

Franciscan Penance

Perhaps the most challenging part of Francis's story for modern readers is that part of his life dealing with penance. This is troubling to us today, because we live in a culture which places great emphasis on care for the body – one does not have to look further than the myriad of health food stores, vitamin stores, gymnasiums, and diets. But when we read reverent biographies of Francis and come to the part about his attitude towards his own body, it can seem disturbing. Francis is known to have called his body, 'Brother Ass' which he subjected to severe disciplines (2Cel 126). And 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 Admonition X, he says, "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." Strong words. Clare is known to have fasted so rigorously that both Francis and the bishop of Assisi had to command her to eat. To understand Francis's attitude towards penance, it is helpful to understand some background on the penitential movement.

When Francis left his family and set out on his own to live his religious life, he began living as did the penitents around Assisi. He took on a traditional life of penance that had been in existence for many centuries. A wonderful book describing the history of this movement in the Church and in the origins of the Franciscan movement is "St. Francis and the Third Order" by Raffaele Pazzelli, TOR. Pazzelli notes that the origins of the practice of penance are found in the Bible. In the original Greek New Testament, both Jesus and John the Baptist urge their followers towards *metanoia*, which means 'change

of heart'. In the Gospel of Matthew they say "*Metanoete!*" which was later translated into Latin as "*Agite poenitentiam!*" (literally do penance), and then into English as "Repent, the kingdom is at hand!". Thus the original biblical meaning of penance is to repent, or to have a change of heart and turn from sin.

Later, the idea of penance would shift from an interior conversion into external acts which accompanied the experience. This started in the first few centuries AD, as a way for Christians who committed a serious sin after baptism (like murder, sorcery, renunciation of the faith) to be reconciled to the Church. To be fully re-integrated in the Church community, they were assigned certain penitential acts by the Bishop, which often included fasting, daily prayer, particular penitential dress usually involving a hair-shirt, and other practices lasting from 1-3 years. The idea was that this would effect a conversion in the Christian. Around the 6th century, the practice of private reconciliation/confession (directly to a priest) spread from the monasteries of the British Isles into continental Europe and would become the normative way a Christian receives forgiveness for sins, and involuntary penance would fall into disuse.

However, about this time Christians who had committed no serious sin, but who desired to imitate Christ and His Passion more closely took on these penitential practices voluntarily. Voluntary penance was a grass-roots movement among lay persons not associated with an established religious Order or a monastery. It took different forms like living as a hermit or recluse either alone or in small communities, or associating as an oblate or *conversus* with a church or monastery. It could involve married or singles, consecrated or lay, men or women. They maintained many of the established penitential

practices of fasting, daily prayer, wearing penitential dress, refraining from military service, or occupations like merchants or public servants.

When Francis began his conversion experience, he identified with the lay-penitents living around and passing through Assisi. Early in his conversion he desired this way of life and after he publicly renounced his father in front of the Bishop, he became a penitential Oblate under the resident priest of San Damiano. He dressed in the penitent's particular garb, served lepers and the poor, and gave alms. And it was to this penitential life that his first followers joined him. When asked who they were, Francis and his followers referred to themselves as '*poenitentes de Assisio*.' It was not until they went to Rome and were granted oral approval of their way of life by Pope Innocent III that they began calling themselves *Fratres Minores*, Friars Minors. Later the Franciscan Order would emerge from within the penitential movement and the Friars Minor would become a distinct Order within the Church.

Having established that Francis did not intend to start a new Order, but, rather desired to live as a lay penitent around Assisi, we can now talk about his understanding of penance. Here often modern narrators downplay this part of Francis' and Clare' lives concluding that they were 'medieval' (in a pejorative sense) and thus excuse them for their 'excessive body punishment'. Then they cite the story where Francis asks forgiveness from God for excessive penances. They seem to conclude that Francis and Clare were great saints despite their extreme ascetic practices, for which they were unfortunately influenced by medieval body-hating.

First I would like to clarify some terms. Francis's understanding of penance is the same as the biblical sense of conversion of heart and turning away from sin. 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. 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.” Thus, we clearly see a change of heart – a *metanoia* – that Francis experienced while working with lepers. He was transformed and this is what penance meant to him.

Although commonly confused with penance, Francis, Clare and their followers regularly practiced what is more properly called asceticism. They both fasted often – Clare eating very little, and Francis is known to have mixed food with ashes or bitter herbs to kill the taste; Francis commonly wore a hair-shirt (a rough garment worn on the skin underneath the habit), Clare a small rectangle of horsehair under her clothes; they deprived the body of sleep; Francis sometimes slept on stone while Clare slept on a bed of vine-branches or the bare floor using rocks for pillows; Francis is known to have responded to temptation by punishing his body by rolling around naked in thorn bushes; and they subjected the body to other corporal disciplines. Thus, we should distinguish between penance (a biblical *metanoia*), and asceticism (self-mortification). It is true that they regularly practiced asceticism as a form of penance, but penance is not limited to asceticism.

To understand the particular harshness of early Franciscan asceticism, it should be understood in its historical context. Life was cruel in the middle Ages and has been aptly described as nasty, brutish, and short. And the Franciscans attempted to live penance and asceticism as personal sacrifices in already harsh conditions. So we must see their

sacrifices as relevant to what they were used to. Normal life for everyone in those days was harsh, even barbaric, to make sacrifices much more so. It is important to take into consideration, as well, the medieval class structure. Life was a little easier on the upper classes of the nobility, but doubly harsh for the peasants. Since Christ identified with the poor, much of the way the early friars lived was modeled after the way poor peasants lived. This made its way into the Rule. For example, the earlier Rule of Francis forbids travel by horses in chapter XV. In those days the nobility traveled by horses, while the peasants walked or rode mules. So the friars walked. Additionally, meat was often shunned by the friars, not for health or moral reasons; rather they ate vegetables because that is what the peasants ate. Meat was expensive and only the wealthy could afford it, while the poor peasants ate what they grew.

Sometimes asceticism is confused with dualism, i.e. the spirit is good, the body bad. This is probably where the negative reactions come in when reading about the life of Francis. There is a big difference between dualism and Franciscan asceticism. Alongside Francis were the heretical Cathars who embraced dualistic beliefs – they judged creation (and the body) as evil. In Admonitions V 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.” Francis, therefore, recognized the human body as being part of creation and in the image of God; and he believed it to be good. For this reason he had fraternal affection for all creation and considered people, animals, and creation his brothers and sisters.

So what did Francis mean when he spoke negatively about the body? When Francis spoke negatively about the body, he meant more aptly, the flesh. The

understanding of “body” in the sense of ‘flesh’ is taken directly from the Bible. In Gal 5, 16-17, Paul says “I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other...” Further he says in verses 19-23: “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness... In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Cf. also Eph 4, 22-24; Romans 8, 1-13). Thus, Francis and the early followers, through ascetic practices, were trying to live in the Spirit by subduing the body, or flesh, which they recognized as housing sin. They were not punishing their bodies because they believed them evil; rather they were trying to discipline and purify the senses, atone for sin, and win grace for others.

Some will deny the practice of ascetic acts claiming that the New Testament is decisive in stating that Christ performed the only sacrifice needed, and we cannot add to it: “Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Heb 9:26) However, the New Testament contains frequent verses telling us to imitate Jesus in his suffering. “As Jesus has loved us, so are we to love one another.” (Rom 12:1) “Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Mat 16:24). Thus, the early Franciscan tradition of self-mortification was a way of imitating Christ.

These practices were acts of sacrifice, and they knew that love involves sacrifice. One need only look at Pope Benedict’s first encyclical ‘*Deus Caritas est*’ - “God is

Love'. He distinguishes between two types of love in the Greek language - '*eros*' and '*agape*'. He describes *eros* love as an initial feeling that attracts people, such as man and woman. Once they make a decision to marry, the love must mature into *agape*, a more mature form of love involving sacrifice, where the good feelings do not always accompany the act of love. Love involves sacrifice and we are called to follow Christ in imitation. Everyone who has ever loved a child or spouse certainly knows that sacrificial form of love.

I think the most important sign of Francis's ability to associate his asceticism with the sacrificial love of Christ is fully apparent when he received the stigmata on Mount LaVerna two years before his death in 1226. Francis received this gift after a life of intensive prayer, penance and service to others. According to Thomas's "Life of Francis", Francis is said to have spent a 40-day fast on the Tuscan mountain during which he asked the Lord for two gifts. The first was to feel in his soul and body the pain which Jesus felt during his Passion. The second was to know in his heart the love with which Jesus felt for all people. Immediately after making this request, he was imprinted with the wounds of the stigmata, accompanied by excruciating pain, and he felt an intense joy and spiritual consolation.

It is a mysterious event and striking that Francis would ask to feel pain and love at the same time – that he would somehow connect the two. This is not masochism. If it were taken apart from the context of the Christian faith, it might be. However, in faith and simplicity Francis understood the connection between the two because he lived much of his converted life focusing and meditating on Christ and the events surrounding His life, most importantly the Passion – the suffering and death of Jesus. Francis understood

that Christ had to suffer for the salvation of humanity, and he wanted to imitate that. Somehow Christ's suffering was connected to his love for humanity.

What does this mean to us today? How are we to understand penance in the modern world? The first thing is that we understand penance as a call to conversion, which is its biblical meaning. Then, we attempt to integrate this into our lives today in the 21st century. To live today as Francis and Clare lived eight centuries ago may not be necessary, practical or relevant. However, we can certainly let their experiences shape our lives today.

Today penance can be any sacrifice offered up to God. It can be either voluntary or involuntary. By that, I mean we can initiate the sacrifice, such as in fasting, prayer, almsgiving, or other renunciation. Or, we can choose to offer up something unintended or unexpected to the Lord, such as illness, financial loss, personal misunderstanding, or any other difficult moment. When these events are united to the cross, the Lord's grace can fill them up and use them to his purpose. In a mystical way God can transform suffering and work his grace within it. The negative becomes positive. Once we begin trying to live a life of penance, the Lord always shows us more – he shows us what to do next. We start small, and it can lead to very big things. As the cross was the pre-cursor to the Resurrection, so can the Lord make all things new. “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Rom 9, 28).

Penance, Christian sacrifice, and ascetic practices only make sense in the light of Christian faith. Without faith, it would seem foolish to deny oneself life's pleasures and happiness. The proper context of penance is within the cross of Christ – our penance must be united to the cross. And it makes sense only as much as the Passion and death of

Christ make sense. As much as the cross of Christ has the power to save, to give life, to make miracles, so does the penance of a believer. It can be used for good. That is what Francis, Clare, and countless saints have done in the past. They have united their works, prayers, sacrifices, and penance to that of Christ's Passion and through them God continues to work out his plan of salvation. The Christian sacrifice is not an historical event that took place two millennia ago; it continues in the Church today. However, in light of Christian faith, we have hope in a resurrection. Our faith does not stop at the cross; rather Calvary is a step on the road to the Resurrection. Some might say a necessary step.

By Bret Thoman, SFO

Copyright, 2009