

Bringing out of our storehouse the flesh and blood of our tradition in such a way as to feed future generations . . .

*The Prophetic Heart* (1994) — Joseph P. Chinnici OFM

## The Franciscan Aspect of the Penitential Movement

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Key aspects from the study

*“Outline of the History and Spirituality of the Franciscan Penitential Movement”*

published in Rome, 1979 as *Le origini del Terz’Ordine*.



### The TAU

From the time of Ezekiel the sign of the TAU, marked on the forehead of those turning to God in faith and repentance has long represented faithfulness and wholehearted love. It was used for healing and victory.

Pope Innocent III, evoked the sign of the TAU from Ezekiel when opening the Fourth Lateran Council in 1216 calling for the renewal of the Church, “Mercy will be granted to those to bear the TAU, a mark of a life of penance and renewal in Christ.”

And so Francis, who was present at the Council, wanted to sign himself with the TAU, and his brothers along with him. The TAU became the sign of the little Band’s mission: the preaching of faith and repentance (Rule of 1221:23).

Thomas of Celano, writing in 1252, notes, “The TAU symbol had, above all others, his preference. Francis used it as a signature for his letters, and he painted a drawing of it on the walls of all the cells.” One of these paintings, believed to be created by Francis, is found in the little chapel of Mary Magdalen at Fonte Columbo in the Rieti Valley where Francis wrote his Rule.

Another very precious document, housed in the Basilica of St. Francis, is Francis’ own handwritten blessing for Brother Leo — signed with the TAU.

*Above all else, the TAU meant mission for Francis: a mission to proclaim the Goodness of God by a wholehearted following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ because of whom all life is sacred.*



Francis became a penitent immediately after the vision he received before the crucifix of San Damiano. 25

T Francis remained in the Penitential Order for at least two years. He was well aware of the strong desire of the Christian people for a more evangelical life and of the urgent need for spiritual guidance to indicate the way to remain faithful to God and the Church. 26

T When Francis began his penitential preaching with his first companions, the number of penitents (old and new) including married people, suddenly increased. This is known as the penitential movement of the XII Century. People voluntarily embraced the penitential state and all it involved, according to long standing laws and customs of the Church. The Prior to the year 1221 they formed local fraternities.

T The sudden increase of urban penitents, must be attributed to St. Francis of Assisi; he had lived as a *friar of penance* before he founded his Religious Order:

T Francis took an immediate and realistic interest in his penitents. It is also commonly accepted that the *Letter to All the Faithful* (unanimously recognized as written by St. Francis) is not directly intended for all the faithful but for those who accepted to follow him, this is, for the *Brothers and Sisters of Penance*.

Of primary importance for the penitential movement is the document *Recensio Prior* a rough draft of the *Letter to All the Faithful*.

T It is likewise certain that Francis gave a Rule of Life to his penitents, even if we have not been able to identify it.

We know of the directives, ideals and aspirations Francis wanted to give to his penitents from the *Recensio Prior* and from the *Letter to all the Faithful*. The elements which render the penitential movement *Franciscan* are found in these two documents. In addition to Historical elements, we must also consider the spiritual aspect which characterize the penitential movement which followed St. Francis: these and only these elements make it Franciscan.



An analysis of these two documents *Recensio Prior* and *Letter to All the Faithful* reveal that:

For Francis to do penance meant first of all to love God. *Recensio* states: people can reach the happiness for which they yearn only in this love. “All those who love the Lord with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind and with all their strength . . . how happy they are, they do so and persevere in this love so that the Spirit of the Lord will shine upon them and will make God’s abode with them.” He repeats the same concept in the final draft of the Letter. Verse 18 reads: “How happy and blest are those who love the Lord and follow His teaching; love the Lord God with all your heart, with [all your soul your mind.”

Penance for Francis is not a state, it is a journey which leads to God — dynamic in the fullest sense of the word. Humans before God recognize their creature essence — fully dependent on God.

At the same time people have a vocational call to greatness reached by the constant journey towards being like God. “You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48) This greater likeness can be realized through a continuous *metanoia* or penance in the sense of a constant aspiration and ascent toward God. This will always be an established and essential aspect of *Franciscan Penitents* of the past and present.

For Francis there is one reality: an attitude of absolute humility and recognition of the relationship between God, creator, and the creatures of the world. Only the Gospels, the call to conversion can make this relationship possible. For Francis the Gospels are primarily an interior state, a meaning to give to life, an attitude to take in respect to all life.

Francis centered a good part of *the Letter* on this basic reality — God who loves — repeating the “*fragrant words of my Lord*” and through them revealing the love of God, One and Triune.

The Father is known both through the prophets and the Old Testament,(v4-11) and through Jesus Christ in the New Testament. “*The Father so desired that His blessed and glorious Son, given and born for us, shed his blood as a sacrifice and victim on the altar of the cross . . .* (V11). The Father wants all to be saved through His Son and that His Son be received with a pure heart and a chaste body. (v14)

Jesus took on our humanity and poverty, gave us the Eucharist, offered essential salvific intervention and invited our participation in it. Jesus is Word of God, Brother, true Light,

And true wisdom of the Father. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us *children of God, spouses, brothers and mothers of Our Lord*. The Holy Spirit will come over them and make His dwelling in them and they will be children of the Heavenly Father (v11-53)



**T** The penitents will respond with love to this love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their response will be radical, complete and practical, realized in a life of prayer accompanied by the spirit of conversion and by the sacraments. (v 19-35) The first concern of the penitent who feels completely pervaded and supported by God's love is service of God. Brotherly love was extremely difficult in the time of Francis when society was sharply divided by religious and social animosity.

**T** Another characteristic of the *Penitent* was complete acceptance of Catholicism and absolute trust in the Church. In the time of Francis, this acceptance and trust was contested by the Catharists and Waldensians. Francis' almost imperceptible struggle against these heretics was simply to insist on Catholic doctrine. He insisted on the physical reality of the person of Christ to oppose the docetic ideas of the Catharists concerning the Incarnation of the Word. *"This Word of the Father is so worthy that the most high Father of heaven declared it in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary through the holy archangel Gabriel. It is from her womb that He received the flash and fragility of our Humanity."* He rejected the docetic teaching about the Passion of Christ. He simply repeated the words of Luke: *"His sweat became as drops of blood falling to the ground," and he insisted that Christ sacrificed His blood on the Cross.*" (v11)

He openly insisted on acceptance of Catholic doctrine on the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Holy Orders questioned by the Catharists and Waldensians.

Francis knew that according to Christ's teachings, the Eucharist is necessary for the spiritual life. He also knew that ordinarily there would be no remission of sins without the Sacrament of Penance. The ministry of the Priesthood is necessary to receive these two Sacraments and no one can be a priest in the full sense of the word without receiving Holy Orders. It is the Sacrament of Orders which confers receiving Holy Orders. It is the Sacrament of Orders which confers the power to consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ and to forgive sins. The Catharists and Waldensians refused to admit these ministerial powers in unworthy priests (or those so considered) as if the power of Orders (to consecrate and forgive) came directly from the evangelical *life* the priest lived. Francis openly contested this teaching and remained faithful to the Catholic doctrine. The basis for his position was the **Gospels**, because the Gospels reveal, not only absolute poverty but also the Church with her priests. He encouraged his penitents to respect priests, even unworthy priests, because they have the power to consecrate the Eucharist and forgive sins. (v 22, 34)

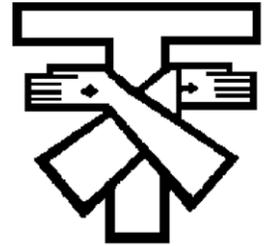
These are the *fundamental ideas*, presented very schematically, which Francis intended to give to his penitents and which render the penitential movement **Franciscan**.



## CONCLUSION

I would like to recall the words of Father Esser: "This is the new person, the Franciscan who forgets himself, who completely renounces himself to serve all (creation) in the spirit of the Lord and to do the will of God . . . Rarely has the way of Franciscan life which should unite the friars Minor, the Poor Women and the Brothers and Sister of Penance been presented so clearly, so fully, and so profoundly as it is in the **Letter**. It is presented with amazing naturalness rather than with a spirit of flesh — a human, egotistical or authoritarian spirit. Francis revealed the spirit of the Lord, this is, thinking, willing, living and working according to the Gospels. This way of life is the metanoia, the doing of penance of St. Francis.

We, Regulars and Secular Tertiaries of both male and female congregations, should be proud to have these documents written by St. Francis and intended for us. Naturally they should be part of every Renewal Program and every Formation Program for the new candidates for our beloved **Third Order Regular**.



**SOURCE:** “The Franciscan Aspect of the Penitential Movement” pp.138-142, in *The Origins of The Franciscan Penitential Movement*” pp.129 – 146. *The Assisi Congress on Formation*. 1979. Greensburg, PA



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