At the beginning of his conversion, Francis did not know what to do. God had broken into his life like a thief in the night, and he was bewildered. His first instinct, which became a major pattern of his life, was to go into retreat, to head for the hills, to find a deserted place and to pray. He was not completely alone: a friend accompanied him, and together they talked about the great ‘treasure’ that Francis had found. They found a cave near the city of Assisi, where they would meet and where Francis would go alone into the heart of the mountainside to pray to God in secret, emerging much later transformed by the experience of meeting God in the darkness.

Later, when a few companions had gathered around him, he was again faced by a dilemma: should he devote himself solely to constant prayer, or should he sometimes go out preaching? He did not trust his own judgement, so he asked two of his friends to pray and seek the will of the Lord. The people he turned to for direction were Brother Sylvester, a hermit living on the mountain above Assisi, and Sister Clare and her companions living a life of enclosed prayer and contemplation at the church of San Damiano. By asking two contemplatives Francis seems to be loading the dice. But the answer came back that he should preach, so he cheerfully jumped to his feet and set off on the road.

For a while. In fact Francis never quite solved this dilemma; it was one of the questions around which he wove his whole life. Thomas of Celano, in his Life of St Francis written in 1228, put it this way: “[Francis] often chose solitary places to focus his heart entirely on God. But he was not reluctant, when he discerned the time was right, to involve himself in the affairs of his neighbours, and attend to their salvation. For his safest haven was prayer;... Walking, sitting, eating, drinking, he was focused on prayer. He would spend the night alone praying in abandoned churches and in deserted places where, with the protection of divine grace, he overcame his soul's many fears and anxieties.”
(1 Cel. 71; Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (ED) vol.1, p.244)

The centre of gravity in the life of St Francis was prayer, often solitary, always intense. But it was out of this unseen devotion, this cave of the heart, that he emerged ‘when the time was right’ to share this gift with others. Contemplation was not for him something that he could add on to his daily life or practice in his spare time: it was his food and drink, the air that he breathed, the blood in his veins. Being alone with Christ he entered into the dark places of his soul and emerged beyond the confinements of fear.

A practice that Francis maintained throughout his life was entering into a forty day retreat. He would do this at various times of the year - after the feast of the Epiphany in honour of Christ wandering in the desert, during the Lent
before Easter, from the feast of Blessed Mary in mid August through to Michaelmas at the end of September, or from All Saints through to Christmas. Solitude, fasting, vigils of prayer and praise were the tools of his trade, the workshop of his profession.

He encouraged his brothers to enter a life of retreat in his Rule for Hermitages:

"Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be the 'mother' and have two 'sons' or at least one. Let the two who are 'mothers' keep the life of Martha and the two 'sons' the life of Mary and let them have an enclosure in which each one may have his cell in which he may pray and sleep... And they may not permit anyone to enter or eat in the enclosure where they dwell."
(Rule for Hermitages;(ED) vol.1, p.61)

These Franciscan hermits would have a qualified solitude of intimate mutual care and support, the mothers and sons from time to time exchanging roles, with each asking of the other whatever they might need.

The friary of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, the place Francis loved above all others, he wanted to be run on similar lines, "preserving its holiness with constant prayer day and night and by constant silence." (Mirror of Perfection 55, ED vol. 3, p.299f) It was the simplicity of the hermitages that kept for Francis the spirit of the early days with his first brothers. He used to say of such houses:

"These brothers of mine are my knights of the round table, the brothers who hide in deserted and remote places, to devote themselves more diligently to prayer and meditation, weeping over their sins and those of others, whose holiness is known to God."
(Assisi Compilation 103; (ED) vol.2, p.208)

So was there no place for action in the life of Saint Francis? Of course there was preaching, and the counsel that worked healing in the lives of those who sought him out, and there was always manual work to be done in any community house or caring for the sick in leprosy hospitals, but all activity was to be immersed in prayer and contemplation:

"Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working may work faithfully and devotedly so that, while avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute."
(Later Rule 5; (ED) vol.1, p.102)

The work was for the sake of prayer, not prayer as a prelude to work. For Francis there was never a question of finding a balance between prayer and work: prayer always had the priority.

The work of a Franciscan is the labour to give birth to Christ in our lives; for as Francis says in his Later Admonition and Exhortation: "We are mothers when we carry our Lord Jesus Christ in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give birth to him through a holy activity, which
must shine before others by example." (ED Vol.1, p.49) What is this holy activity? To "observe the commands and counsels of our Lord Jesus Christ." Francis just wanted to live the gospel: that was his work, his daily grind, and his moment to moment joy. But it is the gestation in prayer, in cultivating love and self-knowledge, that enables the Christ-child to be formed in us. In contemplation we evolve into personhood. Our fears and anxieties become guides and companions, until even our enemies are our faithful friends.

For Francis, eventually, the question faded away: to pray or to preach was no longer a dilemma because he couldn't stop praying, and every action became an eloquent sermon. He just lived what he was - a child of God. May we have the grace to do the same. 
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