

# PROPOSITUM



## **CONVERSION and CONTEMPLATION Cornerstones of the Third Order Regular Franciscan Charism**

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For information about the periodical, please write to:

[secretary@ifc-tor.org](mailto:secretary@ifc-tor.org)

Piazza del Risorgimento,14

00192 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39.06.39723521

Fax: +39.06.39760483

[www.ifc-tor.org](http://www.ifc-tor.org)

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## Editorial

### Conversion and Contemplation: Cornerstones of the Third Order Regular Franciscan Charism

by Fr. James Puglisi, SA

The two issues of *Propositum* for 2012 will examine the four cornerstones of our Third Order Rule (conversion, contemplation, poverty and humility or minority) from three perspectives: biblical, Franciscan and ecumenical.

In this issue we will consider **conversion and contemplation**. First from a biblical perspective followed by reflections from Franciscans from other traditions within the Franciscan family and from different ecclesial traditions. It is the hope of the Council of the IFC-TOR that these reflections will give a fresh reading of our TOR tradition as we prepare for the next General Assembly to be held in 2013 whose theme is “Rooted in Christ, On Fire with the Spirit – Go...Transform the World”.

**Conversion** or repentance is a key theme in the preaching of Jesus and of the Christian message. Fr. Elias Mallon looks at the concept of repentance in the biblical text, both in the New and Old Testaments. Surprisingly even though repentance appears much less frequently than one would expect in the Gospels, it is clear that it played an important role in the preaching of the early Christians. Bro. Elias illustrates the complexity and richness of the concept in the OT. Seen especially from the perspective of the OT, the two concepts of repentance and conversion are related but are not identical. Penitential practices are devotions which are intended to strengthen or sometimes restore the original repentance, conversion, changing of one's mind/heart. The repentance to which the biblical text refers is that life-changing experience which makes one a follower of Christ, perhaps a

weak and sinful follower, but, nonetheless, one who has turned to and planted his/her feet to walk a new path and live a new reality with a changed heart and mind. This important insight sheds new light on our understanding of this foundational value for the TOR Rule.

When considered from the perspective of Francis of Assisi, Bro. Gerry Lobo, OFM sees the epitome of conversion in the history of religious experience. From this, one may understand that conversion is uncovering and denouncing the easy superficiality that very often characterizes our way of living. Perceived in this way, conversion is a prophetic act, a 'disturbing presence' afflicting the comforted consciences and comforting the afflicted hearts. The Religious life is one of constant conversion and the TOR Rule reminds those who profess it that their lives are to be conscious on an ongoing conversion to the Lord through penance. In this way, the religious life becomes a prayer in the same way that Bonaventure described Francis' conversion as a dying to self, until he "became prayer." This process of conversion leads to a disturbing presence in society and for society that has a prophetic edge.

Sr. Gretta Sanjivini D'Souza explores the value of **contemplation** from biblical theology in both the Old and New Testaments as well as in the Franciscan tradition. In her conclusions several important dimensions of contemplation appear. Our conversion because of contemplation causes a personal transformation hence contemplation leads to conversion. Secondly it leads to liberation since our response to the Divine takes us out of ourselves. Thirdly, this liberation eventually leads us to the taking of sides with and/or for the poor. Fourthly, contemplation merges the outside with the inside allowing us to overcome the barriers of separation (such as sexism, racism, caste systems and so forth). Lastly, contemplation opens the way for a counter culture that

challenges the contemporary world and its values of individualism, affluence, power.

From the perspective of a Poor Clare, Sr Beth Lynn shares her invaluable experience of a life of contemplation. Starting from the advice of St Clare on contemplative prayer: keeping our eyes focused on Jesus – looking, listening, becoming mercy, all of us modeling and mirroring the gospel path for one another in Community she offers profound insights into the value of contemplation for the TOR rule. Perhaps the most important point that is made in this article is the communal dimension of contemplation. In reflecting on the letters of Clare to Agnes, the communal dimension of learning to follow the foot steps of Christ becomes essential. At the center of “the form of life of the poor sisters which the blessed Francis founded,” is Chapter 6 that Clare understood as ‘doing penance, that is, to do mercy’. This meant choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, the path laid out by the life and teaching of Jesus in the Scriptures. Contemplation was discovered as ‘contemplation in community’. While Francis’ following the foot steps of Jesus was seen as more linear ‘going out’ or ‘going up’, Clare’s following the footsteps of Jesus was a movement of circling Christ at the center of the prayer and communal life at San Damiano, being brought closer and closer to Jesus.

Finally in the last article, Br Clark Berge, Minister General of the Anglican Franciscans, speaks about falling in love as a conversion experience since it means preoccupation with the beloved, a sense of infatuation and a desire to be with them all the time. In this way he sees how the two values of conversion and contemplation go hand in hand. Common ground is discovered by the Franciscan link to our different histories as ecclesial communities. In spite of these differences the great desire to fall in love and be in love unite us in the Body of Christ as disciples seeking to follow in the footprints of Jesus.

By keeping the stories of our converting moments alive and fresh for ourselves and others we can remain grateful for and in real relationship with the transforming love of God.

Easter 2012

*James F. Puglisi, SA*

Fr. James F. Puglisi, SA  
President IFC-TOR

## **C O N V E R S I O N**

“With all in the holy Catholic and apostolic Church who want to serve God, the brothers and sisters of this Order are to persevere in true faith and penance (RegNB 23:7). They want to live this evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer, of poverty, and of humility.” *TOR Rule, 2.*



# REPENTANCE

By Rev. Elias D. Mallon, SA, PhD

The first words we hear from Jesus in Mark's Gospel are: The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News! (Mk 1:15) Matthew puts these words first into the mouth of John the Baptist (Mt 3:2) in the scene which introduces Jesus for the first time as an adult. After his Baptism Jesus goes into the desert to fast and be tempted for forty days and forty nights. Once John has been arrested, Jesus begins his ministry in Matthew with John's message of repentance (Mt 4:17). At least in Western Christianity the call of Jesus to repent has become a theme repeated over and over. Repentance is often seen as an inextricable part of the preaching of Jesus and of the Christian message. The notion of repentance and penance has profoundly influenced Christian piety. Over the centuries there have been many penitential movements and religious communities formed around Jesus' call to repent.

In what follows I would like look at the concept of repentance in the biblical text, both the New and Old Testaments.<sup>1</sup> The words which the NT uses for repentance is *metanoia* (μετάνοια) and the verbal form is *metanoēō* (μετανοέω). The basic root meaning of the word in Greek is "to change one's mind, attitude." It is interesting to note that the word is not as common in the NT as one might expect, given the attention which Christians have given it. For example, the call of Jesus to repent appears only in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. In Mark's Gospel the Twelve are sent by Jesus to preach. Mark notes "they went out and preached that people might repent" (6:12). Likewise in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke Jesus calls down prophetic woes on the towns where he preached and which did not repent (Mt 11:20 ff., Lk 10:13). Clearly his message to these towns had be

one of repentance. The examples of the Ninivites who repented and were saved in response to the preaching of Jonah find mention in the preaching of Jesus (Mt 12:38-42; Mk 8:11-12; Lk 11:29-32). However, repentance does not appear frequently in the preaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Repentance does not appear at all in the lengthy discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

Although repentance appears much less frequently than one would expect in the Gospels, it is clear that it played an important role in the preaching of the early Christians. In his sermons in the Acts of the Apostles Peter calls his hearers to repent (Acts 2:38 and 3:19). When Paul preaches at the Areopaga in Athens he stresses that all people are called to repentance (Acts 17:30) and when he describes his mission to King Agrippa calling people to repentance is one of the main characteristics of his vocation.

The notion of repentance which is found in the Old Testament is interesting and complex. The most common root used in the MT for repentance is *nhm* (נחַם) used in the *nifal*. The root has several meanings: to regret having done something, to be sorry, to change one's mind, to relent, to have a change of heart. As such it can refer to both God and human beings. In fact, when the characteristics of God are listed in Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2 the last one listed is that God is *nihām 'al hārā'āh* (LXX: μετανοών) "repenting/relenting from evil (i.e. punishment, destruction)." Although the root *nhm* appears some forty-seven times in the MT, the LXX uses sixteen different words to translate it. The notion of changing one's mind is used of God in several instances. When in Gen 6:6 ff. evil and violence increase on the earth, God "repents" of having made human beings. Likewise, when Saul disobeys God's commandment through Samuel, God "is sorry" that he made Saul king (*nihamtî kî himlaktî...*) (1 Sam 15:11 ff.) As would be indicated by lists of God's merciful characteristics in

Joel and Jonah, God's repentance in the Old Testament is very often connected with mercy. The "evil" from which God "repents" is always the evil which the Israelites (Ex 32:12 ff.) would experience if God destroyed them for their transgressions. In a sense God's repentance is a change of attitude from one of vengeance to one of mercy. In Psalm 110:4 the oracle declares "The Lord has sworn and he will not repent (*welo' yinnahēm*)...." Here the oracle is underlining the permanence of God's covenant with David. God has sworn and will not change his mind. Despite the fact that God is frequently presented as changing his mind in the OT, it is, nonetheless, stated in 1 Sam 15:29 that "the Glory of Israel {God} will not go back (*lo' yinnahēm*; LXX: *metanoēō*) on his word because he is God and not human...." Perhaps this is the clearest instance of how difficult the notion of "repentance" is, at least in the OT. On the one hand "repenting from evil" is one of the main characteristics of God in the prophets. God is merciful and always changing his mind from punishment to mercy. Humans call upon God (Ex 32:12-14) to repent, i.e. forgive the people and not punish their sins. But yet when the same word both in Hebrew and Greek would imply "going back on one's word," that is not something which can be attributed to God (1 Sam 15:29 and Ps 110:4

When referring to human beings, the same meanings tend to apply, viz, "regretting, relenting, changing one's mind, having a change of heart." The word clearly covers the contemporary Christian understanding of repentance and conversion when it is used in the story of Jonah preaching to the Ninivites. They were sinners and they were warned to repent or suffer the consequences. In both the book of Jonah and the re-telling of the story of Jonah in the Synoptic Gospels, the word appears with the meaning most understood by Christians, i.e. repenting from sin.

Another relevant concept which appears in both testaments is the notion of turning away (from sin) and turning back (to God). In Hebrew the root that is used is *šûb*.<sup>3</sup> When the word refers to repenting or turning to God (Ps 51:15; Is 6:10; 1 Kgs 8:47; Ezek 16:6; 18:50; Joel 2:12-13, etc.), the LXX translates it with a form of the word *epistrepō* (ἐπιστρέπω). Forms of the word *epistrepō* appear several times in the NT. The most frequent is from a citation of Isa 6:9-10 which appears in Mt 13:15; Mk 4:12; Jn 12:40 and Acts 28:26: “You shall indeed hear and not understand; see and never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown coarse, their ears dull of hearing and they have shut their eyes, for fear they should ... understand with their heart and be converted (*epistrepsousin* {ἐπιστρέψουσιν}) and healed.” Peter in his sermon at Solomon’s Portico in the Temple calls his hearers to “repent and turn to God” (Acts 3:19). Here the two concepts common in the Old Testament come together in the New: repent (*metanoēsate* {μετανοήσατε}) and turn to God (*epistrepate* {ἐπιστρέψατε}). Lastly, in Acts 15:3 the word used to express the conversion of Phoenicia and Samaria is *epistrofē* (ἐπιστροφή).

The relationship of humans to God in terms of sin and repentance is a huge and complex theme in the Old Testament and there are many ways of presenting it. The more common word for repent in the Old Testament is *nhm*, which the LXX often but not always translates with some form of *metanoēō*. The notion of repentance in the Old Testament is extremely complex and several times we find God “repenting of evil.” Clearly English word repentance is far more restricted than the Hebrew word *nhm*. To be sure there is a great deal of overlapping between English and Hebrew but the field of meaning (the semantic field) of the Hebrew word *nhm* is greater than that of the English word repent. Even the LXX and New Testament use of the Greek word *metanoēō* is not

entirely identical with the English word repent; the Greek word too has a broader field of meaning than the English word repent. The point of contact between the *nhm* Hebrew of MT and the Greek of the lexicon might be that *nhm* can be translated “having a change of heart” although there is no notion of “heart” in the Hebrew root.<sup>4</sup> The Greek *metanoēō* clearly contains the concept of “changing one’s mind.” Since in biblical Hebrew the heart and not the brain is considered the seat of knowledge, there is somewhat of an equivalence between “having a change of heart” and “changing one’s mind.” The relationship, however, between Hebrew *šûb* and Greek *epistrepō* is much more straightforward in that the notion of turning (back) is contained in both words.

As a result of this brief survey of repentance in the biblical text, there are several things which we can determine. While the call to repentance clearly appears in the New Testament, it does not appear all that frequently. The call “repent!” is not found in John’s Gospel at all and in fact is used by Jesus only twice (Mt 4:17 and Mk 1:15). In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’ call to repent echoes the same call of John the Baptist in Mt 4:2. Each of the three Synoptics records that Jesus began his preaching ministry after Herod arrested John the Baptist (Mt 4:12; Mk 1:14; Lk 4:14) but Luke does not include the call to repent and believe in the Kingdom of God/Heaven. However, it seems that the call the repentance was more frequent in the preaching of the post-Pentecost church especially in the sermons of Peter (Acts 2:38; 3:19).

Conversion/repentance/changing one’s mind or heart in the biblical text seems to be presented as more than an individual, isolated act. It is a change of heart, a turning (back, around) and going in a new direction. In modern terms it is more of an existential decision than a single act. In the biblical text the state of a person before conversion/repentance/changing one’s mind or heart is

existentially different from the state after the act. It is literally having a new understanding (heart) about things and moving in the direction of the new understanding. The movement of mind/heart brings about a change in the state of the person. One of the problems which the early Church encountered was the question whether a baptized sinner could be forgiven. While rigorists such as the Donatists were of the opinion that they could not, the Church's faith was that even after baptism sinners could be forgiven. The very existence of the question and the heated debate surrounding the answer is an indication that early Christians looked upon the initial "conversion" of baptism and the "turning" to God as something radical which irrevocably altered a person's life. While the faith of the Church held and continues to hold that a baptized sinner can be forgiven, that does not reduce repentance to a private devotion. It is not something which some believers do more or less frequently. Conversion is a far deeper and more radical reality. In a real sense repentance brings about a new state of being especially with baptism. The direction of the believer's life has been changed. To be sure, the believer can tragically be diverted from this change of direction through sin. However, after repentance and forgiveness the sinner once again returns not to a new path but to the one which he/she chose at their original conversion. Thus repentance and conversion are intimately connected with baptism. In the early Church some people postponed baptism till their deathbed in a misguided recognition of how radical and in a sense irrevocable the conversion/repentance/changing one's mind and heart was. Conversion and repentance were life-changing acts and could not easily be undone and then restored. It is, therefore, important to differentiate between conversion, repentance, changing one's mind/heart with penitential practices. They are related but are not identical. Penitential practices are devotions which are intended to strengthen or sometimes

restore the original repentance, conversion, changing of one's mind/heart. The repentance to which the biblical text refers is that life-changing experience which makes one a follower of Christ, perhaps a weak and sinful follower, but, nonetheless, one who has turned to and planted his/her feet to walk a new path and live a new reality with a changed heart and mind.

*Rev. Elias D. Mallon, SA, PhD  
138 Waverly Place  
New York, NY 10014-3845  
USA*

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<sup>1</sup> I am deliberately avoiding the expression “Tanak” or “Hebrew Scriptures” here because, although I will be dealing with the Hebrew text (Massoretic text: MT), the Septuagint (LXX), the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, will play a major role in this paper. The LXX is not identical with the Hebrew Bible MT. Although it is clear that some of the writers of the NT were familiar with the Hebrew text, they were all familiar with the LXX and in some cases opted for the LXX over MT in citations, e.g. Mt 1:23 and Isa 7:14 LXX vs. MT. In what follows I will use “Old Testament” to refer both to the Hebrew Massoretic text and the larger body of the LXX.

<sup>2</sup> Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke.

<sup>3</sup> Although the word does not appear in the Bible, the word *tešūbāh* (תשובה) is the normal Hebrew word used for conversion, repentance.

<sup>4</sup> However, some see a connection between *nhm* and *rhm*, “womb,” the seat of mercy.

## Franciscan Prophetic Differentiation Evangelical Conversion as Disturbing Presence

Gerry Lobo, *ofm*

What is conversion? For many, the word immediately conjures up the image of a Christian missionary going forth armed with a bible and a bottle of medicine to convert the pagan soul in a distant 'heathen' land. This is a stereotype, although one does sometimes come across rather alarming examples of it. The general meaning of the word conversion is clear enough; it means simply 'turning around'. And when one turns around, this involves a double movement: a movement *away from* something and a movement *towards* something.

For many people, both Christians and adherents of other faiths, 'conversion' means a turning from a lower to a higher way of life, from a worldly to a spiritual life. Conversion in this sense is often spoken of as a change of heart – a change of heart which leads one to stop running after the transitory things of this world and direct one's attention and energy to the sublime, everlasting things of the spirit. Put in this way, conversion is common to all religions in one form or another.

In this paper, however, holding Francis of Assisi as the epitome of conversion in the history of religious experience, I wish to understand that conversion is uncovering and denouncing the easy superficiality that very often characterizes our way of living. Perceived in this way, conversion is a prophetic act, a 'disturbing presence' afflicting the comforted consciences and comforting the afflicted hearts.

With these introductory remarks, the paper will elucidate the following aspects: conversion as 'disturbing' presence; conversion of Francis of Assisi upsetting the socio-economic-political equations of his times; evangelical project of the early Franciscan movement as disturbing force in the medieval society; instances of conversion as 'disturbing



presence' in the tor rule, 1982. Living the spirituality of conversion to the gospel by being disturbed like Francis, in our contemporary context, by the brothers and sisters of penance, will offer a modest conclusion to our reflection.

### **Conversion: Prophetic Act and Disturbing Presence**

Generally people understand conversion as a dramatic turn-about in a person's life, such as the one Paul of tarsus experienced, and a one-time affair. Considered purely as a religious experience, it often remains within the enclosure of an individual self as a sentimental, emotional feeling. In order to protect such a feeling, religious practices and ascetic disciplines are performed, namely, devotions, pilgrimages and acts of charity. While the sincerity of this practice may not be undermined, pharisaic sentiments may at times over take in a spurt of zeal leading to fanaticism.

According to Bernard Lonergan, conversion is a radical transformation on all levels of living with an "interlocked series of changes and developments."<sup>1</sup> in keeping with the call of Jesus to the fullness of life (Jn 10:10), conversion affects physical and psychological, emotional and intellectual, social and political, religious and spiritual level. It is a constant call to change, to encounter perspectives and to transformation.<sup>2</sup> Conversion is not a once-and-for-all decision. It involves both an *initial* and *ongoing* decision.<sup>3</sup> These decisions occur on different levels: affective, intellectual, moral and religious.<sup>4</sup>

Conversion touches every level of human existence. Biblically, conversion means to surrender ourselves to god in every sphere of human existence: the personal and social, the spiritual and economic, the psychological and political.<sup>5</sup> The call to fullness of life reaches across the board. Therefore, it challenges us to dismantle our economic presuppositions or intellectual biases or psychological tendencies. in other words, one can not be a disciple of Jesus when economically he or she

hoards financial resources, or psychologically refuses to nurture the emotional growth that helps one to be a more loving person. In the annunciation story (Lk1;26-38), we can find a model for conversion affecting all levels of a human person. Here is the story of a woman of Nazareth who was totally disturbed by god and who in turn disturbs the well-established conventions of her contemporaries by her unquestionable obedience to the word.

To be converted, then, means to change direction along the way of life, not for a slight adjustment, but for a true and total change of direction. Conversion is to go against the current, where the 'current' is a superficial, inconsistent and illusory lifestyle, which often makes us prisoners of moral mediocrity. With conversion, on the other hand, we are entrusted to the living and personal Gospel, which is Christ Jesus. His person is the final goal and the profound meaning of conversion. In this way conversion manifests its most splendid and fascinating face: it is not a simple moral decision to rectify our conduct of life, but a decision of faith, which involves us wholly in profound communion with the living and concrete person of Jesus. We are disturbed, displaced and destabilized in the process of conversion. It demands the total 'yes' of the one who gives his or her own existence to the Gospel, responding freely to Christ, who first offered himself to the liberation and salvation of humanity.

The opening word of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus was a disturbing one. "Repent and believe in the Good news," he said (Mk 1:15). It was a call to conversion at a time when a minority of people were wearing blinders and alienated from one another, whereas a large population was excluded by the religion of the temple precincts and the economic-social opportunities. It was a world convicted of sin. His manifestation disturbed the consciences of the comforted ones. He *was* conversion himself unsettling the mediocre of his

society. His challenge to repent after John the Baptist's call (Lk 3:4-14) was a charge against idolatry, a false centering of the self, "an ultimate investment in that which is not ultimate."<sup>6</sup> Often it manifested as clutching tightly of money, sex, family, another person, wealth. People who lived with idolatry were offended, disturbed and frustrated by the powerful presence of the two Conversions, namely, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. These prophets demanded a turnabout, *metanoia*, the radical restructuring of allegiances and priorities.

Conversion that Jesus preached is not merely the starting point of every spiritual journey but an ongoing process. We are not disturbed only once but always because we never stop being converted to the Lord and to our fellow human beings. It is a task. It is not only a break with the life lived up to that point but a "selling," a "coming" and a "following" (Lk 18:22). Conversion entails a development, even a painful one that is not without uncertainties, doubts and temptations to turn back on the road that has been traveled. Therefore, conversion is not a romantic existence or living a spiritualized spirituality, a spirituality for introspective people who are concerned about themselves and their institutions. It is not living in the island all by oneself in quietude and mystical silence. It is rather a political action, because the human person basically is a political being. It is concerned about the 'city,' a living for others, with others.<sup>7</sup>

Conversion is a disturbing presence. We risk being changed. "We risk having our attitudes altered, our perspectives broadened, our plans modified."<sup>8</sup> It is, indeed, disturbing, because it would appear much safer to stay where one had always been rather than get involved in this risky affair. Grace *is* a risky affair for the one who embraces it. The rich young man found it too demanding when Jesus asked him to sell everything he possessed and give to the poor in order to gain eternal life (Mt 19:21). His plans were thwarted by Jesus. It

was not merely giving up possessions but the risk involved in the business of interior change that the young man could not accept. He did not wish to be disturbed by the One who came to bring about conversion as a 'disturbing presence,' not 'soothing balm.'

### **Conversion of Francis: Disturbing Decision in a Changing Society**

Francis lived in a period of economic growth, with business expanding and the population of Europe rapidly increasing. During this time an entire new social class entered, the *bourgeoisie*, the merchant class, the middle class, as feudalism faded and political power came into the hands of the creators of new history in Assisi. The *bourgeoisie* ego coincided with the appearance of coined money. Hence money and mind went as one. Francis refused to take the road which his contemporaries, including Peter Bernardone, his father, were taking.<sup>9</sup> That is the story of his disturbing decision, his conversion.

Merchants, as a new class in a commercial world, to whom the future belonged, dominated the urban world. With avarice surging in them, money dominated human spirit. Profit economy emerged as the ruler of the world with its consumerist philosophy. Impersonalism and obsolescence of morality were the consequences of the new philosophy. Ironically, the spirit of co-operation characteristic of the merchant class was soon contradicted by the spirit of gain, by passion for money and by thirst for power. Francis' father was caught up in this drama, and eventually his son too would get involved in the monetary affairs arousing ambition.

Being born and raised up in a *bourgeois* mentality, the luxuries of the society and his family, made it difficult for Francis to look at those excluded and marginalized by the powerful and well established people. Though he loved his

purse and irresistibly attracted by the ideals of medieval chivalry and knightly adventure, he did not desire to remain in it any longer. Hence, through a series of events, Francis is deranged from his father's ambitions as well as his own ambitions and was led to understand the underside of history. The excluded of the society, the lepers and the beggars by the way side, disturbed his conscience. They became his teachers in help reading the Gospel of Jesus Christ and apply it radically to life. "What seemed bitter to me became a source of sweetness and joy," wrote Francis in the *Testament* before his death in 1226. He decided to turn his life into a 'disturbing presence' in a comfort-ridden Assisi.

For Francis, the nature of the encounter lay beyond his power of his own capacities; it was something "granted" to him (Test 1). After this experience, the holy Gospel at the Portinuncola would direct his life and destiny (1 Cel 22). The Gospel sending of the apostles (disciples) would become the evangelical programme, a *forma vitae*, an expression of personal conversion and a disturbing presence in the medieval society. Taking nothing for the journey, Francis would live his conversion in such a manner that a band of men of the city of Assisi, being disturbed by his prophetic lifestyle, also decided to live the disturbing presence after the manner of the Gospel.

In his *Testament* Francis qualified his conversion to the Gospel in these words: "This is how God inspired me, Brother Francis, to embark upon a life of penance (*facendi poenitentiam*) " (Test 1). "Doing penance" is living with a difference, a disturbing presence among people. This meant seeing the world not with an attitude of appropriation but with reverence, respect and deep concern, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, taking the place among the outcasts of society (RegNB IX:2). In this new perspective he recognized higher and sublime values. Conversion as a "doing penance" was Francis' stance against injustice, not primarily against the

social and political structures of Church or state. Nor was it any particular vision of new political, social or economic order for his time. His conversion was a personal one, a protest against sin, which he understood as nothing more than the pride, arrogance and selfishness of individuals. Being disturbed interiorly about his own egoism as a wealthy merchant's son, refusing to see lepers, he set out to make his life a disturbing presence by practicing the Sermon on the Mount in a tangible manner, rather than living it piously. Hence, conversion was a prophetic denunciation of mammon god and a prophetic annunciation of the Fatherhood of God. From this perspective Francis saw the unity in all creation as Christ being the hidden centre of the universe.

Conversion in Francis, against the background of his existential situation, as 'disturbing presence' is a constant return to the heart (L3C 8) through which he freed himself from the invasion of the "I". The journey toward the heart was in fact a journey towards an encounter with the "Presence" capable of de-centering from an excessive absorption of the self into an other-centred existence. In this process of conversion Francis passes progressively from superficiality to profundity, from appearance to the truth of being, from dissipation to recollection, from being in the first place to being the *minor*, from annoyance with those who appear lowly and leprous to sweetness of grace, from exclusion to embrace. This process is not merely an initial movement but an ongoing disposition. Hence conversion in Francis remained as a disturbing factor, but also an assurance to freedom from the egoistic ambitions and self-willed projects.

### **Early Franciscan Movement: Evangelical Conversion as Disturbing Force**

The early companions who were disturbed by the evangelical conversion of the wealthy merchant, Peter

Bernardone's son, Francis, turned away from Assisi with him to follow in Jesus' footsteps. They wished to stand apart from others in terms of the philosophy of life and lifestyle, and begin a process of radical turn-about in every aspect of life. In order to differentiate themselves they stated their intent in a brief document, the *Forma Vitae*, which Innocent III approved in 1209. As the movement increased and expanded, the brothers of Francis substantiated their stand against the principles laid down by a consumerist and profit-oriented society, and decided to cast their lots with the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They stated forthrightly that they desired only the "life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (RegNB *Prol*). "They declared their non-participation in the ambitions of the city-state. They intended to do something else with their time and energy."<sup>10</sup> They wanted to "follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ," (RegNB I:1) as a disturbing presence by simply adhering to the radical demands of discipleship laid down by Jesus (Mt 19:21; 16:24; 19:29; Lk 18:22; 14:26; 18:30; Mk 10:29).<sup>11</sup> By this decision the early brothers sever their relations to the high-minded ones of the society and the relations to properties which made them citizens of Assisi.<sup>12</sup> Doing this they took up the cause of Jesus Christ whose life was conversion, *par excellence*, to God and to human persons. For the citizens of Assisi this form of conversion in Francis and his brothers was a kind of *utopia*. Conversion, in a real sense, is *utopia*!

In their Basic Document of 1221, the *Regula non Bullata*, the brothers of the early Franciscan Movement explain the ways in which their conversion remained as a disturbing presence. These are related to their relationships *ad intra* and *ad extra*, work and lifestyle, use of money, manner of going through the world, life in the Church and their self-understanding before God and the world.

### ***Manner of Relationships:***

Franciscan form of relationship among themselves (*ad intra*) as well as other people (*ad extra*) differed from the contemporary practice. Although the city had come under the influence of democratic institutions such as the *Commune* or the municipal corporation, people related to each other only in terms of the monetary gain. 'Usefulness' played a dominant role in relationships. Moreover impersonalism and anonymity in the urban living conditions, kept people at a distance. Wealth of the new economy brought about sufficiency and independence. In this background the brothers developed *maternal* and *fraternal* bonds among themselves: "And each one should love and care for his brother in all those things in which God will give him grace, as a mother loves and cares for her son" (RegNB IX:11). Singular concern for the good of others for their own sake out of abiding affections and loyalties that surpass the regard demanded by impersonal principles was showed by the brothers.<sup>13</sup> The brotherhood represented diverse ways in which individuals were freely drawn together by their common humanity and the fraternal bond. This form of relating disturbed their contemporaries.

From this altruistic phase of fraternity Francis and his brothers moved on to touch upon a hierarchical dimension. Brotherhood was understood only in terms of service and humility. Therefore, they stated: "And no one should be called Prior, but generally should be called Friars Minor. And the one should wash the feet of the others (Jn 13:14)" (RegNB VI:3-4). The fraternity was not a governmental organization with hierarchical layers. They did this in order to convince people that brotherhood was the foundation of society and denial of fraternity was the negation of humanity. The symbol of this fraternity was love and kindness on an egalitarian bases. Hence they wrote: "And whoever comes to them, friend or foe, thief or robber, should be receive ed with kindness" (RegNB VII:14).



The fraternity envisioned by the brothers consisted of the poor, lepers, beggars and the outcasts of society (RegNB IX:2). By this they showed that the “existence of a common bond is an essential characteristic of fraternal relations.”<sup>14</sup> Thus the Franciscan fraternity was the antithesis of the medieval conditions of life and this was designed to be the sublime epitome for a true human society.

### ***Work and Lifestyle:***

The medieval society was divided into a hierarchical social pyramid: the pray-ers, the warriors and the workers. According to the order of function humanity was segregated. Hence, workers were on the lowest rung of the society. Work was considered as mean exercise, not meant for the pray-ers by the altar or the warriors belonging to the nobility. Francis and his brothers, on the other hand, desired to express their conversion to the Gospel by getting down to doing work wherever it was possible. Work was a grace from God and through work world could be transfigured into the original creation. For, by work done faithfully and devotedly, one ‘eternalizes’ oneself, the world and glorifies God.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the early brothers conscientize themselves by saying: “...You shall eat the fruit of your labours; you are blessed and it will be well for you (Ps 127:2)...Whoever does not wish to work shall not eat ...” (RegNB VII:4-5).

Work was seen as service done to humanity and not to inflate one’s ego as the nobles and merchants did in the time of Francis. Therefore, they detached themselves from the fruits of their work and gave good example to others. They also banished idleness because they considered it as the “enemy of the soul” (RegNB VII:11). Work done for no reward, work done conscientiously as grace given by God, and no matter how menial it might have been : this powerfully manifested the minority of the brothers (RegNB VII:1-2). This was truly a

disturbing form of their evangelical conversion in a society which looked down upon workers, down played the unemployed and segregated the needy ones.

### ***Use of Money:***

Francis and his brothers lived their conversion by dissociating themselves from the monetary currents that were hurtling around the medieval towns. Money worked its way into every type of human activity and transaction. as the barter system was no more convenient, coined money was invented for exchange. However, money became the most abstract and impersonal element that dominated human life and had its corrosive, destructive effects on humanity.<sup>16</sup> in this background Francis and his brothers resolved : “therefore, none of the brothers...in any way carry, receive or have received by another either money or coins...unless it is for the evident need of the sick brothers; for we must not suppose that money or coins have any greater value than stones” (RegNB VIII:3). They dedicate an entire chapter to deal with the use of money. The denunciation of money found in *regula non bullata* viii was thoroughly disturbing the sensibility of their society. It was combined with the warnings against corruption in the economic system, exploitation of the marginalized, dishonesty of the merchants, the evil of money-lending and moral dangers involved in striving to accumulate money. The attitude towards money and the use of it in this way concretely showed the conversion of the early brothers as a disturbing force.

### ***Manner of going through the world:***

The brothers, following the evangelical path, lived their conversion in disturbing fashion. Departing from the monastic stability, they lived as pilgrims and strangers, having no fixed houses but depending on the generosity of people. They

strictly adhered to the norms set by Jesus for his disciples. They took nothing for their wandering way (RegNB XIV). They avoided riding horses except in times of manifest necessity (RegNB XV). When they went among the people of other faiths they lived spiritually among them by not engaging in arguments or disputes but just being subject to them and by acknowledging that they were Christians (RegNB XVI:5-6). They gave themselves and abandoned their bodies for Christ in a spirit of sacrifice and rejoiced in their afflictions (RegNB XVI:10-21). In this way, people found their conversion very unusual and disturbing their sensibilities.

***Life in the Church, before God in the world:***

In the context of the heretical movements dampening the ecclesial spirit in the Church of the medieval times, Francis and his brothers lived their conversion by being Catholics and by obeying the spirit of the canons drawn up by Lateran IV, 1215. They lived by the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist and Penance (RegNB XIX-XX). Their preaching consisted of the primary Gospel demand, namely, penance.

Most powerfully, the brothers understood themselves before God and the world as lesser ones and useless servants (RegNB XXIII). They confessed their unworthiness and exalted the place of God in their lives. God was All-powerful who had come down to us, they believed, and human weakness did not end His loving plan. They committed themselves solely to God and wished to serve all in the universe without fail. The conversion of the brothers was their living gratitude to God.

**Rule of the Third Order Regular: Programme of Disturbing Conversion**

The TOR Rule of 1982 originated in one individual, Francis of Assisi, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when he abruptly turned his back on his avaricious father, the symbol of the monetary

power. Being disturbed by the events of the socio-economic-political upheaval, the Gospel of Christ disturbed him even more. Men and women, his contemporaries in the Assisian society, having been deranged by the unimaginable conversion of the merchant's son, also decided to make his conversion theirs and to live with a difference. These were called, 'Brothers and Sisters of Penance.' Francis served them the 'fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ' as a spiritual guideline for a committed conversion of life, in a written text, named, "Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance."<sup>17</sup> These words of Francis are now transposed into a Rule approved by John Paul II, laying out a programme of conversion in the world today. What is that conversion which is a disturbing presence which the followers of Francis are invited to carry out according to this Rule?

### ***Living the Franciscan 'Differentiation':***

Following of Jesus with a radical difference in our society today. This is the primary form of conversion. This means we walk together on the same path with Jesus. It is 'acting from below' after the Incarnate Lord by breaking with the world and its powers and by "transgressing" the law! This means placing the new law in the right context and according to human need. Hence, following would imply solidarity with the poor and downgraded, by a critical attitude to institutionalizations asserted by power in society and Church. It is following Jesus not only in death but also in life. This is the radical option for Christ and his Gospel that differentiated Francis from the powerful of his society.

The TOR Rule, reminding the Brothers and Sisters of Penance to "recognize that they are called to make greater efforts in their observance of the precepts and counsels of our Lord Jesus Christ" (TOR 1) is proposing an evangelical conversion which must become a disturbing phenomena in the

society. No passivity and sentimental piety would go with the demands of the Lord. Hence, a denial of themselves in every way possible is demanded of them (TOR 1). Their conversion must proclaim that they have cast their lots with Jesus uncompromisingly.

***Conscious Ongoing Conversion:***

Religious life is not a static reality, neither is it an end product. It is always a 'becoming,' ever creative and a progressive movement. It is 'from beginning to beginning.' The point of arrival is always the point of departure. Therefore, it is an ongoing journey made up of conscious beginnings.

We are never totally converted because life is always in the making with new challenges and responsibilities. Being conscious of this dynamic, we are to use all our affections and energies to the fulfillment of our life. Hence, the TOR Article 3 makes the Brothers and Sisters of Penance aware of their ongoing conversion to the Gospel which consists in the love of God and love of neighbor, self denial, reception of the Body and Blood of Christ and a conscious praxis of their new found life (EpFid I. 1:1-4). For Francis his conversion was not a one-time affair, but an ongoing journey towards the fullness of life.

***Making Life a Prayer:***

Conversion in the Franciscan way is a passage from self-centred need to other-centred love. Another name for this is 'prayer.' Prayer is not so much a matter of techniques and methods, although they may be useful. Prayer is a way of being. It is a way of life, a total commitment to God with all one's human capabilities of body and soul. The Article 9 of the TOR Rule places the basic option, namely, to glorify God who is the highest good.

Ongoing conversion or living with a difference is prayer, lived with an attitude of humility and constant adoration,

being in the presence of God as 'Transcendent love.' Eric Doyle suggests that we should find each day fifteen minutes simply to be in the presence of God. He adds: "It should be made as structural to the day as reading the morning paper, taking afternoon tea, or whatever else we have made indispensable elements in our lives."<sup>18</sup> Whole-hearted attention, heightened sense of awareness and presence to the Mystery who is present to us in each moment is the expression of a disturbing conversion. Such awareness can disturb our apathy towards evil in oneself and in others and lead us to do the right.

### ***Three-dimensional Path to Conversion as Disturbing Presence:***

After the manner of the Gospel, the TOR Rule proposes the evangelical counsels as a three-dimensional way to live our conversion as a disturbing presence. Profession of **Chastity** for the sake of the Kingdom of God (TOR 15) is a total immersion in that which belongs to the things of the Lord. Nothing else matters in this commitment other than the fulfillment of life by way of unconditional love of God through one's dedication to the neighbour. The vow of chastity enables us to focus our gaze on the essential values of the Gospel, to concentrate on our priorities in religious life and to de-centralize ourselves from our egoic pursuits and make the Other the centre. Chastity is a prophetic voice recalling man and women that there are ultimate values not wholly attainable in our present life.

**Poverty** is a radical conversion as disturbing presence. It is in reference to Jesus Christ who chose to live among the *minores* of the society, namely, the sick, the marginalized poor, sinners, tax collectors, widows, prostitutes. This implies, according to the TOR Rule, being content with the little, avoiding consumerist practices, having only those goods of this world which are necessary for our body. In a deeper sense, making our home with those who are excluded from the

society because of its greed for power and wealth (TOR 21). Poverty is also appropriating nothing but living a pilgrim state of life by considering life as gift. This does not mean denial of the earth, rather a new way of dealing with life and things. Freedom from earthly appropriations alone will bring about personal happiness and communal well being (TOR 22).

Conversion as disturbing presence is lived with an attitude of **obedience**. Jesus Christ is the supreme model of this practice. His birth, life, death, resurrection, were all a finest expression of his obedience to his Father. In him there was a perfect de-centering of the self in order to make God and others the centre around which he moved (TOR 25). Obedience is relational. It is truly a conversion to the other and the Other by being a servant. Love, kindness, mercy, approachability, mutual respect and humility are ingredients of obedience (TOR 26-27). Practicing these values is evangelical conversion which can disturb the consciences of others.

### ***Conversion in Fraternity as Minors:***

Fraternity and minority as fundamental dimensions of the life of evangelical conversion are highlighted by the TOR Rule. God is Love and that is the foundation for fraternal relationships. Lived with attitudes of mutuality, reverence, equality, forgiveness and self-denial, fraternity could be a place of conversion as a disturbing presence in a world of fragmentation and violence. Fraternity, thus, becomes a place of mission of incarnating God in our flesh through the bond of selfless love (TOR 23, 24, 27,28).

Living as minors, lesser ones, is nothing but living the Incarnation in our mind, heart and body. Following our God whose way is eternally a downward movement, Francis and his brothers made minority their intent and practice in a society which valued the heroes of a class who distrusted the zeroes. TOR Rule stresses the need for being peaceful, unassuming,

mEEK, humble, mild, respectful in speech, joyful, taking the last place, unpretentious, not quarrelsome and being servant to all, as concrete ways of living our conversion (TOR 20, 19, 31).

### **Third Order Regular: Living the Conversion as Disturbing Presence Today**

Evangelical conversion can never be living enclosed in a shell all by oneself. It is a prophetic presence. It is epiphanic. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under the bushel, but on stand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Mt 5:14-15). Francis and Clare enfleshed in their lives the message of the Gospel. It disturbed their consciences in their times to a *metanoia* in terms of values and lifestyle. How can the evangelical conversion be a disturbing presence today?

Political, economic and cultural globalization has emerged as the dominant system and ideology in the world today. It is a totalitarian ideology affecting all areas of life. It is also characterized by neo-liberal democracy, free market capitalism, military power and non-spiritual values of a western civilization. The logic of profit, the logic of exclusion failing to respect human person have destabilized and created imbalance in the biosphere. The quality of life is degraded.

The human person in the modern or the post-modern society as another "I" to be befriended, considered as a brother or a sister is hardly possible in spite of the enlightenment received from social sciences. Each one lives by himself or herself as someone who is useful for someone else. The other is a convenience for ones own desires. Lack of reciprocity and mutuality has created vacuum among people. All in all, the human person in our society today tends to see in the other only a similarity rather than a brother or a sister to be loved and be promoted. The other is seen as an adversary, a



competitor and is dangerous. Thoughts of anger and suspicion have created antagonism and aggression towards the other.

These attitudes and values are diametrically opposed to those of the Gospel such as pluralism, ecumenism, diversity and the particularism of diverse cultures, justice to the outcast, the lost and the least, and worship of one God as the Lord of all creation. The Gospel makes us realize that using goods and even people will not satisfy the human dream of fulfillment; that doing and having is no guarantee of pleasure. There is an enormous void in today's world and it can not be filled by consumerism, production, material well-being and monetary wealth. There is a need for a return for an affective life and spiritual experience, to religion, to an awareness of Transcendence and to the world of ethical values, and to a greater sense of moral consciousness. This form of confession is truly a disturbing presence both for the individual and to others.

In conclusion, in the context of the history of the world today, our conversion to the Gospel as Franciscans could be a solution to human predicament created by modern scientific and technocratic developments. Our conversion must mean denunciation of power, possession and honour which our highly institutionalized life and ministry provides for us today. If corruption in disguised forms has entered our fraternities and our dealings with others, it must be rooted out. If consumerism and competitiveness have become part of our lifestyle, and the logic of profit is directing our destiny, then this is the hour when the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be re-read in the way Francis and his three brothers did at the church of St Nicholas on that day in Assisi, and that should mould our life into a 'disturbing presence' in the world today as it happened to them in their history. Our movement will be always from "below" – the way of diminishment, a way of 'disturbing presence.'

BIODATA: GERRY LOBO, OFM (ST THOMAS THE APOSTLE PROVINCE, INDIA) Professor of Franciscan Studies and Religious Studies at St. Anthony Friary College and other Institutes. Editor of *Tau: a journal of research into the vision of Francis* (QUARTERLY REVIEW). *Spiritual assistant to SFO; secretary for ongoing formation in the province. Assistant director of formation of temporary professed friars*

## THE ABBREVIATIONS :

REGNB -	EARLIER RULE ( <i>REGULA NON BULLATA</i> )
EPFID I -	FIRST VERSION OF THE LETTER TO THE FAITHFUL ( <i>EPISTOLA AD FIDELES</i> ,I)
TEST -	TESTAMENT
L3C -	LEGEND OF THREE COMPANIONS
1 CEL -	FIST LIFE B Y THOMAS OF CELANO
TOR -	THIRD ORDER REGULAR

## **NOTES**

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<sup>6</sup> JOHN SHEA, **THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS**, GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK : DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., 1977, P.64. PAUL TILlich STATED IT MOST PRECISELY : "IDOLATRY IS THE ELEVATION OF A PRELIMINARY CONCERN TO ULTIMACY. SOMETHING ESSENTIALLY CONDITIONED IS TAKEN AS UNCONDITIONAL, SOMETHING ESSENTIALLY PARTIAL IS BOOSTED INTO UNIVERSALITY, AND SOME THING ESSENTIALLY FINITE IS GIVEN INFINITE SIGNIFICANCE..." IN **SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**, VOL. I, CHICAGO :THE UNIVERSITY CHICAGO PRESS, 1951, P.13.

<sup>7</sup> GERRY LOBO, "JOURNEY OF FAITH : LIFE OF CONVERSION," IN **TAU : REVIEW ON FRANCISCANISM**, XIII (1988) 34-37.

<sup>8</sup> MELANIE SVOBODA, **TRAITS OF A HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY**, MYSTIC, CT : TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATION, 1996, P. 89.

<sup>9</sup> ADOLF HOLL, **THE LAST CHRISTIAN**, GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK : DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., 1980, PP. 16-18.

<sup>10</sup> DAVID FLOOD, **FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND THE FRANCISCAN MOVEMENT**, QUEZON CITY, PHILIPPINES : FIA CONTACT PUBLICATIONS, 1989, P.10.

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<sup>11</sup> THE CHAPTER I OF THE *REGULA NON BULLATA* BRINGS TOGETHER THE GOSPEL TEXTS TO EXPRESS THE DECISION OF THE BROTHERS WHICH GOT THE MOVEMENT GOING.

<sup>12</sup> DAVID FLOOD, **FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND THE FRANCISCAN MOVEMENT**, P. 9.

<sup>13</sup> PAUL K. J., "SOCIAL CONCERNS OF FRANCIS AND HIS BROTHERS IN THE *REGULA NON BULLATA*," PART III, IN **TAU : REVIEW ON FRANCISCANISM**, XIV (1989) 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> ANDREAS ESHETE, "FRATERNITY," IN **THE REVIEW OF METAPHYSICS**, XXXV(1981) 27.

<sup>15</sup> TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *LE MILIEU DIVIN : AN ESSAY ON THE INTERIOR LIFE*, LONDON : COLLINS, 1960, P.26.

<sup>17</sup> THE TEXT IN THE MANUSCRIPT TRADITION COMES TO BE NAMED WITH SEVERAL NAMES. FOR A STUDY ON IT SEE, MARGARET CARNEY, "THE 'LETTER' OF FOURTEEN NAMES : READING THE *EXHORTATION*," IN **FRANCIS OF ASSISI : HISTORY, HAGIOGRAPHY AND HERMENEUTICS IN THE EARLY DOCUMENTS**, ED. JAY M. HAMMOND, NEW YORK : NEW CITY PRESS, 2004, PP. 90-104.

<sup>18</sup> ERIC DOYLE, **ST FRANCIS AND THE SONG OF BROTHERHOOD**, LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD., 1980, PP.49-50.

## **C O N T E M P L A T I O N**

“Those who the Lord has called to the life of contemplation (Mk 6:31), with a daily renewed joy should manifest their dedication to God and celebrate the love that God has for the world.”

*TOR Rule, 9*

## Contemplation – A Biblical Perspective

*Sister Gretta Sanjivini D'Souza, UFS*

Unless the missionary is a contemplative, the missionary cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. A missionary is a witness to experience of God.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Human life blooms to the best when it is profoundly open to the divine. But unfortunately, the hustle and bustle of modern high-tech living produces boredom and emptiness besides leaving one with a sense of futility. Violence committed, innocent blood shed, the just oppressed so on and so forth have almost become such an ordinary news item. The eruptions of brutality, individual and collective, structural and informal show the shadows of death, to say the least. Its inhuman faces are terrifying. Given this predicament in which one finds oneself, how does 'contemplation,' seen from biblical perspective, make our presence valuable? How does it enable us to 'disturb' the powers that be, be it religious or secular, in promoting life and wholeness and contribute towards enhancing the joy of being human would form the focus of my argument.

### Contemplation

Contemplation, one of the most widely misunderstood and misinterpreted words in all traditions, is basically a life to be lived in the image of God (love): a life of thanksgiving, a life of moral commitment and behaviour shaped by liberative values, based on one's religious orientation. For us, it is a fundamental value and is related to an evangelical life style that we are called to bear witness to and, in the process, become a disturbing presence in today's world because of its radicality. It is a *sadhana*, a way of being: a being in relation to

the Other Christianising in oneself, in Chardin's words, "all the human of his own time."<sup>2</sup>

Seen in this perspective, the basis of contemplation can be grounded on two broad dimensions:

1. The virtues and values of faith, hope, love, happiness, justice and compassion (kingdom values).
2. Our interrelatedness and the interconnectedness of the divine, the human and the cosmic as St. Francis of Assisi has shown: a legacy that made a difference in the life of the Church in her impressive history.

*Contemplation* is often used interchangeably with *mysticism*, though the latter is a more abstract term applied to a number of phenomena that relate human creatures to God.<sup>3</sup> But the word "contemplation" is derived from the Latin *templum* (a diminutive of *tempus*), translated as "time." Among the Romans the *templum* was a space in the sky or on the earth sectioned off for the foretellers to read the omens. It came, therefore, to refer to a sacred space, marked off from other space.<sup>4</sup> However, the temple was the place where certain sacred persons looked at the "insides of things" to discover divine meanings and purposes. Seen from this context, contemplation, by extension, would designate not so much the place but the actual "looking" at the insides of reality from the perspective of God: the "third-eye" perspective, or the second act in the Gutiérrezian sense. It is, in a sense, therefore, building "habits whereby we approach people with open hearts, and with our senses, inner and outer, alert and welcoming."<sup>5</sup>

### **Contemplation in the Old Testament**

The Christian contemplation owes, first and foremost, its sources and origin to the faith experience of the people of Israel in the Old Testament and to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. The creation of the world

inherently presented as a result of a harmony of work and rest, or action and contemplation. Such a view is further strengthened when one notes the history in which God chose to grant a self-disclosure. As biblical revelation affirms, it was granted to an oppressed people, and the nature of the revelatory deed was synonymous with the emancipation of that people. It is evident, therefore, that the Exodus of Israel from Egypt was liberation-contemplation event. In this revelatory event, Israel came to contemplate and know God as the liberator of the oppressed. This liberation that God initiates through the exodus event is an unending liberation as it continues throughout the life and history of Israel. In other words, he reveals himself as saviour of the oppressed and punisher of the oppressors throughout history because he is a righteous God (Lev 25:17; Ezek 34: 27; Hos 13:4; Is 41:17, 20, 45:13, 21). It is this Lord in whom we are called to “be still and know.” The Old Testament concept of ‘knowing’ God was not speculative knowledge, but rather ‘experience’ of Him through His revealed word and His saving deeds.<sup>6</sup> To hear the word of the Lord, therefore, was to respond with one’s entire being.

The biblical writer uses the form of a prophetic call narrative to show that the Exodus was not simply the result of a great social activist’s zeal. Moses, who was convinced of his mission after his experience with Yahweh, returns to Egypt as a messenger representing God’s commitment to Israel’s liberation. It is precisely because of this experience that in the Passover, the Jewish feast of liberation and becoming a nation, it is above all, the living God who is contemplated as the “source of life,” since what is involved in all his saving acts is ‘life’. Exodus is not quoted as an event of the past; rather Yahweh’s liberative action is seen as profoundly characteristic and continuously constitutive of his nature.

In Jewish mystical tradition, contemplative prayer is the vehicle for ascending through the heavens to the ultimate

vision of beholding the throne of God—that is, of experiencing the kingship of God. Just like Moses, Prophet Elijah spends long periods of time in solitude and communion with God. It is his contemplative experience that impels him to prophetic action. He denounces without fear the actions of the powerful people of his day and he brings the light of the word of God into situations of sin (cf. Kgs 21: 1-29). Contemplation is common in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. We find Ezekiel in silent contemplation for seven days: Ezekiel writes, "At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me" (Ez 3:16). It is only this experiential knowledge that enables him to be God's servant and to lead and teach the people. This is the case with the other prophets as well (Cf. Is 38:4; Jer 1: 2, 4, 11, 13; 2:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1 and Zep 1:1; Zec 4:8; Mal 1:1).

### **Contemplation in the New Testament and its Challenge**

Like Moses and Elijah, Jesus regularly withdrew into solitude for long hours of prayer. The synoptic texts narrate that Jesus would regularly and consciously withdraw in order to pray (cf. Mk 1:35; Mt 14:22f; Lk 6:12) and that he encouraged his disciples to do likewise cf. (Mk 6:30-32; Lk 9:10 and 10:17). Luke reports that Jesus on occasion prayed all night.<sup>7</sup> It is, in fact, contemplation through which action receives its value, meaning and goal.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, Jesus, our Master, felt that by limiting the God-experience to rules and regulations, the religious authorities of his time dishonored the God of their fathers and created oppressive structures that fleeced the people rather than feeding them. So he decided to become a 'disturbing presence:' he broke the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-3:6); he ignored the rules of ritual cleanliness (Mk 7:1-15); he touched the lepers (Mk 1:41); he dined with the socially outcast, the tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15-17, Lk 15:1-2); he associated himself freely with women and admitted them in to his company and



mission. He was, in short, a disturbing presence, a pain in the neck, as it were, to the 'pious' Jews because he went against the status-quo by going beyond the man-made boundaries. A contemplative therefore is challenged to bring his depth reflection or introspection which takes place in the church, chapel or a prayer room to the marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

The intimacy of Jesus' experience of Spirit is pointed to by one of the distinctive features of his prayer life: his use of the word 'Abba' to address God, an Aramaic word used by Jewish children to address their father. 'Abba' is like the English "daddy." Thus at the heart of Jesus' prayer life was the experience of communion with God. It was precisely this new vision of the reign of God and his new experience of God as Abba, and consequently of everyone as his sister and brother, that brought Jesus in conflict with the religious, social and economic order prevailing in his time. Jesus upheld the primacy of love, the love that is radical and universal.

The early Christian community experienced the moment of grace, discovery, searching and life – both with the Lord and with the brothers and sisters (Act 2:41-47). To be contemplatives, therefore, means that we be and become persons who enter into "an all embracing process that leaves no dimension of human life untouched, because when all is said and done, it expresses the saving action of God."<sup>10</sup> This is precisely, for example, what John wants of his readers by frequently using the verb *menein*, "to abide," "to live on in," to describe Jesus' oneness with the disciples. Such a community is called to be (in contemplation) and to be sent (in mission) as witnesses of the person of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, to be a contemplative, in the biblical sense, is to be a person with a heart on fire unsettling oppressive structures and shadows, and building bridges of love and hope. It is to become a 'discomforting' or 'disturbing presence' in the world, just like Jesus, Francis, and Clare were. For that "the

first and essential thing is a listening heart.”<sup>11</sup> Contemplation necessarily leads one to actions of love. It challenges us, the religious, with questions that shake our comfort zones: How can one remain silent and indifferent faced with an appalling spectacle of the oppressed, underprivileged and disadvantaged situations in which we find our people?

### **Contemplation in the Franciscan Tradition**

In the past, the contemplation was not so much a rigid formal sort of way by making a list of things which one was going to drop, so to speak or crossing everything off the list like the joys of human love, the joys of music, secular literature, and celebration etc...<sup>12</sup> Today we realise that the contemplative is one who is, like the Servant of Yahweh, "acquainted with infirmity," in all its shadows and darkness far more terrible than the innocent night of unknowing. To be precise, contemplation, in the age of **Godhra** and **Kandhamal**, and other places is something darker and more fearsome than contemplation in the age of the Fathers. It is from this angle that we need to view Vatican II Decree on the *Renewal of Religious Life* states:

The Gospel must be taken by all institutes as the supreme rule. The spirit and aim of each founder should be faithfully accepted and retained, as indeed should each institute's sound traditions, for all of these constitute the patrimony of an institute.<sup>13</sup>

As per the exhortation of Vat II Council, like other religious Congregations, the Franciscans of the Third Order Regular too attempted to go to the roots and figure out what it meant to be a Franciscan religious. On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1982, Pope John Paul II gave his approval to the up-dated Rule with the *Brief Franciscanum Vitae Propositum* - the project of

Franciscan life. It involved that we get to know our founder as well in order that the grace of the founder be permeated to all the other members. Francis of Assisi was not a theologian - he did not leave any systematic presentation of the pressing theological questions of his day. He was not interested in the God of the philosophers or theologians but in the God who touched and transformed his life - the God of Jesus Christ: a God who loved him and was interested in his life, who invited him into personal relationship and who challenged him to truly love his brothers and sisters addressing each one a 'brother,' 'sister,' and 'mother'. This mystic communion with his fellow human beings and nature did not consist in a mere passive, reverence for beauty and life, but in encountering God in all creatures.<sup>14</sup> For Francis, this God was profoundly Christocentric, highlighted in the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Eucharist<sup>15</sup> or, as some would say, in the Crib, the Cross and the Chalice: "the poverty, which the Divine Word accepted in becoming incarnate, than in the helplessness of infancy, the defenselessness of the crucifixion and the silence of the Eucharist."<sup>16</sup> This is also the manner Clare viewed the mystery of God in Jesus Christ, on whom she exhorted people to contemplate:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.

Hence, contemplation is related to self-identity and transformation which, for Clare, is *imitatio Christi*. Imitation is not a literal mimicking of Christ; rather, it means becoming the image of the beloved, an image disclosed through transformation. The more one gazes upon the incarnate Word

of God, the more one discovers the truth of oneself in God and, we might say, God in oneself.<sup>17</sup> “To gaze” is not simply to see, but “to be drawn into” the object which one sees. Delir Brunelli states that “when she (Clare) says “look,” she also means “touch,” “listen,” “experiment,” perceive the essence and flavor of the One who loves us. Clare invites Agnes to look at “the Spouse’s bruised and violated beauty ..., and embrace him ..., touch him..., and perceive his fragrance..., hear his voice ...and taste the hidden sweetness which his friends experience...”<sup>18</sup> One must have the Spirit of the Lord (who joins one to Christ) to see into the depths of things.<sup>19</sup> How precisely this seeing into the depth of things (contemplative presence) gets articulated today? I tend to think in the following manner when

1. **Contemplation leads to conversion – a journey into faith:** Our conversion, as a result of contemplation, causes a personal transformation. Such a life transforming *metanoia* is radical and is more demanding because one is challenged to break out of the routine, just like Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10).
2. **Contemplation leads to liberation:** As a result of our contemplation, our response to the Divine takes us beyond ourselves towards people in service. According to Guitierrez, spirituality is, “walking in freedom according to the spirit of love and life.”<sup>20</sup>
3. **Contemplation leads to taking sides with/for the poor:** We are called for an other-centred existence, which means, an orientedness towards the other in love and service especially those that are marginalised and dehumanised.
4. **Contemplation merges the outside with the inside:** The division of the outside and the inside based on sex, age, race, ethnicity, class, caste, religion and physical ability, to be destroyed. We need to draw larger circles

to include the so called outsiders, the sinful, the despised, and the outcasts, etc.

5. **Contemplation that paves way for a counter culture:** a radical culture, that challenges the dominant values of contemporary life—affluence, achievement, appearance, power, competition, consumption, individualism.

### **Conclusion:**

To be a disciple meant “to follow after.” It means to take seriously what he took seriously, to be like him in some sense. It has three core elements. First, its source is a “birth” in the Spirit which involves that “dying to self” of which Jesus spoke and which he himself experienced: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). The second flows from the first, namely, compassion. As a feeling, it becomes the motive for deeds. As a way of being, it is a persistent trait or quality of character. The third core element of life in the Spirit is a dialectical relationship to culture. As Franciscans, we are called to be *in* the world, but “not *of* the world,” grounded not in the world but *in God*. It is a call to contemplation, conversion and authenticity, to compassion, courage and hope; a call to exploring its ‘disturbing’ implications for Church and Society; to contribute to our ‘being disturbed’ and to our ‘becoming a disturbing presence.’ It is basically to be called, to be with, and to be sent on mission. Today the Crucifix of San Damiano continues to challenge us. Together with Francis, then, let us ask: “Lord, what do you want us to do?” so that we may “Go and repair my (God’s) Church”.

*Sister Gretta Sanjivini D’Souza UFS, currently serves as the Superior of Assisi Conven, Dimapur. She has a Masters degree (M. Th) in Biblical Theology from Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. She*

has served for three years as the novice directress. She is also a visiting Professor of Scripture at Mater Dei, Goa.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 91. Cf. [http://www.rcan.org/evangelization/Redem\\_Missio\\_JPII.pdf](http://www.rcan.org/evangelization/Redem_Missio_JPII.pdf), 49 (accessed April 14, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Robert L Faircy, *The Spirituality of Teilhard De Chardin* (London: Collins Publishers, 1981), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, s.v. “templum,” 957, ed. William Smith and Charles Anthon.

<sup>5</sup> W. R. Callahan, *Noisy Contemplation: Deep Prayer for Busy People* (Brentwood, MD: Quixote Center Publications, 1982), 75.

<sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Faith.”

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:12. Luke emphasizes the role of prayer in Jesus’ life more than the other evangelists, in addition to 6:12, see 3:21, 5:16, 9:18, and 9:28-29, 11:1.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Goergen, *The Mission and Ministry of Jesus* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986), 129-145. This is highlighted in the Mary-Martha pericope (Lk 10:38-42) and in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:38-42). Cf also Clare D’Auria OSF, “Contemplation in the Franciscan Tradition.” *The CORD*, 45.6 (1995) 163-176.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas D’Sa, “The Cross and the Resurrection,” *VJTR*, Vol. 68 (April, 2004): 296-97.

<sup>10</sup> G. Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1984), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Transl. Adrian J. Walker, (Doubleday: New York, 2007), 147.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, “Is the Contemplative Life Finished?” in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Doubleday & Co., Inc. Garden City, N.Y., 1965), 341.

<sup>13</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., “Perfectae Caritatis,” n 2, *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello Publishing Co, 1975), 612.

<sup>14</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A model for human liberation* (Britain: SCM Press, 1985), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. No. 12 of *La Regla de la Tercera Orden de San Francisco*, translated and adapted by Seraphin Conley, TOR from P. Luis Cuesta Nozal, *Pastor Bonus*, no. 83 (Roma: Curia General T.C, 1990) 209-235.

[http://www.franciscanfriarstor.com/archive/resources/stf\\_rule\\_of\\_the\\_third\\_order\\_regular.htm](http://www.franciscanfriarstor.com/archive/resources/stf_rule_of_the_third_order_regular.htm) (accessed April 12, 2011)

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Doyle, "St. Francis of Assisi and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan Life and Doctrine," in Kenan Osborne, ed. *Franciscan Christology* (Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, 1980) 10.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Blastic, "Contemplation and Compassion: A Franciscan Ministerial Spirituality," in *Spirit and Life: A Journal of Contemporary Franciscanism*, vol. 7, ed. Anthony Carrozzo, Vincent Cushing and Kenneth Himes (New York, 1997), 165.

<sup>18</sup> See Delir Brunelli, "'Contemplation in the Following of Jesus Christ' the Experience of Clare of Assisi," *The Cord* 52.4 (2002), 156–161.

<sup>19</sup> See Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought, and Writings* (New York, 2001), 199.

<sup>20</sup> Gutierrez Gustavo, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1984), 35.

## Contemplation, Poor Clare Theme

*By Sr. Beth Lynn*

A Pathway of Prayer: keeping our eyes focused on Jesus: looking, listening, becoming mercy, all of us modeling and mirroring the gospel path for one another in Community. Some thoughts.

I begin with a personal story. It was the late 1950's and I was a novice, eager, wanting to learn about prayer and Poor Clare life. We had exposition of the Blessed Sacrament every day, all of us taking a turn, and all day on Sunday. Sunday afternoons were open without an assigned adorer. I so longed to be outside in the beautiful California sunshine under a tree with a good book. And that's where you would usually find me. But occasionally guilt would drive me into the Chapel where a single faithful Sister was always kneeling. Some months later I was at adoration with our two postulants when I heard the same Sister screaming wildly. She was being taken to an institution where she could receive proper care for her mental illness. This experience gave me pause for thought. I think that I and we were looking for models, models and mirrors, to help us become who we were called to be. It was a step in learning that the Sister who spent the most time in Chapel was not necessarily the model I wanted to follow.

Contemplation is a word that holds different meanings for people in different spiritual traditions. In our Clarian documents it has the sense of gazing upon Christ. The word "contemplation" is not used in the Form of Life of the poor sisters. Nor are there specific times set aside for silent prayer or adoration. We are called without a doubt to total surrender into our God who is Love, called to the transformation of our person into Christ so that "I no longer live but Christ lives in me." Franciscan contemplation is a path on a journey that is



unique to each and every sister and brother even as we walk along together following the footprints of Jesus.

We see a path laid before us in the early sources of Clare. At the center of “the form of life of the poor sisters which the blessed Francis founded,” is Chapter 6. To paraphrase Clare, after the most high enlightened my heart to do penance, that is, to do mercy, **we** promised obedience to Francis. Francis assured **us** that by divine inspiration we were choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, the path laid out by the life and teaching of Jesus in the Scriptures, handed on to us through the spirit-filled human communities of the early Church.

Contemplation for “the order of poor sisters which the Blessed Francis founded” was contemplation in community. The community at San Damiano celebrated the Eucharist and prayed the liturgy of the Hours. According to Agnes of Assisi, Oportulo’s daughter, “Although Clare had never studied letters, she listened willingly to learned sermons” (ProcX,8) On one occasion when Brother Philip of Atri, a friar who had studied at Paris, was preaching, Agnes saw a young boy about three years old with Clare. Agnes prayed for clarity and received the words, “I am in their midst,” signifying that “I am at the center of my people when the word of God is preached.” The community was attending together to the Scriptures and sacramental presence of the Lord. In the Eucharist and Liturgy they saw their gospel path laid before them. In “the form of life” the sisters are not encouraged to learn to read. (FL10:8). Many learned by listening to the Scriptures, not by reading them. It was communication through another person, not from a book. On the Christmas night before Clare died she “heard the organ, responsories and the entire Office at the Church of St. Francis.” Another Sister testified that Clare “heard Matins and the entire Office.” Just as Francis and the brothers found their gospel path in listening

to the Scriptures in the Church, so too the community at San Damiano kept their eyes focused on Jesus, his deeds and words as celebrated in the liturgy and preached in the homilies.<sup>1</sup>

“The Father of Mercies” sent his only Son to do mercy among his people. Jesus is God’s mercy among us; Jesus is the mirror and example of Divine mercy. The Spirit of Mercy entices us out of ourselves by enabling us to follow in the footprints of Jesus, especially of humility and poverty which empty us of self and allow us to become a dwelling place for God, to give flesh to the Christ we carry within us, as Clare teaches. (3LAg)

Francis, who feared lepers, met a leper and he did mercy to the leper. In that moment he saw the footprints of the One who became mercy in the flesh to show us the mercy of God. Francis found a poor rich girl and taught her to follow the footprints of Jesus and do mercy. Soon there was a great crowd following Francis who followed Jesus, the Father’s Mercy.

Years passed with Francis faithfully following the footprints of Jesus. One day on Mt. Alverno while Francis was following the footprints of Jesus, Jesus turned around and met Francis face to face. There was no longer the One who went before, and the one who followed after. “There was “only Jesus,” Mk: 9, 8b; a transfiguration of Francis.

Clare cared for Francis at San Damiano. She saw the wounds on Francis’ body before his death. When Francis died at the Portiuncula the brothers took his body up the hill to San Damiano. The Sisters wept. And they carried on, following the footprints of Jesus.

Clare continued to do mercy. She served and taught, consoled and healed, always following the footprints of Jesus. And she received mercy from the Father of Mercies through her sisters during the twenty-nine years that she was ill, and

from the brothers who were so attentive to the needs of their sisters.

In 1252 Clare was about 60 years old. She had been following in the footprints of Jesus with the poor sisters and the lesser brothers for about 42 years. Cardinal Raynaldo, with the blessing of Pope Innocent IV, had approved the document expressing the manner of life, the manner of following Jesus at San Damiano. In the final letter of 1253 to “her dearest daughter and mother,” Agnes of Prague, Clare expressed her great joy in Agnes who had given herself to a life following Jesus, “the mirror without blemish.” Clare told Agnes to look into that mirror and see her own face therein, a clear mirror of the divine.

Francis’ following in the footprints of Jesus tended to be more linear in his journeys than Clare whose journey was at home in San Damiano. Francis headed for Morocco where the friars had been martyred, to follow Jesus who gave his life for love of us. This journey ended when Francis became ill. He traveled to the east, as far as Syria to do mercy among the Saracens, inspiring us today to connect with our brothers and sisters of different beliefs. Then there was the time he was stopped from going to France by Cardinal Hugolino because Francis was needed among his brothers to do mercy. When Francis was not heading out, he was going up: to Mt. Alverno, or across to Lake Trasimemo, always following the footprints of Jesus.

In Clare’s following of the footprints at San Damiano in community, it was a movement of circling Christ at the center. We can read the development of gospel life at San Damiano in the four letters addressed to Agnes and her community at Prague, as Clare, in relationship with her sisters and brothers at San Damiano, is brought closer and closer to Jesus.

In 1234 four nuns from the monastery in Trent, Italy, came to Prague with the Constitutions of Pope Gregory IX to help in the founding of a monastery in Prague. There is no indication why Clare took the initiative to write to Agnes. It may have been at the instigation of Elias, friend of Clare and Minister General at the time, or of the guardian of the hospice of St. Francis of which Agnes was patron.

In this first letter to Agnes, Clare and the poor sisters had been engaged in their gospel project for 22 years. They were not newcomers to the following of Jesus Christ. The main focus of the letter is poverty. Like the rich man who approached Jesus in the Gospel of Mark 10: 17-30 and Mathew 19: 16-22, Agnes had “many possessions.” She was one of the most materially wealthy women of her time. She also had earthly power through her father and brother who were Kings of Bohemia. The twin forces of power and money were at her disposal. Clare sent Agnes a collage of gospel passages exhorting Agnes to be strengthened in her “service of the Poor Crucified.” Clare wrote of poverty as a lady, as in the poem, *The Sacred Exchange*, and uses the word “exchange” later in that same letter to Agnes. Clare points to poverty as the compassionate handmaid that Jesus came into our world to embrace, holding up Lady Poverty to Agnes as a model of freedom in following in the footprints of the Crucified.

In the second letter dated 1235 Clare commended Agnes for “holding fast to the footprints of him to whom you merited to be joined in marriage.” The sure guide for her proposal of gospel life was Elias, the Minister General of the brothers. The sisters were obliged to follow the successors of Blessed Francis.

In letter three, 1238, Clare wrote: “And I sigh with so much more exultation in the Lord, as I have known and believe that you supply most wonderfully what is lacking both in me

and in the other sisters in following in the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus.”

In letter four, 1253, Clare rejoiced with Agnes who has obtained the “form of life of the order of poor sisters that the blessed Francis founded...”

According to the “form of life,” the sisters are to “work in such a way that, while they banish idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion...” We sisters of Clare are called to continual prayer. The days of liturgy and service yield to silent, intimate times of prayer when the footprints of Jesus lead us into the darkness of night, the nights and early mornings that Jesus spent in prayer with the Father. How did Clare find time and place to pray in the small, cramped quarters of San Damiano? Clare lingered after Compline, praying with tears (Proc X, 3). Sister Pacifica, who was with Clare from the beginning at San Damiano said that Clare “kept vigil much of the night in prayer”(Proc I, 7). According to Sister Benvenuta “Clare was very persevering, day and night, in prayer,” and Clare was the one who woke the Sisters for Matins (Proc II, 9). Sr. Benvenuta also said that there was a special place where Clare “usually went to pray” (Proc II, 17). When Clare returned from prayer her face was glowing (Proc. IV, 4).<sup>2</sup> Various forms of illness are named frequently in the remembrances of Clare’s life at San Damiano. Sickness was surely an occasion of solitude and suffering in prayer.

Some points for reflection:

1. Was there a practice of the Sisters that enabled them to remain in “holy prayer and devotion” even as they went about their work?
2. How does continual prayer work its way of transformation in our daily lives?

3. Can we detect an aspiration or mantra that may have sustained their focus?
4. It seems that the “Our Father” was the most frequently prayed prayer. What place does the “Our Father” have in my daily journey in prayer?
5. How do we deal with interruptions? As we listen to the gospel stories we hear how Jesus is continually interrupted in his ministry and prayer. Is that not like our experience in Community life? The footprints of Jesus in the gospel stories lead us on the path of interruptions that lead to transformation.
6. At times images take the place of words drawing us into deeper relation with Jesus. What are your favorite images that evoke prayer?
7. What about sleep? How do I pray the wonderful gift of sleep? “I sleep but my heart watches” (Song of Songs). Do I surrender into sleep as practice for the final surrender into God?

*Sr. Beth Lynn  
Poor Clares, Minneapolis*

*Beth Lynn is a Poor Sister of Saint Clare. Baptized at Santa Cruz Mission replica she was inspired by the early Spanish padres and their passionate efforts on behalf of the indigenous people of California. When her family moved to the bay area she found Franciscan friars as teachers at St. Elizabeth’s High School in east Oakland. She and her classmates began a fraternity of secular Franciscans for youth, the Heralds of St. Francis. Following high school Beth took her next Franciscan step down to Santa Barbara where she was received to vows as a Franciscan Poor Clare. In 1970, responding to the invitation of the archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia, Beth was part of the founding group of Clares in that area of Africa. She returned to the US in 1982 and is a permanent member of Poor Sisters community in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Along*

*the road she received a BA in Theology and Ministry and a MA in Franciscan Studies from the Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY. She uses her experience and studies in formation work, spiritual direction, writing and sharing about the early Franciscans and Poor Clare life today.*

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<sup>1</sup> In Psalm 77 we find one of the saddest lines in the Scripture: though all of creation revealed God's love for his people "no one saw your footprints" (Wed. Wk II Morning Prayer).

<sup>2</sup> A personal note. When we were in Zambia the two of us from Santa Barbara had brought along the custom of praying prostrate with our foreheads on the floor of the chapel. One day we were leaving prayer and our leader said to us, "Your faces are not 'glowing'; they are all scrunched up." From then on I decided to pray sitting on my heels. It is a much better position for prayer and there is no danger of falling asleep.

# Fall in Love and be in Love: An Anglican Franciscan Perspective on Conversion and Contemplation

*By Br. Clark Berge, SSF*

The more I study about conversion and contemplation the greater I discover the interrelatedness between the two. Conversion is a process of letting go and giving my life to God. Contemplation is one of the practices I use to move forward towards a deeper union with God. The Anglican Franciscan tradition places union with Christ as a top priority. From this union flows the grace to be engaged in the works of active ministry in the world, prayer or study. Some of the distinctive qualities of Anglicanism influence the way we follow Francis; perhaps this ecumenical perspective on two of the foundational values of IFC-TOR will help us understand and expand our common ground.

## Conversion

As one writer states: “Modern Anglicans are heirs to a Tradition that expects encounters with God to generate tangible changes in people’s lives, while patiently respecting the speed at which real people change.”<sup>1</sup> Br. Ramon SSF, an Anglican Franciscan writer, observes:

“Whatever else we may say about Franciscan spirituality, conversion is basic to its emergence and development...conversion cannot be limited to [evangelical conversion exemplified by Saul of Tarsus]...with its dramatic faith and enlightenment. The experience may have its beginnings there, but it is prolonged in the whole of life of increasing transformation, until the soul reflects the image of God that had been broken and distorted by sin.”<sup>2</sup>



He characterizes conversion as “*evangelical*, because it is rooted in the Gospels,” and “*catholic* because it implies the perseverance and continuity...leading to the ultimate perfection of union with God in love.”<sup>3</sup>

For most of the members of the Society of St. Francis, I have learned that their decision to join the community was part of an on-going process of conversion in their life. Some are born Anglican and our story is one of growing up in the Christian faith and responding to God’s invitation to explore yet another way to live out our Baptismal vows. Some chose Anglicanism (the Church of England, the Episcopal Church, or any of the other national churches) because of its freedom. As Archbishop Peter Carnley, retired Anglican Primate of Australia and former member of Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, says: “we see ourselves as being on an open-ended journey into a future to which we are called by God...”<sup>4</sup> Because the decision to become a Franciscan, or a member of any other religious order for that matter, is so unusual among Anglicans we are constantly explaining to other Anglicans how we are still Anglican/Episcopalian. Some find religious life a perplexing innovation, others express delight at the scope of the Spirit’s work. But our decision always requires explanation. A good analogy for me, already a parish priest, is that the call to become a Franciscan felt like falling in love.

Falling in love is a conversion experience. It means preoccupation with the beloved, a sense of infatuation and a desire to be with them all the time. This step of my conversion process began with what seemed a chance introduction: “After listening to you for nearly four years, I think you’ll really like this book,” a parishioner said in 1988, giving me a copy of Julien Green’s God’s Fool. The impact of this first encounter with Francis was dramatic. I was deeply attracted to the stories of how he stripped his clothes, encountered the leper, and all the other moments of letting go and turning to God up

to the moment of his death when he asks to be laid naked on the floor of his cell. It was all about his love of God. I felt that Francis embodied a spirituality that made sense of many different strands in my experience: struggling with parental expectations, deeply unsettling experiences with the poor and attraction to nature. The descriptions in the book of community life and ministry addressed a growing sense of longing I had for a more radical Christian life and to live a more communitarian life. The Franciscan story offered an integrating paradigm to me, bringing together my social activism with a spiritual practice that offered healing and challenge. Joining the community the process of conversion continued. I discovered a community of brothers who live honestly with each other and share the truth of themselves with the world; they demanded this of me.

In his Principles of Christian Theology , John Macquarrie writes about the entry into the Christian life. He identifies one of the stages of entry as “justification.” His writing resonates with my experience of seeking a deeper connection with God, a more meaningful religious life: “there may be a sense of frustration and what is called “meaninglessness,” and the accompanying need to have a place in the scheme of things—a place that maybe very small, but is nevertheless one’s own and that somehow matters. To be “chosen” or “called” and also “justified” by Being is to have assurance that one counts for something in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Becoming Franciscan counts for something, it is a way to show how our Christian commitment to Jesus Christ and desire to serve God in a particular way is shared; that the things we know to be true for ourselves as individuals are in some way shared by others. Many of us respond to God’s call with a sense of amazement and gratitude that such an opportunity exists for us.

Brother Ramon describes his decision to become a member of the Society of St. Francis, which grew in him during a Hermit Symposium in 1975, in terms of love:

I often reflect on that week, and wonder why it affected me so profoundly. The truth is that I was in the presence of men and women who were living out a vocation of prayer, that it bowled me over. It was not that they represented something beyond the grasp of ordinary Christians. Quite the opposite: by their very humanness, simplicity and humor, it was clear that they were truly human... Here I was on the edge of entering into community life, hungering for the life of prayer with its roots deep into the mystery of divine Love. And the Lord had brought me to a place where I could see, and feel, and know the reality, the power and the validity of a life dedicated to God in prayer.<sup>6</sup>

Though he was a Baptist minister and I was an Episcopal priest, both Ramon and I found in the Society of St. Francis a way of risking more of our life in order to become more loving.

As Br. Ramon points out, conversion is a life-long process of turning again and again to Christ and finding new invitations to deeper commitment. As Macquarrie says: "...[repentance] keeps happening throughout the Christian life, reminding us that this life cannot itself be turned into a secure possession—if this happens it has been distorted into a new idolatry—but that it must continually be renewed, and never achieves completion so long as we live under the conditions of this earthly life."<sup>7</sup> The truth of this was borne out in my life when I discovered I had a problem with alcohol. It was after my life profession that I quit drinking and really learned how to

surrender myself to God. Sobriety changed many things in my life, even the way I pray.

## **Contemplation**

Putting down alcohol I had to look closely at how my relationship with God had dried up. An exciting adventure in love had become routine. I needed to discover prayer, again, as a loving relationship with Christ. Gradually I began to read familiar passages from The Principles of the First Order with greater awareness. In our Principles there is no explicit reference to contemplation. In true chiasmic form the description of prayer occurs at the middle of the document, reflecting prayer as the heart of our life. The life of prayer is clearly described in Day 15, outlining the expectations of the community for its members in praying the four-fold office and Holy Eucharist. In addition: “the meditation which follows later is the opportunity for quiet tryst with him who through the sacrament is present inwardly, and for feeding on him in the heart by faith with thanksgiving.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly we are being invited into contemplation even if the word is not used. Contemplation, according to Br. Ramon, “belongs to what used to be called ‘infused’ prayer, and is not the result of ascetic discipline, technique, or psychological methods. It is wholly God’s work.”<sup>9</sup> I get impatient with efforts to parse out the difference between contemplation, meditation and other sorts of prayer. The thing is to pray however we can. Informed and nurtured by Holy Scripture and the Sacrament all of us are invited into a life-transforming, converting, encounter with Christ. We “tryst” or meet with our Savior as lovers. Br. Ramon writes of the encounter:

But I am thinking of the desire of the converted believer, the lover of God, to draw nearer in devotional and reflective meditation—gazing upon the beloved.

When the lover receives a letter from his beloved, or looks upon her photograph or a gift she has given him, he will meditate on her loveliness. He will not only recall the qualities which reflect the beauty of her mind and body, but upon the very nature of her being, that mingling of their lives in which the well spring of love bubbles up to the mutual delight of one another.

To meditate on the qualities of the beloved brings one to the borderland of mystical prayer...the whole gamut of positive human relations remind one of the beloved.<sup>10</sup>

Both Br. Ramon and The Principles make the unequivocal case that the foundation of our life as Franciscans is the personally affective relationship with Jesus Christ. As Jesus says in St. John's Gospel: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn. 17:21).<sup>11</sup> We encounter Christ in the Scriptures then go deeper by opening our hearts to what we read and hear. As Alan Bartlett states, "the purpose of the Bible is to enable us to be transformed by God." He cites the words of Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu: "The Church exists first and foremost to praise and glorify God...so for us prayers, meditations, Bible reading are not peripheral to our operations. These are at the centre of our lives. We are not embarrassed that we put God first..."<sup>12</sup> Contemplation, or prayer according to our Principles, is essential "to every department of [our] lives. Without the constant renewal of divine grace the spirit flags, the will is weakened, the conscience grows dull, the mind loses its freshness and even the bodily vigour is impaired."<sup>13</sup> Pray or else!

Brian Taylor, rector of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, describes the impact of contemplation in every day life:

“Awareness reveals to us our own anger, attraction, distrust, arrogance, compassion or whatever else is really there. Coming to the point of reality, we are then finally able to offer the relationship to God as it is, and surrender to grace, that we may be renewed in faith, love and truth. This renewal might take the form of an honest confrontation, an action, or acceptance and letting-go. But whatever form it takes, if it is rooted in contemplative prayer and self-awareness, it will be influenced by greater clarity, humility and love.”<sup>14</sup>

So it is not just for ourselves that we embrace our times of prayer. Christ whom we meet in Word and Sacrament calls us to be agents of transformation in the world. The sense of having been chosen or called by God, or Being as Macquarrie says, often gives rise to a sense of responsibility or obligation to the world. To experience God’s saving love in my life is not a private experience, but one which sends me out into the world.

In November 2010 the Society of St. Francis, along with the Sisters of the Church, the Melanesian Brotherhood and the Sisters of Melanesia, four Anglican religious orders in the Anglican Church of Melanesia held a social justice conference in the Solomon Islands, one of the poorest nations on earth. These four orders have over 750 members among them in the Solomon Islands, and many villages in the country have some contact with a brother or sister. They comprise the largest presence of Anglican religious in any province of the Anglican Communion. Because there is obvious potential for a tremendous impact on the country through the religious orders, I invited Franciscans International to come and give basic training on human rights and how to develop social

justice ministry. It was the first time Franciscans International had done training for Anglicans, the largest training they had ever done with over 150 participants, and the first time Franciscans International had worked in Melanesia: it was in many ways, an historic occasion. We began with theological reflection, reminding ourselves that the idea of human rights grew out of Biblical values. The Brothers and Sisters were able to make connections between their calling as Christians and Religious with the call to be involved in social justice for women, climate justice and good governance. For many of them, this first exposure to social justice training and awareness of human rights was a converting experience. Conscientization was nurtured by contemplation. Objects from nature found their way to the place of prayer. Pictures of persons affected by domestic violence were hung on the walls. As we looked deeply into these images we grew in our determination to do something. This collaboration between Franciscans International and the Society of St. Francis with the other Anglican religious orders in Melanesia is an example of how social transformation can begin when we are grounded in the foundational experiences of conversion and contemplation.

### **Common Ground**

As followers of Jesus Christ, with the example of St. Francis to inspire and encourage us, there is a tremendous amount of common ground in the life and work of the Anglican Franciscan Society of St. Francis and the Roman Catholic Franciscan Third Order Regular. Reflecting on our shared values is one way; working with Franciscans International is another way. The stories of Francis' conversion and life of prayer and contemplation have inspired many of us to embrace the Gospel life and test our vocations as Franciscans. By keeping the stories of our converting moments alive and

fresh for ourselves and others we can remain “grateful for and in real relationship with the transforming love of God.”<sup>15</sup> If we have gratitude for what God has done for us, we can engage each other and the world with appropriate humility, knowing that “God can do for us what we could not do for ourselves.”<sup>16</sup>

*By Br. Clark Berge, SSF  
Minister General of the Society of St. Francis  
New York, USA*

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bartlett, *A Passionate Balance: The Anglican Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Br. Ramon SSF, *Franciscan Spirituality: Following Francis Today* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994), 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Jones, *Common Prayer on Common Ground: A Vision of Anglican Orthodoxy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 113.

<sup>5</sup> John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 342.

<sup>6</sup> Br. Ramon SSF, *A Hidden Fire: Exploring the deeper reaches of prayer* (Basingstoke, Hants, UK: Marshall Pickering, 1985), 26.

<sup>7</sup> John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 340.

<sup>8</sup> The Society of St. Francis, *The Daily Office, revised edition* (London and New York: Mowbray, an imprint of Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 794.

<sup>9</sup> Br. Ramon SSF, *Franciscan Spirituality, Following Francis Today*, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Br. Ramon SSF, *A Hidden Fire: Exploring the deeper reaches of prayer*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Bible NRSV, Division of Christian Education of National Council of Churches in USA, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Bartlett, *A Passionate Balance: The Anglican Tradition*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> The Society of St. Francis, *The Daily Office, revised edition*, 795.

<sup>14</sup> Brian C. Taylor, *Becoming Christ: Transformation through Contemplation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2002), 101.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Bartlett, *A Passionate Balance, The Anglican Tradition*, 186.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous, fourth edition* (New York, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001), 84.