

# Penitence and Conversion

## Spirituality of Conversion

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## **Penitence – Conversion**

### **Spirituality of Conversion**

Conversion is the particular character of Secular Franciscan spirituality—it is the signature concept which specifies the uniqueness of the Secular Franciscan spirituality within the Franciscan family even as minority is for the Friars of the First Order. So what is conversion or as we find it referred to in Franciscan writings—“doing Penance.”

Current theological writings devote a good deal of attention to the explanation of the phenomenon of conversion. In reviewing some of the current writings on the subject of conversion, it becomes clear that conversion, in both its personal and communal dimensions, cannot be easily explained. Conversion is a complex process of transformation involving various conscious movements of the human person. These dynamics, such as the distorting power of bias and the clarifying endeavor of questioning, are themselves complex movements of the intellect. In attempting to explain the conversion experience, the greatest dilemma for Christian spirituality is the understanding of the working of grace, which is itself a mystery. Conversion is caught up in the mystery of grace operating within the human person.

We can only truly comprehend conversion in glimpses. The whole experience of conversion is a journey of discovery. The movements and scope of the conversion process, brought about in grace cannot be easily categorized or explained. However, certain elements can be helpful in attempting to grasp the concept of conversion and hopefully clarify its meaning.

### **The Personal Biography**

The clearest understanding and example of the experience of conversion can be discovered through the personal biography. A biography offers a unique understanding of conversion for several reasons. The story of a life, in its various stages and crises, can offer insight into the unfolding history of a specific person. The life stories of many of the saints

are classic examples and stories of conversion. For us Franciscans, the many biographies of St. Francis help us to grasp his conversion story concretely. The biography helps to show us the experiences and relationships that are worked out in the transformation of the person. In this context, the life story gives an account of the movement of grace and its implications in human life. Finally, the life story offers insight into the worldview of a person and how, in the process of conversion, the worldview is developed, integrated, and transformed. While the life story offers the clearest portrayal of the conversion experience in context, we can also gain important insights from other sources.

### Insights from Sacred Scripture

The experience of conversion is central to the biblical and spiritual traditions of both the Old and New Testaments. Within the Judeo-Christian scriptures, conversion means a two-part turning: first, it is a turning away from alienation and sin, a movement ordinarily called repentance; second, it is a turning toward the living God, a movement often called enlightenment. The Christian Scriptures refer to this process by two Greek words: *metanoia*, a turning from sin, and *epistrophē*, a turning toward God.

Christian spirituality has traditionally placed an emphasis on conversion as repentance. In more recent years, however, a more complete understanding of conversion has come to include the biblical insight into the understanding of the process as a turning from and a turning toward. An emphasis has been placed on the transformational character and on the role of God's gift of grace within this process.

In both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, the call to conversion and repentance is central. In the Bible, we can find many great stories of conversion. Scriptural persons such as David, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, the Prodigal Son, and Paul tell the story of the importance of this experience. The prophetic tradition within the Old Testament is the classic example of the emphasis placed on conversion. This tradition is a constant reminder of the need for not only a personal but also a communal turning to the God of the covenant. When Israel forgets the covenant, the prophet proclaims the need for conversion and calls the community back.

The prophetic ministry of the Old Testament is brought forward into the Christian tradition in the person of John the Baptist, who preaches conversion in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. In the Christian Scriptures the call to conversion finds its clearest proclamation in the ministry of Jesus, who gives flesh to the experience of human transformation.

## **Conversion and Sacrament**

The renewal of the liturgy in the Catholic Church has emphasized the relationship between the celebration of the sacraments and the movements and periods within the experience of conversion. This is most clearly seen in *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). The revised RCIA, which was promulgated in 1972 following the Second Vatican Council, outlines a dynamic process of catechesis and liturgical formation which provides a useful pattern for understanding conversion and supporting the experience, and it also reflects the formation process we employ to prepare candidates for entry into the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS).

The RCIA process leads an adult through stages of conversion to an embrace of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. In the case of the OFS, the process of formation experienced in stages leads to Profession of the Rule. The RCIA recognizes that conversion is a process by which the grace of God leads a person away from sin into the mystery of love. The model of journey is used by the rite to describe the conversion process. Moreover, it is made clear that the conversion journey is not undertaken alone; new members journey together with others in a community of ongoing conversion and faith commitment.

Similarly, the OFS Candidate journeys with the grace of God into a deeper experience of the Gospel life—an intensification of the Baptismal commitment through profession of the Rule in the context of the Franciscan fraternity journeying together and supporting the candidate.

The RCIA outlines the conversion process in four periods. This four-part process has been employed by catechists, formation directors, and spiritual directors as a paradigm for understanding and encouraging conversion in other settings of Christian formation and is helpful in understanding initial formation into the OFS.

1. The period of the *precatechumenate* is a time for the first hearing of the gospel and for what the rite calls initial conversion. Initial conversion means a gradual and beginning movement to make sense of one's life and to find the difference for one's existence in the encounter with Christ as proclaimed within the Church. Once initial conversion is discerned by the catechumenal leaders of the community, the inquirer is publicly brought forward to profess the desire to journey further in the knowing of God within the community's Liturgy of the Word. The inquirer is signed with the cross and is given the name "catechumen." For the Secular Franciscan, the precatechumenate experience is similar to the Inquiry Period in the Initial Formation process. The ritual of reception to Candidacy similarly marks the movement into the Candidacy phase of formation even as the person moves in the RCIA process into the Catechumenate.

It is interesting to note that the RCIA marks each stage of conversion with a public ritual and a new name indicating the movement in the journey of conversion and deepening of membership within the community. The same elements are seen in the initial formation process of the Secular Franciscan Order.

2. The period of the *catechumenate* is marked by various rites that focus on the hearing of the word of God. The word proclaimed is understood in the RCIA as the main symbol of God's grace inviting the catechumen into a deepening of the initial conversion. Together with the word proclaimed, the deepening of relationships within the community, as well as apostolic activity, brings the catechumen into a new affiliation with the Christian community.

At this point of the journey, the RCIA understands conversion to Christ and membership in the community as inseparable. One comes to know and follow Christ in the

community of discipleship. Conversion, therefore, becomes a reorientation of one's relationships with God, with oneself, and with a community of faith for the life of the world.

In the same way, the experience of the Candidate in initial formation into the OFS includes a gradual hearing of the Franciscan gospel life, a deepening of relationships in Fraternity and entering into the apostolates of the Fraternity. In this way, the Candidate gradually embraces the new identity of being a Franciscan, and this new relationship with God and others is marked by this reality.

Following a second deliberation by the RCIA ministers of the community, the catechumen is brought forward to the celebration of the Rite of Election. This rite, celebrated both in the local parish community and at the cathedral with the bishop on the First Sunday of Lent, proclaims God's election of the catechumen and the movement of grace and conversion. The catechumen is now called "elect" and begins a forty-day fast with the Church in preparation for Easter. While this parallel in the OFS initiation process is not as clear, many fraternities offer a special retreat experience for the candidate as the day of Profession draws near.

3. The period of *enlightenment* is normally seen as the forty days of Lent. The RCIA understands this period as a Lenten retreat of spiritual preparation for the sacraments of initiation. Included within this period are the three scrutiny rites celebrated on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. These rites call upon God to assist the elect in their final turning away from sin and the power of evil. They celebrate the scrutinizing power of the Spirit and the transforming grace of Christ. In the context of the RCIA, the Lenten season has been offered a new appreciation as a season of ongoing conversion for the entire Christian community.

At the conclusion of the forty days, the sacraments of initiation--Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist-- are celebrated during the Easter Vigil. The conversion of the elect is completed in water and anointing with oil and in the sharing of Christ's Body and Blood at the altar. Sharing at the Eucharist is considered the highpoint of initiation and the chief

sacrament of conversion in the Christian community. The newly baptized person is given the name “neophyte” and is offered a special place in the community. Similarly, at the conclusion of Candidacy and a prayerful retreat time, the Candidate is called to make profession or permanent commitment to the rule of the OFS.

4. The fourth period described in the RCIA is called *mystagogia*, which means “a breaking open of mystery.” This period has traditionally been equated with the fifty days of Easter and is a time for sacramental catechesis. The neophyte, along with the rest of the community, examines the stories of the risen Christ with the converted eyes of faith as a means of supporting the neophyte’s continuing journey of conversion. Similarly, in the process of initial formation in the OFS, the newly professed should be supported in a special way during the first year after profession to deepen and mature their experience of membership in the OFS.

From the RCIA, and the process of initiation that it supports, several insights about conversion can be noted:

- conversion is symbolized as a journey of transformation led by the movement of God.
- it is a communal experience involving the entire community in its encouragement and witness.
- the RCIA considers conversion as an ongoing process, celebrated in stages and finding its greatest Christian expression in the celebration of the Eucharist.
- conversion is not a one-time experience but rather a lifetime transformation that is absorbed in appreciating the mystery revealed in Christ.

The RCIA sees and understands conversion as central to the sacramental celebrations of initiation. These rites are a celebration and an acceptance of the gift of conversion in the life of the individual and the community.



## Conversion in Theology Today

Modern theologians have placed conversion at the heart of theological work. They have explored the dynamics of conversion and have attempted to explain the experience in clear types. Different models have been offered as ways of explaining and understanding the experience of conversion. These explanations have often used developmental theories from modern psychology. The writings of psychologists such as Freud, Jung, James, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Piaget have helped the theological understandings of conversion. The writings of James W. Fowler are noted for their study of faith development using the developmental-stage theory of Erik Erikson.

In recent years the work of Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., has proved to be especially important in understanding conversion. Lonergan's work sets up explanatory categories of human consciousness.

From this standpoint he explains conversion as a set of judgments and decisions that move the human person from an established horizon into a new horizon of knowing, valuing, and acting.

In this way he identifies and explains the activity of human consciousness and identifies three kinds of conversions: intellectual, moral, and religious. In the same way as climbing up to a higher point makes it possible for us see further and beyond the limit of our sight, a conversion experience moves us to a new horizon.

- Intellectual conversion is understood as a deep clarification of experience and meaning that allows the person to eliminate stubborn and misleading ideas about reality and knowledge. In this way, intellectual conversion allows the human person to differentiate various levels of meaning, to understand the limit and the horizon of one's own knowing.
- Moral conversion is the shifting of one's criteria for decision-making from the satisfaction of the self as basis of choice to the uncovering and pursuit of value. Moral conversion allows the person to choose the truly good. The morally

converted person is able to understand one's own biases thus allowing for authentic decision-making.

- Religious conversion occurs when one is completely grasped by ultimate concern or love. It is a falling in love unconditionally, leading to surrender to the transcendent, to God. Lonergan further differentiates the religious conversion with the additional category of Christian conversion as God's love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given in Christ.

Interpreters of Lonergan have differentiated even more kinds of conversions. For our purposes, we can speak of Franciscan conversion as the process supported by initial and on-going formation in the OFS as a further category within Christian conversion helping the Franciscan to acquire the intellectual, moral and religious values which are uniquely identified with the Franciscan story.

Conversion is a complex experience that transforms the entire human person. Within a Christian community it is a process of hope whereby persons are caught up into the promise of the new creation and the transformation promised in Christ. For Secular Franciscans, conversion is the singular character of the Order which is supported by the initial and on-going processes of formation in the life of the fraternity. In the end, conversion is shrouded with mystery. While personal stories, biblical insights, the sacraments of initiation, theological reflections, and psychological categories are helpful to understand and explain the experience, the Christian tradition in the end must stand before the grace of God in silence and wonder.

(The following portion concerning the historical perspectives on the Order of Penitence relies heavily upon and is an adaptation of the material on this subject as found in the CIOFS *Forming the Formators* Manual on Formation.)

## **The Order of Penitence in History**

Conversion or “doing penance” is the critical element and character of the Secular Franciscan Order. In the earliest time, the members of the Secular Franciscan Order were known as Brothers and Sisters of Penance.

In St. Francis’ own life, it was his plan to devote his life to “doing penance.” The Franciscan gospel life emerged from those who, in Francis’ day, were living according to an ancient form of life finding its origin in the third, fourth and fifth centuries. These were people who voluntarily chose to live a life of penance which was the same as embraced by those who were living a life of public penance imposed as a means of reconciliation after serious and public sin.

In the early Church, persons who were guilty of serious public sin were excommunicated and were required to do public penance in order to re-enter the community. Penitents could not attend Mass with the community but, instead, remained outside the worship space and asked for the prayers of the faithful. After a sufficient time of public penance, the penitent would be reconciled publicly with the community usually at the Easter vigil.

Such was the origin and celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in its earliest form. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for a “second chance”-- a kind of “second baptism.” Unlike in our own day, when the Sacrament of Penance can be celebrated privately over and over again, at this earlier time in the church’s history it was thought that even as baptism was only celebrated once, this sort of public Penance was possible only once in one’s life.

Public, external acts of penance were considered as outward expressions of an inward reality—conversion of heart. It was not that external acts brought about conversion; rather they were seen as an outward sign of the inward change that they signified.

Once readmitted to the community after public penance and reconciliation, the individual was received into the Order of Penitence, by means of a laying on of hands signifying a lifetime commitment to live a very strict and rigorous penitential lifestyle designed to assist the penitent to remain faithful to the commitment of baptism.

This was understood as entrance into the Order of Penitents. Membership in the Order was so strict that many postponed Reconciliation until the end of their lives and bishops were very cautious about who would actually be called to Reconciliation and admission into the Order of Penitents.

From this earlier form of penance, there evolved various forms of *voluntary* public penitential practices including the pilgrim, the hermit, Oblates, Virgins (not liturgically consecrated), Recluses and pietists. In addition to these forms, after a time, some who wished to deepen their spiritual life as committed disciples, chose to *voluntarily* accept the penitential lifestyle as a way of seeking spiritual growth and “perfection.”

These people, (*the voluntary penitents*) had not been separated from the Christian community through serious, public sin but they, nevertheless, took upon themselves the lifestyle of the “Order of Penitents” voluntarily and remained in it for their entire lives, living according to the rigorous, austere penitential practices prescribed for members of the Order. These could have included the wearing of special penitential clothing (tunic, staff, satchel, sandals and Tau), working with lepers in hospitals, rebuilding churches, burying the dead during epidemics, dedicating oneself to a life of prayer, complete continence for the unmarried and periodic continence for married couples, avoidance of dances, festivals and banquets, refusal of public offices (judge or advocate), refusal of military service, refusal of the carrying of weapons and participating in war, abstaining from commercial activity and avoidance of travel on horseback or donkey. These practices were put in place in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and remained more or less the same to the time of Francis.

While penitential practices have changed as have authentic ways of expressing faith, there is much to be learned from the “spirit” of these early penitents and how we can come to understand ourselves as their spiritual successors. St. Francis, himself was one of these early penitents. It was in his “refounding” of the Order of Penitents for those penitents who wished to follow his gospel way that we can find the origins of the Secular Franciscan Order.

## The Time of Francis and the Beginnings of the Order of Penitents of St. Francis

In St. Francis' time, not all the members of the Order of Penance were in harmony with Church leadership. This was a time of clerical corruption and worldliness of the hierarchy and lax and abusive conduct of the clergy. This often led to dissociation from the Church leadership and heresy by those attempting reform but carrying their efforts too far.

Francis went in another direction. As a penitent, Francis sought God with his whole heart and aimed to focus upon personal conversion. He saw the Church as the Body of Christ and wished to relate to it as an obedient son rather than as a critic. In order to maintain his bond with the church he sought out the approval of the Pope.

Francis wished to rebuild the Church but to do so not through criticism but rather through holiness of life. Having received the approval of the Holy Father to live the "form of the Gospel," he began preaching in public with startling results:

*"...many, casting aside earthly concerns, gained knowledge of themselves in the life and teaching of the most blessed father Francis and aspired to love and reverence for their Creator. Many people, well born and lowly, cleric and lay, driven by divine inspiration, began to come to Saint Francis, for they desired to serve under his constant training and leadership. All of these, the holy one of God, like a fertile stream of heavenly grace, watered with showers of gifts and he adorned the field of their hearts with the flowers of perfection. He is without question an outstanding craftsman, for through his spreading message, the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes according to his form, rule and teaching, and there is victory for the triple army of those being saved. Furthermore, to all he gave a norm of life and to those of every rank he sincerely pointed out the way of salvation. (1Cel37)*

St. Bonaventure echoes the words of Celano:

*"...He went about the cities and towns proclaiming the Kingdom of God not in words taught by human wisdom, but in the power of the Spirit. To those who saw him he seemed to be a person of another world as, with his mind and face always intent on heaven, he tried to draw them all on high. As a result the vineyard of Christ began to produce buds with the sweet smell*

*of the Lord and, when it had produced flowers of sweetness, of honor and respectability, to bring forth abundant fruit. For set on fire by the fervor of his preaching, **a great number of people bound themselves by new laws of penance according to the rule which they received from the man of God. Christ's servant decided to name this way of life the Order of Brothers of Penance.***

*As the road of penance is common to all those who are striving toward heaven, so this way of life admits clerics and lay, virgins and married of both sexes.”*

(LMj, Chapter IV, 6).

These are only two examples.

Historians speak of an immediate and dramatic increase of people who bound themselves to this penitential way from 1215 onwards. It is no coincidence that this happens to be the year in which the first Form of Life was given by Francis to his penitents (the **Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance**, which forms the prologue to our present Rule). It is probably inaccurate to speak of St. Francis “founding” the Order of Penance as such since the idea of voluntarily embracing a life of penance existed from early in the church’s history.

Rather we can say that he refocused, reanimated and refounded an already existing entity within the Church intentionally founding his own movement of Penitents—the Order of Franciscan Penitents—that is, that group of penitents who wished to follow his Gospel way, to follow his inspiration and live according to his example and teachings and participate in his mission to restore the Church alongside the friars and the Sisters of the Second Order.

In one sense we can say that Francis really gave his three orders only one rule, that is, to follow the Gospel (as applied to their particular way of life) and to live a life of continual conversion to the Gospel (“to do penance”). Living a penitential life was central to all three Orders enabling them to preach about both penance and conversion from their own lived experience.

However, just as he had provided for the other Orders which he founded, St. Francis wished to provide a simple written way of life for his penitents based upon the words of the Gospel.

Scholars agree that the *First Letter to the Faithful* is the first or Proto Rule. Here we find the recommendations of St. Francis for anyone wishing to walk beside him on this road of permanent conversion. In it we find five fundamental elements for the penitential lifestyle:

1. To love God
2. To love our neighbor
3. To resist the sinful tendencies of our fallen nature
4. To receive of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist
5. To act or live in conformity with our conversion

Even today, more than 800 years later, there is little more that can be added to live a sincere and authentic penitential life. Living according to this plan will immerse us in the very life of God in the Trinity itself. We have Francis' own words to confirm this:

- The Holy Spirit will come to rest on his penitents and dwell in them
- We are children of the Heavenly Father when we do His will
- In the Holy Spirit we are united to Jesus
- We become spouses, brothers and mothers to the Lord Jesus
- We carry him in our hearts and bring him forth by means of our holy works

Truly, one cannot be more closely united to God than this. This is the Franciscan life in a nutshell. It is always important then for Secular Franciscans to read and re-read the Prologue to our Rule where we find this *First Letter to the Faithful* in order to constantly renew and revisit the original inspiration of Francis for the Secular Franciscan Order. It is here that we will experience the meaning of conversion from the uniquely Franciscan viewpoint.

## Appendix 1 – The Prologue to the Rule

### Exhortation of Saint Francis to the Brothers and Sisters in Penance

In the name of the Lord!

#### Chapter 1

#### Concerning Those Who Do Penance

All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love their neighbors as themselves (cf. Mt 22:39) and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.

Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because "the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them" (cf. Is 11:2) and he will make "his home and dwelling among them" (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are the sons of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

We are spouses, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord Jesus Christ; we are brothers to him when we fulfill "the will of the Father who is in heaven" (Mt 12:50).

We are mothers, when we carry him in our heart and body (cf. 1 Cor 6:20) through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through a holy life which must give life to others by example (cf. Mt 5:16).

Oh, how glorious it is to have a great and holy Father in heaven! Oh, how glorious it is to have such a beautiful and admirable Spouse, the Holy Paraclete.

Oh, how glorious it is to have such a Brother and such a Son, loved, beloved, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10:15) and prayed to the Father saying:

"Oh, holy Father, protect them with your name (cf. Jn 17:11) whom you gave me out of the world. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me and they received it. They have known that in truth I came from you; they have believed that it was you who sent me. For these I pray, not for the world (cf. Jn 17:9). Bless and consecrate them, and I consecrate myself for their sakes. I do not pray for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word (cf. Jn 17:20) that they may be holy by being one, as we are (cf. Jn 17:11). And I desire, Father, to have them in my company where I am to see this glory of mine in your kingdom" (cf. Jn 17:6-24).



## Chapter 2

### Concerning Those Who Do Not Do Penance

But all those men and women who are not doing penance and do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and live in vices and sin and yield to evil concupiscence and to the wicked desires of the flesh, and do not observe what they have promised to the Lord, and are slaves to the world, in their bodies, by carnal desires and the anxieties and cares of this life (cf. Jn 8:41).

These are blind, because they do not see the true light, our Lord Jesus Christ; they do not have spiritual wisdom because they do not have the Son of God who is the true wisdom of the Father. Concerning them, it is said, "Their skill was swallowed up" (Ps 107:27) and "cursed are those who turn away from your commands" (Ps 119:21). They see and acknowledge; they know and do bad things and knowingly destroy their own souls.

See, you who are blind, deceived by your enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil, for it is pleasant to the body to commit sin and it is bitter to make it serve God because all vices and sins come out and "proceed from the heart of man" as the Lord says in the gospel (cf. Mt 7:21). And you have nothing in this world and in the next, and you thought you would possess the vanities of this world for a long time.

But you have been deceived, for the day and the hour will come to which you give no thought and which you do not know and of which you are ignorant. The body grows infirm, death approaches, and so it dies a bitter death, and no matter where or when or how man dies, in the guilt of sin, without penance or satisfaction, though he can make satisfaction but does not do it.

The devil snatches the soul from his body with such anguish and tribulation that no one can know it except he who endures it, and all the talents and power and "knowledge and wisdom" (2 Chr 1:17) which they thought they had will be taken away from them (cf. Lk 8:18; Mk 4:25), and they leave their goods to relatives and friends who take and divide them and say afterwards, "Cursed be his soul because he could have given us more; he could have acquired more than he did." The worms eat up the body and so they have lost body and soul during this short earthly life and will go into the inferno where they will suffer torture without end.

All those into whose hands this letter shall have come we ask in the charity that is God (cf. 1 Jn 4:17) to accept kindly and with divine love the fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ quoted above. And let those who do not know how to read have them read to them.

And may they keep them in their mind and carry them out, in a holy manner to the end, because they are "spirit and life" (Jn 6:64). And those who will not do this will have to render "an account on the day of judgment" (cf. Mt 12:36) before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 14:10).

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