

CONVERSION

Rome, June 1, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Perhaps one of our favorite stories of Francis that Celano recounts in his First Life of St. Francis is about Francis' encounter with some bandits on a snowy hill area:

He who once enjoyed wearing scarlet robes now traveled about half-clothed. Once while he was singing praises to the Lord in French in a certain forest, thieves suddenly attacked him. When they savagely demanded who he was, the man of God answered confidently and forcefully: "I am the herald of *the great King!* What is it to you?" They beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with deep snow, saying: "Lie there, you stupid herald of God!" After they left, he rolled about to and fro, shook the snow off himself and jumped out of the ditch. Exhilarated with great joy, he began in a loud voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of all. | Celano VII, 16

Do we relate this story to conversion? Conversion can mean change and we clearly see that in Francis' change in his manner of dress: from full scarlet robes to being half-clothed. However, the deep meaning of conversion not only implies transformation, but is constituted by transformation and the change of life that follows. More deeply, it is a transformation of the spirit within. This little incident shows us Francis whose physical and spiritual eyes have been opened with a new freedom, a freedom that allows him to see and understand all of creation in a transformed way. He seeks the God he wants to announce to all, as God's Herald.

We, brothers and sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, want to follow Jesus in the example of Francis:

They wish to live this evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer, of poverty, and of humility. TORule #2

The consequences of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the corona virus, have had major consequences on each person. Many speak of the changes that need to be made, and yes, there are many. However, through it all, everyone has been called to conversion, a conversion of spirit, and a new seeing with an accompanying deep transformation of spirit and life. Francis shows us this new way of seeing and being (some name it conversion) in his ability to strip the pretenses and wrappings, to see the essential and celebrate that, to transform what might seem the ordinary to what reveals the divine. We delight in his ability to see God in all creation and to love God in every person. Deeper yet, Francis was graced to know God's love for him. This was the transformation of Francis which led to his conversion or change of heart and spirit.

Celano relates another story:

Sometimes he used to do this: a sweet melody of the spirit bubbling up inside him would become a French tune on the outside; the *thread of a divine whisper* which *his ears heard secretly* would break out in a French song of joy. Other times—as I saw with my own eyes—he would pick up a stick from the ground and put it over his left arm, while holding a bow bent with a string in his right hand, drawing it over the stick as if it were a viola, performing all the right movements, and in French *would sing* about the Lord. All this dancing often ended in tears, and the song of joy dissolved into compassion for Christ's suffering. Then the saint would sigh without stopping, and sob without ceasing. Forgetful of lower things he had in hand, he was caught up to heaven. 2 Celano XC, 127.



In these times of global reassessment and universal discernment, how do we, as followers of Jesus and Francis, listen to the divine whisper we hear secretly?

We know that we do nothing in isolation: our listening, our praying, our responding. We are grateful to our brother and sisters who have shared their understandings of CONVERSION in this issue of PROPOSITUM.

May these inspire us and encourage us on our common journey.

Sr. Deborah LOCKWOOD, President IFC-TOR
Sr. M. Magdalena SCHMITZ, Vice-President
Sr. Dolores CANEO, Councilor
Sr. Joanne BRAZINSKI, Councilor
Bro. Franco KANNAMPUZHA, Councilor
Sr. Benigna AOKO, Councilor

THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER
LIVING MEMORY OF THE EARLY FRANCISCAN PREACHING

40° Anniversary of the approval of the OFS Pauline Rule

P. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

Rome, Seraphicum, March 24, 2019

«Francis go, repair my church!»

In order to understand a prophet in the Bible, we have to know the story of his vocation. We must always go back to that moment when the prophet was seized by the power of God who told him: "Go to these people and tell them ...". Francesco also had his call, his "Go!" and it was when, from the Cross of St. Damian, a voice (we do not know whether it was real and physical, or only internal) said to him: "Go Francesco and repair my Church which, as you can see, is falling into ruins!".

To discover the early Francesco we must therefore see what he says to the Church after what Christ asked him; we must examine how he understood and realized his "mission". In order to do that we have some guiding lines. One of them is undoubtedly the preaching of Francesco the day after his conversion. Let's look at Francesco's writings or about Francesco, to see what he starts preaching and telling people, after he heard that "Go Francesco!".

It is surprising but everyone has noticed it: Francesco almost always speaks of "doing penance". In his preaching this expression has the same place that the following sentence has in Jesus' preaching: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!". In his Testament he recalls the beginning of his new life as follows:

"The Lord granted me, Brother Francesco, thus to begin *to do penance* because, as I was in sin, it seemed too bitter to see lepers and the Lord himself led me among them and I showed them mercy. And I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. And then I stayed a while and left the world"¹

Tommaso da Celano relates that, since then, Francesco began to preach penance with great fervor and exultation, edifying everyone with the simplicity of his word and the magnificence of his heart.² Wherever he went, Francesco said, recommended, begged them to do penance. Shortly after the conversion, he embarked on a journey to the Marca of Ancona, just him and Fr. Egidio. Francesco, as soon as he saw some people gathered, used to start crying, begging them to do penance. Egidio, who could speak even less than him, used to take aside those who had listened to Francesco to tell them: pay attention to what that man tells you, because what he is saying may sound simple, but it comes from God! That was all their preaching and the people were crying and converting.³ And everyone wanted to know who they were and although - notes the biographer - it was annoying to answer so many questions, they simply confessed to be penitents of Assisi.⁴

Penitents of Assisi: this is how Francesco and his companions considered themselves. In the *Legend of the three companions*, we read that Francesco exhorted the friars by saying:

¹ Testament of St. Francesco [Franciscan Sources], nr. 110

² Franciscan Sources [FS], 358.

³ FS, 1436-1437

⁴ FS, 1508

“We go out into the world, exhorting everyone, by example more than by words, to do penance for their sins and to remember the commandments of God. Do not be afraid of being considered insignificant or unbalanced, but announce penance with courage and simplicity. Trust in the Lord who has conquered the world! He speaks with his Spirit in you and through you, admonishing men and women to be converted to him and to observe his precepts”.⁵

In the *Regula non Bullata* (the First Rule), he uses accents that are even more passionate: "All peoples, races, languages, all nations and all the men of the earth, who are and will be, we all minor friars, useless servants, humbly pray and beseech you to persevere in true faith and *penance*, for otherwise no one can be saved".⁶ Finally, sister death arrives for him and in describing her, the biographer sums up his life: "Therein (in S. Maria degliAngeli), being fulfilled the forty years of his life and the twenty years of *his perfect penitence*, the year of the Lord 1226, on the 4th of October, he migrated to the Lord Jesus Christ.»⁷ In the Testament, the story of Francesco with the theme of penance and closes with it.

I insisted on the subject of the penance because the Secular Franciscan Order was born precisely from this early preaching of Francesco and his companions and it keeps this memory alive through all the historical changes. The OFS original rule is the letter of Francesco entitled "Exhortation to the brothers and sisters of penance". It constitutes the prologue of the current Rule, promulgated by Paul VI in 1978 and embodies its original spirit and intuition.

What did Francesco mean by "doing penance"

We must ask ourselves a question: what did Francesco mean by the word "penance"? In this regard we have unfortunately fallen into the serious error of reducing Francesco's message to a simple moral exhortation, to a "beating the chest", to grieve and mortify, to expiate sins, while it has all the vastness and the breath of the gospel of Jesus.

Francesco did not urge to do "penances", but to do "penance" (singular!) and this, as we shall see, is quite different.

To better understand what it is about, we need to refer to the Latin expressions used by Francesco. Let us not forget that Francesco wrote the *Canticle of the Creatures* in Italian and he is therefore considered one of the initiators of our language; but, apart from a few cases, his language was Latin. He preached in Latin, certainly not the classical one, but still Latin. And what do we find in the Latin text of his writings, that is translated as "doing penance"? What do we find, for example, in the Testament, when he writes: "the Lord made me, Brother Francesco, start doing penance"? We find the expression "*poenitentiam agere*".

Now we know that Francesco wanted to preach the gospel *sine glossa*, simply and purely. His early rule, orally approved by Innocent III, was only about a hundred of evangelical sentences. He loved to express himself with the words of Jesus himself. And that word - to do penance - is the word with which Jesus began to preach, the one that, in the beginning of His ministry, He repeated in every town and village where He went. The evangelist Mark says that:

⁵ FS, 1440

⁶ FS, 68

⁷ FS, 1824

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the gospel!” (Mk 1,15)

The word that today is translated as "convertitevi" in the Latin text, used by the Poverello, sounded "poenitemini", do penance. Francesco did nothing but revive the great announcement of Jesus, His "good news". Therefore for a better understanding of the announcement that Francesco gave at the time, we must start from that word of Jesus.

Before Jesus, conversion always meant a "turning back" (the Hebrew word, *shub*, means reversing the course, retracing one's steps). It indicated the act of someone who, at a certain point in life, realizes that he is "out of the way". Then he stops, he has an afterthought; decides to return to the observance of the law and to re-enter into the covenant with God. That makes a real "turnaround". The conversion, in this case, has a meaning which is fundamentally moral and suggests the idea of something painful to be accomplished: to change the way of life, to stop doing this and that.

This is the usual meaning that prophets give to the word "conversion", up to and including John the Baptist but on the lips of Jesus this meaning changes. Not because He enjoys changing the meanings of words, but because, with His coming, things have changed. "The time has come and the Kingdom of God has come near!" In this case, conversion means no longer turning back to the old covenant and observance of the law, but rather means taking a leap forward and entering the kingdom, grasping the salvation that has come to men gratuitously, for free and sovereign God's initiative.

Conversion and salvation traded places. No more the conversion first and then, as its consequence, the salvation but the contrary: first salvation, then, as its requirement, conversion. Not: repent and the Kingdom will come among you, the Messiah will come, as the last prophets were saying, but: be converted because the kingdom has come, it is among you. To convert ourselves is to take the decision that saves, the "decision of the hour", as the parables of the kingdom describe it. "Repent and believe" does not mean two different and successive things, but the same fundamental action: convert, that is, believe! Get converted by believing!

All this requires a true "conversion", a profound change in the way we conceive our relationship with God. It requires passing from the idea of a God who asks, who orders, who threatens, to the idea of a God who comes with full hands to give us everything. It is the conversion from "law" to "grace"; it is the message of gratuitous justification through the faith that was so dear to St. Paul.

Every religion or religious philosophy tells men what they have to do in order to save themselves, both ascetic practices or intellectual speculations. They start with duties. Christianity does not begin by telling men what they must do to save themselves but what God, in Christ, did to save them. There are duties and commandments even in Christianity and there is one that is considered "the first and greatest of all": to love God with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself. Very true but the commandments and duties are placed on the second level, not the first. Above all there is the plan of the gift. Christianity is the religion of grace!

I don't know whether Francesco had this in mind, I don't think so. In his time there was less need to affirm this hierarchy between faith and works. Faith was a fact given for granted; people lived in a Christian society where everything was imbued with faith, despite all the inconsistencies in practical life. What was therefore necessary to preach to the people was the concrete consequences of believing. Today we no longer live in a "societas christiana", in some ways we live in a post-Christian society. We must therefore return to re-establish the hierarchy followed by the apostles.

In the apostolic Church, the distinction between Kerygma and Didaché was clear, that is between the announcement of faith of the Easter mystery of Christ and the moral teaching on the vices to be avoided and the virtues to be cultivated, in particular the most important virtue which is the charity. It was equally clear the conviction, especially in Saint Paul, that faith does not blossom in the presence of moral teaching but in the presence of the Kerygma, the announcement of the death and resurrection of Christ: " If you declare with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom 10: 9).

In obedience to the canonical prescriptions of the time and to the explicit recommendation of the pope, Francesco, in the Rule, points out as the content of the preaching of the friars "the vices and virtues, the pain and glory" but if the evangelical meaning of the word "repent and believe" was not in the mouth and in the pen of Francesco, it was in his heart. His whole person loudly proclaimed the joyful sense of the discovery of the hidden treasure and the precious pearl. He does not sell all his possessions to find the hidden treasure but because he had found the hidden treasure. Even for him, the gift had preceded duty. Francesco did not need to announce with words the Esther mystery - the cross and resurrection of Christ - because his person had become a living image of it; his life was his preaching.

Today we Franciscans are called to make explicit what in Francesco was implicit or unspoken, to proclaim what Francesco *experienced* and not just what he left *written*. He wanted just one thing with all his strength: to relive the gospel and preach the gospel. Imitating him in this, which was the longing of his whole life, means that we do not limit ourselves to preach always and first of all "the vices and virtues, the pain and the glory"; it means that we don't have to limit ourselves to a moralistic preaching, that we do not reduce Christianity to an ethical doctrine but that we must proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified, with the joy and enthusiasm of Francesco.

The apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis "Evangelii gaudium", The Joy of the Gospel, is all imbued with this Franciscan spirit. It begins with the words: "The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who meet Jesus" and who embodied the truth of these words better than Francesco of Assisi?

“And Peter said: Repent!”

Now we need to take a step forward. In the cry of Francesco: "Do penitence" there is something else that we must discover, taking into consideration a second text of the Scriptures.

Let's think back to what happened on the day of Pentecost. The roar of an impetuous wind was heard, flames of fire were seen "and all were filled with the Holy Spirit". Since the Holy Spirit is the personal love of the Father and the Son, to say that everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit means that everyone was filled with the love of God. God! Paul also explains Pentecost: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us". (Rom 5: 5)

After this, the apostles expose themselves. The anointing of the Spirit completely transformed them into burning torches. They proclaim enthusiastically "the great works of God" and everyone understands them. Some suspect their mental condition. Peter reassures them that they are not drunk but he does it quickly, without lingering long. He has something much more important to say. "Jesus of Nazareth! You crucified him, God raised him up and made him Lord ". (Acts 2, 22 next)

Hearing these things, they had remorse in the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles: "Brothers, what shall we do?" and Peter to them: "Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ". (Acts 2,37-38)

In the Latin text known by Francesco, instead of the word "repent" there was the expression "*poenitentiam agite*", that is to say again "do penance". Thus we discovered the two great sources of Francesco's preaching, the two cries that he wanted to make resound again in the Church: the cry with which Jesus began the announcement of the Kingdom and the cry with which the Church began its preaching on the day of Pentecost.

The word used by Peter is identical to that of Jesus: the same verb, the same imperative way, the same second person plural: *metanoete* but the word has been enriched with a new meaning, due to what happened in the meantime. The rejection of Jesus from the world, His death and His resurrection. That is why, instead of translating the term with convert yourself as in the first case, it is translated with *repent* or *mend your way*.

In short, it is no longer just a matter of believing in the Gospel, it is also a matter of recognizing and repenting of the sin. Francesco often speaks of "doing penance for sins". This is now the door to enter the Kingdom and to experience a new Pentecost: "Repent, then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit".

What does the famous word *metanoia* mean? What is true repentance and true contrition? Literally this word means a change of thought, of the way of seeing and judging things, a mental revolution. But it is not about abandoning the old way of thinking or the worldly mentality of the past, to form a somewhat more spiritual and evangelical one. True metanoia is abandoning one's way of thinking and embracing that of God, seeing oneself and our life as God sees them.

Francesco has known the true metanoia. He entered the heart of God and saw sin as God sees it, from within His paternal love without limits, He saw it because of what He did to Christ on the cross. And he cried, he became blind from crying, not just because of the illness. His tears were of love and pain, like those that Jesus poured on Jerusalem.

I asked myself: what kind of sin would Francesco ask us to repent, in particular if he returned back to preach today? A word of Jesus gave me the answer to this question: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all the rest will be given to you in addition". In fact, if not in words, we have simply overturned the terms: we first seek all the rest - health, business, pleasure, fun - and if some time is left, perhaps an hour on Sunday, we think of God, of Jesus Christ and of the things of up above.

We preserve the parable of the wedding guests: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king, who made the marriage of his son. He sent his servants to call the guests to the wedding ... but those, not caring about it, went away, who to his field, who to his trade" (Mt 22, 2-5). For many, God has become a "secondary" interest but God can never be a secondary interest. It's almost worse than not knowing Him at all! Last month I was in the chapel of the hermitage where I have lived for years with some Capuchin Poor Clare nuns and I commented on the Gospel of the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time. This Gospel passage speaks of the Nazaretans who, resentful of His preaching, push Jesus "on the edge of the mountain on which their city was built" (Lk 4,29). I pointed out how we do the same when we relegate Jesus to the edge of our lives, we put him on the sidelines, putting so many other things before Him.

The TAU on the forehead

To Francesco the meaning of penance was entering God's heart, sharing His suffering, seeing things from that center, where everything, especially unfaithfulness and sin, takes on its true appearance. One thing, best of all, reveals to us what it means to do penance for Francesco: his incredible devotion to the Tau. There is a story behind this devotion that is worth remembering. In the prophet Ezekiel we read:

Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it". (Ez 9,1-4)

In the speech with which the elderly Pope Innocent III opened the IV Lateran council in 1215, he took up this symbol. He would have liked, he said, to be himself the man "dressed in linen, with a writing kit at his side" and to go personally through the whole Church to mark a *Tau* on the foreheads of people who agreed to enter a state of true conversion.⁸

He could not do it in person because of his old age (he died three months later), but that day, hidden in the crowd, probably there was also Francesco of Assisi hidden in the crowd. It is certain that the echo of the Pope's speech came to Francesco's ears and he embraced this appeal and made it his own. From that day on he began to preach penance and conversion even more intensely than before and he started making the sign of the *Tau* on the foreheads of the people who met him. The *Tau* became his seal. He used to sign his letters with it, he drew it on the cells of the friars.

After Francesco's death, Saint Bonaventura said: "He had from heaven the mission to call men to cry, to moan ... and to sign the *Tau* on the foreheads of those who groan and cry".⁹ This is why Francesco was defined as "the angel of the sixth seal": the angel who bears himself the seal of the living God and marks it on the forehead of those who are elected. (cf. Ap 7,2 f.)

I know that the symbol of the Tau is particularly dear to the brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order and therefore I ask the Seraphic Father to continue from heaven to put this sign on their hearts and on our hearts, as he put it on the forehead of people.

P. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap



⁸ Innocent III, *Sermo VI* (PL 217, 673-678).

⁹ S. Bonaventura, *Legg. magg.*, 2 (FF, 1022).

CONVERSION – the INNER PATH

*Nancy Westmeyer, OSF
Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin, OH
United States
Original language English*

Francis' entire adult life was about conversion. It's encouraging to trace his beginnings and to see the gradual and growing realization of exactly what God was asking of him. In hindsight I can see some of the same unfolding in my own life. I was trained as a math teacher and I did that for almost ten years. One of my earliest memories of conversion was when I grew enough to turn away from fear and challenged my students to work on problems that I could not easily unscramble.



When I left teaching and began pastoral ministry I was amazed at the relief I experienced not being bound to the rigid class structure of a high school. I enjoyed the freedom, but I was glad that I had experienced that discipline for it helped me to be able to structure my days. Though I left teaching in a school classroom, I was not done with teaching. Every ministry of which I was a part included some form of teaching and much transformation. Like Francis I came to see that the inner journey, the soul journey was what I was called to for myself and for others.

The ministry of which I was most grateful was the establishment of a Servant Leadership Center. Through encouraging others on the journey to servant leadership, I was challenged again and again in my own inner journey. To embrace that I was God's beloved, just as I am, was a grace. To acknowledge every other person as the beloved, those I loved and those I struggled with, demanded more prayer and greater growth. To see and respond to every other as an equal demanded humility and transformation. I have had to face my brokenness, to love it and to accept responsibility for how it impacted others when it was out of control. Over and over I'm challenged to do this. To look into the eyes of the person without a home and to see Christ and to embrace them; to bring them into my home, with the dirt and the smell, is still sometimes a challenge, but I don't let myself falter. This is my encounter with the person with leprosy.

To develop a spirit of inclusivity, of compassion, to discover one's authentic self, and to discover how to use one's gifts for persons whom are poor and marginalized all demand a deep inner life that is nurtured by the wisdom of all whom we encounter. That is what we are about in servant leadership. It is a very Franciscan journey.

Living Out of Metanoia

Sister Camilla Wolfgram, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
Original language English

The Foundational VALUES for Conversion in Propositum 2013 state that CONVERSION, namely (Metanoia) is *“to have our eyes fixed on Jesus, returning to God in conversion, is a constant force to grow in faith, to see the light of God in all creatures, in the events and the signs of the times. We must have a God-centered life so as to witness His merciful love.”*

Fully living religious life as a vowed Franciscan means being God-centered, no matter what the cost. It is all about reaching out to one another with the message that God loves each person with His all-embracing love. We are His redeemed people.

The challenge is to work on a radical interior change first, then reach out to others in our community, family and ministry. It can perhaps be compared to “getting one’s house in order first,” then moving out and about.

Three “de-stressers” I find are prayer, silence and spiritual reading. They bring about a “metanoia” that helps one to be God-centered first, then other-centered. As a result, there is no room for living a self-centered life.

The “metanoia” of being other-centered promotes actions that positively allow for conversion in another. Two actions that I am specifically choosing are

- 1) Reaching out to the Sister members of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity who are the “anawim”, the marginalized who somehow believe that they have no worth and nothing to offer. It is both challenging and rewarding to experience their hopeful response to simple ways of outreach.
- 2) Action (2) is becoming involved in the mission and outreach of our local homeless shelter, namely Hope House.

Poverty has so many faces that need loving care and personal intervention. Helping to make a difference in other’s lives is indeed a challenge, however, it also has positive outcomes. The credit goes to the Holy Spirit who guides us in this process of conversion. We are God’s instruments. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

My Way or God's Way?

*Sister Mary Frances Maher, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
Original language English*

When I think of conversion I usually think of a dramatic event that has happened in someone's life, like St. Francis or St. Paul. However, as I have grown in my religious life, I've discovered that it is the daily events in my life which determine my own conversion. Yes, I do believe that God does permit a so-called turning point in our lives to bring us closer to Himself. But I also know that dying daily to my own will and saying yes to God's plan, is also a way of conversion. I try to think of it as doing little things with great love as St. Therese, the Little Flower, did.

Living in Community gives me many opportunities for conversion. I may not agree with a decision, but I am open to what God has planned for me in a particular situation. This means that I pray daily for His guidance and direction in my life. Listening to what He tells me in prayer, spiritual reading, talking with others is how I know what He has in mind for me. Do I always follow Him? No, I'm not perfect, but the daily Eucharist gives me the strength I need to continue to try to be who God is calling me to be. Frequent Reconciliation allows me to see myself, to accept myself and know that God loves me with all of my faults and failings, encouraging me to be a better person.

Is conversion easy? No, as I said at the beginning, it is a daily struggle to do God's will. It can also be a joy-filled experience as I gradually accept myself and allow myself to be the person God is calling me to be. Joy is knowing that I am a child of God and living that joy in all of my encounters. I hope to keep in mind that conversion is a gradual event, an opportunity to change for the better, to improve my life and to keep God at the center of my life.

All of what I have said relates to my vowed commitment. To put it in very simple terms: Poverty and Obedience are letting go of my will and what I don't need to follow Jesus. Chastity is loving the Jesus in myself and others. St. Francis told us that he had done what was his to do, now it is time for me to do what is mine to do.



THE CHURCH PENITENT

*Sister Mary Ann Spanjers, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
Original language English*

Conversion for us, as a Church, needs to come in the form of penance. One of my former students summed up in a sentence what such a church would look like. Thanking me for being his teacher, he said: "You loved us, even when we disappointed you." (I can add that my students love me, even when I disappoint them.)

Is this not a call to conversion to be a penitent, to recognize that one fails, sins, disappoints and yet knows that despite it all, one is loved and forgiven? Is this not how we experience God's love and forgiveness? The only real answer to the brokenness of the world is Jesus' love, through us, his church. Yet when we as church fail to be authentic, to love and forgive each other, we, too, become broken. When those called to guide us in the church become the cause of sin, harm and evil, the brokenness leads to rejection, pain and distrust. Sometimes the damage seems beyond repair and reconciliation.

How do we identify ourselves as church? What images do we use? The Second Vatican Council urged us to search for new images of the church so that it could become what it was intended to be from the beginning. The question my students struggle with is, what is an authentic identity of the church today? I believe that the only way the church can be relevant is if it embraces the model of a penitent.

St. Francis of Assisi provides us with a historical example. He chose to live among the lepers of his time, to take on the stigma of being an outcast and to befriend the sinners, the wretched and the poor. He took on this way of life as a penitent so that he might imitate Jesus, who shared our humanity and atoned for the sins of all through his living, dying and rising. Jesus accepted the sins and sufferings of others through death so that new life could be born. This is the call of the penitent to conversion, to face sin, to reconcile and to rise above it with the grace God offers. The proposed model of the church as penitent views the church as human beings in relationship with God. This relationship is shared with all God's creatures.

As a [Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity](#), embracing the life of a penitent is my reality. It is how I am able to teach my Lasallian Cristo Rey students. I am able to walk with them in need of God's love, mercy and forgiveness. I teach theology about a church that is in disarray. Honesty with teenagers is the only thing that works. It is their honesty about who they are and who they hope to be that gives me hope. We are the church, we are a human faith community, but God is with us. We fall and sin and get up because of God's love through and in each other. It is in this that we embrace the life of penitents and experience conversion of heart.

CONVERSION

Sister Sharon Paul, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
Original language English

To me, *CONVERSION* takes a lifetime. It is challenging, on-going and exhausting. It began with Baptism, when I was gifted with Christ's life in the soul and continued as I received the other sacraments. These sacraments are the *FUEL*, especially the Eucharist, Penance and Confirmation, that keep my body and soul in rhythm, by being open to the Lord, withstanding worldly ways and in living the *Gospel* daily.

The *KEY* to conversion is my relationship to the Lord and in using my God-given talents in furthering His Kingdom, by having a listening ear to His designs and in co-operating with others.

I live out conversion as a Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity, by following the Rule of St. Francis as a member of St. Benedict's Convent, Cambridge, Ohio, with my Sisters in community. Prayer, silence and conversion, in listening to the Lord's direction, is essential. Matthew 18:3 says: "Unless you become like a little child you cannot enter Heaven." Some helps in furthering the Lord's relationship in my life are:

- Daily Meditation, Mass & Eucharist
- Lauds & Vespers in Community & once a week with parishioners
- Adoration & Benediction on Wednesdays at 4:00 P.M.
- Prayer Group each Monday with St. Vincent de Paul Group
- Spiritual Reading, Magazines, Books, Speakers & Catholic Papers
- Once a month Spiritual Discussion on the Sunday Liturgy & other Community Articles
- Write original "Principles, & "Reflections"
- Listen to outside speakers, programs, live or on the internet
- Member of "Christ's Life Group"

In the Apostolate, I strive to live out my God-given talents as a Pastoral Minister & Counselor at Christ Our Light Parish by serving at 8 Assisted Nursing & Rehab Facilities, two hospitals & three surrounding towns of homebound individuals. Some of the duties performed:

- Attend all funerals & minister to the grieving, injured, sick, handicap, those on drugs, alcohol, single & divorced
- Refer the poor, hungry or needy for help in town
- Procure food, clothing & furniture for the needy
- Recommend clients to mental help agencies, to Senior Center for meals & transportation
- Work with our Pastor & Pastor Emeritus in anointing & returning ones back to the faith
- Work with many different cultures

Respect God's Creation by:

- Being thankful for what we have
- Conserve water
- Recycle paper, glass & cans
- Support Right to Life by attending fundraisers

Attend Community, Church & School Events:

- Auction & fund raisers
- Plays, sports, programs & musicals
- Sing in Thanksgiving Ecumenical Choir & Lenten Speakers & Luncheons
- Respect and be attentive to other cultures
- Work on a Sacred Concert to raise monies for a Parish & School in Haiti

I learn from others far more than I give. Sometimes, it takes time to examine my own beliefs and biases, and to work with one another for a shared vision.

YES, CONVERSION is never ending. It's constantly turning from worldly matters and ways and I have to keep my gaze on JESUS. "They stand fast in the Lord." (1 Thes. 3:8) Each day, I continue to strive for conversion and LIVE the spirit of the Beatitudes by Living the Gospel, in hope, for the Lord says in Matthew 28:20: "...I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS UNTIL THE END OF THE AGE!"

CONVERSION

*Sister Carol Juckem, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
Original language English*

Conversion is a daily experience for those who love God and surrender to His will. Each daily encounter with people and circumstances calls us to turn again back to God and His way of responding.

As we put on the Lord Jesus Christ each day He sharpens our vision to see those we meet as He does. All of us are wounded, need healing and understanding. When we see with the Lord's vision of compassion we will not only be converted within, but will cause others to turn towards God and be converted also.



What is in the heart of those who are continually converted to become one with Jesus Christ, other than the heart of Jesus Himself? What is in the mind of those who are continually converted to Jesus Christ but His thoughts and His mind? What is in the will of those continually converted to Jesus Christ but a constant surrender to His will?

We are not created to be a carbon copy of the Lord, but a “version” of the Lord that is uniquely our own. Through our talents, our personality and our way of living life the Lord lives His life through us with the flavor that is our special version of “God with us”. We are constantly called to be that best version of ourselves that enables the light of Jesus to shine through us.

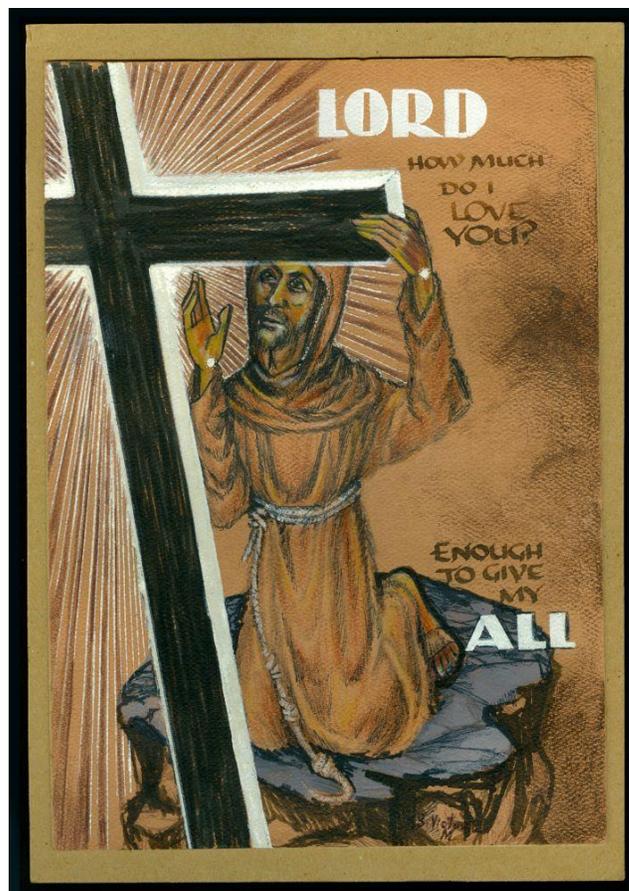
Perhaps conversion is really not just a daily turning but a moment by moment turning. A turning to the Father who loves us into being, Jesus who saves us and the Holy Spirit who guides us into union with the One we desire and long for. Turn to God, be converted and live.

CONVERSION

*Sister Bernadette Selinsky, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
English*

For 52 years I have been trying to use the little every day opportunities for further conversion. On the days that I am more “in tune with God,” these opportunities are many. Several years ago I had what I now see was a blessed opportunity for a giant conversion. I needed a serious eye surgery which had the potential to result in blindness. There was no doubt that the surgery was necessary and I pondered it immensely in the weeks before the surgery. During that time I made a retreat whose theme was “Five questions that Jesus asked.” The question on the first day of retreat was contained in the Gospel account of Jesus healing a blind man. In that account Jesus asked: “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man answered: “Lord, that I may see.” I pondered that question and his answer. The more I pondered it, somehow that answer did not feel “right” for me, it was not a “perfect fit.” I asked myself: “What do I REALLY want Jesus to do for me? What is the DEEPEST thing I need from Jesus at this time?” Over the course of the retreat, my answer gradually unfolded: “Lord, that I may see YOU even if that means I will go blind. Just let me see YOU.” This response felt right, but I prayed for the sincerity to truly mean it because I knew the cost might be great. The song that I sang in my heart in the days prior to the surgery was: “Open my eyes, Lord, help me to see your face.” I feel I went into the surgery totally surrendered after having experienced the conversion to truly mean my response to Jesus’ question: “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, that I may see YOU even if that means I will go blind. Just let me see YOU.”

(Follow up: The surgery was successful and I was able to see better than before! Praise God! But my eyes are gradually worsening again, and I was already informed that there is nothing more they can do for them. So there may be another even deeper conversion in my future if my response will need to be lived out to the very end. “Lord, that I may see YOU even if that means I will go blind. Just let me see YOU.”)



*Painting by Sister Victoria Masil, O.S.F. +
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States, English*

How Do We Witness to the Third Order Charism of Conversion?

Sister Mariella Erdmann, O.S.F.
Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
United States
English

As Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity we profess to follow the Gospel spirit of St. Francis. This takes a conversion of heart. The specific charism of the Third Order is continuing conversion. Francis understood this and this is what brought him to the point of being captivated by God's love so completely that he became like Christ in his daily living out of the Gospel message. Pope Benedict XVI tells us that transformation of one's whole being is not the fruit of a psychological process of maturation or intellectual and moral development. Rather, it is our encounter with Jesus Christ. In this deeper sense we must speak of conversion.

We may ask what does this mean for us. Like St. Paul who could say that "*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my LORD, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ . . .*" *Phl 8*, we only become true Christian when we encounter Christ. Repentance and conversion mean we put on a new attitude because we recognize the compelling presence of God. Only a profound encounter with Christ can affect such a deep change in us.

As members of a religious community we experience our vulnerability before Christ as individuals and also together as a community. It is in accepting our vulnerability in humility and trust, that Christ's love for us becomes so real and beyond all our imagining. It is only then that our ego can begin to die and we can live anew in the Risen Christ. We are not 'lone rangers' in community but we pray, work, eat and recreate together as we follow the Franciscan way of daily conversion. Conversion is not a one-time event but is a continual turning back to God and allowing him to transform our lives. A strong community life rooted in Christ is a tremendous support to each of us individually just as each individual is a support for the good of the whole when each person opens herself to the transforming presence of Christ in her daily life.

Rediscovering the need for exterior and interior silence is most important in order to hear God speaking to us in the reading and contemplating of Scripture as well as partaking in the Liturgical life of the Church, especially the Mass, and the recitation of Morning and Evening Prayer in common. Taking advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly helps us to grow in self-knowledge and humility. Through a daily examine of conscience we are called to reflect on our relationships with one another and with God. The reading aloud each year of the Rule, our Constitutions, and Directory along with letters of exhortation by our Community Director to live what we are called to be are additional guides for us. The only way to hold true to our calling and keep alive the fire of the Spirit within, is by the practice of turning to God daily. Today there is such a temptation to become disillusioned, discouraged, and mediocre religious who have lost the will to inspire and set others on fire for Christ.

In the end, conversion is a matter of person wanting an encounter with Christ. God initiates in our lives and we have a choice to say yes or no. We are on the journey to maturity of life in Christ and it is God who wants to lavish us with his love and draw us the fullness of life. So, let us pray for this encounter with Christ that will open us to truth, give us a lively faith, and open our hearts with a great love for all. This is what will renew the world.

An experience from Paraguay

*Sr. Evanilda Ramirez
Hermanas Educacionistas Franciscanas de Cristo Rey
Province Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Paraguay
Original language Spanish*

"Let us begin, for up to now we have done nothing."

With these words of our group, Francesco, began to share the experience lived in the mission that the Franciscan Family has carried out this year 2020, as every year, from 19 to 26 January in Paraguay.

The theme proposed to share this experience is conversion. In this sense, the concrete participation in a mission helps one to go out of one's way of living, to disengage oneself, conditions which are necessary for a conversion process.



Having accepted the invitation to be part of the group of missionaries, we had to organize some activities, in order to be fully involved. The activities are freely chosen by the men and women religious or lay people who participate. No one is sent out to the mission under obedience. Who decides to participate accepts the invitation by the Lord through his Church: we are sent by Him.

To be involved in the mission implies the change of the mind set/structure. It is unknown where I will stay, with whom I will be sent on a mission, unknown the people I will meet. All this has to be based and carried out in an attitude of faith to contribute to the proclamation of the Gospel which is the mission of the Church. And this is my commitment, as a baptized person and even more as a consecrated person.

We do not bring anything with us, except what is absolutely necessary, trusting in the Master of the harvest who will provide for us by giving us everything we will need. And so it happens. He, like a good father, excels in generosity, and the community we visit does not let us miss anything. He takes care of us, all our needs are satisfied.

We do not go on a mission with pre-established schemes, we only bring with us the guidelines that have been given to us by the coordinator; the individual group adapts it to what is presented during the day. In fact, it is a question of opening up to the newness of the Spirit, with trust in Him because He is the protagonist of the mission. Every day presents a surprise, every day it is necessary to listen, listen to God, in prayer, in the Eucharist, in fraternal sharing and above all to listen brothers and sisters who welcome us, sometimes with joy and hope, sometimes with a bit of a hurry, with the phrase "I don't have time" or sometimes with "now I can't".

All these experiences speak to our heart and push us to open it wide to make space in us to welcome the novelty that missionary experience offers us at all times.

We return to our communities having treasured all these experiences, recognizing the wonderful contribution that we as Franciscan religious can offer to the mission of the "outgoing" Church accepting the invitation of Pope Francis. And above all recognizing that this contribution comes from the loving initiative of the Lord who calls us to collaborate in His work of love; He looks with compassion on his people who walk like a flock without a shepherd. This leads us to live more simply, to a less structured lifestyle according to the Franciscan charism of minority, fraternity and continuous conversion.

