

Saint Francis and Penance

by Bret Thoman, OFS

St Francis was a man of penance. He embraced radical penitential practices and subjected himself to severe disciplines. He wrote in his Letter to the Faithful: “All those who love the Lord with their whole heart ... and hate their bodies with their vices and sins ... produce worthy fruits of penance.” In the 10th Admonition, he wrote, “Many people, when they sin or receive an injury, often blame the Enemy or a neighbor, but this is not right, for each one has the real enemy in his own power; that is, the body through which he sins.” St Clare is known to have fasted equally rigorously, and to have treated her body harshly, as well. Their penances were so harsh that they may seem excessive or extreme to us today. In a post-Vatican II Church that has sought to correct past abuses and excesses, how should we, then, understand Franciscan penance today?

In the original Greek language of the New Testament, both Jesus and John the Baptist urge their followers towards *metanoia*, which means “to have a change of actions, mind and heart.” (cf. Matthew 3:2; 4:17). First John the Baptist, then Jesus command their listeners, “*Metanoete!*”, which means “Have a change of heart!” This phrase was translated into the Latin Vulgate as “*Agite paenitentiam!*” (literally, “do penance”). Then, the words were translated in the English Bible as “Repent!” Thus, the original biblical meaning of penance and repentance is *metanoia*, which mean to change one’s heart, mind, behavior, and attitudes.

In later centuries, the understanding of penance, or *metanoia*, would shift from an interior conversion experience into a series of external acts. In an era before confession and absolution were available as a private sacrament, public penances were the only way to be reconciled or fully re-integrated to the Church after committing serious sins. The acts often included fasting, fixed daily prayers, particular garb usually comprising a hair-shirt, tunic, and open shoes (i.e. sandals). As the penitents had sometimes committed violent sins, they were forbidden to bear arms, serve in the military, or work in public service.

However, in roughly the same time, Christians who had committed no serious sins, but who desired to imitate Christ and his sacrifices more closely, adopted *voluntarily* many of these same penitential practices. Such voluntary penance became a non-centralized movement among lay persons not associated with an established religious Order or monastery. It took different forms like living as a hermit or recluse either alone or in small communities. It could involve married or single people, consecrated or laypersons, men or women. These people became known as penitents, and they maintained many of the same penitential practices of fasting, daily prayer, wearing tunics, refraining from military service, or occupations like merchants or public servants.

When Francis’s conversion began, he chose to live as the lay-penitents around Assisi. He dressed in the penitential tunic, served lepers, and gave alms to the poor. And after the first followers came, they joined him in this penitential life. When asked who they were, Francis and his followers referred to themselves as penitents from Assisi. It was not until they went to Rome and were granted oral approval of their way of life by Pope Innocent III in 1209 that they began calling themselves *Fratres Minores* (Friars Minors). Soon after this important meeting, Francis’s fledgling group of penitents would emerge from the penitential movement, and become established as a distinct Order within the Church: the Order of Friars Minor.

So how did Francis understand penance? First, Francis's understanding of penance is the same as the biblical sense of turning away from sin and having a conversion of heart, which is metanoia. He states in the first line of his Testament that he began to do penance by serving lepers. "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." His bitterness was changed into sweetness, and he was transformed. For him penance was not merely an *external* act, but it was an act accompanied by an *internal* change of heart. Penance changed him and brought him closer to God.

Francis believed that creation and material things were good, since they were created by God. In particular, the human person was good, as it was created in the image of God. In the 5th Admonition Francis wrote, "God had created you and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body, and to his likeness according to the spirit." For this reason he had a fraternal affection for all creation and considered people, animals, and all of creation his brothers and sisters.

Francis's primary form of penance was working with the lepers. We might judge that he struggled with pride before his conversion. The sources say that he often sought to look good in fine clothes, he wanted to impress people by becoming a knight, he enjoyed feasts and parties, etc. However, these vices kept him rooted to worldly things. They prevented him from being able to truly experience, enjoy, and love God. Thus, once he discovered the humility that was necessary to work with lepers, his pride was leveled. Through working with lepers, Francis was freed of his vices, and he could love and enjoy God. And so great was the spirituality he experienced through that humble service, he continued to work with lepers all his life, and he established leprosaria throughout all of Italy. He even required that new friars work with lepers as fundamental to their formation.

So what does penance mean to us today in the modern world? How are we to understand such strict penances practiced by the early Franciscans? The first thing is that we continue to understand penance as a metanoia – a call to conversion – which is its biblical meaning. Then, we attempt to integrate penance into our lives today in the 21st century. To live as Francis and Clare lived eight centuries ago may not be necessary, practical or even possible today. However, we can certainly let their experiences shape and mold our lives today. We can seek to imitate Francis and Clare in their penances, however without engaging in extremism.

Penance always remains an act or acts that lead to metanoia – conversion. Paragraph 1435 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one's cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance."

Penance, sacrifices, and ascetic practices help us to avoid vice and grow in virtue. They reform the human condition that is naturally inclined towards selfishness and self-centeredness, and they create the interior freedom that allows the soul to re-orient itself towards altruism – other-centeredness. We can be inspired by the experience of Francis, Clare, and the early Franciscans who experienced a radical and full metanoia. Without falling into Phariseism – showing off external mortifications in

order to receive praises from the people – or without engaging in extremism, we can discover in them what true penance is: metanoia, another way of saying conversion.

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