

## Saint Francis and Penance

by Bret Thoman, SFO

St. Francis was a man of penance. He embraced radical penitential practices and subjected himself to severe disciplines (2 Celano, 97). He often called his body “Brother Ass” (i.e. donkey). He wrote in his letter to the Faithful: “All those who love the Lord with their whole heart ... and hate their bodies with their vices and sins ... produce worthy fruits of penance.” In the 10<sup>th</sup> Admonition, he wrote, “Many people, when they sin or receive an injury, often blame the Enemy or a neighbor, but this is not right, for each one has the real enemy in his own power; that is, the body through which he sins.” Clare is known to have fasted equally rigorously, and to have treated her body harshly, as well (cf. witnesses of canonization process.) Their penances were so harsh that they may seem excessive or extreme to us today. In a post-Vatican II Church that has sought to correct past abuses and excesses, how should we, then, understand Franciscan penance today?

To begin looking at Francis’s attitudes towards penance, it is helpful to have some background on the penitential movement. When Francis left his family and set out on his own to live his new converted way of life, he began imitating the penitents who lived around Assisi. He took on a traditional penitential life that had been around for many centuries. A wonderful book describing the history of this movement in the Church and in the origins of the Franciscan movement is “St. Francis and the Third Order” by Raffaele Pazzelli, TOR. Pazzelli notes that the origins of the practice of penance are found in the Bible. In the original Greek language of the New Testament, both Jesus and John the Baptist urge their followers towards metanoia, which means “to have a change of actions, mind and heart.” (cf. Matthew 3:2; 4:17). First John the Baptist, then Jesus command their listeners, “*Metanoete!*”, which means “Have a change of heart!” This phrase was translated into the Latin Vulgate as “*Agite paenitentiam!*” (literally, “do penance”). Then, the words were translated in the English Bible as “Repent!” Thus, the original biblical meaning of penance and repentance is metanoia, which mean to change one’s heart, mind, behavior, and attitudes.

In later centuries, the understanding of penance, or metanoia, would shift from an interior conversion experience into a series of external acts. Penance were prescribed to Christians who had committed serious sins after baptism, like murder, sorcery, or renunciation of the faith. In an era before confession and absolution were available as a private sacrament, public penances were the only way to be reconciled or fully re-integrated to the Church after committing serious sins. The authority, usually the bishop or maybe an abbot, would order the penitent to perform these penances for one to a few years, or sometimes even a lifetime. The acts often included fasting, fixed daily prayers, particular garb usually comprising a hair-shirt, tunic, and open shoes (i.e. sandals). As the penitents had sometimes committed violent sins, they were forbidden to bear arms, serve in the military, or work in public service. In later times, around the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the sacrament of private reconciliation/confession directly to a priest became the normative way a Christian received forgiveness for sins, even serious ones. From this time onwards, involuntary penance fell into disuse.

However, in roughly the same time, Christians who had committed no serious sins, but who desired to imitate Christ and his sacrifices more closely, adopted *voluntarily*

many of these same penitential practices. Such voluntary penance became a non-centralized movement among lay persons not associated with an established religious Order or monastery. It took different forms like living as a hermit or recluse either alone or in small communities, or living as an Oblate or *conversus* associated with a church or monastery. It could involve married or single people, consecrated or laypersons, men or women. These people became known as penitents, and they maintained many of the same penitential practices of fasting, daily prayer, wearing tunics, refraining from military service, or occupations like merchants or public servants.

When Francis's conversion began, he chose to live as the lay-penitents around Assisi. After leaving his father's house, he became a penitential Oblate associated with the church of San Damiano. In fact, his association with the local church put him under canon law, not civil law, which is why his father's grievance against Francis (stealing from him) was heard by the bishop, and not the mayor. After Francis left his father, he dressed in the penitential tunic, served lepers, and gave alms to the poor. And after the first followers came, they joined him in this penitential life. When asked who they were, Francis and his followers referred to themselves as penitents from Assisi (cf. Legend of the Three Companions, Chap X). It was not until they went to Rome and were granted oral approval of their way of life by Pope Innocent III in 1209 that they began calling themselves *Fratres Minores* (Friars Minors). Soon after this important meeting, Francis's fledgling group of penitents would emerge from the penitential movement, and become established as a distinct Order within the Church: the Order of Friars Minor.

So how did Francis understand penance? First, Francis's understanding of penance is the same as the biblical sense of turning away from sin and having a conversion of heart, which is metanoia. He states in the first line of his Testament that he began to do penance by serving lepers. "The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world." Thus, in Francis's experience with the lepers, we clearly see not just an external action, but a change of heart – a metanoia. His bitterness was changed into sweetness, and he was transformed. For him penance was not merely an *external* act, but it was an act accompanied by an *internal* change of heart. Penance changed him and brought him closer to God.

Although commonly confused with penance, Francis, Clare and their followers also practiced what is more properly called asceticism. Francis often mixed his food with ashes or bitter herbs to kill the taste, while Clare ate very little; Francis commonly wore a hair-shirt (a rough garment worn on the skin underneath the habit), while Clare wore a small rectangle of horsehair under her tunic; they deprived their bodies of sleep; Francis sometimes slept on stones while Clare slept on a bed of vine-branches or the bare floor using rocks for pillows; Francis is known to have responded to temptation by punishing his body by rolling around naked in thorn bushes or snow. Thus, we should distinguish between penance (a biblical metanoia), and asceticism (self-mortification). It is true that the early Franciscans regularly practiced asceticism as a form of penance, but penance was not limited to asceticism.

To understand the particular harshness of early Franciscan asceticism, we should look at it in its particular historical context. It is important to take into consideration the medieval class structure. Life was cruel in the middle Ages, and has been described as nasty, brutish, and short. It was a little easier on the upper classes of the nobility, but doubly harsh for the peasants. Since the Franciscans embraced poverty centered on the experience of the poor, crucified Christ, much of the way the early Franciscans lived was modeled after the way poor peasants lived. They sought to imitate Christ and the poor by living as they were. Thus, they sought to live out penance and asceticism as personal sacrifices in already harsh conditions.

Sometimes asceticism is confused with dualism, i.e. the spirit is good, while the body is bad. Early Franciscan asceticism was not dualistic. The heretical Cathars or Albigensians did embrace dualistic beliefs, and their beliefs were widespread in Francis's era. They, too, embraced poverty, but not for the same reason as Francis; rather, they judged creation and the body to be evil, thus, they did not want to possess anything material for fear that such attachments would corrupt them. Francis believed that creation and material things were good, since they were created by God. (cf. Genesis 1:1-31). In particular, the human person was good, as it was created in the image of God (ibid.). In the 5<sup>th</sup> Admonition Francis wrote, "God had created you and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body, and to his likeness according to the spirit." For this reason he had a fraternal affection for all creation and considered people, animals, and all of creation his brothers and sisters.

So what did Francis mean when he spoke negatively about the body? When he referred to the body, he really meant the flesh. The understanding of "body" in the sense of "flesh" is taken directly from Holy Scripture. Paul wrote, "I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other..." (cf. Galatians 5: 16-17) Further, Paul wrote: "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness... In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (ibid. 19-23; cf. also Eph 4: 22-24; Romans 8: 1-13). Thus, Francis believed at the same time that the body was good, yet sin resided within its flesh. Thus, he practiced corporal penances and asceticism seeking to discipline, even quell the flesh.

Further, Francis and the early Franciscans practiced asceticism because they believed that sin was the result of an inordinate attachment to worldly things. While fervently believing that the world was good (see above), they believed that too strong an attachment to the things of the world could lead to sin. In fact, the seven deadly sins (pride, greed, lust, gluttony, ire, sloth, and envy) are natural God-given instincts taken to the extreme. By subduing the body, or flesh, which they recognized as housing sin, they were seeking to free themselves of vices in order to live in the Spirit. They were not punishing their bodies because they believed them to be evil; rather, through self-mortifications, they were trying to detach themselves from the things of the world, avoid vices, and be free to practice virtues.

Francis's primary form of penance was working with the lepers. We might judge that he struggled with pride before his conversion. The sources say that he often sought to

look good in fine clothes, he wanted to impress people by becoming a knight, he enjoyed feasts and parties, etc. (cf. Legend Three Companions, Chap. 1). However, these vices kept him rooted to worldly things. They prevented him from being able to truly experience, enjoy, and love God. Thus, once he discovered the humility that was necessary to work with lepers, his pride was leveled. Through working with lepers, Francis was freed of his vices, and he could love and enjoy God. And so great was the spirituality he experienced through that humble service, he continued to work with lepers all his life, and he established leprosaria throughout all of Italy. He even required that new friars work with lepers as fundamental to their formation.

So what does penance mean to us today in the modern world? How are we to understand such strict penances practiced by the early Franciscans? The first thing is that we continue to understand penance as a metanoia – a call to conversion – which is its biblical meaning. Then, we attempt to integrate penance into our lives today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To live as Francis and Clare lived eight centuries ago may not be necessary, practical or even possible today. However, we can certainly let their experiences shape and mold our lives today. We can seek to imitate Francis and Clare in their penances, however without engaging in extremism.

Penance always remains an act or acts that lead to metanoia – conversion. Paragraph 1435 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one’s brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one’s cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance.” (cf. Luke 9:23).

Penance, sacrifices, and ascetic practices help us to avoid vice and grow in virtue. They reform the human condition that is naturally inclined towards selfishness and self-centeredness, and they create the interior freedom that allows the soul to re-orient itself towards altruism – other-centeredness. We can be inspired by the experience of Francis, Clare, and the early Franciscans who experienced a radical and full metanoia. Without falling into Phariseeism – showing off external mortifications in order to receive praises from the people – (cf. Matthew 6:2), or without engaging in extremism, we can discover in them what true penance is: metanoia, another way of saying conversion.

by Bret Thoman, SFO