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EVANGELICAL CONVERSION

Ramona Miller, OSF
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Historical origin of the four values

The Spirit of God has been very active with Franciscans during the renewal years since the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Today, we gather together for our international conference seeking a richness of renewal that will animate us for our leadership in our congregations. In the spirit of the conciliar document, *Perfectae Caritas*, the renewal of the Religious life comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the Institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.ⁱ It is necessary that we leave our ordinary tasks occasionally to reflect on our charism in order to assess how we are doing personally and collectively. Without such opportunities we might become atrophied and comfortable in maintaining the status quo. Looking back in history, we are grateful for the inspired leadership of all Franciscan superiors of the various male and female congregations who collaborated in the 1970s to arrive at the designated Working Group who wrote the 1982 *Rule for the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis*. In the first chapter, article two, we read that we want to live “this evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer, poverty, and of humility.” The Working Group had spent hours in prayer, study, and dialog to find the language that conveyed our rootedness in the tradition of the penitential movement. It was recognized that The First Letter to the Faithful was the form of life that Francis wrote for the penitents which inspired them to live a renewed response to the Gospel.ⁱⁱ Our TOR brother, Raphael Pazzelli, did the research identifying the title of the letter to the faithful found in Codex 225 in Volterra. It reads: “These are the words of life and salvation, concerning those who do penance.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our Third Order charism springs from the form of life that Francis provided for “those who do penance.” The penance that we desire to live is not any code of mortifications or negative ascetical practices, but rather a joyful embrace of daily living the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Penance is biblical *metanoia*, evangelical conversion. This is our hallmark.^{iv}

Evangelical

First, let’s consider the adjective, evangelical. The term comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “the good news” or the “gospel.” Franciscan evangelical life is to live the Gospel in the spirit of Saints Francis and Clare, the founders of the Franciscan movement. Francis’ conversion did not begin with reading the Gospels. Rather, he had impactful encounters with Christ (examples: Christ speaking to him from the San Damiano cross, and the Spirit leading him to embrace a leper). Francis’ became attuned to listening to the Word of God; his religious imagination became sensitized to the spoken Word. So much so, that on a specific day in February 1208 while attending Mass in the Portiuncula chapel, Francis, while listening to the missionary discourse of Jesus sending out his disciples, took the words as a personal mandate. Thereafter, Francis went forth preaching the Good News, taking nothing for his journey—a literal interpretation of the Gospel. Clare’s conversion stories are less dramatic, but not less important for her example of living the evangelical life. She insisted in living poverty to imitate the poor Christ. The Scripture images and words in Clare’s letters to Agnes convey the Gospel foundation for her lifestyle.

Similar to Francis’ experience, the written Word of God might not be the initial experience that awakens us to the presence of God in our lives, but Scripture becomes the ongoing meeting place for Franciscans and God. Hearing the Word proclaimed, in a respectful and meaningful manner, is an opportunity to hear the voice of God. Privately reading Scripture in the particular manner of *lectio divina* allows us “to be transformed by the Spirit.”^v We become enlightened and changed so that we embody the Gospel, we become the Gospel

for others. This reminds me of the description of Francis becoming prayer from the *Second Life* by Celano.

Francis would often ruminate inwardly with unmoving lips, and, drawing outward things inward, he raised his spirit to the heights. Thus he would direct all his attention and affection toward the one thing he asked of the Lord,^{vi} not so much praying as becoming totally prayer.^{vii}

We penitents of the twenty-first century may be the only Gospel some persons know. How are we interiorizing the Gospel in order to have it influence us? As we dialog with each other during this conference, let us share the best practices we have in our congregations for deepening our understanding of Scripture. What are the means for educating incoming members to know Scripture? What biblical sources and programs aid our ongoing formation? What is the experience we have of good preachers? Do we have access to retreat presenters who provide biblical foundation for our lives? We can assist each other in identifying the ways we have for our ongoing conversion to become the Gospel.

In chapter three of *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis exhorted preachers to prepare by a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity.^{viii} If we substitute the word “preacher” in this exhortation with our own names, might we develop a new outlook on the importance of our own evangelical lives? “It is good for us to renew our fervor each day.”^{ix}

Elements of Conversion

Daily, each of us strive to incarnate in our local situations the same spirit of prayer, poverty and humility that characterized the early Franciscans who were known for their happiness and their generosity; the lifestyle of evangelical conversion. Franciscan penitents in the 13th century changed their behavior from following societal norms for a prosperous life to living simply for the purpose of serving the poor. They were familiar with Francis’ own conversion story recorded in his *Testament*:

“when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and *I showed mercy to them*. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.”

In Francis’ account we find three elements of conversion: **1) the initiative of God, 2) a change of outward behavior, and 3) an interior transformation.**^x First, the initiative of God: “the Lord led me,” introduces the mystery and the grace of the personal call from God. The first apostles heard Jesus’ voice: “Come, follow me.” The young Francis did not hear the voice explicitly say “Come, follow me,” but there was a call or some motivating force that directed him who abhorred lepers to be moved to touch a leper. God’s initiative in Francis birthed a movement that we continue to manifest in our lives. The call that each of us experienced is a guiding light for us to live the Franciscan tradition. Throughout history, God’s initiative has raised up persons to respond to specific situations. We have the utmost respect for our founders and foundresses whose response to God’s inspiration acted in such a manner that our religious congregations came into being.

The second element of conversion is an outward change of behavior. The change of behavior of Francis—from avoiding lepers to embracing and caring for lepers—happened by the grace of God. These outward behaviors demonstrate the interior response to God’s call. In the initial stages of our formation and preparation for vows there are obvious changes such as renouncing property ownership, and moving into a celibate community. What happens after profession of vows? How do we keep our commitment to live daily, evangelical conversion grounded in the initial conversion experience? When we do so, there might not seem to us to have significant changes happening in our behavior, but all outward behavior

flows from our interior. Our personal transformation will be observable by others even when we are not conscious of the changes. Through the years, the process of dying to our ego so that we “live, now, not I, but Christ lives in me” requires a diligence in continuous formation of conscience.

The third element, an interior transformation, designates the conversion. Francis testified, “what had seemed bitter was turned into sweetness of soul and body.” Can we recall in our lives such interior changes? Perhaps there was a time when we were paralyzed with fear – like anxiety about a specific assignment which turned out later to be a joyful chapter of our life. Personally, I was terrified of the assignment to become a staff person for the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs. The conversion to trust in God and develop interdependency with other staff persons transformed me to enjoy this ministry. For the challenges of needing interior transformation when dealing with difficult relationships, Francis’ letter to the minister offers advice. Francis told the minister who was complaining about one of the friars that he was supposed to accept the person as he was! Specifically, Francis wrote, “love them...and do not wish that they be better Christians. And let this be more than a hermitage for you.”^{xi} How many times I have wanted to seek out solitude in a hermitage when Francis’ letter would remind me that the necessary conversion was to love the person with whom I was having difficulty, and not to avoid the situations. And the interior transformation that is felt? A sweetness, an inner peace, that generates new recognition of the Spirit of God at work within us.

Sources for God’s Initiative

There are many sources for God’s initiative intervening in our lives to bring about conversion. By praying the “Prayer Before the Crucifix” asking God to “enlighten the darkness of my heart,” we are disposing ourselves to be available for God’s initiative. One of the ways that God speaks to us is through Pope Francis, who has provided much invitation for our personal and communal transformation since becoming Christ’s vicar in March of 2013. On Easter Sunday this year, in the “Urbi et Orbi” address, Pope Francis addressed many situations of suffering in the world through a prayer to the Risen Christ. This prayer could provide us with an examen of consciousness about our response to the global family.

Conclusion

There are challenging situations in society that require new generous responses. Our ongoing evangelical conversion prepares us to respond with innovative ministry. We do not undertake such actions to impress others, but rather as selfless ministry done in the name of Jesus Christ. The stories of each of our congregations reflect God’s desire for people in many different cultures and countries around the globe to have the witness of “those who do penance.” We are assembled here from diverse cultures with unique communal histories, and we have in common a public profession to live the *Rule of the Third Order Regular*. As we dialog with each other during this conference, let us listen for the various ways that characterize us as Franciscan penitents who live evangelical conversion!

ⁱ *Perfectae Caritas*, 2

ⁱⁱ See the dissertation by Robert M. Stewart OFM, *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: Origins, Development, Interpretation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1990), 49-53.

ⁱⁱⁱ Raphael Pazzelli TOR, “The title of the ‘Recensio Prior of the Letter to the Faithful’: Clarification regarding Codex 225,” Trans. Nancy Celaschi OSF, *Analecta TOR* XIX, 142 (1987), 241-248.

^{iv} Margaret Carney OSF, "In Nomine Domini!," *The Cord*, 57.4 (2007), 374.

^v Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #152.

^{vi} See Ps 27:4 "the one thing" is to dwell in the house of the Lord.

^{vii} 2 Cel 95

^{viii} Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #145.

^{ix} Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #149.

^x Margaret Carney OSF, "Fundamental Value: Conversion," *History of the third Order Regular Rule*. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2008), 248.

^{xi} LtMin 2-8