those in Franciscan communities ought to revisit as the circumstances of each era demand renewed consideration of a tradition's guiding figure(s).

With the pertinence of the subject-matter as a foundation, it's worth noting the value of this work as an act of scholarship. While the embrace as well as Francis' ministry to lepers is a reoccurring topic of discussion within Franciscan scholarship, there have been astoundingly few studies that make this dimension of Francis' life their focus. This lack is noteworthy, even shocking, given the prominence of the embrace in Francis' life as well as the sheer volume of scholarship devoted to him. Speaking to the prominence of the embrace, fellow contributor Jean-François Godet-Calogeras writes:

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difference between the two cases is their separation by centuries' worth of progress in technology, economics, and communication. Our ability to…meet our physical needs with minimal face-to-face interaction made mass quarantining possible—and, for many of us, worsened its effect." From Barbara Spies chapter, she writes of Brother Tony, who "saw the [COVID-19] experiences as just a hint of what it must have been like for Francis…we got a glimpse of what Francis and his society would have confronted for [a] much longer period of time, the uncertainty of 'what is this disease,' 'how was it transmitted,' 'how to control it.'"

> The experience was…fully real and concrete. Something happened that changed the course of his life, something which caused him to leave the world of Assisi. What happened was between him, God, and the lepers outside Assisi. What happened was the turning point between being in sin and doing penance, between bitterness and sweetness.

Another contributor, Mark Lambert, writes of how "Francis' *Testament*, a text he appraises as on equal footing with the Rule—indeed the hermeneutical key for properly understanding the Rule, begins with his encounter with leprosy sufferers. Leprosy plays a pivotal role in his self-presentation of his faith journey."[5] Having considered the embrace as the "turning point" of his existence,[6] a concerted effort to reflect upon Francis' relationship with lepers is overdue. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to address a lacuna in Franciscan scholarship.

Justifying the reality of a lacuna, one can begin with the fact that, in my research, there is only one book[7] devoted to Francis' life with lepers. This book focuses on the medical question as to whether Francis contracted leprosy. In asking how one ought to live during a pandemic given the embrace and how one ought to assess Francis given our pandemic experience, this collection is oriented in a socio-political and ethical direction. In turning to scholarly articles dedicated to the theme of Francis' life with lepers, a review of the major Franciscan journals and periodicals reveals a paucity of attention. I could not locate any articles focusing on

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[5] Exhibiting a nuanced understanding of the embrace's centrality to Francis' conversion, fellow contributor Mark Lambert writes that, while "[t]he identification of Francis' conversion point will become a matter of contention in the hagiographic tradition…the *Testament* unequivocally links this moment to leprosy and Francis' perceptual or 'aesthetic' shift."

[6] Duane Arnold and C. George Fry note that "to the day of his death [Francis]…would recall the incident as a turning point in his life" See Duane Arnold and C. George Fry, *Francis: A Call to Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Cantilever Books, 1988), 36. The Franciscan scholar, Allan Wolter, makes the point that "Francis himself, in reviewing his spiritual Odyssey…could date its beginning to the discovery of Christ in the person of the leper." See Allan Wolter, *The Book of Life: An Explanation of the Rule of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis* (Allegany, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1954), 102.

[7] Joanne Schatzlein and Daniel Sulmasy, "The Diagnosis of St. Francis: Evidence for Leprosy," *Franciscan Studies* 47 (1987): 181-217.

Francis and lepers in the volumes of *The Way*, *Friar,* and, most recently, *The AFCU Journal*. *Franciscan Studies* contains one article specifically devoted to Francis and the lepers. However, the article, "The Diagnosis of St. Francis: Evidence for Leprosy,"[8] is a precursor to the aforementioned book devoted to Francis' life with lepers. *Greyfriars Review* contains one article[9] devoted to Francis and the lepers, while *The Cord*, with two to six articles,[10] represents the greatest repository of academic work focused upon this subject matter.

Prior to moving beyond a discussion of the embrace in the overarching Franciscan literature, several articles/book chapters are noteworthy in that they highlight the relevance of Francis' relationship with lepers to the AIDs pandemic. Sister Joanne Schatzlein (fellow contributor) and Daniel Sulmasy note that, in "the mid to late 1980s when the HIV/AIDS epidemic burst upon the scene…Those who were afflicted with this disease had become the lepers of our day…Many Franciscans heard the call to embrace persons with HIV/AIDS as…central to the[ir] charism."[11] In Paul Crowley's article, "Rahner's Christian Pessimism," he defines "AIDS" as "the contemporary leper's bell for theology," which leads to the recognition "that often enough the way to a deeper apprehension of God points to a direction far different from the one we are trained to take."[12] The value of these studies, as well as others,[13] is that they highlight the relevance of

[8] See immediately preceding footnote.

[9] I reference the *Greyfriars* article from Luciano Canonici, "Leper, Leprosarium," Dizionario Francescano (Padova, 1995) trans. Anthony M. Carrozzo, OFM in *Greyfriars Review* 9, no. 3 (1995): 247-258.

[10] I say between two and six because two of the articles clearly fit into the paradigm of traditional academic articles. Three of the articles constitute personal reflections regarding the story of Francis and the leper. The other article makes the case for moving beyond associating Francis' care for the marginalized solely or primarily in terms of his care for lepers. It is also worth mentioning that one can find articles in *The Cord* that study some of the Franciscan women who were most notable for their care of lepers, namely, Mother Marianne Cope and Angela of Foligno.

[11] Joanne Schatzlein, OSF and Daniel Sulmasy, *Francis the Leper: Faith, Medicine, Theology, and Science* (Phoenix, AZ: Tau Publishing, 2014), 12.

[12] Paul Crowley, "Rahner's Christian Pessimism: A Response to the Sorrow of AIDS," *Theological Studies* 58, no. 2 (1997): 307.

[13] See also Victoria Masterpaul, "AIDS: An Invitation to Diminish Suffering," *The Cord* 39, no. 9 (1989): 261-275. One could also reference the prominent Franciscan scholar and

Francis' life with lepers to the health crisis of their time and remind readers that Francis is a man of pandemic times.

As part of the general introduction, the collective nature of the text deserves comment. Ironically, the collection brings together 19 thinkers. The contributors are both seasoned, well-known Franciscan scholars as well as junior and non-Franciscan thinkers. Together, they explore the relationship between Francis, the lepers, and COVID-19 across a variety of disciplines and worldviews. Naming some of the disciplines and worldviews found within the collection, one encounters theology, philosophy, sociology, spirituality, history, psychology, linguistics, and healthcare/nursing perspectives. An interdisciplinary effort is an apt way to explore the depths as well as highlight the breadth of such subject matter. A collection of such essays is warranted, perhaps even demanded, given the profundity of Francis' example and the complexities of the pandemic.

The contributors to this collection have begun a dialog that is ripe with possibility. My hope is that the collection will generate further conversations both within and outside the Franciscan community. In further developing such a dialog, Francis' relationship with lepers ought not to be restricted to the pandemic. There is interesting work that could be carried out when thinking about how the embrace contributes to analysis of subjects such as gender identity, economics, power structures, including within the Church, and a host of other contemporary controversies and issues.

A Narrative of the Contributors

The essays in the collection are grouped according to four themes: "Historical Francis," "Contemporary Reactions," "Followers of Francis," and "Theological Reflections." The first section includes essays focused upon historical accounts of the embrace. Understanding the context of the embrace and how that context contributes to an understanding of Francis are focal points of these reflections and the basis from which their authors

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fellow contributor, William Short, *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 80.

offer socio-political commentary. The next section contains essays that examine contemporary reactions to the pandemic. These examinations take shape within social, personal, and healthcare frameworks. "Followers of Francis" highlights both historical and contemporary Franciscans. Historical Franciscan figures, such as Mother Marianne Cope, Father Damien, and Angela of Foligno, illustrate distinct ways of living out the embrace. Accounts of contemporary Franciscans emerge from first person reflections as well as interviews with those who heeded the call of Francis in the midst of the pandemic. "Theological Reflections" culminates the collection with two essays that utilize theological analysis to interpret the meaning of the embrace as well as its relationship to the contemporary response to the pandemic.

Sensitivity to Suffering

While the section introductions will draw out additional themes as well as key elements of each contributing author's argument, it is worthwhile to say something about the essays as a whole. Assessing what I take to be the collection's central theme, the essays reveal the non-ideological nature of the Franciscan pandemic response. Heidi Giebel writes that, "[a]lthough we generally felt compassion for those dying of (and losing loved ones to) COVID-19 itself, many of us were insufficiently attentive, or even insensitive, to the legitimate concerns—and real suffering—of those whose perspectives on the pandemic differed from our own." In place of an ideological response, there is a sensitivity to suffering. This is a sensitivity to suffering generated both as a direct result of COVID-19 as well as to goods that were sacrificed in the name of slowing or controlling the virus. Myopic and rigid views of what constitute suffering give way to a Franciscan openness to a plurality of goods–goods threatened both by the COVID-19 virus and the social response to it.

Entering this non-ideological Franciscan space, Giebel is once again helpful:

> [T]hanks in part to the polarizing effects of social media (and other hand-picked sources of information), most of us tended to be more confident in our scientific and policy-related opinions than our

> actual knowledge warranted. And when we're so sure we're right, it's easy to cast others as not just wrong but obviously and obstinately wrong. This pride regarding our own opinions and uncharitable interpretation of others' perspectives often led to a deficiency in compassion for them. It was easy to interpret others' concerns (e.g., about physical illness or government control) uncharitably, to dismiss their distress as ignorant, self-induced, and even vicious—and, based on that assessment, to withhold any attempt to alleviate their distress.

Speaking of a sensitivity to suffering that blurs the lines of an ideological response, Alberto Montero contrasts "culture warriors" with what he terms the "healer's archetype":

> Unlike culture warriors, those who listen to the cries of the suffering and choose to live in solidarity with them—and even risk their lives to tend to the ill during a deadly pandemic—do not require a teleological answer to the 'why' of human suffering. St. Francis most certainly did not view the lepers he lived with as subhuman, evil, or personally responsible for their illness.

Sensitivity to Suffering: Pandemic Restrictions

To explore the non-ideological Franciscan path, I begin with a sensitivity to the losses associated with pandemic restrictions. Underlying this sensitivity, at least in this collection, is a reoccurring sense of being cut off, both from others and reality more generally.

With the embrace as a backdrop, the first loss to be considered is that of incarnate contact. Christina Welch's essay is keenly attentive to losses derivative from pandemic prohibitions upon touch. Speaking of such prohibitions in the early phase of the pandemic, she writes, "[f]or those who contracted COVID-19…social-death awaited them; no visitors and all staff protected by Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)…'those who [were]…isolated…[were] especially vulnerable, inclined to feel that they

not only have a contagion, but they are a contagion.'"[14] Not only in reference to patients, but also caregivers, Welch illustrates the toll that the loss of physical contact incurred:

> For many medical staff in hospitals, not being able to touch their desperately sick patients was one of the many tolls that nursing through COVID-19 took on their emotional and mental well-being. Indeed, many nurses who were unable to relieve suffering using 'instinctive methods…[reported] low levels of compassion satisfaction and, ultimately [high levels of] compassion fatigue.'

As Welch illustrates, touch is a fundamentally reciprocal act, with both the touched and the one being touched impacted.

The reciprocal nature of touch finds expression in numerous essays within the collection. Giebel references Gloria Lewis, who "felt a strong and persistent call several years ago to start feeding the homeless—even though she could barely pay her own bills." Giebel notes that Gloria "didn't worry about catching COVID-19; continuing to show love and compassion, she emphasized, is more important than avoiding risk. (Gloria doesn't accept volunteers who are unwilling to touch homeless people; she considers it a necessary way to express respect for them and a recognition of their humanity)." Welch is once again helpful as she offers a practitioner's perspective that aligns with Gloria's conclusions:

> Touch as a form of care in a US medical context was important to clinical nurse specialist Cliff Morrison, who in 1983 helped establish an HIV ward in San Francisco General Hospital. He advised the nurses that 'the most important thing we can do is to touch our patients.' Nurses on the ward held the hands of their dying patients without masks, gowns, and gloves. Morrison, a devout Catholic, believed compassion was essential.

[14] Defining the reference to social death, Welch writes, "the socially-dead are individuals who are not physically dead but dead to wider society, unable to participate in everyday life in culturally-normative ways."

Giving voice to Morrison and Gloria's insights, Geoffrey Karabin turns to the population most vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. He points his readers to:

> [A]n October 2020 protest at a nursing home in Colorado. The protest involved a group of residents who were frustrated by state restrictions that prevented them from socially interacting with family members. At the heart of the protest was a desire not simply to interact with loved ones, but to physically embrace them. As expressed by one of the residents, 'we did this because one thing we have to look forward to is a simple hug…It gives us meaning.'

Regardless of one's position as to the merits of allowing or not allowing such a request, it is instructive that these residents prioritized incarnate human contact over disease prevention. A willingness to risk their lives for the sake of a loving touch supplements the "practitioner perspective," wherein "touching should be considered an indispensable part of…[medical care]."

A concern about the loss of incarnate contact is intimately connected to a concern about a loss of community. Schatzlein speaks to such a loss when reflecting upon her quarantine, which she entered after returning from Italy at the onset of the pandemic: "Fourteen days of isolation, unexpected and unplanned for, left me with many feelings – the main one being alienation from all human contact." For Schatzlein as well as others, "alienation" is a state that connects pandemic restrictions to the experience of lepers.

Assessing the impact of alienation, Brother Pierre Brunette points to its indiscriminate and comprehensive nature. He also speaks to the way in which incarnate contact and human community supplement one another:

> Many age groups of people suffered from such a radical distance. Scientists noted, for example, that since the beginning of the pandemic, the lack of cognitive stimuli and regular physical contact among the elderly accelerated their aging process. Many children suffered emotionally from not being in contact with their grandparents. Many teenagers missed their friendly relations to the

> point of meeting, despite the social defenses. Electronic and media means compensated for the social distancing without ever fulfilling the essential necessity of physical and intimate proximity. Our happiness and mental health depend on real, carnal, human contacts.

As a testament to an acceleration of the "aging process," Karabin returns to the pandemic experience of nursing home residents:

> While no residents at our nursing home have contracted COVID-19, they are still greatly affected by this virus. Some residents have drastically deteriorated emotionally, mentally, and physically. They are at a loss for what to do, some stay in bed all day, which only hurts the situation. Without seeing their family members, doing activities, going on outings, or even being able to converse with the friends they've made here has made their lives unrecognizable.

Speaking more generally to the "necessity of physical and intimate proximity," Schatzlein offers the example of her friend Kay, "a pilgrim from a rural Wisconsin area, with no international travel experience." Kay was forced to quarantine in Italy:

> Kay's isolation involved a genuine separation from everyone, with all the cautions of not leaving the room at any time. No one could enter her room; cleaning services were discontinued; while she had a window to at least have a view outside, she was instructed not to go out in the corridor for any reason…These days became a pilgrimage of a different kind.

The need for connection—for "real, carnal, human contact"—is evident in its absence. That such connection is needed is illustrated by the consequences associated with those who were most acutely disconnected via COVID-19 distancing protocols.

The impact of isolation is given vivid expression in Barbara Spies' interview with Brother Thomas. She writes, "[t]he loneliness that came with the lockdown, is an emotion Fr. Thomas encountered, especially in the Northern Cheyenne community. He emphasized: 'It was heartbreaking

seeing people for whom families are so important, for whom the elders are so important and not having that contact.'" The relationship between culture and isolation is also a subject of Sister Suzanne Mayer's essay. She explores how the infamous leper colony on Molokai, Hawaii generated acute loss as well as heroic responses. Upon the implementation of forced deportations of suspected lepers, Mayer writes of how "the whole community within the Hawaiian Islands was…shaken to the core. For them, each patient's seizure was a major calamity with the individual being removed from their *'aina*, that is, their familiar milieu, as well as according to the Polynesian beliefs, from the whole community." The tragedy provoked a response that reiterates the profound importance of incarnate human community within Hawaiian culture. Mayer writes that:

> Often a member from their *'aina*, their circle of relations, be it family, village, or friendship bond, would leave their island home and travel to the colony knowing that their trip would also be a life sentence. When asked as to what these *kamaaina* intended now ashore on Molokai, they answered, '...we wish to live together…and to die together with those who are sick.'

Returning to COVID-19 pandemic considerations, the loss of touch and community are goods to which Franciscans are especially attuned. Christopher Zajner illustrates this attunement: "The concrete effects of COVID-19 extend far beyond the direct impact the virus has on individuals around the globe, but profoundly impacts many more through the concomitant societal response in terms of limitations on social, economic, and lived experiences." The COVID-19 pandemic was a rare event wherein the daily life of nearly every person on the globe was impacted. Isolation, in turn, was a featured component of that impact. Brother William Short sums up the subtle but pervasive nature of the impact as he writes, "I believe we all became a little more introverted, cautious, even apprehensive at times in the company of others."

The loss of community is further developed via another important theme within the collection. In the "Historical Francis" essays, friendship is central. The relationship between Francis and lepers, understood in terms of friendship, is offered as a corrective to the traditional vision where

Francis steps down to serve the lepers. Godet-Calogeras captures this dynamic:

> When Francis dictated his *Testament* twenty years after that founding experience with the lepers, he connected it with the teaching of Jesus and used that fundamental expression: to do mercy, *facere misericordiam*. But he also slightly modified it: he did not do mercy *to* the lepers, but *with* the lepers. That means that…he entered into a relationship with them.

Applied to the pandemic, the loss of friendship stands out. Brother Thomas offers a particularly poignant example. Speaking of the pandemic's impact upon his ministry to the homeless, Brother Thomas recounts how "we would bring 200 boxes [of prepared meals] there and they can pick it up here. We didn't see our guests at all." Rather than looking at such persons as lucky recipients of one's service, the homeless person is treated as a guest. Guest then becomes synonymous with friendship: "[B]efore the pandemic we would kind of hang out with our guests, with our friends, because you know them, and they would tell the stories, and so on. And that's when it completely changed and it was really like, 'OK, here are your bags, and please go,' with gloves everywhere and masks." The inability to serve (at least in the incarnate way Brother Thomas references) was experienced not as an excusal from one's moral duty, but as a loss of friendship.

A Franciscan sensitivity to lost community is not restricted to relationships between the living. The inability to attend or even conduct funerals at certain periods of the pandemic impacted the ability to mourn. Speaking to the all-encompassing nature of certain pandemic prohibitions, Welch discusses their impact upon funeral workers: "Washing and preparing a corpse for burial or cremation, is an act of compassionate care for that person, perhaps the last act of kindness that emphasizes their humanity, but this was denied not only to the dead, but to those who care for them." Welch's sensitivity to the value of touch allows her to tease out the ripple effects of its loss, including in the unexpected locale of a morgue.

Franciscans living out their vocations during the pandemic further note how restrictions disrupted forms of community between the living and the dead. Spies' interviews with Brother David and Sister Immaculate capture this disruption. Brother David recounts how "[w]e had a Friar from India whose mom died, probably of COVID…He couldn't go back for his mother's funeral, and so there was…that sense of people being kept away from loved ones, not being around to be able to grieve with people." Sister Immaculate reflects upon an instance in which:

> One sister got COVID. It was so severe that she ended up on a ventilator. But even when the ambulance took her, the rest of the sisters were not told which hospital she was sent to…So, Sister was there for two weeks. They didn't know whether Sister had died or not. So it was really painful. You see, you don't know how your neighbor is doing, and you're supposed to be each other's keeper.

A sense of responsibility to loved ones and the helplessness of being unable to fulfill that responsibility is a way in which COVID-19 restrictions challenged the communal calling of the human experience. Both Brother David and Sister Immaculate keenly felt such a responsibility to those who passed or were in danger of passing and, as Welch makes clear, the inability to fulfill that calling was felt far beyond Franciscan borders.

Sensitivity to Suffering: Sources of Isolation

Sensitivity to lost community and human touch includes a sensitivity to the dispositions that generate and sustain such losses. A primary instance of such a disposition is fear. Spies opens her chapter with a provocative conversation:

> In September of 2022…a Franciscan Friar friend of mine and I were chatting about whether the response of Franciscans during the time of COVID-19 was in any way similar to the experiences of St. Francis, especially in his encounter with the leper. As I recall his words, he spoke of how we, in this time of COVID-19, were so afraid. We didn't go anywhere. We didn't give the sign of peace…Most of us were very frightened, trying to not have contact with anyone, engaging in

> paranoid behavior, cleaning doorknobs with bleach, very different from Francis' way of doing and seeing things.

While the question of whether to follow Francis, particularly in the manner described by this friar, is a matter of debate both within and outside of this collection, the salient point is that Franciscans were sensitive to the way in which fear could take hold of one's psyche. Spies concludes with the consequences of such fear: "[T]he trepidation of the healthy causes exclusion of others."

Short speaks of such "trepidation" and its comprehensive social impact:

> [T]he fear of infection…had corrosive effects on what we may call the fabric of a community…Any friar who had to leave the property, even with an official document authorizing him to buy the groceries or necessary medications, would suddenly find himself on his return seated a little further away from others at meals. Any cough or sneeze raised anxiety. The looming question was, of course, 'Who is next?' For the next two years, that question remained in the air every day, eating away at our confidence in one another.

"[E]ating away at our confidence in one another" constitutes a mindset/way of being that privileges separation rather than communion, caution rather than trust, and distance rather than contact.

A sensitivity to the types of dispositions that support and sustain separation is not restricted to fear. The non-ideological Franciscan response is itself a sensitivity to the way in which ideology generates separation. Montero counterpoises Francis to "a divisive culture where sharply divided lines have been drawn, the common good is no longer valued, and sufferers who fall outside these imaginary partisan categorizations are vilified not only as 'other' but also as somehow deserving whatever poverty, illness, or calamity may afflict them." These "sharply divided lines" also concern Darleen Pryds. Pryds writes of the caustic social milieu and the emotional uncertainty that can fuel ideological intransigence:

> [There was] a decline in civil discourse and a rise in reactivity that continues to be expressed in volatile manners of speech and violent actions. The personal strain of the pandemic added stress that fueled reactivity as people's expectations of just about every part of living came to be unmet. Expectations around how things should be, from daily routines to the end of life and most mundane and significant experiences in between.

Working to undermine the divisive impact of ideology, Montero writes of Bernard Rieux, from Camus' *The Plague*, and how his "attitude is refreshingly dissonant with our polarized times where people seem to thrive on dividing, canceling, separating, and demonizing one another."

As a third disposition undermining human communion, Zajner focuses on a tendency toward abstraction. Zajner writes, "[i]t is, in this author's view, precisely the statistical approach which has molded the mass conception of COVID-19, rather than the concomitant humanistic consequences that underlie certain applications of these statistics." Zajner discusses the way in which abstraction undermines treatment within the healthcare system. It is a worry that is shared by Montero, who writes that "[t]he practice of medicine always begins with a narrative: a patient's history. However, the importance of this history tends to be lost in the contemporary explosion of technological information: radiographic, genetic, laboratory, etc." For both Zajner and Montero, the loss of the personal via a privileging of the abstract—a loss which simultaneously generates distance between oneself and the person one is to care for—constitutes a social source of separation that also impacts medical practice.

Zajner links the abstraction derivative from the statistical approach to another form of abstraction. He writes that, "while the past theological model discounted the personal suffering of individuals through subsuming an attitude of just retribution, the contemporary statistical model discounts suffering by focusing on the broader trends of disease, of which the patient is only a numerical part." Theodicy as a source of abstraction and as a mechanism to distance oneself from human suffering is also prominent in Mayer and Montero's chapters. Of the leprosy epidemic in Hawaii, Mayer writes that "[w]ithout any modern science or medicine, the reason for the

raging sickness and consequent ostracism was attributed not to the presence of foreigners, but reached back in time to biblical beliefs of the connection between sin and contagion." Providing flesh to this connection, Mayer notes that:

> [T]he attitude of outsiders was that they considered Hawaiian natives responsible for their illness and subsequent suffering, attributing causality to multiple negative behaviors: they 'hold life at a cheap rate,' 'take little care of themselves,' live in houses 'small, filthy, and open to the rain,' and are 'exceedingly slovenly in their habitations and persons.'

Whether due to fear, ideology, abstraction, or theodicy, a Franciscan sensitivity to suffering includes a sensitivity to those dispositions that contribute to the separation and isolation discussed in this introduction.

Sensitivity to Suffering: Illness and Death

While one line of Franciscan thought exhibits a sensitivity to losses related to pandemic restrictions and another focuses on dispositions that allow or exacerbate such losses, there is no less attention paid to the suffering that occurs as a direct result of the virus. The devastation associated with such suffering, as Michael Hahn points out, was often a result of "great trauma from the untimely loss of family members or loved ones." Cataloging a mere sampling of COVID-19's trauma, Short reflects upon his pandemic experience:

> We had worried over family, friends, and friars at home in our seven different countries of origin, with their great differences of access to healthcare and reliable vaccines. We would later learn that 269 priests in Italy died from the illness in the first twelve months of the pandemic…We heard the news of religious communities, Franciscan and others, where infections had spread rapidly, causing the death of many of the aged and frail sisters and brothers. I remember the deep shock…about the Felician Sisters in Livonia, Michigan, where 13 sisters in the Infirmary died from the virus within a brief period beginning on Good Friday of 2020.

Spies' interviews reinforce a Franciscan sensitivity to pandemic loss of life. Brother Thomas poignantly reflected upon his time with a Native American tribe in Montana, "[s]o many people died. When I was there, we had funerals weekly, maybe two a week and you know it's a tiny community…I remember one of the elders saying, 'This might be the end of the tribe.'" Recognizing the grave threat posed by COVID-19, particularly to those communities who were simultaneously most vulnerable to the virus and whose suffering could and often was overlooked, illustrates a Franciscan sensitivity to suffering wherever and to whomever it occurs.

A Franciscan sensitivity to COVID-19 deaths proves to be universal in scope. As Godet-Calogeras writes, "[w]hat Francis' experience reminds us of is that we are all vulnerable; it is part of being alive as human beings. We can and we do experience all kinds of suffering." Abbott further develops the claim:

> The subject to be considered here is the extent to which St. Francis' understanding of creation and the dignity of the human person (as seen most graphically in his care for lepers), can shed light on how humanity might approach the poor and marginalised in our societies, whether the issue is leprosy, COVID-19 or indeed other ailments that afflict humanity, in a world where 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' but where the treatment of such people often falls short.

Hahn translates such sensitivity into a call to action: "In our present moment, we should especially highlight the voices of the marginalized in society." Combining Godet-Calogeras, Abbott, and Hahn's insights, the universal scope of Franciscan sympathy does not preclude a heightened sensitivity to the vulnerable. In reference to the pandemic, the concern for the marginalized expresses itself as concern for those who were or still are vulnerable to the virus.

Franciscans on the pandemic front line give voice to this vulnerability in stark terms. Brother Tony, one of Spies' interviewees, recalled how "I had a patient…who was terrified. I think that exacerbated her situation,

ultimately, with her dying, because of her anxiety and not being able to stay calm with her saying, 'How am I going to pay for this? How am I going to pay for this?' yelling that out a lot." A similar tone of socio-economic desperation sounds in Father Thomas' encounter with a woman in Chicago: "I remember one woman telling me, 'I just don't have health insurance. I just can't afford it. And if I get COVID I know I will die. And I have children that I've got to take care of. I just can't allow myself to get COVID.'" Hearing such cries and recognizing the vulnerability inherent in them forestalls any simplistic rejection of the restrictions meant to slow COVID-19's spread.

Yet, apart from the question of COVID-19 restrictions, there is the question of whether such cries are heard at all. A Franciscan sensitivity to suffering requires that one listen. For they are cries whose too frequent invisibility further testifies to the vulnerability of those who make them. In a chapter that explores the forgotten status of Africa, Day writes that "[r]eflecting on justice in the pandemic means considering the many social groups that comprise our global community and what right relationship could look like. It would require us to think about whose voices are not at the table and who is excluded from the global community." To intentionally look for the forgotten is to be sensitive to the reality that some are forgotten.

Pointing to a specifically Franciscan reason to engage in such a search, Gino Grivetti writes that, "[l]ike the lepers in the story of St. Francis, the poor disappeared from the story of COVID-19, even though they suffered the most during the pandemic, especially through the tragically unnecessary loss of lives and livelihoods." Expanding the ways in which the invisibility of the poor generated suffering that was endured by some groups, but not others, Grivetti writes:

> Even in the early days of the pandemic, expert analysists warned that while the health repercussions of the virus would be unavoidable, the social and economic impacts on the most vulnerable could be prevented. In the absence of actions to respond to the plight of the poor, these predictions appeared more as a terminal prognosis than as a prophetic call for justice. Extending the analogy of leprosy, such reports functioned in a similar way to the ritual *separatio leprosorum*:

> the sacrifice of the poor was proclaimed even before the virus took its fatal toll. Impoverished communities, already separated from the centers of society, became the new *leprosaria*.

Keeping in mind the lives lost as well as the increased trauma endured by the vulnerable undermines a reactionary, anti-restriction ideology. Lyle Enright captures this sentiment and develops a characteristic Franciscan response to pandemic restrictions. He encourages humility in the face of such measures. Enright suggests that we "surrender…our confidence in the right ways to defy them [COVID-19 restrictions], especially where the good of our neighbor is an open question." Expanding upon the thought, he writes that "our default position in pandemic times must be one of basic charity towards others that is heuristically formed by obedience to Christ. The supernatural encounters us there, in often radically subjective ways, demanding our authenticity and self-transcendence."

Pushing back against the notion that the embrace is a declaration against quarantining measures, Giebel writes that Francis' example "isn't tossing prudence aside (at least not entirely!), and it doesn't always mean doing away with the source of the other's suffering. For example, although Francis was willing to take personal risks in his ministry to the lepers, he didn't advocate un-quarantining them." While allowing for ambiguity and a degree of recklessness in Francis' example, Giebel makes the case that Francis' communion with lepers does not entail that he lost sight of his responsibilities to his broader community.

Welch provides a third example of a pandemic perspective sensitive to the losses involved in COVID-19 restrictions, while simultaneously exhibiting a humility that allows her to recognize the good associated with such restrictions. She writes:

> [T]ouch, being perhaps our primary sense, is the first to go when contagion, or potential contagion occurs, and this has deep-seated affects on us all. It would, in hindsight, be easy to say that restricting touch to only those in one's own immediate household during the initial months of COVID-19 was inappropriately restrictive and did not value enough the power of the haptic. But hindsight is a

> wonderful thing and scientists and politicians were initially 'working-blind and with their hands-tied' trying to keep as many people safe and well as they could.

To follow Francis is to take seriously the value of incarnate forms of human communion. To follow Francis is also to adopt a posture of charity that is averse to ideological certainty. While one could challenge pandemic restrictions due to the value of touch and with the works of Enright, Giebel, and Welch in mind, a Franciscan refusal to restrict the good to a single form allows for charitable interpretations of and responses to pandemic restrictions.

Adopting a common sense and professional perspective in response to the question of how a Franciscan ought to respond to pandemic restrictions, Schatzlein offers these thoughts:

> Being a registered nurse, I understood all the isolation protocols and had enforced them many times during my nursing career. We understood that certain kinds of infections require extra precautions to keep both the patient and caregivers safe, along with preventing the spread of those infections.

Attentiveness to suffering calls one to be attentive to the mechanisms by which such suffering, including illness and death, can be prevented. Because there are goods lost due to preventive measures and/or to the rigid implementation of them, the good of COVID-19 restrictions is tempered, but never lost from view in a Franciscan pandemic approach.

Another way in which a Franciscan sensitivity unveils forms of good in restrictive approaches to the pandemic is an affirmation of the good in its abundance. Whereas the ideological framework privileges one kind of good to the exclusion of others, the Franciscan framework is attentive to the plurality of goods at play and at risk in different pandemic approaches. Enright captures the Franciscan spirit when he writes of finding, in Francis, "the creative embrace of abundant life…regardless of socio-political arrangements enacted during COVID-19 or otherwise." Lambert likewise views Francis as a figure that encourages one to recognize good in the midst of sickness and death. He writes that Francis views leprosy, "(and

encounters with those who suffer from it) as a bricoleur of excessive meaning that discloses a (true) reality 'which surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us; an experience that upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible.'" Enright and Lambert offer a view of creation in which an excess of good transcends any human effort, intentional or otherwise, to limit it. Remaining sensitive to the good in its abundance entails that one counteract the forces and dispositions that would limit one's awareness of such abundance and/or that would blind one to certain forms in which the good expresses itself. Giebel and Pryds, it should be noted, offer particularly helpful ways to become aware of and then overcome such blind spots.

Advancing the thesis that an abundant good continues to pulsate beneath the limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions, Enright provides an example: "[It] emerges as an affront to power through fanfares played on balconies and voices raised on rooftops. It emerges whenever we learn new ways of expressing care and deference even with our faces covered by masks." Schatzlein provides another example via the experience of her pilgrim friend Kay:

> After the fourth day, the director of our hotel suggested that in the afternoon, after the housekeepers had gone home for the day, Kay could make her way down a short corridor and go outside into an enclosed garden area…she was to mask up, look into the corridor to make sure no guests were present...Her pilgrimage experience at San Damiano came alive in her appreciation of the gifts of Brother Sun, Mother Earth, and the beauty of the flowers and trees. This simple privilege went a long way to heal Kay's soul.

The ability to find beauty, meaning, and joy in simple gifts, pandemic restrictions notwithstanding, emerges from a sensitivity to the good in its abundance. Such abundance dulls the edge of an ideological approach, wherein pandemic restrictions could be viewed as the denial of all meaning or value.

Franciscan Humility

Sensitivity to goods lost and goods saved, to goods restricted by the pandemic and to those newly emergent within it, constitutes the central theme of this collection. Such sensitivity is at the root of the non-ideological Franciscan response, while the response itself is rooted in what may be the foundational Franciscan virtue. Grivetti writes of how "Francis wanted the Lesser Brothers to serve in the *leprosaria* as a sign of their imitation of the 'greatest humility' of the Son of God." Additionally, in "the *Legend of the Three Companions*…the Lord instructs…[Francis] to embrace the discipline of humility." Related to the contemporary pandemic reaction, humility allows for an openness to goods beyond ideology and/or the self-certainty of personal conviction. As such, Abbott writes that "[w]e are desperately lacking in humility…To be humble, a person needs great, great courage." A courage that allows one to remain faithful to the good as it presents itself, not as it "ought" to present itself according to one's expectations, ideological or otherwise, is deeply Franciscan and profoundly humble.

Franciscan humility is visible throughout the collection. Perhaps there is no better example than when the Franciscan religious speak of their pandemic experiences. Simple service, as opposed to heroism, marks their descriptions of Franciscan life. Emphasis is placed on caring for the everyday needs of those one encounters and often this emphasis is framed in the language of serving one's brothers and sisters. As Brother Anthony Carrozzo puts it in reference to his and his friars' commitment to a local homeless person, "[w]e did little more than see him, name him, and feed him occasionally. It was enough for him. It does not take much to see a person."

Conclusion

To summarize this introduction and the collection as a whole, lessons derivative from a sensitivity to suffering serve as a fitting conclusion. To share those lessons, I would like to highlight, without further commentary, a mere sampling of the recommendations and insights offered by contributors to this collection.

Brother Pierre Brunette: Since March 2020, we have experienced the pandemic of social and interpersonal distancing. It has been imposed by the global health crisis, the many prescriptions of the governments, and the World Health Organization (WHO). Social distancing restricted our physical contacts, affected our global awareness, our networks of leisure, labor, and business. And even our personal psyche, our spirituality, and our way of envisaging the world of tomorrow. Our sense of time was shattered: the present was threatened. The prolonged distance between people triggered a kind of individualism, a withdrawal into oneself, on a small or larger scale. But distance and remoteness also increased our urgent need for closeness and communion.

Brother Anthony Carrozzo: Today we have new lepers that need our attention and ministry. Consider all the marginalized people among us, not only the poor but also the elderly who are housed apart from us so that we will not be disturbed by the weakness of aging….Consider those who had COVID-19 and were isolated from their daily routines, families, friends, and workers. Today's lepers are everywhere. The challenge is to see them and embrace them.

Maureen Day: Our life is less full, our hearts are less free, our courage is less resplendent until we have gone (and continue to go) among the excluded and isolated and see each individual not as a 'population,' but as a human person. Only then do we realize that we were likewise excluded and isolated from a clearer reality and a fuller manifestation of our own personhood and only then are we positioned to embrace a reality more aligned with God's love and our own humanity.

Jean-François Godet-Calogeras: Now that the pandemic is over, we should not go back to the old life, the so-called normal life before COVID-19 hit us. We should seize the moment, the opportunity to change for better. As the poet and activist Sonya Renée Taylor put it: 'We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a

new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.' How true! I could not have said it better. Onwards.

Darleen Pryds: The story of Francis and the lepers may nudge us to reflect on our own tendencies of judgment that separate us from others and to consider who we are called to turn around and face in order to cultivate healing and relationships.