

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 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.



The Spirituality of Franciscan Sisters

Raphael Pazzelli TOR

The “*Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis*” was approved by Pope John Paul II and intended for the entire movement of the Third Order Regular, male and female. Besides representing and expressing the basic unity of this Franciscan family, the Rule shows its essential elements of spirituality. It follows from this that the spirituality of Franciscan Sisters will be fundamentally that of the Third Order Regular!¹

One can ask: Does there exist a spirituality of the Third Order Regular that is *different* from the other Franciscan Orders? We can give some enlightenment on the question.

Franciscan scholar Lino Temperini TOR stresses that in the sphere of Franciscan spirituality one can identify three main currents that all refer to Saint Francis. Each is distinguished by its own orientation and particular expression. The three currents are practically identified with the three Orders of Saint Francis.

1. Order of Friars Minor, OFM Conventual, OFM Capuchin
2. Order of Poor Clares
3. Third Order Regular and Secular

Each of the three Franciscan Orders has its own set of spiritual elements that characterize each one in the sphere of Franciscan tradition. We call it a spirituality. To be able to identify that spirituality of the Third Order, *it is necessary to be clear about the nature of this order.*

Today, we know with certainty that the **Third Order** is the continuation, with new contributions, of the *penitential movement* which existed *before the time of Saint Francis*; a movement which was known to Saint Francis; a movement which he followed. In 1206, standing before Bishop Guido, Francis renounced his father, Peter Bernadone, changed his clothing to that worn by the penitents and officially entered the penitential state.

I. Penitential Movement

In that penitential movement, there were some constant elements of spirituality which formed its charism. The **Third Order** of Saint Francis thus takes its life from the convergence of two spiritual streams:

- the gospel witness of Francis,
- the penitential movement.

The “penitential movement” had followed Saint Francis in his spirituality and the directives received from him. Later on, *towards the end of the thirteenth century*, this “penitential movement” began to call itself, or was called, “the **Third Order of Saint Francis**.”

“Penance” as it developed in the penitential-Franciscan charism is composed of and explained by the two principal characteristic elements:

- “*continuous conversion*” in the biblical sense of “metanoia,” that is, a redirecting of oneself towards God and the undertaking of a life in which God is the center of activity and aspiration.
- “*active and effective charity*,” on behalf of the brothers and sisters in Christ, an active charity extended to those who have greater need of ‘the works of mercy,’ both spiritual and corporal.

II. Explanation of These Concepts

These two elements are essential to the make-up of this movement:

a) *The Life of Penance*

The term ‘penance’ *does not* have the common meaning here of penance, i.e., actions of external mortification, such as fasting or abstinence from some pleasurable things. *Rather*, the first meaning of penance is in the biblical sense, that is, conversation of the heart, a return to God, a change of outlook, a resolution for the future to follow the will of God. Penance corresponds to ‘metanoia,’ in Latin, ‘conversion.’ Thus the three words: *metanoia*, *penance* and *conversion* have the same meaning and are interchangeable.

According to scholar Lino Temperini, Franciscan penance indicates above all an *interior attitude* that turns the primary interest of the soul and the impulse of the heart incessantly toward God. Penance expresses a type of relationship with the Lord, a way of seeing the world as a turning toward God-Love.

For the sisters and brothers of the **Third Order of Saint Francis** the *charism of penance* is a particular way of

freeing oneself toward Love.

LOVE must be responded to! This is the uncomplicated substance of Franciscan spirituality. *This is why Francis preached penance.*

Lino Temperini TOR.
The Assisi Congress on Formation, 1977.

These are spiritual moments of a more intense conversion to God by means of conformity to Christ who is the only way to draw near to the Father. (see John 14:6.)

Penance confers a special dynamism to the development of the spirit. It shapes and draws to itself the means of Christian perfection, nourishing a continuous turning towards God who is seen as love and sought out as love.

This profound orientation, that arises from a definite decision to seek God, guarantees the 'Primacy of the Spirit,' which constantly keeps awake enthusiasm, nourishes commitment and influences all the moments of existence that involve the body, the psyche, the mind, and the will. Consequently, the penitential life does not originate in the fear of divine punishment but by its attraction towards God as the highest Good and the mystery of love.



Called for centuries “the Franciscan Order of Penance,” today’s penitents have their own style of life, their own way of evaluating things, and of defining their human life. They have their own view of earthly things which they look upon with admiration and detachment; they are optimistic and happy in the Lord, generously *witnessing* to the love that God has for His creatures.

b) *The Life of Active Charity*

There is enough evidence to show that **charity and availability to the brothers and sisters** are natural consequences of an interior conversion deeply lived. A life of active charity is the life of penance achieved. Scripture clearly says: “Whoever does not love the brother or sister whom they can see, cannot love the God whom they have not seen.”

(1 John 4:20.):

T “... and may we love our neighbor as ourselves by drawing them all to Your love with our whole strength, by rejoicing in the good of others as in our own, by suffering with others at their misfortunes, and by giving offense to no one.

St. Francis' Prayer Inspired by the Our Father, 5

In the spirit of Saint Francis, the brothers and sisters of penance are dedicated to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the orphans, the handicapped, the marginated, the illiterate and the afflicted. Thus those suffering in body or spirit have always been the ones beloved by the Friars and Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis. Together with the penitential spirituality, charitable service is to be considered a characteristic of the life of the Tertiary Regulars. The concrete sign of conversion for Saint Francis was

his embrace of the leper, his attention to the poor, the humble, the suffering, to those without God, and to those thirsting for truth and peace.

III. The Voice of History

a) *Life of Penance*

Before the fourth century in the East there were the forerunners of that way of life which would later be called the penitential movement. They would be called “*abrenuntiantes*” or those who renounce the “world.” In the West, these people were called “*conversi*”, those who had decided upon a conversion, a breaking with the kind of life experienced in the past, called the “world,” and the making of a commitment, often public, to live “penance,” a new kind of life in which God is the center of one’s existence. The very concept of “conversion” tells us that the purpose of such a decision was to make God the reference point and the aim of one’s own life.

Conversion was considered a gift from God and also a response on the part of a human being in the presence of divine initiative. This idea was clearly present as early as Dionysius of Alexandria (+264 AD) and again in a spiritual treatise of the twelfth century in the *Book of Penance* by the Anonymous Benedictine of the Twelfth Century.

In the seventh century, Saint Isidore of Seville, speaking of penance and the meaning of “conversion of heart,” emphasized the interior dimension which should make penance a Christian “way of life,” not only an act or rite *but* a constant disposition of the religious spirit . . . mostly an interior consecration to a new style of life. This element of deep interiority was ‘rediscovered,’ lived and taught by Saint Francis insistently and in great detail to his penitents.

The Rules of 1289 and 1521

present the penitential spirituality more in terms of deeds, or actions to perform (fasting, alms, vigils);

The Rule of 1927

places greater stress on *charity*. Care of the sick, even mitigating the cloister observance, is a very important witness in this life.

T Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit . . . Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of the day, every day and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honor, adore and serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High.

St. Francis' *Earlier Rule* (1221) 22:27; 23:11

b) *The Works of Mercy or Active Charity*

The other essential element for the charism of penance, besides conversion, is active charity. It grew slowly through the centuries in a systematic way and follows the development of society in its practical manifestations. There are always those who suffer or have need of assistance: it is indeed to these practical needs of humankind that the penitential movement has always sought to bring comfort and help by following the teachings of the great masters of the ages.

The most complete text concerning penitential teaching which has come down to us is from the **tenth century**. RATHERIUS lived from 887-974. A monk of the Abby of Lobbes, he was elected Bishop of Verona in **926**. It will be helpful to remember his words written a thousand years ago: "Are you a penitent? Remember above all the rule of penance given by the Baptizer of the Lord; 'Produce fruits worthy of penance. The penitents must put this into practice with generosity if they desire to obtain the mercy of the Lord.'" Here he gives the spiritual motive for each of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to which penitents should dedicate themselves. Thus, practically for RATHERIUS, "to do penance" means "to perform worthy fruits of penance," that is, perform the works of charity for one's neighbor.

T All those who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with their whole strength and love their neighbor as themselves, who hate their bodies with their vices and sins, who receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who produce worthy fruits of penance. O how happy and blessed are these men and women while they do such things and persevere in doing them.

St Francis' *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, 1-5 (1209-1215)

But, the way of penance is a difficult thing. Invoke then divine help every day or rather every moment; whether in silence or in whatever thing you do, ask for it seriously of the Lord: O God, create in me a pure heart.

RATHERIUS of Verona bears witness that the two elements of the penitential life, perseverance in the way of penance or continuous conversation and the works of active charity were already considered essential in his day.

IV. The Two Elements in the Rule

These two elements, the life of penance and the works of active charity, will form the cornerstone of the life and spirituality of the penitents and the spirituality of those penitents who followed Francis of Assisi. The **first** "Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance," called the *Memoriale propositi*, 1221 exhorts the penitents to persevere in their penance and to put into practice the works of mercy."

This **same admonition** is repeated in the Rule of Nicholas IV in **1289**. This text of the Rule of Nicholas IV remained legally in force also for those women



associations of Franciscan inspiration whose sisters began to live community life and more correctly the religious life, at least until **1521** when Pope Leo X desired to give these new entities their own Rule, one more suitable for **the religious life**. He states that these two elements,

- a) continuous penance and
- b) mercy or active charity, represent and summarize, the whole specific purpose of the Order of Penitents, **establishing its reason for existence in the ecclesial community**.

These elements (on-going conversion and mercy or active charity) established the **charism of the Third Order** and, having remained intact through the centuries, have been *automatically* inserted into the many congregations of Franciscan sisters which have arisen from the time of the fifteenth century to the present.

The **new Rule of 1982** includes the same realities: "Led by the Lord, let them begin a life of penance." (Art. 6); "They wish to live this evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer, poverty and humility." (Art. 2); "The brothers and sisters are called to heal the wounded, to bind up those who are bruised, and to reclaim the erring" (Art. 30).

V. Corollary: *How Penance Became the Characteristic of the "Brothers and Sisters of the Penance"*

To look into the historical question of how, when and why penance-conversion became the principle characteristic of the Third Order of Saint Francis, we begin with the four principal elements which all agree go back to the constitutive nucleus of Franciscanism: minority, poverty, penance-conversion and prayer-contemplation. We consider two.

Minority: The beginnings of Francis' conversion were penitential. In the primitive preaching before going to Rome, to those who asked them "where do you come from?" they "confessed with simplicity that they were penitents from Assisi." (3 Com 37) Soon (we don't know exactly when) they began to call themselves "Friars Minor." James de Vitry, in his letter from Genova in October 1216, clearly states that the *Pauperes Minores* were commonly called *Frați minori* and the followers of Saint Clare the *Sorelle minore*.²²

From Celano's remark in the *Vita prima*, (First Life) it seems that Francis was struck by the expression "they are to be minors" as soon as it was suggested and wanted it to become the actual name of his fraternity.³ Even without any association with the *minori* of the city, Francis knew the *maggiori* and the *minori* competed for control with one another. The novelty was quite evident: even those who were "maggiori" in the world voluntarily became "minori" like Francis, wanting to compete with no one. "Minority" will also be the characteristic of the spirituality of the Friars Minor.

Poverty: Another characteristic of the new fraternity immediately developed — poverty — chosen for the love of God and "to follow in the footsteps of His Son."

T *Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, give us the grace to do for you alone what we know you want us to do and always to desire what pleases you. Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footprints of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.*

St., Francis' *A Letter to the Entire Order*, 50-51

From the moment he heard the gospel passage on the "mission of the apostles," which practically marked the beginning of the fraternity, Francis understood that the *vita evangelica* included a life of poverty. Although Francis practiced poverty since the first days of his conversion (the decision made at San Damiano and his renunciation of his wealth before Bishop Guido,) now poverty became an essential element of his evangelical vocation.⁴ The gospel passage showed Francis *how* and *why* he should practice poverty from then on. Thus, heeding the advice of Francis, Bernard of Quintaville, Francis' first companion, "hastened to sell all his goods and gave the money to the poor . . . carrying out the counsel of the holy gospel: If you will be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me." Then follows the important remark that "his conversion to God was a model to others: they should sell their patrimony and distribute the money to the poor." Poverty was, from that time on, considered as a fundamental characteristic of the spirituality of the Order of Friars Minor.

These two elements — **minority and sublime poverty** — also became the two basic points for the spirituality of the Second order, the Poor Clares. Due to *ecclesiastical disciplines* in force at that time,

the order was also characterized by the contemplative life.

Consequently, it was "penance" (understood as conversion of heart and active charity) that remained the primary characteristic of only the Third Order of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. For centuries these characteristics and particular traits of the three Franciscan Orders *have been practically forgotten*. In our own time, they have *gradually* been rediscovered, explained again and placed in proper perspective so that there might be fuller understanding of Franciscan spirituality; as it is fitting and proper that each order have its own features well defined.

END NOTES

¹ We say fundamentally because a Rule by its nature, does not have the obligation of containing all the spirituality of a religious order which follows the Rule. The spirituality will instead be completely expressed in the Constitutions which are proper to each order or religious congregation.

² See Cf. Lemmens, *Testimonia minora*, pp. 17; OMNIBUS, p. 1605.

³ "For he wrote in the rule, 'and let them be lesser brothers,' and when these words were spoken, indeed, in that same hour, he said; 'I wish that this fraternity should be called the order of Friars Minor.'" *1 Cel.*, 38.

⁴ D.V. Lapsanski, *Evangelical Perfection, an historical examination of the concept in the early Franciscan sources*. The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY, 1977, p. 100.



SOURCE: *The Franciscan Sisters*. "The Spirituality of Franciscan Sisters" Chapter XIII, pp.200-215, Raffaele Pazzelli T.O.R., Franciscan University Press, Steubenville, OH 43952. **1993.**

AUTHOR: **Raffaele Pazzelli T.O.R.** — born in San Ginesio, Italy, spent his life as a TOR Friar/Scholar teaching in Rome, India and the USA. Serving as a key consultant to the "Rule Project," Raffaele's scholarship and enthusiasm for the best of T.O.R. heritage was unequalled. His courses and books *St. Francis and the Third Order* and *History of the Third Order Regular* are foundational to the best understanding of the T.O.R. heritage. From 1977 to 1989, he served as Definitor General of the Order, Director of the review *Analecta Tertii Ordinis* as well as the *International Historical Commission* of the T.O.R.

PREPARED BY: **Marian Leaf**, *Sister of St. Francis of Philadelphia*, Aston, PA. With an MSW from Marywood University, Scranton, PA, Marian has served for 12 years in Zambia, Africa and presently ministers as a Parish Facilitator to five Parishes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region of the Fairbanks Diocese in northern Alaska. These parishes are accessible by small plane and receive a visiting priest every 2-3 months. Marian's missionary vocation had brought great blessing.

ART: Bardi Dossal, Santa Croce, Florence, 1245