



**Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations**  
**The Friends of St. Francis**  
by Sidney F. Wicks

**M**

**Meditation – Franciscan History**

**Part III – *The Third Order***  
**CHAPTER I**

**St. Francis and the Wars**

This chapter is in the nature of a preface to a study of the mission of the Third Order.

It touches on wars and the part St. Francis played in them. All social problems arise from some kind of war between nations and classes. If the spirit in which St. Francis faced the Saracen soldan of Egypt were inspired by a power both universal and immortal, it would be valid for the hatreds and hostilities of today. If it were merely the glow of the romanticism of a saint of medieval Italy, then what has Francis to do with the economic problems of Europe and the threat of war between Soviet Russia and the Western nations?

This is written in the faith that the message of St. Francis, and the spirit of the man behind it, is of universal validity. That is precisely why I have protested so much against the sentimentalism that hides St. Francis in a romantic mist of fairy tales. Such a charming man! A gifted lady wrote to me recently: “The book on St. Francis brought back memories of college days when we had a nature study guild delighting in the name of the Guild of St. Francis.” There you have it! A delightful activity, no doubt. Love birds, of course. But I think of the eventide on which St. Francis died. His request that he be stripped of his habit had been obeyed. He lay on the bare ground, the stigmata visible on his hands and feet, and while the suffering of our Savior was being read from the Gospel of St. John, he died. And it is recorded that as he breathed his last, there was “some late lark singing.”

Only that St. Francis who made an utter renunciation of material things and of earthly ambitions; only that St. Francis who was inspired with such a burning compassion for all human beings that he reconciled them one to the other wherever he went; only that St. Francis who rebuilt ruined chapels so that the Mass of the eternal sacrifice of God the Son might be celebrated on their altars; only that St. Francis who bore the five wounds of Jesus Christ on his body and who died ungarmented on the naked earth—only that St. Francis, I say, possesses any relevance to the problems of today. Any other St. Francis is as irrelevant to the enormous tragedies of the modern world as Tennyson’s Sir Galahad and Sherwood Forest’s Robin Hood.

The dominant force in St. Francis was his compassion. Compassion is not a static emotion as its Greek equivalent “sympathy” may well be. It was a love supernaturally radiant in words and deeds. The outstanding virtue of his compassion was its reconciling influence. It melted hostility to himself, and made sworn enemies shake hands with each other.



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Although his way of life constantly challenged powerful interests, it is not recorded that he ever made one enemy. Even his opponents were glad to have his blessing. In the Vatican, where men devised clever and devious ways of gaining the approval of the pontiff, St. Francis walked freely, and no pope refused him. He was unaware of his power. He had no self-consciousness and no vanity. All men were subdued by his compassion.

St. Francis would brook no hatred between man and man. But he did not reconcile them by the direct approach—no didactic finger, no railing argument, no interchange of dialectic notes. Reconciliation took place in the presence of his compassion.

A vivid contemporary picture is painted by Thomas of Spalato. St. Francis visited Bologna in 1222 when he was forty-one years of age. He knew that Bologna needed above all peace between the rival factions who disturbed the city's life. Here are Spalato's own words:

“In the same year, on the day of the Assumption of the Mother of God, when I was a student at Bologna, I saw St. Francis preaching in the piazza before the Palazzo Publico, where almost the whole town was assembled. The theme of his sermon was Angels, Men, Devils. And he spoke so well and so wisely of these three rational spirits that to many learned who were there the sermon of this ignorant seemed worthy of no little admiration, in spite of the fact that he did not keep to the method of an expositor so much as of an extempore speaker. Indeed, the whole manner of his speech was calculated to stamp out enmities and to make peace. His tunic was dirty, his person unprepossessing, and his face far from handsome; yet God gave such power to his words that many factions of the nobility, among whom fierce anger of ancient feuds had been raging with much bloodshed, were brought to reconciliation.”

[In 1952, Sidney Wicks asked,] ...The perturbed in mind may reply, “Yes, but where is the St. Francis who will confront the modern soldan and uplift his soul by his preaching of God's righteousness and love? In the soldan's camp no abstract general principle was laid down. The righteousness and love of God spoke through a living and unique man. Where is that man?” The answer is just. It would seem that the world has no man of the caliber of St. Francis who is free to take his message to the Kremlin.

*(St. John Paul II the Great?)*