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# The CORD

A FRANCISCAN SPIRITUAL REVIEW

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## The CORD

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### Standard Abbreviations used in **The CORD** for Early Franciscan Sources

#### I. Writings of Saint Francis

Adm: Admonitions	Fragm: Another Fragment, Rule of 1221
BenLeo: Blessing for Brother Leo	LaudDei: Praises of the Most High God
CantSol: Canticle of Brother Sun	LaudHor: Praises at All the Hours
EpAnt: Letter to St. Anthony	OffPass: Office of the Passion
EpCler: Letter to Clerics <sup>1</sup>	OrCruc: Prayer before the Crucifix
EpCust: Letter to Superiors <sup>1</sup>	RegB: Rule of 1223
EpFid: Letter to All the Faithful <sup>1</sup>	RegNB: Rule of 1221
EpLeo: Letter to Brother Leo	RegEr: Rule for Hermits
EpMin: Letter to a Minister	SalBMV: Salutation to our Lady
EpOrd: Letter to the Entire Order	SalVirt: Salutation to the Virtues
EpRect: Letter to the Rulers of People	Test: Testament of St. Francis
ExhLD: Exhortation to the Praise of God	UltVol: Last Will Written for Clare
ExpPat: Exposition on the Our Father	VPLaet: Treatise on True and Perfect Joy
Form Viv: Form of Life for St. Clare	<sup>1</sup> I, II refer to First and Second Editions.

#### II. Other Early Franciscan Sources

ICel: Celano, First Life of Francis	LM: Bonaventure, Major Life of Francis
2Cel: Celano, Second Life of Francis	LMin: Bonaventure, Minor Life of Francis
3Cel: Celano, Treatise on Miracles	LP: Legend of Perugia
CL: Legend of Saint Clare	L3S: Legend of the Three Companions
CP: Process of Saint Clare	SC: Sacrum Commercium
Flor: Little Flowers of St. Francis	SP: Mirror of Perfection

**Omnia:** Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973).

**FC:** Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., and Ignatius Brady, O.F.M., ed., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

## The Gift of Clare

By his own desire, Francis lingered behind his brothers along the road from San Damiano. He was still basking in the glow of his visit with Clare. It was always a sacred moment when they were together. The light that shone from Clare — her warm smile and radiant glow and the way she spoke of Jesus — made Francis' heart leap for joy. There was more than natural beauty there; there was a godly quality in the way she talked and walked. It was a loveliness that was beyond words, beyond description. It was as if Clare were his own soul.

That drove Francis immediately to prayer. He could not see her too often; she evoked something within him that he had to be cautious about. What was it? Francis asked himself. Was it just man attracted to woman? It seemed to be more. Was it the erotic in him that did not die easily, the old man in him that needed to be transformed yet more by the power of God?

Clare was important to Francis, and he did not want to lose her. She was a living testimony of all that Francis could not find within himself — all that was kind and gentle, all that was delicate and compassionate and warm. He loved her deeply. His eyes teared up as he thought of her. She was gift.

The brothers had walked long and hard that day. Francis sat down, apart from his brothers, by the shore of Lake Trasimene. The vastness of the lake spoke to him of the vastness of the mystery of life. There were so many questions to be explored; and yet, in the final analysis, one had simply to bow to what could never be explained. Life was, by and large, a mystery to be embraced and lived out in faith.

As the waves lapped gently at the feet of Francis, Clare tugged at his heart again. She and her sisters were the contemplative dimension of the vision that the Lord had given Francis. In and out the waves flowed ... the ebb and flow of life ... the fusion of the active and contemplative. Clare always seemed to be there, praying him and his brothers in the marketplace to another victory for Jesus. Her place in their hearts and in the Kingdom was unmistakable.

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*This story appears in the book **The Touch of God: Telling Stories of St. Francis for Everyday Living** by Kieran M. Kay, O.F.M. Conv. Readers will enjoy learning more about this unusual work in the Book Review section of this issue of **The CORD**.*

# "The Reign of God and Penance"

(1Cel 22)

CHARLES V. FINNEGAN, O.F.M.

Preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ necessarily implies proclaiming the Reign (Kingdom) of God. This was the great love of Jesus' life, the core of His message. "Thy Kingdom come" is the ardent longing of Jesus' heart and the petition He put in our hearts and our lips. For Jesus, God's reign is the only absolute; everything else is "the rest": "Seek first the reign of God and his way of holiness, and all the rest will be given you besides."<sup>1</sup> Paul VI's statement on the centrality of the reign of God is so emphatic that at first it may cause surprise: "Only the Reign of God is absolute. Everything else is relative."<sup>2</sup>

The Reign of God metaphor is very fluid and comprehensive. We can discover the specific meanings Jesus attached to it only by a study of the whole of His life and teaching. Scholars often point out three dimensions of the Kingdom motif: the **eschatological** ("the certainty that at the end God will reveal Himself as the absolute Lord of all the world"<sup>3</sup>), the **theological**, and the **soteriological** (the Kingdom is God's saving presence in human history).

The biblical authors are very aware that God acts not only in the sacred precincts of the temple, but also, and indeed very preeminently, in the **history** of His people. The Exodus, for example, is far from a "purely spiritual" event. It is also, and very conspicuously so, social, economic and political **liberation**. Salvation history is **our** history, and every dimension of human life is to be saved. Not confined to a place or a people — the Reign of God is not restricted to the church, for example, — it is God's loving self-communication and saving action

*Readers of The CORD have expressed appreciation for Fr. Finnegan's series on the New Evangelization. This particular article addresses itself to foundational issues pertaining to evangelization and the Franciscan charism. All members of the Franciscan family will find the author's insights of great value for their spiritual growth.*

freeing people from sin, sickness and death. Wherever and whenever people are open to the gift of God's loving presence in their lives, the Reign of God comes into being within them and among them.<sup>4</sup> The Reign of God is God making Himself present to us in Jesus, "the exact representation of the Father's being"<sup>5</sup> by the activity of the Holy Spirit.

God's Reign is then a loving **action** of God to which we are invited to submit in total trust, and in that very submission are set free. God means to rule at the center and core of our being to liberate us from the idols that enslave us at that very center and core; John 8:36 is emphatic: "If the Son sets you free, you are really free." God's Reign is not cheap grace; it is transforming grace. God Who created us in love, wants to recreate us in love: "This means that if anyone is in Christ **he is a new creation**. The old order has passed away; now all is new. All this has been done by God."<sup>6</sup> No one is **born** in the Kingdom; we need to be born **from above** to enter God's Reign.<sup>7</sup> By the power of the sovereignly free Spirit we are transformed in our innermost self, filled with the very life of God, and made partakers in the divine nature.<sup>8</sup> This work of our "divinization" is pure gift, God's sheer and abundant goodness at work in us. In his **Sermo 185** Augustine says: "Ask if this were merited; ask for its reason, for its justification, and see whether you will find any other answer but sheer grace." Similarly, St. Gregory Nazianzen, 4th century bishop of Constantinople and known in the East as "the theologian," writes: "What is this wealth of goodness? What is this new mystery surrounding me? I am both small and great, lowly and exalted, mortal and immortal, earthly and heavenly. I am to become a coheir with Christ, a son of God, and indeed God Himself."<sup>9</sup>

Those last words of a great bishop and Doctor of the Church may appear to us exaggerated, but they help us understand something of the awesome power and mystery of God's Reign among us. The radical demands of the gospel become doable only when one has been transformed by radical grace.

## Apostolic Preaching

It is not Jesus alone who proclaims the good news of God's Reign. He entrusts that same message to the 72 disciples when he sends them out on mission.<sup>10</sup> While the Reign of God is not a major theme in the epistles of Paul, he does mention it in Gal 5:21; 1 Thess 2:12; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9-10; 15:24, 50; Rom 14:17. The Kingdom motif appears also in Paul's speeches in Acts.<sup>11</sup> The last word we have of Paul in Acts is also the last sentence of Acts: "With full assurance, and without any hindrance whatever, [Paul] preached the Reign of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." No doubt the other apostles made the proclamation of God's Reign central in their verbal proclamation, as Jesus had instructed them to do when He first sent them out on mission.<sup>12</sup>

### St. Francis' Teaching

Given the importance of the Kingdom motif in Jesus' preaching and in that of the apostles, we are not surprised to see that same theme is central in Francis' ministry to the friars and to all who will listen to him. Before Francis sent his first friars out on mission, he "spoke to them at great length about the Reign of God."<sup>13</sup> Francis himself set out from the Portiuncula to visit many towns and villages "as a herald of the Gospel, to preach the Reign of God."<sup>14</sup> In his rule for hermitages Francis notes that "the first concern [of the brothers living in them] should be to seek the Reign of God and His justice."

The response to the proclamation of God's loving rule that Jesus asks for is **metanoia** (penance, conversion): "Do penance [**metanoete**] The kingdom of heaven is near."<sup>15</sup> We turn our attention to this response, of crucial importance in the New Testament, and absolutely central in the Franciscan tradition of spirituality and mission.

### Penance

In his *First Life of St. Francis*, Thomas of Celano informs us that one day when Francis was at Mass at Portiuncula, he heard the gospel reading in which Jesus sends His disciples out on mission. With his limited knowledge of Latin Francis understands the words of the Gospel "somewhat" (**utcumque**) and after Mass humbly asks the priest to explain it further to him. The priest explained that Jesus sent His disciples out on mission "without gold or silver or money ... to preach the Reign of God and penance." Celano concludes: "From that moment on, [Francis] began to preach penance with great joy."<sup>16</sup> Proclaiming the good news of God's Reign and preaching penance went hand in hand.

If that seems strange to us, it is because in our modern languages we have trivialized the notion of penance, depriving it of its rich biblical meaning. To a large extent we have identified penance with works of mortification and asceticism. Lent is a special time of penance and people speak of "giving up something" they enjoy doing as a "Lenten penance." Asceticism surely has its importance, but is not the heart of the matter.

When penance is understood in its rich biblical sense, as Francis surely understood it, it is seen as the only adequate response to the central gospel message of God's Reign. Penance, in the first place, is a change of mind, a change of heart. Those who live in penance are constantly "putting off the old self, and putting on the new person created in God's image."<sup>17</sup> Penance leads to reconciliation: with God, with one's true self, with others, with all creation. Penance and reconciliation are inseparable. Together they lead to our becoming "in Christ, a new creation."<sup>18</sup> In this, their primary meaning, penance and reconciliation bring about the most radical of changes, since they transform the

"core self."

Through the prophet Ezekiel God speaks to His people of this grace: "I will sprinkle clean water on you to cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart ... I will put my spirit within you."<sup>19</sup>

Gospel penance is turning away from a self-centered life to live an ever more God-centered life. It is seeking to discover one's true worth not in riches, talents, power, fame or pleasure, but in the free gift of God's unconditional love. This change at the core of one's being (what Scripture calls the heart) will surely be expressed in a change of conduct, "the fruits of penance." As we are continually converted our conduct becomes more loving. Thus the insistence of John the Baptist: "Produce worthy fruits of penance."<sup>20</sup> This changed conduct is the secondary meaning of penance. In the third place are acts of asceticism or mortification.

The gospel call to penance is then more than a call to acts of mortification; it is more even than a call to give up this or that vice or to practice this or that virtue. IT IS AN INVITATION TO RE-CENTER OUR LIVES ON GOD AND GROUND OUR WHOLE EXISTENCE ON THE FREE GIFT OF GOD'S LOVE. Penance consists of an **aversio** (turning away from the reign of sin and death) and a **versio** (turning towards God). Penance is the grace to transcend the confines of an egocentric existence that so constricts the human spirit, and to reach out to others in love.

In the light of the Communion of Saints, this grace of self-transcendence benefits all humanity: "every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world."<sup>21</sup>

Penance is the grace to "deny oneself"<sup>22</sup> — one's false self, the self of one's own delusions, especially the delusion of absolute autonomy, and to surrender in total trust to God Who is Love. In that surrender one finds freedom. In discovering one's true worth in the free gift of God's unconditional love, one finds peace. Merton thus expresses this paradox: "In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I have to go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die."<sup>23</sup>

Works of mortification, so dear to St. Francis, are important precisely because they express and nourish the change taking place on the inside, the change of heart. Consider, for example, the traditional penance of fasting. Fasting is more than cutting down on one's consumption of food. There is a difference between fasting and dieting. Dieting is something I do for myself. Fasting is something I do for others: "This is the fast I wish ... that you share your bread with the hungry."<sup>24</sup> To fast is to move away from a life that is less

compassionate to one that is more so. To be truly penitential, all the works of penance are at the service of love of God and neighbor.

### Centrality of Penance

Jesus is totally centered on His Father. In Ernest Kaseman's phrase, "Jesus is a Jew of the first commandment." There are no false gods in his life, no idols. His very food is to do His Father's will.<sup>25</sup> He has come not to do His own will but that of the Father who sent Him.<sup>26</sup> Because Jesus is so totally centered on God, His life convicts us of centering elsewhere. He convicts, not to fill us with despair or remorse, but to call us lovingly to re-center our lives. He accuses us of walking in darkness only to invite us into the light.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Jesus' first sermon is a call to conversion.<sup>28</sup> A typical exhortation of His public ministry is an urgent appeal to live in penance. Indeed not to live in penance is to invite disaster into one's life, for conversion is the essential condition for obtaining salvation.<sup>29</sup> Jesus' last command to the apostles is a commission to preach penance to all nations,<sup>30</sup> the Lucan equivalent of the command in Matthew "to make disciples of all nations" and in Mark "to proclaim the good news to all creation."<sup>31</sup> These are three different ways of saying essentially the same thing: preaching the good news = preaching penance = making disciples.

Penance then becomes central in the apostolic preaching. When Paul is on trial before King Agrippa, he sums up his ministry in one sentence: "I have been preaching a message of penance and conversion to God."<sup>32</sup>

### The Tragedy of Refusing To Live In Penance

Those who do not accept the call to penance will decide against Jesus and refuse His invitation to discipleship. Of all the tragic lines in the gospels about the pharisees, the most tragic is surely that which says "they defeated God's plan for their lives."<sup>33</sup> How could such a thing happen to these men, the most religiously observant of their people and the most skilled in the law? Luke's answer may surprise us. They defeated God's plan because they refused the baptism of John! Why was John's baptism of such crucial importance? Precisely because it was a baptism of penance, as the New Testament says repeatedly.<sup>34</sup> The message is clear: to refuse the call to penance is to "defeat God's plan for one's life," and that, in Jesus' perspective, is the ultimate tragedy.

It is also the ultimate bondage. To the extent that human lives are not centered on God they are centered on something else, and that "something else" becomes an idol. As John Shea points out,<sup>35</sup> according to a biblical tradition, idols do three things to those who worship: they become an obsession, they

enslave, and in the end they destroy their worshippers. Speaking of idols, psalm 115 says: "Having eyes they see not, having ears they hear not, there is no breath of life in their nostrils." They're dead! The tragic result? Those who worship them will become like them."

The Scriptures mention a number of such idols: one's ego (the self turned in on itself), self-righteousness (soaring on the wings of delusion and deceit), the pursuit of wealth, power, prestige, pleasure. One can ground oneself and come to see one's self-worth in possessions, in an office (in the world, the church, the community), in one's accomplishments, in one's talents, even in one's appearance. Again, John Shea:

Idolatry is a false centering of the self, an ultimate investment in that which is not ultimate. According to Paul Tillich "something essentially finite is given infinite significance (the best example is the contemporary idolatry of religious nationalism)."<sup>36</sup>

When we center our lives on God and ground ourselves on the free gift of God's love, we are set free from the Love substitutes—the idols that so constrict the human spirit. Says Jesus: "If the Son sets you free, you will really be free" and "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."<sup>37</sup>

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*Penance therefore is not something predominantly negative, it is rather a new springtime in our spiritual journey*

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### Penance, a New Spring

Penance therefore is not something predominantly negative, it is rather a new springtime in our spiritual journey, a time of new beginnings in great hope. Interestingly, the English word **Lent** comes from an anglo-saxon word meaning "Spring." In our first lenten preface the Church prays: "Each year you give us this joyful season." The season of penance is a season of joy!

### The Example of St. Francis

If anything is clear about the life of Francis, it is that he lived penance in the biblical meaning of that word. His life is ever more God-centered. He can truthfully say: "My God and My All." After receiving the stigmata, Francis' life is so God-centered that he can honestly say to God: "You are all our riches. You are enough for us."<sup>38</sup>

In his Testament Francis divides his life into two periods: "When I was in sin ..." and when "the Lord gave me to begin to do penance."

"When I was in sin" — that is, living a self-centered life, pursuing fame and wealth, quite willing even to kill in the pursuit of personal glory. (The battle of Collestrada [1202] in which Francis took part as a young man was an exceptionally bloody battle. How many men did Francis injure, or perhaps even kill, before being taken prisoner?)

"The Lord gave me [the grace] to begin to do penance" — that is the grace of freedom from the idol of self-centeredness, and the gift of the most wonderful of all discoveries: our only true center is God and any grounding other than God is a false grounding.

In this context it might be helpful to note that both Francis and medieval monasticism use the expression "leaving the world" but attach very different meanings to those words. The monks literally withdraw from the world ("fuga mundi"), spending their lives in prayer and work in the monastery and on its lands, often taking a vow of stability. In Francis' writings he speaks five times of the friars "going through the world" — the opposite of monastic stability. In the dialogue between Lady Poverty and the friars which takes place in that very early Franciscan treasure *Sacrum commercium*, when the Lady asks the location of the friars' cloister, they "show her the whole world, as far as she could see, and say: This, Lady, is our cloister."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in his *Chronicle*, Jordan of Giano recounts how he was asked at Erfurt "if he wanted a house built [for the friars] like a cloister." Jordan, "who had never seen a cloister in the Order" replied: "I do not know what a cloister is; just build us a house near the water so we can go down to it and wash our feet."<sup>40</sup> That is very different from the monastic view of "leaving the world." When Francis speaks of leaving the world,<sup>41</sup> he means embracing a life of penance. He does indeed leave that world which was so dear to him before his conversion, the world of his self-centered existence, the world of feudalism's divisions between *maiores* and *minores*, to begin a totally new life: the gospel of Jesus Christ, in a brotherhood in which all would be *minores* and entirely equal among themselves, whose greeting to all people would be: "The Lord give you peace!" No longer interested in building a kingdom for himself, Francis was free to be "the herald of the great King."<sup>42</sup> 3Cel 2 tells us that from the beginning of his conversion Francis decided to wear "a habit of penance" made in the form of a cross, so that as his mind was filled with devotion for the crucified Christ, his body would be clothed with the likeness of the cross. The Franciscan habit is "a habit of penance."

As he approaches the end of his life, Francis still encourages his followers "to begin again to serve the Lord God, for up till now we have made little or no progress."<sup>43</sup> Conversion for Francis was never an achievement but a process. Hence, "the Lord gave me [the grace] to begin to do penance"<sup>44</sup> for penance

would be characteristic of the rest of his life. Both Celano and Bonaventure tell us that Francis was "always new" and "always beginning again."<sup>45</sup> Francis' conversion was complete only when he embraced "Sister Death." But the journey began some 20 years earlier with another embrace — that of a leper. If Francis ministered to the leper,<sup>46</sup> even more so did the leper minister to Francis. It is **Francis** who is changed, and at a very deep level: "... that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body."<sup>47</sup> Embracing the leper, Francis redefines what is bitter and what is sweet. A complete reversal! He thus began the magnificent gospel venture of becoming "in Christ a new creation."<sup>48</sup>

### Penance in Francis' Ministry

Penance was also a key theme in Francis' ministry to others. The first version of his *Letter To The Faithful* consists of two chapters: "Chapter I — Those Who Do Penance" and "Chapter II — Those Who Do Not Do Penance." It is as if these are the only two classes of people that Francis knows: those striving to live a God-centered life, and those who choose to live a self-centered life. Indeed not to live in penance is to be a child of the devil.<sup>49</sup> The great burden of Francis' ministry to the friars and to all who will listen to him is to call them to a life that is ever more God-centered. In the Rule of 1221 he writes: "And now that we have left the world we have nothing else to do except to follow the will of the Lord and please Him."<sup>50</sup> Nothing else to do! In chapter 23 of that same Rule Francis speaks of the only distinctions among people that are important to him: "the wicked who have not done penance and have not known you, Most High and Supreme God" and "those who have known You and adored You and served You in penance." Knowing God and serving God means living in penance; not living in penance is equivalent to not knowing God. The greatest grace given people is "to die in penance, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven."<sup>51</sup> To die in penance is to die still centering on God; death is then one's **final and definitive choice for God**, bringing our baptism/profession to fulfillment. Embracing "Sister Death" and celebrating his death as a Passover liturgy, Francis brings his conversion to completion. "When all the mysteries of Christ were fulfilled in him, his soul took flight to the joy of God."<sup>52</sup> Embracing his own creaturehood at its weakest, Francis fulfills his most ardent longing "to serve [God] in great humility."<sup>53</sup>

So important was penance in Francis' and the early friars' understanding of the gospel way of life, that when they went on their first missionary journeys through central Italy they identified themselves simply as "men of penance from the town of Assisi."<sup>54</sup> Penance was also central in their preaching. When Francis had only eleven brothers, and as the Lord shall deign to inspire you, preach penance to all."<sup>55</sup> Even earlier, when Francis had only six companions, he sent

them out to preach with the instruction: "Dear brothers, let us consider our vocation, and how God, in His great mercy, has called us not for our salvation alone but for that of many. For this reason we are to go through the world exhorting all men and women more by our example than by our words to do penance for their sins, and to live keeping in mind the commandments of God."<sup>56</sup> The entire chapter XXI of the RegNB is an exhortation to penance which "all my brothers [therefore, both lay and cleric] can proclaim ... among all the people." In his First Letter to the Custodians, Francis writes: "In every sermon you give, warn the people about penance."<sup>57</sup> In every sermon you give!

One final example. It is very likely that St. Francis was present at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.<sup>58</sup> On November 11 Pope Innocent III delivered a famous homily to the Council. It was a reflection on Ezekiel 9 which speaks of the TAU to be marked on the foreheads "of all who deplore and disapprove of all the filth practiced in [Jerusalem]." Said the Pope:

The TAU ... has the form of a cross, just as [Christ's] cross appeared before the placard with Pilate's notice affixed to it. One bears on his forehead the TAU, and shows in his conduct the splendor of the cross; if one bears the TAU it is to crucify his flesh with its many sins and vices. Bearing the TAU one proclaims: "I wish to glory in nothing except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Whoever bears the TAU will find mercy; IT IS THE SIGN OF A PENITENT LIFE RENEWED IN CHRIST. Be therefore champions of the TAU and of the cross!

That sums up Francis' whole approach to life: a penitent life renewed in Christ! According to Ezekiel, only those who turned away from sin were to be marked with the TAU. No wonder that the TAU was so dear to St. Francis, and that he signed his letters with it and decorated the walls of the friars' cells with it.<sup>59</sup>

As Francis understood so clearly, the life of penance and continual conversion is not principally our work, it is grace: "The Lord gave me [the grace] to begin to do penance." The Scriptures often stress that conversion, reconciliation and the new life following are gifts.<sup>60</sup>

### St. Clare "The Abbess of Penitents"

Of the twenty people who testified about St. Clare during the process of her canonization, there were fifteen Sisters from San Damiano and five others. Eight knew her during her youth, and six knew her very well. These witnesses stress repeatedly that from a very early age, while still living with her parents, Clare lived a very holy and penitential life, devoting herself to prayer, fasting, and generosity to the poor. One may wonder what it could mean to speak of the

conversion of such a saintly young woman, nonetheless, Clare does speak of the grace of her conversion:

After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart, that I should do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, a short time after his conversion, I, together with a few sisters whom the Lord had given me after my conversion, willingly promised him obedience, as the Lord gave us the light of His grace through [Francis'] wonderful life and teaching.<sup>61</sup>

During the process of her canonization, so many witnesses spoke of Clare's penitential practices after she entered the monastery, that there would not be enough space to cite them all in a brief article.<sup>62</sup> One thing is certain. Pope Alexander IV was fully justified in calling Clare "the first of the poor, the guide of the humble, the teacher of those who live continent lives, and the abbess of penitents."<sup>63</sup>

Finally, we need to recall those followers of Francis who, since the end of the 13th century have been known as "Third Order" Franciscans. So essential is continual conversion as part of their charism, that originally they were known simply as "Brothers and Sisters of Penance" and later, "Penitents of Blessed Francis."<sup>64</sup>

### Reflection Questions

1. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (15), Pope Paul VI spoke of the Church as "the People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols." What are the idols that most tempt us and the church today? How does the example of St. Francis and St. Clare encourage us to resist these idols?

2. The scriptural and franciscan texts cited above point to the centrality of penance (continual conversion). In your experience of Franciscan life and ministry, does this theme receive its due importance?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mt 6:33

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8. [In the official Latin text: "Quare Regnum Dei absolutum quiddam est habendum, et efficit ut reliqua omnia ad idem sint referenda."]

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kasper in *Jesus the Christ*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lk 17:21

<sup>5</sup> Heb 1:3

<sup>6</sup> 2Cor 5:7

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jn 3:3

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 2 Pt 1:4

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Discourse 45* (found in Office of Readings, Tuesday, first week of Advent) and *Discourse 7* (Office of Readings, Friday, 31st week in ordinary time)

- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Lk 10:9,11  
<sup>11</sup> Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23  
<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mt 10:7  
<sup>13</sup> 1Cel 29  
<sup>14</sup> LM IV, 5. Cf. also 1Cel 36 and L3S 54.  
<sup>15</sup> Mt 4:17; cf. also Mk 1:15. The Greek verb used here is "meta-noeo" meaning literally "a change of mind." This was translated into Latin as "poenitentiam agere." Because modern languages attach a different meaning to *penance*, current English translations prefer to avoid the literal "Do penance," preferring instead such expressions as "Repent," "Reform your lives," and "Turn away from your sins."  
<sup>16</sup> 1Cel 23  
<sup>17</sup> Cf. Eph 4:23  
<sup>18</sup> Cf. 2Cor 5:17  
<sup>19</sup> Ez 36:22 ff  
<sup>20</sup> Lk 3:8  
<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Leseur, quoted by Pope John Paul II in *Reconciliation and Penance*, n. 72.  
<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lk 14:26  
<sup>23</sup> *Seeds of Contemplation*, 20.  
<sup>24</sup> Is 58:6  
<sup>25</sup> Jn 4:34  
<sup>26</sup> Jn 5:30  
<sup>27</sup> Jn 8:12  
<sup>28</sup> Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15  
<sup>29</sup> Lk 13:1 ff  
<sup>30</sup> Lk 24:27  
<sup>31</sup> Mt 28:19 and Mk 16:15  
<sup>32</sup> Acts 26:20  
<sup>33</sup> Lk 7:30  
<sup>34</sup> Mt 3:11; Mk 1:14; Lk 3:13; Acts 19:4  
<sup>35</sup> *The Challenge of Jesus*, 78.  
<sup>36</sup> *op. cit.*, 76  
<sup>37</sup> Jn 8:32 and 36  
<sup>38</sup> *The Praises of God* on the parchment given to Br. Leo. In the original: "tu es omnia divitia nostra ad sufficientiam."  
<sup>39</sup> SC 63  
<sup>40</sup> *Chronica fratris Jordani*, 43  
<sup>41</sup> Test 3; RegNB 22,9  
<sup>42</sup> 1Cel 16; LM II, 5

- <sup>43</sup> 1Cel 103  
<sup>44</sup> Test 1  
<sup>45</sup> *Analecta Franciscana*, X, pp. 80, 222, 366, 577, 621.  
<sup>46</sup> 1Cel 17  
<sup>47</sup> Test 3  
<sup>48</sup> 2Cor 5:17  
<sup>49</sup> EpFid I, 11: 1-6 and EpFid II, 63-66  
<sup>50</sup> RegNB XXII, 9  
<sup>51</sup> RegNB XXI, 7  
<sup>52</sup> 2Cel 217  
<sup>53</sup> Cant Sol 14  
<sup>54</sup> L3S 37  
<sup>55</sup> 1Cel 33  
<sup>56</sup> L3S 36; see also 1Cel 29  
<sup>57</sup> EpCust (I), 6  
<sup>58</sup> LP 67  
<sup>59</sup> 3Cel 3: "Of all the letters, TAU was dearest to him [Francis]. He signed his letters with it and decorated the walls of the friars' cells with it." At least two letters of Francis (that to the clergy and the blessing for Br. Leo) bear the TAU. Leo made a marginal note: "In like manner, he [Francis] made this sign [a large T] ... with his own hand."  
<sup>60</sup> Cf. Dt 8:17f; Jn 6:44 and 15:5; 1Cor 1:26-31; Eph 2, esp. verses 4-10  
<sup>61</sup> Testament of St. Clare 24-26 and Rule of St. Clare VI, 1  
<sup>62</sup> Cf. "Acts of the Process of Canonization (1253)" in *Clare of Assisi - Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap, 125-175 and "The Legend of St. Clare," *ibid*, 184 ff.  
<sup>63</sup> Bull of Canonization, 10. See: "Clare, Abbess of Penitents" by Beertulf van Leeuwen in *Greyfriars Review*, IV (1990): 73-81.  
<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Dizionario Francese*, 1133-1166 and 1297-1310; *St. Francis and the Third Order* by Raffaele Pazzelli (Franciscan Herald Press); and "De Illis Qui Faciunt Penitentiam" - *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* by Robert M. Stewart (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991).

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## The Life of Penance: A Grateful Response to the Lord

DOMINIC F. SCOTTO, T.O.R.

Early in the morning of a cold, dreary February day of 1978 Assisi seemed exceptionally quiet and melancholy. Several friars and I had driven up from our convent of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Rome at the confidential invitation of the friars of the Sacro Convento. The body of Saint Francis of Assisi had been secretly exhumed with the permission of the Holy See and as fellow Franciscans we had been discreetly invited to review the sacred remains before the body was once again reinterred.

When Saint Francis died in 1226, he was temporarily laid to rest in the Church of San Georgio in Assisi under heavy security. There was a genuine fear that one of the rival states to Assisi, such as Perugia, would attempt to abduct the body, for Francis was revered by all and many sought the honor and prestige of possessing his mortal remains.

In the meantime, work had begun on the new Basilica of Saint Francis and upon completion of the first phase of construction the remains of Francis were to be relocated to this new site. Consequently, in the year 1230, when this goal had been achieved, the body was translated to what was to be its permanent resting place. Brother Elias, who was Minister General at the time, with much religious fanfare led the procession to the new Basilica. Unknown to all, except to Elias and a few trusted friars, a secret tomb had been excavated deep in the rock beneath the main altar. Upon arrival at the Basilica only this select group of friars was allowed to enter with the body of Francis so that the remains could be secretly interred in the newly carved out tomb and all chances of it being stolen at some future time be eliminated. After the death of Elias and his confidants, the actual site of the tomb was lost and no one knew exactly where it

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was located within the Basilica. For six centuries this remained the situation until in the early 1800s when a search was initiated to relocate the exact site of the tomb. After tunneling deep beneath the pavement, on December 10, 1818 the remains were finally found under the main altar of the Middle Church of the Basilica where they are resting today. During the next six years the crypt chapel presently surrounding the tomb was constructed to accommodate the religious services and the devotional respect of countless numbers of pilgrims who have come and continue to come into Assisi each and every year to honor the Poverello.

At the prescribed time we were admitted into the monastery and were led into a well illuminated chapter hall in the center of which rested a thick hermetically sealed plexi-glass coffin containing the mortal remains of Saint Francis. While I had visited, prayed and celebrated Mass at his tomb in the lower crypt of the basilica many times, the feeling which I now experienced was unique. Here before me were the actual remains of Saint Francis neatly laid out in this small, simple coffin. It was a very moving and privileged moment for me as I stood next to and gazed down upon this rather small and delicate skeleton. As I prayed I was able to put flesh upon those meager remains and to imagine the painting of Francis by Cimabue to have come alive before my very eyes. But more importantly, it demonstrated to me that Francis true to his nature had left this world as he had entered it, with nothing. This deeply moving and religious experience remains with me in a very significant way to this very day.

Eventually word of the exhumation leaked out to the general public and newspapers and periodicals wrote extensively about it. Several of the articles revealed that a group of specialized scientists had been invited to examine thoroughly the remains of Saint Francis. Among their many observations was the fact that apparently, while alive, Francis had led a very mortified life. After knowing how severe Francis had been with himself in the practice of self-mortification and his overall penitential lifestyle, as well as personally having visited many of the places where he had lived and prayed — such as the Sasso Spico at Mount Alvernia, the caves at the Carceri, at Narni, at Fonte Colombo, the tiny cell at Monte Casale — these conclusions came as no surprise to me. All of these sites were austere, damp, cold and devoid of all comfort.

Yet, despite all of this, Francis never advocated his own severe lifestyle to others because he knew only too well that these practices did not embody the essence of his penitential pilgrimage. While they certainly symbolized an important part of his life style, they were not representative of its essential spirit. Although Francis practiced such a penitential lifestyle with every fiber of his being, his idea of the life of penance featured something infinitely more profound. For his understanding of the life of penance was translated primarily in the sense of METANOIA, a value which is rooted firmly in the Sacred

Scriptures. While this value is most often understood in terms of conversion, a turning to God, or as a separation, its meaning is actually much broader. Central to the Gospel message itself, it should be primarily understood as the force of God's love upon an individual which in turn elicits a reaction from that person in a radical, Christ centered redirection of one's life towards God.

As an ongoing dynamic extension of our baptismal commitment, it entails an ever deepening involvement in the Lord's paschal mystery. Since it connotes a break with or a separation from the past, METANOIA involves a daily taking up of one's cross and a dying to self which is ideally expressed in the living out of the life of love as preeminently delineated for us in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-12). Inseparable from the concept of reconciliation, it views peace with God and peace with other human beings as an indivisible unit which serves as a basis for all Christian efforts to overcome ill-will, disaffection and divisions at all levels of humanity. Far from being a forbidding and somber lifestyle characterized by fearful and austere ascetical practices, this ongoing conversion of life is simply the joyful expression of a grateful heart professing the wonderful works of the Lord who has called all of us out of the darkness of sin and ignorance into His own marvelous light of love and grace.

Francis incorporated this wider and deeper meaning of the "life of penance" in a most forceful manner in the twenty-third chapter of the non-confirmed Rule. In a rousing exhortation to all his followers Francis begins this chapter with a sublime prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord and King of the universe for all that He represents and for all the gifts of grace that we have so bountifully received from Him.

Beginning this chapter of the early Rule in this manner illustrates that Francis understood very clearly that the life of penance of every Christian must spring from an overflowing gratitude to God for all the loving and merciful gifts He has poured forth upon His children through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the life of penance is first and foremost our grateful response to God's saving and merciful call of grace to us. From this true and heartfelt response of love and gratitude flows our commitment to lead a penitential life. "You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last ..." (Jn 15:16).

Obviously, the world today would reject this point of view since it is accustomed to viewing and judging everything from a purely human egocentric standpoint depending entirely upon the good will of the individual. Unfortunately, this viewpoint has also had its effects upon religious life. Francis, however, never countenanced such a humanistic point of view. That he should pursue a life of penance did not depend upon his own will but upon the will and action of God upon him. By taking such an attitude, Francis was able to give a

very definite and unique direction to religious life. Today there is a great need to present this starting point of Franciscan religious life as clearly and forcefully as possible, for to the extent that the modern view effects religious life, and the entire Christian life for that matter, it places it completely on the plane of the merely human.

No matter how well disguised or refined, no matter how vehemently denied, the truth is that from this approach everything becomes dependent solely upon one's own will. Consequently, religious life would only flourish within the parameters that such an individual would set for himself. Hence a religious vocation would cease to be primarily the result of a divine call from God followed by our generous response, but would instead become a personal question of choice which as we know is weak and vacillating at best. Eventually, dependent upon one's own will, it is subject only to the human foibles of that will with all its accompanying limitations. A personal commitment to God's loving call would therefore become merely a career choice which can be changed at the mere whim of one's own determination.

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*the life of penance . . . should be primarily understood as the force of God's love upon an individual which in turn elicits a reaction from that person in a radical, Christ-centered redirection of one's life towards God.*

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However, to be truly initiated into the genuine life of penance, a religious must divorce the self from this egocentric view of life. Instead one must be completely possessed to the very depth of soul by God's love and by a deep gratitude for all that God has accomplished and continues to accomplish in our lives through the merits of Jesus Christ His Son. Every moment of our lives we must learn how to thank God for His many gifts to us especially for the gift of our vocation. Only when we are possessed by this sense of awareness and this overflowing gratitude can God truly work in us and can we in turn be fully involved in the true life of penance.

This is exactly that life of penance, that METANOIA so firmly rooted in the Sacred Scriptures that Francis so forcefully demands of all his followers. It is the root value of the Franciscan tradition. Francis demonstrated his own joyful gratitude for all God's wonderful gifts of grace not only in word but most especially in action. He believed strongly that one must not be merely a hearer of the word, but above all he must be a doer of the word. The life of penance must not be something merely talked about, but above all it must be lived in a total renunciation of self so clearly required of all by our Lord himself in the holy Gospel:

If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. For he who would save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will save it. (Lk 9:23-24).

In a very simple and clear manner the Lord invites all who wish to live a true life of penance to renounce all self-seeking and to walk with Him whose only desire was to do the will of Him who sent him. Renouncing self in this fashion disposes one to become fully integrated into that wonderful harmony of grace and salvation which God effects in our redemption through Christ the Lord. Therefore, when one decides to live in this manner, in a state of true METANOIA for God alone, that person is in fact responding to the very first condition of Christ's preaching which remained at the heart of the earliest Christian kerygma or teaching:

The Kingdom of God is at hand. Do penance and believe in the Good News. (Mk 1:15).

Consequently, the Kingdom of God can only become a living reality within us when we are willing to respond completely and without reservation to God's loving call.

In the "Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life" we find this particular point of view strongly underscored:

The members of each community should recall above everything else that by their profession of the evangelical counsels they have given answer to a divine call to live for God alone not only by dying to sin but also by renouncing the world. They have handed over their entire lives to God's service in the act of special consecration which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and which provides an ampler manifestation of it. (paragraph 5)

As an individual increasingly submits the self to the reign of God in this life, so will that person increasingly die to self and begin to live for God alone. And the more an individual forgets self and loves God, the more faithfully will that person deepen and perfect the life of penance, the life of METANOIA. This is the process so fervently referred to by Saint Francis in the third part of the twenty-third chapter of the earlier Rule. "Let us therefore desire nothing else, let us wish nothing else, let nothing else please or delight us, except our Creator and Redeemer and Savior."

This is an ongoing dynamic process in which we are constantly rewarded by God's grace and love the more intensely we seek to lead the penitential life. Above all we must always endeavor to deepen our gratitude to God by continuing to respond as fully as possible to His loving call. Francis understood this in a most profound way as illustrated by his own words in his early Rule.

Nothing then must keep us back, nothing separate us from Him, nothing come between us and Him. At all times and seasons, in every country and place,

every day and all day, we must have a true and humble faith, and keep Him in our hearts, where we must love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and acclaim, magnify and thank, the most high, supreme and eternal God ...

This is the essence of the life of penance, of genuine Gospel METANOIA.

In summary, therefore, what Francis so faithfully lived, and what he so strongly recommended in the final chapter of his earlier Rule was that every Christian life must essentially be a life lived in penance, a life of true METANOIA. In turn, this life of penance originates not in us but in God's loving call to us, in His church, through Christ our Lord. We in turn must open ourselves to God's loving action in a spirit of thanksgiving and must allow His grace to transform our lives.

Unfortunately, all too many Christians, religious included, credit themselves with the primary role in this entire process thereby succumbing to one of the principal temptations of our modern era. This heresy of individualism inexorably leads to a subtle form of self worship which is diametrically opposed to that true life of penance so passionately insisted upon by Francis.

If as religious, as Franciscans, we are faithfully to live a life of penance, then we must involve ourselves more fully in the process of an every deepening awareness of God's loving action upon us. Through prayer we must seek to develop a heightened consciousness of the many miracles of grace that occur continuously within our lives. With this increased sensitivity and knowledge of God's loving grace and goodness, one would be inspired to respond more gratefully to such an understanding of God's loving initiative towards us. Driven by this process a person would instinctively think less of self and would live more for God and others.

The entire vocation of a Franciscan is therefore to live a life of continuous and total conversion to the Lord. It is a life of Gospel METANOIA, a life of penance initially springing from a heart filled with gratitude in response to God's loving call.

With all in the holy Catholic and apostolic Church who wish to serve the Lord, the brothers and sisters of this Order are to persevere in true faith and penance. They wish to live this evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer, of poverty, and of humility. Therefore, let them abstain from all evil and persevere to the end in doing good because God the Son himself will come again in glory and will say to all who acknowledge, adore and serve him in sincere repentance: "Come blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world" (Mt 25:34). [The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis, 1:2]

# The Blessing of Penance

## The 1982 Third Order Regular Rule

ROBERT M. STEWART, O.F.M.

*To have the Spirit of the Lord...*

Francis' words offer both challenge and promise!

Some seven centuries ago... amidst the deadening silence of massive suffering, amidst the chilling cacophony of oppressive structures... there arose a voice: Francis of Assisi sang anew the Gospel of Christ. Francis' voice and life proclaimed the visitation of God: "how happy and blessed are these men and women... the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them."

Many people heard his song and were touched by his person; they wanted to follow him on the way. When they asked him for guidance, Francis spoke of the joy and blessing of a life of penance:

How happy and blessed are these men and women who:  
love the Lord with their whole heart, their whole soul and mind, and with  
their strength, and  
love their neighbors as themselves, and who  
despise the tendency in their humanity to sin,

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*Fr. Robert M. Stewart, O.F.M., assistant editor of The Cord and a member of the teaching faculty of the Franciscan Institute, was invited to give a keynote address at the Franciscan Federation's 27th Annual Conference. Prompted by requests that his presentation be published, we here present his address as given in Greensboro on August 23, 1992 - hoping that the power of his creative juxtaposition of texts has not been lost in the move from oral to written form. One further editorial note: Fr. Robert's book on the SFO Rule, referenced here and in Fr. Finnegan's article (and reviewed in the May issue of The Cord), is available from the author at the Franciscan Institute for \$37.00.*

Francis presented them with the challenge of penance, the Gospel call to radical conversion:

- to love God
- to love all people
- to turn from selfishness, from our self-centeredness
- to unite ourselves with the Body of Christ
- to practice the love we experience and profess

But as you well know, as inscribed in the Prologue of your 1982 Rule, Francis also proclaimed boldly the promise of doing penance:

How happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things,  
and persevere in doing them,  
because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them,  
and the Lord will make His home and dwelling place with them.  
They are the children of the heavenly Father whose works they do.  
They are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

I hope here to explore briefly the challenge and promise of Francis' words, both the challenge and promise of doing penance, for Third Order Franciscans moving toward the 21st century.

Towards the end of his life on earth, reflecting back on his own conversion, that movement of self-transcendence by which his world was transformed, Francis wrote:

The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way:  
While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world.<sup>3</sup>

From the early sources we know that Francis' conversion developed gradually and extended over a span of years. Those thirteenth century biographies narrate a sequence of events, but leave the significance of the events clouded in silence. While we can wonder if Francis did not have some "near-death" or "limit" experience in the battle of Perugia, during his imprisonment or prolonged illness, he himself reduces the essential moment of his conversion to two critical components: God and lepers. Francis affirms that God brought him to do penance, and that his reversal of values occurred before lepers. In and through the lepers - in and through Francis' contact with the poor, the lowly, the suffering - God had acted in Francis. In knowing the suffering of the outcasts, Francis knew the suffering of his Lord who had been rejected, the Lord of lords who was born into poverty and who died on the cross.<sup>4</sup>

In the thirteenth century many people believed that suffering would make God's power manifest in their lives; the penitential culture nurtured the belief that the embrace of a rigorous life of penance and mortification could facilitate an experience of the divine.<sup>5</sup> But Francis does not speak a belief or concept; Francis proclaims the truth he has experienced. Toward the end of his journey of conversion, Francis' love of Christ crucified, his identification with the suffering of Christ, brings him to bear the grace of the stigmata. Francis encourages others to embrace the struggle precisely because he has experienced the promise, because he has experienced the gift of the Spirit.

Francis' insight, or better his experience - that by entering into the suffering of others we come to know Christ - weaves itself through many of his writings. I would suggest that the invitation to enter into the sufferings of others and the acceptance of our own suffering as grace is the very key to understanding that letter which you all must know so well, the Letter to a Minister. To that minister and to all of us who might at times want to retreat in prayer, Francis - a lover of solitude - offers an invitation:

I speak to you, as I can, about the state of your soul. You should accept as a grace all those things which deter you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether they are brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. And you should desire that things be this way and not otherwise...

And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians.

And let this be more valuable to you than a hermitage.<sup>6</sup>

In effect: let *this* be your seeking after God.

In offering mercy, in bearing through trials, the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon us.

But what more can we say about this "doing penance"? Certainly, it means radical conversion in the Gospel sense of metanoia. This conversion or life of penance expresses itself externally: blessed are those who "bring forth from within themselves fruits worthy of true penance." But Francis clearly places the action of God and the interior attitude or change within the person before the visible manifestation of penance. This recognition, at the heart of Francis' understanding of penance, remains crucial for any articulation of a Franciscan penitential spirituality. Francis does not suggest simply the adoption of norms and practices of penance; he does not suggest that one begin with the "fruits of penance." Rather, for Francis a life of penance begins with God's action.

The beginning of both the Testament and the Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance reveal the central dynamic of conversion or metanoia: the radical turning from self to God.<sup>7</sup> For Francis, penance is the only possible response to a loving God. The way of penance is a means to freedom,

the way to mystical union with God. For Francis, the way of penance is the radical choosing of God's love, the constant seeking after God, a "thirsting after fullness of mystical experience."<sup>8</sup>

The Prologue of the 1982 Rule must, therefore, be understood first as a call to an intimacy with God. For Francis, penance begins with a mystical experience, that is, an experience of God that radically changes the person. And Francis found this intimacy with God in and through Christ. For Francis, Christ remains the focus of the penitential life; identification with Christ is the way of penance. Francis calls people to that intimacy with God. Clearly, this intimacy begins with God's initiative, but this intimacy with God also demands the person's response. Francis experienced a deepening of that intimacy with God in and through a life of penance and thus exhorts others to that path.

In exhorting people "to do penance," Francis implicitly exhorted people to embrace the penitential practices of the Order of Penance. The way of life of those early Franciscan penitents became codified in the *Memoriale propositi* and, as it became further regularized, it included many specific penitential practices. But, Francis' exhortation is not about hating our bodies, or specific days of fasting, or working with lepers in any literal sense. But what then can we say about "doing penance"?

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*"those who do penance" live by a different wisdom, engage in a different struggle, and have a different understanding of power.*

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David Flood, in his analysis of the Later Exhortation in which Francis speaks more specifically about the "way of penance," offers some insights into Francis' concept of "doing penance." Flood claims that here Francis

does not explain how to become Franciscan; rather, he explains what one does once one has heard Jesus' word and crossed over from darkness into light - he explains how one lives and what one does once one has become Franciscan.

Franciscanism is not a set of ascetical disciplines. It is a way of dealing with the universe. One does not bend oneself to law and rule; one catches onto the rhythm of things. . . . Francis runs through the motions of Franciscanism. People have changed because they engage in them; by doing them they change. One goes through the steps in order to dance; and soon one is dancing and forgets the steps. . . . Francis emphasizes doing. Consciousness changes in doing the truth.<sup>9</sup>

Flood's analysis focuses upon the summary statement in verses 45-47 as the Franciscan way of penance. While these sentences follow upon the series of

injunctions which begin with "debemus" (we must), structurally sentences 45 and 47 receive an emphasis by the use of debemus twice in each phrase, both in a negative and positive form:

We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh; rather, we must be simple, humble, and pure.

And let us hold ourselves in contempt and scorn, since through our own fault all of us are miserable and contemptible, vermin and worms, as the Lord says through the prophet: I am a worm and no man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people.

We must never desire to be over others; rather we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake.<sup>10</sup>

According to Flood, these verses contain a summary of the Franciscan experience or way of penance. Here Francis explains that "those who do penance" live by a different wisdom, engage in a different struggle, and have a different understanding of power.<sup>11</sup>

But Francis also proclaims quite powerfully the promise, the blessing of those who live by a different wisdom, engage in a different struggle, and have a different understanding of power. Francis proclaims this radical conversion as the way of the mystic. Francis speaks experientially of those who do penance as the "spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> He explains those relations:

We are his **spouses**  
when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit with our Lord Jesus Christ.  
We are **brothers**  
when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven.  
We are **mothers**  
when we bear him in our hearts and bodies with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences;  
and we give birth to him through a holy life which should enlighten others because of our example.<sup>13</sup>

Francis moves beyond the Matthean response of Jesus: "Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me."<sup>14</sup> Francis expresses his own trinitarian experience of God in concrete relational language. Francis does not simply proclaim that we come to know God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Rather, we are children of the Father; we are brothers and sisters of Christ; through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are spouses and mothers of Christ.

Almost reminiscent of Jesus' parabolic response to the lawyer's question, in which he describes how to be neighbor, Francis here describes how to be spouse, brother, and mother. We are to do penance, to do the will of the Father,

to meditate on Christ, to love God in word and deed, to act with justice, to offer forgiveness, to carry within us always as the principle of our being, as lover and brother and Son: Jesus Christ.

Francis waxes poetically and mystically of his own intimate experience of God. In the doing of penance we know God in and through Christ. We live by the wisdom of the Spirit and know Christ as spouse. We engage in a different struggle and we come to know Christ as brother. We develop a different understanding of power as we carry Him in our heart and give birth to him by our lives in the Spirit.

In the Earlier Exhortation, Francis could speak of the "words of our Lord Jesus Christ" as "spirit and life" because he had come to know that intimate and loving God in and through Christ.<sup>15</sup> As he speaks of God's love and trinitarian life in terms of relationships, Francis offers to us and to our troubled world new ways to image "family" and our relatedness. Francis moves beyond family as defined by blood, ethnic or national ties. Francis has experienced "family" in Christ; Francis knows and invites us to know how we are related to all people and all creatures precisely by turning to God in and through Christ, in and through a radical conversion, in and through a confrontation with the suffering Christ in our world. Third Order Franciscans, as an international "family," as able to re-vision existing institutions in our world, as spouses, brothers, sisters, mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ, have much to offer a very broken world. Our world desperately needs new, empowering, Spirit-filled images of "family" as global, "creation" as sacred, "life" as God-given...

In our own century... amidst the deadening silence of massive suffering, amidst the chilling cacophony of oppressive structures... may the voice of Francis arise anew; may Franciscan women and men once again do penance and bring forth from within themselves fruits worthy of true penance... For how happy and blessed are these men and women... the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them.

That **challenge** and **promise** might better be spoken in a familiar story, in a powerful franciscan symbol:

At a time when St. Francis was staying in the town of Gubbio, something wonderful and of lasting fame happened.

With the cold war over, military spending on the decline, economic and political freedom expanding, and a growing public awareness of environmental issues, the world now has a unique opportunity to make a substantial break with the past.<sup>16</sup>

For there appeared in the territory of that city a fearfully large and fierce wolf which was so rabid with hunger that it devoured not only animals but even

human beings.

14 million children die every year before they reach the age of five.  
Over 100 million people were affected by famine in 1990.  
More than a quarter of the world's people do not get enough food, and  
nearly one billion go hungry.  
1.2 billion people still barely survive - in absolute poverty.<sup>17</sup>

For while the Saint was there at that time, he had pity on the people and decided to go out and meet the wolf.

We are brothers  
when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven.

But St. Francis placed his hope in the Lord Jesus Christ who is master of all creatures.

We are his spouses  
when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit with our Lord  
Jesus Christ.

The Saint made the Sign of the Cross toward it. Then, calling to it, St. Francis said: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt me or anyone."

We are mothers  
when we bear him in our hearts and bodies with divine love and with  
pure and sincere consciences;  
and we give birth to him through a holy life which should enlighten  
others because of our example.

St. Francis said to it as it lay in front of him: "Brother Wolf, you have done great harm in this region... and this whole town is your enemy. But, Brother Wolf, I want to make peace between you and them, so that they will not be harmed by you any more, and after they have forgiven you all your past crimes, neither men nor dogs will pursue you any more."

In practice, there are no development institutions managing the new integrated global economy - much less doing so democratically in the interests of the world's people. Democracy may be sweeping through individual nation-states, but it has yet to assume a global economic dimension. Global governance, if it comes at all, risks arising by default rather than by design. This situation is dangerous for the health of our shrinking planet, and it bodes ill for the majority of the world's people.<sup>18</sup>

Then St. Francis said: "Brother Wolf, I order you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to come with me now, without fear, into the town to make this peace pact in the name of the Lord."

And the Wolf immediately began to walk along beside St. Francis, just like a very gentle lamb. When the people saw this, they were greatly amazed, and

the news spread quickly throughout the whole town, so that all of them, men as well as women, great and small, assembled on the market place, because St. Francis was there with the wolf.

We are Franciscan men and women who are followers of St. Francis of Assisi. We believe that all of creation, from the smallest organism to human beings, is an interdependent relationship on planet earth. We are aware that this relationship is threatened by a refusal to admit this interdependence, by exploitation and by domination.<sup>19</sup>

"So, dear people," he said, "Come back to the Lord, and do fitting penance, and God will free you from the wolf in this world and from the devouring fire of hell in the next world."

Within themselves, let them always make a dwelling place and home for the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so that, with undivided hearts, they may increase in universal love by continually turning to God and to neighbor.<sup>20</sup>

Then in the presence of all the people the wolf raised its right paw and put it in St. Francis' hand as a pledge.

Led by the Lord, let them begin a life of penance, conscious that all of us must be continuously and totally converted to the Lord...

For He has sent them into the world so that they might give witness by word and work to His voice and to make known to all that the Lord alone is God.<sup>21</sup>

And the crowd was so filled with amazement and joy, out of devotion for the Saint as well as over the novelty of the miracle and over the peace pact between the wolf and the people, that they all shouted to the sky, praising and blessing the Lord Jesus Christ who had sent St. Francis to them, by whose merits they had been freed from such a fierce wolf and saved from such a terrible scourge and had recovered peace and quiet.

How happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things, and persevere in doing them,  
because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them,  
and the Lord will make His home and dwelling place with them.  
They are the children of the heavenly Father whose works they do.  
They are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Ep Fid I*, 5, 1-4. (This translation is taken from the Prologue to the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of The Third Order Regular of St. Francis.)
- <sup>2</sup> *Ep Fid I*, 5-7.
- <sup>3</sup> *Testament* 1-3.
- <sup>4</sup> See: Raoul Manselli, "San Francesco dal dolore degli uomini al Cristo crocifisso," in *Analecta TOR* XVI (1983): 191-210.
- <sup>5</sup> I offer some discussion and further bibliography on this point in "De illis qui faciunt penitentiam" - *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991), 120-123.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ep Min* 2-3, 7-8.
- <sup>7</sup> Roland Faley, T.O.R., "Visione Biblico-teologica della Penitenza e sua Espressione Oggi," in *Ritorno a Francesco* (Rome 1980), 93-94.
- <sup>8</sup> Lino Temperini, T.O.R., "Penitential Spirituality in the Franciscan Sources," *Analecta TOR* XIV/132 (1980): 555.
- <sup>9</sup> David Flood, "The Commonitorium," in *Haversack* (April 1980): 20.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ep Fid II*, 45-47.
- <sup>11</sup> Flood, "The Commonitorium," in *Haversack* (April 1980): 22.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ep Fid I*, 1: 7.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ep Fid I*, 1: 8-10.
- <sup>14</sup> Mt 12:50
- <sup>15</sup> *Ep Fid I*, 1: 19, 21.
- <sup>16</sup> *Human Development Report 1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.
- <sup>19</sup> Vision Statement of *Franciscans at the UN*.
- <sup>20</sup> *TOR Rule II*: 8
- <sup>21</sup> *TOR Rule II*: 6, IX: 29.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ep Fid I*, 1: 5-7.

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## Book Reviews

**The Touch of God: Telling Stories of St. Francis for Everyday Living.** By Kieran M. Kay, O.F.M. Conv. Hauppauge, N.Y.: Living Flame Press, Publishers, 1989. Paper, \$6.95.

Reviewed by Gordon J. De La Vars, S.F.O., Ph.D., Assistant Professor of English, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N.Y.

In his Forward, Fr. Kieran admits that while most of the thirty-seven short stories in this collection "are based upon historical incident in the life of Francis," some are "entirely made up." All the stories, however, "deal with some aspect of Franciscan spirituality" that "every Franciscan knows with his or her mind, but often finds difficult to pin down in words." The intention here is not to chronicle Francis' life so much as to evoke the spirit of Francis' vision, to characterize his imagination, and thus to give us a way to approach him and his experience of God through our own imaginations, at an individual and intimate level.

Fr. Kieran accomplishes this handsomely for the most part, through deftly drawn portraits of Francis and his followers that display a lyrical quality reminiscent of Murray Bodo's *The Journey and the Dream* and, more recently, his *Tales of St. Francis*. In some stories, however, such as "Love Creates Light," "Healing the Hurts," and "Flowing with Life," he presents Francis himself too sentimentally and Francis' situation with too little depth or scrutiny; in others, contemporary jargon competes with evocative, metaphoric language, further blurring the intended message. Nonetheless, the best of these stories

read like prose poems, with moments of spiritual energy and insight emerging suddenly from ordinary events. This is, of course, appropriate when considering Francis, for whom the ordinary was always extraordinary, the simple and the everyday invariably marked and informed by the divine presence. What comes through quite vividly in these accounts is the pattern of a man's life all but completely imbued with the knowledge that, as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Yet Francis' humility never allowed him to boast of this knowledge; so Fr. Kieran scrupulously avoids portraying Francis in any way confident or self-assured, and this is perhaps the book's most compelling feature. For it is a very human Francis we meet in these pages, a person with whom we can readily identify: someone haunted by desires, assailed by doubts, at times frightened by the enormity of life's challenges, at other times even bewildered by the grace sent to meet them. Significantly, the radical conversion that changed his life has not, in Fr. Kieran's telling, provided all the answers. A good example is an early story called "The Grey Days," in which Francis, despite his certainty of God's indwelling, experiences an almost palpable emptiness, a "weakness and powerlessness" that soon becomes an "agony." It is a feeling of isolation that C. S. Lewis once compared to that of having "a door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence." Gradually, though, out of this silence and seemingly "interminable" waiting, Francis hears a voice: absence becomes substance, and the empty moment itself speaks "softly of the mystery of God."



The honesty with which Fr. Kieran depicts Francis' relationship with God is also evident in his portraits of Francis with his followers. One especially moving story that demonstrates this is "The Gift of Clare." Here Francis, recalling a previous meeting with Clare, is overcome at once by exaltation and fear, by the sense that Clare in her radiant holiness symbolizes "his own soul," yet also by the suspicion that he is too much attracted to her physical beauty. "Was it the erotic in him that did not die easily," he wonders, "the old man in him that needed to be transformed yet more by the power of God?" Characteristically, neither of these questions is explicitly answered, and once again Francis is confronted by the ambiguity both of his own nature and of his response to God's call. The answer he does receive, however, is more profound and encompassing than he

could have anticipated, coming in a moment of critical insight in which he at last understands who Clare is: "She was a living testimony of all that Francis could not find in himself — all that was kind and gentle, all that was delicate and compassionate and warm ... She was gift."

Fr. Kieran's book is filled with such moments of awareness, examples that grace moved mysteriously but steadily through Francis' life, as it does through our own lives, appearing when we least expect it, when we feel farthest from God's presence, when we are the most ignorant of his will. Francis' great strength, the gift of his conversion, was his ability to wait and listen for these appearances. So in these meditative stories we encounter a man who consistently allowed God to take control of his whole self and thus liberate it from the illusory belief that one can accomplish all things on one's own.

\* \* \*

### BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

"Blown by all the winds that pass  
And wet with all the showers"  
They lie forever still, our dead  
Condemned to their own cyclic bed  
In Glen Riddle's convent churchyard.

They will not see the grass return  
Nor hear the squirrels sport above them  
Nor joy to find a sun-filled stream  
Nor feel what loss their love can mean  
To us who grope about without it.

Sr. Clare Immaculate



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