

To Follow - Whom do I follow?

Pilgrims of St Francis Discussion Theme 2023



Authors: Jan Peter Axelsson, Anders Mårtensson, Ulla Mårtensson
Contributions from: Annie Axelsson, Birgitta Jansson

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Introduction

This document aims to give an introduction to the theme for 2023 – *To follow – whom do I follow?*

It has been written by a team and this fact may be seen as somewhat disparate parts in style and language in the text. The theme itself emanates from the reflection by one of us (Ulla) about the background of the Franciscan “companions” and in what way we still stick to the founders’ idea of “following” St. Francis. Maybe we, as an organisation and as individuals, should refresh our thinking about following?

This text is the result of a rather long period of sharing loose ideas and thoughts. We have found it somewhat difficult to write a text that describes the theme in a formal way. The theme contains so many aspects of life and human nature and is so closely linked to individuals that we understood that several limitations had to be applied to our writing. Thus, we do not go deeply into descriptions of the human nature explaining the process of following. Further, we only discuss following a person, not an organisation or general trends in the society. Our method is mainly to give examples, from our own experience or from friends or literature.

Our hope is that what we finally put down in text will lead to fruitful exchanges of thoughts in the contexts where the material will be used. Fruitful, meaning that our thoughts will be used and expanded both theoretically and in practical life for both followers and for the one followed.

We start by giving our view on what is meant by “to follow” in different contexts. The large span of degree of commitment between the follower and the followed is treated in some detail. The need to follow someone varies largely from person to person and likewise during the lifetime of each person. To some extent we treat positive and negative sides of following, being aware that this involves a large portion of subjectivity on our side. We do, however, wish that discussions occur on how to evaluate both following in general and the forms of following that include social media platforms. The ability to evaluate both the influencer/adviser and the contents of what is said or written is crucial in our view.

Examples are given describing different types of following. One part of the document contains a brief description of what the Bible says about following Jesus Christ who often invited people to follow. Finally, we want to return to the question of St. Francis, his way of following Jesus, and what that might mean for us today as companions of St. Francis.

1. The meaning of “to follow”

It is necessary to clarify what we mean by “to follow”, the main concept of this theme. It appears that in many languages there can be different meanings depending on the context and circumstances. Thus, for example, in Christian tradition “to follow Jesus” appears to involve a radical dedication encouraging the follower to be **imitating** Jesus. In Swedish this is expressed by the word “*efterfölja*” (follow after, follow in someone’s footsteps). A well-known book, published in the 15th century, expresses this meaning of follow in the title *The Imitation of Christ* (in Latin *De Imitatione Christi*), by Thomas a Kempis. This type of following is common in religious traditions, but not limited to those. We find various ways of following in other fields as well, for example in the political realm. We will return to the religious use of the concept later in this document, especially in the part where we relate to Bible quotations about following Christ.

A broader approach to what could be the meaning of to follow is fruitful. In our daily life there are numerous situations where we follow someone else, and vice versa, i.e. where I am the person who is followed. Examples range from rather trivial things like advice on what to buy or sell, to more important choices (work, place to live) and even more crucial choice of a partner for life (if one can say that one chooses a partner!). In these cases ‘follow’ can be expressed as “take/give advice”, “be inspired/inspire”, “learn”/“teach” etc. Certainly, the most common situation of following is when teachers or parents encourage children “Do like me!” or “Follow me!”.

One could characterise the different interpretations of follow as described above by the degree of commitment or dedication of the follower. At one end of the scale, we find the very dedicated follower for example St. Francis in his way of following Jesus Christ. At the other end there could be low dedication, for example someone who “follows” an “interesting” person occasionally without having any ambition to imitate or even take advice.

Commitment or dedication thus points at how much of the behaviour and/or thinking the follower takes on from the one followed. So far, we have only discussed voluntary following but there are of course examples when the following is forced upon the follower. This can be found, e. g., in the military realm or in nations or

communities governed by dictators. There are also contexts where the enforcement of following may vary in, for example, schools or workplaces. However, in this document we concentrate on voluntary following.

It is interesting to reflect on why someone becomes a follower but also to think of reasons why someone becomes a person who is followed. Probably some individuals are more inclined to be leaders and have certain gifts that make them suited for the task. Who becomes what is also depending on the situation. It is not uncommon that in one context a person becomes a follower and in a different context becomes the one that is followed.

An interesting example is Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary General of the UN. He was obviously a leader and someone that many tried to follow in some aspects. But it became known after his death that he himself was a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ. [Note 2:1]

Obviously, the need to follow someone varies from person to person. Some of us do not recognise any particular role model that we wish to follow. Others may have been searching for someone to follow without finding the right person. To follow someone, we have to trust that person. Trust here relates both to the person *per se* but also to what the person says or writes. This process of discernment or evaluation is important in all situations of communication but perhaps even more crucial when it comes to internet and social media. We will elaborate a little more on this later.

2. Influencers and followers

As we are interested also in more recent forms of following, e. g., as found in social media, we will treat this area a little more deeply below. For millions of people the terms “follow” and “follower” are closely connected to the phenomenon of “influencer”. This phenomenon has developed rapidly during the last 10 – 15 years, partly as a consequence of the availability of various internet platforms. These include “blogs” and a number of social media e. g., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc. The vast interest in using internet either as influencer or as follower seems to emanate from human nature, both the need to have a *role model* and the urge by some to be a leader or to influence. The technologies developed as internet platforms, social media, clearly exploit these human traits. Economic profit is certainly a large contributor to the rapid growth. [Note 2:2]

A reflection one could elaborate on here is the paradox (at least seemingly) of, on one hand, the extremely individualistic culture that has developed during, say the last 20 – 30 years in the “western” society and, on the other hand, the growing interest in following influencers of all kinds. The absence (or at least a low presence) of a common cultural, religious, and social environment presumably plays a role here.

Our observations, of course, only scratch on the surface of what is driving the development of social media. To go more deeply into explanations, one has to search in disciplines describing human nature and behaviour, e. g., anthropology, psychology, sociology etc. That is outside the scope of this document, and we restrict ourselves to observations and examples which hopefully will lead to reflections and fruitful discussions among the users of our text.

There are numerous examples of influencers who have succeeded in getting surprisingly large numbers of followers. One can ask why? What is it that makes a person interesting enough to be read/heard/seen and admired by millions of people? Much of the attraction is of course the same as “idols” have experienced long before the invention of the internet. That includes musicians, actors (theatre, film), sports stars, and many more. But we can also find a somewhat different category of influencers. Those have more of a mix of having something interesting to say about some specific issue, of having a nice or “cool” appearance, and having a tone which makes the follower feel comfortable and/or amused. The following text gives a couple of aspects on this type of following.

Interview with Annie Axelsson (15 years old), a follower of Therése Lindgren, a Swedish influencer.

- Annie was interviewed by Ulla Mårtensson.

1 Who is Therése? What does her blog tell us?

Therése is a Swedish influencer at Instagram and YouTube, she is registered as a company and works with skin care and make-up products. She has written books and she has also collaborations and small projects on her own. Her blog contains a little about what is behind the scenes about her working life but mainly about her daily life or her videos e. g. “Therése testing” which is a mini-series where Therése tests various well-known products.

2. How many followers has she got?

Just over one million on YouTube and her videos are in Swedish.

3 Why do you think she has so many followers?

I think that she has many followers because she teaches us also about mental health and illness and she is rather open about her own experiences of anguish and panic attacks. Many persons may identify themselves with her. She is an honest, nice, and very considerate person who also burns for the question of animal rights. She is simply a good role model.

4 Why do you follow her and how often?

I respect her, and I think that her videos are both funny and entertaining, but also cosy and relaxing. I watch her videos approximately once or twice a week, sometimes more and sometimes less. I like what she has done with her life.

5. Do you think she has influenced you and if so, in what way?

Yes, she has. She made me reflect on my own about my attitude towards certain issues, and about my mental health and she inspired me to eat more vegetarian food. I have also tested her products and when she started a commercial collaboration with Anamma I bought their vegan food, which I still buy. She inspires me to take extra care of myself. In this way she has influenced me. She is also funny. Coming home and looking at her videos could sometimes be a highlight of the day/evening.

A different type of influencer is the one with a political agenda. We all know that the influence of a person who wishes to spread a political message from some internet platform can be massive. In some cases, this may lead to a benign development when, for example, democratic values are supported. The so called “Arab spring” aimed at removing authoritarian regimes in several Arab countries, starting in Tunisia 2010 and in Egypt 2011. A large number of people gathered to protest. Particularly in Egypt they were inspired by influencers on social media. Initially this revolutionary movement gained some success and spread to other countries. However, in the long run there were severe backlashes, and the good development gained was crushed. In most countries, with few exceptions, the situation became much worse than before. Another example of an influencer with a good cause who has managed to have a broad impact is described below.

In 2011 the 8-year-old girl started to realise that the adults had made nature dirty. She learnt that the sea was filled with plastic rubbish. Indeed, only a child, but she thought something must be done. In 2015 the Paris Agreement was reached. She was aware of the faint measures that were taken by politicians in many countries, even in Sweden. She started to skip class and instead sit down outside the Swedish Parliament building in Stockholm. Her parents told her she must go to school. The girl refused. “You have to”, her parents nagged. Then the girl fell ill. The parents were alarmed and let their daughter demonstrate one day a week. And the girl took her poster and sat down outside the Parliament building.

Her name is Greta.

Her claim was to fulfil the purpose from the 2015 Paris agreement, and she always referred to the climate scientists, “Don’t listen to me, listen to them” she said. Her movement Fridays for Future started in 2018. Three global protest marches assembled each more than 1 million participants, more of them school children, in more than 120 countries all over the world. Greta has talked in many world assemblies, in Climate Conferences, in the Economic Forum, in some Parliaments in Europe, the USA and Canada, in the European Parliament. She has met A. Schwarzenegger, the Pope Francis I, B. Obama. She has been given awards by many instances. Time Magazine chose her to the Person of the year 2019 for her challenging world leaders about mankind’s greedy and irresponsible relation to the only home we have.

By Birgitta Jansson

However, there are also a large number of influencers who have other goals. These range from spreading “fake news” about persons or organisations to spreading hatred and encouraging violence in order to destroy democratic institutions. Another area is the increasing creation and proliferation of “conspiracy theories” over the internet. Social media play an important role in this. Conspiracy theories may be created by an influencer, picked up by followers and “shared” for example in Facebook groups. [Note 2:3]

A more sophisticated way to influence can be to spread news which has a small part of truth but otherwise is fake. This may be hard to see through, if one is not very cautious about evaluation both of the source of the message and the message itself. In the next section we will elaborate on the necessity of discernment especially when using social media or searching information on the internet.

3. About discernment

There has always been a need to judge information and advice carefully, so what is new?

Needless to say, the internet gives us access to vast amount of information at our fingertips. Further, the quality of the material we get when we search varies a lot. The content may also change without notice.

Let us, for a moment, compare the internet with a traditional town library. In both “places” we can get information as well as entertainment of all kinds. In a library the material available is chosen by some committee and there is a limited budget determined by politicians. On the internet, organisations and individual people are rather free to publish material. The budget seems limitless, but availability or exposure of what is there is to some extent governed by “popularity” and interest from advertising companies. Further, in a library material is categorised and put in different shelves with similar material. There is often a librarian that can be of some help. When we search the internet, we are more on our own. We search by our own keywords and phrases and search results may depend on what searches we have previously done, depending on what search engine used. The search engines may provide top results tuned for interesting headlines that other people have been attracted to. Here is less focus on objectivity and neutrality compared to a library one could say.

We can of course choose to look for sources of authority on the internet and we can sometimes check sources. It is good to approach both the library and the internet with a thoughtful attitude and some basic questions are good to have in mind - such as taught in schools and described below.

For the printed word there is generally a person or an organisation responsible and there are laws that somewhat govern what can be said. For internet texts there are, in principle, similar laws as for the printed word, but the responsible person or organisation is not always obvious since pseudonyms are often used and makes responsibility in practice more diffuse. In each country there is an organisation that administrates the domain and through them the person (or organisation) behind a pseudonym can be looked up and held responsible. This may however call for a legal judgment first, see note 3:1.

In school Swedish children from young age get some basic teaching on how to relate to social media and the internet in general. Below questions are taken from two posters made by the Swedish National Agency for Education, freely translated, see note 3:2. Focus here is on the posting on social media while similar questions for a webpage are given in parentheses. There is certainly similar training in other countries in Europe.

Questions you should ask yourself:

- 1 Who speaks? – (who has made the website?)
 - o Some one you know?
 - o Someone you trust?
- 2 Why does the person speak? – (why is the web page made?)
 - o To tell you something?
 - o To make you think something?
 - o To make you buy something?
 - o To entertain you?
 - o To frighten you?
 - o To be naughty to someone?
- 3 Ask yourself before you share – (is the web-page trustworthy? References?)
 - o Is it true?
 - o Is it important for you?
 - o For others?
 - o Is it good for you?
 - o For others?

It is good to see the encouragement here to combine judgment of both content as well as person and intentions behind what is published in social media or internet in general.

The ability of citizens to judge and handle information is one corner stone in a democratic country. The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency is an organisation that aims to strengthen society and prevent and handle crisis of various kinds and even consequences of war.

They have published the following short guideline for judging information, see note 3:3.

Source criticism – a short list of things to think of:

- Who is behind the information? Can you find the original source?
- Why does the information exist? Think about how the information can change your thinking and actions.
- What information do you use and who benefits from your spreading it?

- How old is the information? Is it still relevant?
- How did you get the information? Does it come from a source that is reliable and has before delivered confirmed information?
- Check if you can get the same information from other sources. Information from only one source must be taken with great care. If the information is “too good to be true” then that is often the case.
- Search also for information that does not confirm your current position in order to avoid that you only look for information that strengthens your current view.

There is of course similarity between the two lists of questions.

It is good to approach both the internet and a library with a critical eye, but the internet is obviously much more challenging. Many of us need to improve our ability of discernment and the above lists may be a starting point. There is a risk that we get overwhelmed and find it hard to get the information we want and can trust. There are numerous examples of “fake news” which have been placed on the internet deliberately. The responsible, whether individuals or organisations can sometimes be hard to trace.

We think the need for “advisers” or “influencers” is related to the vast and bewildering landscape of information we all face in combination with a weaker common culture as mentioned in section 2.

There are many passages in the Bible that speak of the value of discernment, and we end this section with a few lines from one of the Apostle Paul’s letters to a congregation:

“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”.

Philippians 1:9-10

4. Follow Jesus – examples from the Bible

Here we look in the Bible for some passages that relate to Jesus’ call to “follow me”.

To help us we have had a Bible concordance and we looked up the word “follow” (and we used a Swedish translation slightly different from the English translation cited below). There are also some passages that come to our minds that relate strongly to “follow Jesus” but do not actually contain the word “follow” and we included a few of these. We also start with a couple of texts from the Old Testament that include “follow” and relate to the ten commandments but they have a bearing on our first broader sections on what “to follow” can be. This is also a part of Jesus’ discipleship.

For most quotations a short comment is given that briefly describes the context. In a few cases a comment on interpretation of the passage is also given. The quotations are short, and we encourage you to look up passages to get the wider context. Quotations are from the NIV translation 1978. The word “follow”, or similar, in the quotations are written in bold face.

Civil courage

Exodus 23:2 *“Do not **follow** the crowd in doing wrong. When you give a testimony in a lawsuit, do not prevent justice by siding with the crowd”*

The text occurs in the context of explanation of the ten commandments. The quote is in the beginning of the explanation of the eighth command “You shall not give a false testimony against your neighbour”.

Proverbs 1:10 *“My son, if sinners entice you, do **not give in** to them.”*

Call to discipleship

Matt 4:19-20 *“Come, **follow** me, Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men’. At once they left their nets and **followed** him.”* [Note 4:1]

Mark 1:17 very similar.

The context is that Jesus in Galilee started to proclaim *“Repent. The kingdom of heaven is near”*. By the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers (Simon) Peter and Andrew and he called them to follow him, and they did without hesitation. Soon they met two other brothers James and John, and they were also called and followed. Peter was married (later you find a passage where Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law). James and John left their father and other relatives.

Comment: Probably these people have heard about Jesus, but nothing is said about that. Then the little group of Jesus and the four first disciples walked around in Galilee and taught people. The distances were not big, so it is close at hand and easy think that they kept contact with their close relatives even though they walked together with Jesus.

Luke 9:57-62 *"As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will **follow** you wherever you go'. Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' He said to another man, '**Follow** me.' But the man replied. 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will **follow** you Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'"*

Matt 8:19 – very similar.

Comment: Here we understand that some time has passed with teaching of people around the Sea of Galilee and more people have become interested. Jesus' response was brusque. Possibly he perceives the not uncommon resistance to change among these people and that is what he is criticising. The tradition of the church we perceive otherwise as everything has its time and we should be very careful to push people to repentance and discipleship. We may see it as it is God who "pushes" but our role is to support and teach. We have different roles. Worth thinking about.

Matt 9:9-12

*"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. '**Follow** me', he told him, and Matthew got up and **followed** him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.'"*

Mark 2:14-17 – very similar.

Luke 5:27-29 – very similar.

Comment: The name of the tax collector shifts between: Matthew, Levi Alpheus' son, and Levi. The stories are otherwise very similar and probably it is the same person.

John 20:25-29 *"So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"*

The context is that Jesus is meeting the disciples just after the resurrection and they become convinced in different ways.

The discipleship central role for a human being

John 8:12 *"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever **follows** me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"*

Here Jesus is in dialogue with the Pharisees who accuses him of witnessing about himself and therefore it is not valid, and Jesus responds to this rather logical criticism by asking how one in general handles witnesses in a legal case at the time.

Matt 16:24 *"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and **follow** me.'"*

The context is that the disciples start to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, and he explains that his mission is to go to Jerusalem and that he must suffer. Further Jesus underlines in the quoted verse that discipleship requires prioritisation. In the following verse 26 we read: *"What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"*

Matt 19:21 *"Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, **follow me.**'"*

Mark 10:21-22 – similar but look it up!

This story is about the young, well-to-do and caring man who asked Jesus what he should do to receive eternal life. Furthermore, Jesus says to the disciples that the requirements are actually impossible and in verse 26 we read:

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

The story continues with Jesus' dialogue with Peter and the other disciples, as we understand.

Matt 19:27-30 *"Peter answered him, 'We have left everything to **follow** you! What then will there be for us?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have **followed** me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.'"*

Mark 10:28-31 – very similar.

Comment: This paragraph describes what the fruit of discipleship is in the eternal perspective and what we can take to heart is the promise of eternal life.

John 21:19-22 *"Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, '**Follow me!**' Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is going to betray you?'). When Peter saw him, he asked, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus answered, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must **follow me.**'"*

The context is the last supper.

John 13:36 *"Simon Peter asked him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus replied, 'Where I am going, you cannot **follow** now, but you will **follow** later.'"*

The context is that Peter professes his loyalty to Jesus just before the crucifixion.

How to recognise true discipleship?

Mark 9:38-41 *"Teacher', said John, 'we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was **not one of us.**' 'Do not stop him', Jesus said. 'For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.'"*

In this context Jesus is teaching his disciples about a range of issues. This was before the disciples truly understood that he was Messiah, and that he would walk the path of suffering. In earlier Swedish translation "not one of us" is translated by "not following us".

John 10:4-5 *"When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep **follow** him because they know his voice. But they will never **follow** a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice."*

John 10:27-28 – very similar.

The context is that Jesus teaches a larger group in which Pharisees are also involved, if we interpret it correctly. It also says that people did not really understand this parable.

John 12:26 *"Whoever serves me must **follow me**; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me."*

John 13:34-35 *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."*

John 14:5-6 *"Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered, '**I am the way** and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"*

The context is that Jesus gathers those closest to him and speaks of his impending death.

Following Angels

Luke 1:28.31 *"The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.'"*

The context is that Zachariah's wife Elizabeth has become pregnant high up in age and in her sixth month the angel Gabriel is sent to Maria and tells her that she will become pregnant.

Acts 12:8 *" Then the angel said to him, 'Put on your clothes and sandals.' And Peter did so. 'Wrap your cloak around you and **follow me**', the angel told him."*

This is the story of when Peter was imprisoned by King Herod. Several other Christians had been imprisoned and some had been killed. The night before Peter was to be tried, Peter was visited by an angel who freed him and helped him out. The story describes how Peter at the beginning did not really understand what was happening and thought it was a sight, but then he understood that it was actually real. And Peter described it later that it must have been an angel of the Lord.

Comment: The author of the acts is usually attributed to Luke, who wrote one of the Gospels and was Paul's doctor, accompanying him on his travels. He writes in a more down-to-earth way and should certainly be read that way. A common character of these stories is that after the initial uncertainty, a peace of mind is created that strengthens the recipient and makes her/him follow.

The eternity perspective

Rev 14:4 *"...They **follow** the Lamb wherever he goes..."*

Rev 14:13 *" Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes', says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them.'"*

The context of this story is the three angels who give notice of the last judgment.

A brief reflection and some questions for discussion

When Jesus calls disciples, he simply encourages them to come along. These people had probably heard about him and perhaps directly heard him teach. There is very little argument when Jesus calls disciples. When Jesus meets the educated Pharisees, a lot of argument is depicted to meet their critical questions and a lot of it is about getting them to change perspectives. Eventually there were some Pharisees who turned to Jesus, but we cannot find where individual argument was crucial.

The meeting between Jesus and the disciples in the weeks after the resurrection is important. Thomas asked to see Jesus' hands and side of the body and his doubt changed to wonder and over the years to come he became devoted to missionary work. Legends tell that he spread the Christian faith in India and is buried in the big city of Chennai (former name Madras).

The well-educated Paul's own conversion occurs through the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Before he had persecuted followers of Jesus and knew about his teaching this way. It led to a specific occasion of repentance and conversion described in the book of Acts.

Questions to discuss:

- 1) In more complex questions and choices in life it is reasonable to "try for a while", and later lead to decisions, commitments, or promises. Give some examples of such situations where argument is not enough.
- 2) Jesus made an effort to argue with the Pharisees, as we can read at a number of places in the Gospels. Give examples from everyday life where argument opens up and improves understanding for each other and leads to a change, and when it does not do that.
- 3) How well does the person and the argument strengthen each other when we change opinion, or make major choices in life? When is it important to separate these two aspects?
- 4) In the question of repentance and following Jesus, what is similar to other questions, and what is different?

5. St. Francis – how does he inspire us?

When describing who we – The Pilgrims of St. Francis – are, we write about our pilgrimages “...we try to live in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Claire...” and we also write that during our walking “...each of us is invited to live in Franciscan simplicity...” [Note 5:1]. We also describe the thoughts that were in the minds of the founders of our movement, Joseph Folliet and René Beauguey from France and Franz Stock from Germany. In a leaflet, issued by the Swedish branch of the Pilgrims of St. Francis, it is written “...They [i.e. the founding group (our comment)] saw Francis as the servant of the Lord who most clearly walked in the footsteps of Christ and showed us a way for our lives.” (In Swedish: “Man såg Franciskus som den Herrens tjänare som tydligast gick i Kristi fotspår och visade oss en väg för våra liv”) [Note 5:2].

From this and similar writings about our movement we understand that to follow St. Francis means ultimately to follow Jesus Christ. This is interesting and seriously challenging and should be subject of interpretation. In what ways did St. Francis follow Christ? In what ways have individuals and movements followed in the footsteps of St. Francis and how has this related to following Christ? There is a large amount of literature about St. Francis describing his way of living and preaching. We can be certain about some of the principles that guided him in his way of following Christ. It is clear that St. Francis wanted as much as possible to follow in the footsteps of Christ, imitating Christ. There are some particular traits in this following that can be recognized, such as poverty, obedience, loving one’s enemy, love and care for the creation, charity, and humility. Each of these virtues can naturally be subject to different interpretations in different contexts. Certainly, one has to be careful when trying to understand what those expressions meant and what we can understand and apply today.

During the years after his death, followers of St. Francis have emphasised various parts of his teaching. During modern times his great love for the creation has been picked up and inspired both Christian and more secular individuals and movements. The Pope Francis has clearly been highly inspired by the Saint. The Pope starts in his Encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* [Note 5:3] to relate to the well-known hymn of St. Francis, *Canticle of the Creatures*, which starts

*“Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”.*

Pope Francis took the name of the Saint for “...guidance and inspiration...” [Note 5:4].

Likewise, St. Francis has inspired millions of people as a role model for what it is to follow Christ. However, there are traits that most people at least nowadays find hard to understand and follow, for example, the extreme ascetic life which St. Francis practised. This caused severe health problems and we have difficulties to understand how this can be a beneficial way of following Christ.

But, there are many other traits in the way St. Francis followed Christ which may inspire us. In the following we will elaborate somewhat on possible ways to follow St. Francis today. We choose two of the well-known virtues that were important for him. The first is poverty and the second love and care for the creation.

Poverty. What does it mean to live in poverty today? We have to be careful here and emphasise that when we talk about poverty, it is a relative measure. Many of us, even if we live in the “rich part of the world” do not live in affluence. Poverty is not something that can be imposed on someone else. Living in poverty in itself is not normally a good thing. But many of us can think of ways to live in simplicity. That could mean something as simple as to have fewer things around us or spend less of our money on activities that are costly. But here we would like to connect to what we have written earlier on spending time, for example, following various influencers on social media. Maybe here we could find a form of “ascetism” and simplicity in the intake of information and various visual or audible stimuli. Following St. Francis on this way of simplicity could be a protest against the “normal” way of living with hours each day dedicated to consumption of media which could instead be used for other purposes (silence, being together with friends, walking in the forest, praying, making a phone call or a visit to a friend who feels lonely...). There are so many lonely persons in the community today. [Note 5:5]

Care of the creation. Around 1970, when the awareness grew about environmental deterioration caused by mankind, many people discovered St. Francis and his warm relation to the creation – all nature. It was sometimes claimed that in a way St. Francis had a similar perspective as the ecologic view of today. But,

compared to contemporary views, St. Francis had a wider perspective in that he saw creation in the light of his belief in God. The writer Warren G Hansen, Chicago writes in 1971:

“... St. Francis perceived an inner and higher interrelation in the creation, a perception which exceeds the view of the ecologist. St. Francis sensed that all things created come from God and are, as he himself, dependent upon God. In this perspective, all created things are members of God’s large family. Therefore it is a duty, according to St. Francis, for the whole creation to praise God, each one in its own special way. It is important to underline that we humans are part of the creation, not only in the fashion that the ecologist describes us, but also in the way St. Francis meant.

St. Francis tried to set reverence for all created, before the human total domination of the creation....” [Note 5:6]

The recognition of St. Francis as a role model for many people active in the environmental movement was supported when, in 1979, St. Francis was canonised as the patron saint of ecologists by Pope John Paul II. Later Jan J Boersema, a scholar in environmental science and philosophy, wrote a comprehensive text about what we know of St. Francis’ view of the nature. Further, he analysed reasons for St. Francis being canonised as the the patron of ecologists. An important aspect and a source for inspiration, Boersema concludes, is St. Francis’ virtue of living in material simplicity. [Note 5:7]

In the same spirit Pope Francis writes that St. Francis “... helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human...”. The Pope further writes that for St. Francis “...each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection...” [Note 5:8]

Maybe this could be a starting point for following St. Francis in his way of living in solidarity with and reverence for the whole creation. This would mean a turn away from many of the current ways of dominance over nature towards a more humble way of seeing our place in creation. If we, inspired by St. Francis, discover our bonds of affection with all creatures we may be encouraged to do what we can to save our fellow-creatures from extinction. And we can try not to contribute further to the environmental damage which forces our human sisters and brothers to become climate-refugees.

In this section we have emphasised two ways in which St. Francis may inspire us today. Each of these are worth following but we have also seen that these virtues support each other. Our love and care of the creation may inspire us to live in materialistic simplicity. Also, a life in simplicity, among other good things, is good for the environment.

6. People from History with many followers reflecting St. Francis’ ideals

We think reading about other people’s lives gives a better understanding of life choices and may be of great value as inspiration in our own lives. Here we list a group of well-known people who portray some of St. Francis ideals. There is a lot of written material about these people and in the reference notes we give some starting points. Their stories are more about reverence of their neighbour citizens, combined with a simplicity of living and care for creation, than about direct following St. Francis. They sort of reinvent St. Francis’ experience and in their old age they show similarity with St. Francis’.

First four persons internationally well-known and considered as contemporary followers of St. Francis by many. Their life and work described in a small Swedish booklet published to the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis. [Note 6:1].

Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1831-1910): He worked among the poor and sick and saw the importance of daily activity and job. He was involved especially with people suffering from epilepsy. He founded and led the Bethel-community. In later years he became member of the German parliament and could spread his ideas and experiences.

Wilson Carlisle (1847-1942): He became a devoted Christian after an economic crash of his textile- business. He later founded and led the Church Army in England. He and his followers were known for their great patience with people in the street who initially opposed and ridiculed them but later converted to Christian belief.

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965): He worked among African people close to the equator and combined medical help with missionary work. His base was in Lambarene. He was also a well-known organist and an expert on

the music of Bach. Together with his friend Albert Einstein he tried to stop the nuclear weapon race. He got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1954.

Mother Theresa (1910-1997): She worked among the poor and sick in Calcutta in India. She founded a monastery and adapted the rules of Franciscan monasteries. Her work continues and has become international and there are 4500 nuns in 133 countries. She got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Two persons central to the foundation and the early time of our own movement are Joseph Folliet and Franz Stock. Our movement was founded in 1927 in France and about 20 people gathered for the first pilgrimage.

Joseph Folliet (1902-1973):

He worked as a professor in social science in Lyon, and in later years he became a priest. Social questions interested him, and he tried to bridge the gap between people from different backgrounds. As a layman he was called to participate in the 2nd Vatican Council in 1962 by Pope John XXIII.

Franz Stock (1904-1948): He worked with prisoners of war during the second world war. Both before and after the war he was concerned with facilitating friendship among young French and German people. Pope John Paul II during his visit to Germany in 1981 mentioned his name together with the names of great saints of German history.

Finally, four internationally very well-known persons who worked for peace and civil rights. We think they also reflect something of the ideals of St. Francis of our focus: simplicity and care of creation.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961): The secretary general of UN 1953-61. He was involved in reforming and strengthening the UN and he introduced the UN peace-keeping forces. During later years he was personally involved in peace negotiations in several international crises. He died in an airplane crash when negotiating peace in the Congo-conflict. His concise and poetic private diary "Vägmärken", (English: "Markings") was published a few years after his death and can still be bought. In Sweden he was active on the board of the Swedish Tourist Association (STF) who promote people to walk in the Swedish Alps as well as in the countryside in the whole country and live in simple cottages. [Note 6:2]. He got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961 posthumously.

Mahatma Ghandi (1869-1948): An Indian lawyer who after 21 years in South Africa came back to India 1915 and organised non-violence campaigns for civil rights. He lived a simple, ascetic life and he and his ideas became widely spread in India. In 1947 India became independent. In early 1948 he was assassinated by an Indian extremist. He was nominated for the Noble Peace Prize several times. Instead, this year the choice of the committee was not to give anybody the prize this. [Note 6:3].

Nelson Mandela (1918-2013): Educated and working as a lawyer he became early involved in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. After 27 years in prison, he returned and in cooperation with the President de Klerk managed to stop apartheid and bring a new constitution to the country. Nelson Mandela then became President. The country was close to civil war many times, but this could be avoided and Mandela and de Klerk shared the Noble Peace Prize in 1993.

Desmond Tutu (1931-2021): Priest and later bishop of the Anglican church in Johannesburg in South Africa. He was involved in the anti-apartheid movement and stressed the importance of non-violence in the protest work. The important "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" was established by the new government and Desmond Tutu was the appointed chairman. [Note 6:4]. He got the Noble Peace Prize in 1984.

Biographical information about these persons you can get on the internet through:

- Britannica - <https://www.britannica.com/>
- Wikipedia – <https://en.wikipedia.org/>
- Nobel prize - <https://www.nobelprize.org/>

For a few people we have added some extra information in the notes.

7. Concluding remarks

Our aim for this document has been to reflect on some aspects of the concept “to follow” and more specifically from the perspective of The Pilgrims of St. Francis. It has been an interesting but a challenging task and there are many aspects that we have not been able to cover. However, we hope that this text may be of use for those who will continue to develop and refine our ideas. We have in mind the organisers of the international chapter, of national chapters and seminars and of the group that will prepare activities for the international pilgrimage. If the text can inspire to further studies and discussions among individuals and groups, we would be happy.

Finally, the authors wish to thank AnnSofi Danielsson and Birgitta Jansson for their comments and corrections of the text.

8. References and notes

Note 2:1

Dag Hammarskjöld (born July 29, 1905, Jönköping, Sweden—died September 18, 1961, near Ndola, Northern Rhodesia [now Zambia]), Swedish economist and statesman who, as the second secretary-general (1953–61) of the United Nations (UN), enhanced the prestige and effectiveness of that organisation. He was posthumously awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1961.

Source: Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Dag Hammarskjöld". Encyclopedia Britannica, 14 Sep. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dag-Hammarskjold> Accessed 6 January 2023.

Note 2:2

A comprehensive description of the economic mechanisms behind the social media development is found in Zuboff, Shoshana, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019)

Note 2:3

Some research has been published on how social media is the major tool for spreading disinformation and distrust in established institutions and traditional media. One book that particularly describes the function of Facebook in this respect is: Vaidhyanathan, Siva, *Antisocial media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Note 3:1

Personal communication with press communication officer Olle Hallberg at Internetstiftelsen. <https://internetstiftelsen.se/domaner/vem-tar-ansvar-for-innehall-pa-natet/> Accessed 23 January 2023.

Note 3:2

Swedish National Agency for Education – two internet pages (in Swedish) with posters on questions you should ask yourself about what you see on the internet in general and in particular focused on social media. Both have similar content. <https://www.skolverket.se/download/18.6bfaca41169863e6a65d1f2/1553967871709/pdf3925.pdf> <https://www.skolverket.se/download/18.6bfaca41169863e6a65d1e4/1553967867545/pdf3924.pdf> Accessed 23 January 2023.

Note 3:3

The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency. The poster taken is found in the first link and you have also here a shorter English version available. The second link contains both text and a shorter video both in Swedish and English.

<https://www.mpf.se/vart-uppdrag/> Accessed 23 January 2023.

<https://www.bliintelurad.se> Accessed 23 January 2023.

Note 4:1

There is interesting archaeology around the town of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee where Peter is believed to have lived. The article gives an idea of what it may have looked like at the time. <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/capernaum-and-the-house-of-peter-what-we-can-and-cant-say-about-it/132985.htm/> Accessed 23 January 2023.

Note 5:1

From the English version of the website Pilgrims of Saint Francis. <https://pellegrinifrancesco.eu/en/who-are-we/> Accessed January 4, 2023.

Note 5:2

Taken from a leaflet issued by the Swedish branch of The Companions of St. Francis (*Franciskanska Pilgrimsrörelsen*).

Note 5:3

Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* of the holy Father Pope Francis *On care for our common home* <https://www.laudatosi.org/the-letter/> downloaded 2022-12-05.

Note 5:4

Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* by the holy Father Pope Francis *On care for our common home* (10).

Note 5:5

The ideas expressed in this part have been inspired by a Swedish theologian Patrik Hagman in his book *Skapad skapare* (Created creator), Spricka förlag, 2021.

Note 5:6

The quotation (translated by us) is taken from a Swedish book, Bengt Ingmar Kihlström, *Franciskanska perspektiv*. The original source is found in Warren G Hansen, *St. Francis of Assisi, patron of the environment*, Franciscan Herald Press; First Edition, 1971.

Note 5:7

Jan J. Boersema, *Why is Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecologists?*, Science & Christian Belief, Vol 14, No 1 (2002).

Note 5:8

Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* of the holy Father Pope Francis *On care for our common home* (11).

Note 6:1

In the Swedish book "De gav sig själva" (Eng "They gave themselves") the Swedish priest Herman Schlyter in Malmö, portrays St. Francis and the four persons listed here. He hosted Albert Schweizer and Mother Theresa himself when they visited Malmö and Sweden. The book was printed in 1982 by SkeabVerbum and is out of stock but is likely to be found in libraries.

Note 6:2 Dag Hammarskjöld <http://dhbackakra.se/en/home> Accessed 23 January 2023.

Note 6:3 Mahatma Ghandi

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/themes/mahatma-gandhi-the-missing-laureate/> Accessed 23 January 2023.

Note 6:4 Desmond Tutu

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/tutu-and-his-role-truth-reconciliation-commission> Accessed 23 January 2023.