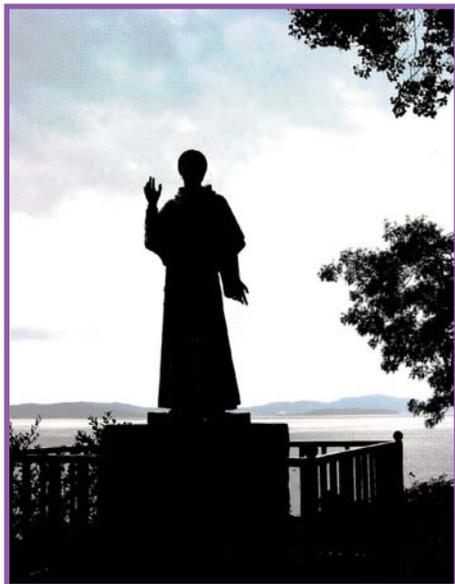


The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

February 2009 - No. 19

FRANCIS AND LENT THE CALL TO REPENTANCE



Francis arrived on this island, Ash Wednesday 1213.

There is a story about how St. Francis spent Lent of the year 1213. It appears in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, 7.

Once Saint Francis was alongside the Lake of Perugia (Trasimeno) on the day of Carnival, at the house of a man devoted to him. He was inspired by God to go to make that Lent on an island in the lake. So Saint Francis asked this devout man that he carry him with his little boat to an island of the lake where no one lived, and that he do this on the night of the Day of the Ashes. Since there was no dwelling in which he could take shelter, he went into some very thick brush that was formed like a little den or a little hut. And in this place he put himself in prayer and contemplation of heavenly things. There he stayed the whole of Lent without eating except for half of one of those little loaves.

This event reveals a wonderful quality of Francis's freedom of spirit. When Jesus was in the desert for 40 days, he had no synagogue for the Sabbath. He simply wished to keep his gaze on the Father. When Francis spent time on the island (called *Isola Maggiore*) for 40 days, he had no church, no priest for Sunday Mass. He came here with two loaves of bread and a desire to imitate

Jesus, his Lord. Like Jesus Francis spent time deepening his fascination for God with great freedom of spirit. No methods, no formal practices. Simply a heart directed to God.

Books and sacred music often speak about walking in the footprints of Jesus Christ as an invitation to conform one's heart to that of the Lord. It is easy, however, to confuse conformity with external acts, as has often happened in attempting to understand the meaning of penance and conversion in the Christian spiritual journey. The difficulty is with the reality we call "the heart." How does one get to the heart, that mysterious inner self in need of lifelong transformation?

The spiritual journey of St. Francis of Assisi was to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ as closely as possible. One can easily point to outward similarities between him and Jesus, particularly in the way Francis lived poverty, practiced humility, and ministered to the poor and outcasts of society. Some would claim that his outward conformity was most evident in the stigmata that Francis received in his flesh. It is more important, however, to penetrate Francis's spirit. More than anything he wished to conform his heart to Jesus Christ.

Conformity for Francis meant a process of interior transformation, nurturing a heart that was humble, poor in spirit and overflowing with compassion for all. Conformity for Francis meant that each of these facets became realities which molded his heart into the image of God. Francis wanted his heart to

be shaped into what it was created to be, namely Jesus Christ. St. Paul's words sum it up: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ Jesus who lives in me." (Galatians 2,20)

We have traditionally understood repentance as acts of asceticism or mortification. We identified penance with doing things we found difficult and giving up things we found pleasant. During Lent, for example, we would speak of "giving up something" we enjoyed doing as a "Lenten penance" (candy, TV, smoking, alcohol, gossip). Many of us would spend an entire Lent pursuing such mortification and keeping tabs. At the

SFO Rule 7:

United by their vocation as *brothers and sisters of penance*, and motivated by the dynamic power of the gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls *conversion*. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.

end of Lent, however, with the arrival of Easter Sunday, we would return to our former patterns of behavior with no evident change of heart.



Isola Maggiore, Lago Trasimeno

At the end of his life St. Francis of Assisi handed a Testament to his brothers and sisters. He described his life as having been divided into two periods: "When I was in sin..." and "when the Lord gave me the grace to begin to do penance." "When I was in sin" didn't necessarily mean performing sinful actions. The "sin" Francis confronted were the idols in his heart such as money, pleasure, ambition, fame and power. "When I was in sin" referred to living a self-centered life. Then, Francis said, "The Lord gave me (the grace) to begin to do penance." Penance did not mean a multiplication of ascetical practices. For Francis, penance was the grace of transformation that re-directed his heart and entire life to embrace the vision and values of the Gospel.

Then, again, we might pursue a change of behavior as a sign we have begun to repent. This might be similar to behavior modification. Behavior modification, however, does not necessarily change one's heart. We cannot simply stop external actions (behavior) like murder, violence, anger, war, that stem from hatred. We must abandon the hatred itself if we are to be true to the Gospel. We cannot simply adopt more pious prayer habits and the offering of sacrifices. We must squelch the evil in our hearts that leads to divisions, make peace with those we have harmed, and truly commit to a new way of life.

Getting to the heart is a daily effort to grow in compassion, forgiveness and service of others. It is reflected in the giving of one's self to the poor, to a more Christ-centered prayer life and to a Gospel-oriented lifestyle. It is the daily effort to be converted affectively, intellectually, morally, socio-politically, and religiously. Then radical demands of the Gospel are possible.

When we come to a moment in life of desiring fuller conversion, we are in effect becoming aware that God is asking for more. Not more legalism or more mortification, but more interior holiness. We can easily get caught in a web of legalities or a penchant for fulfilling all kinds of obligations, trying to win God's favor or change ourselves. Surely the Church's laws that guide us, and the obligations to which we need to pay attention, are important. More than anything, however, we need to keep a heart focused on the living God and to strive for purity of heart. This summons is a grace, a gift freely given. We do not make it happen. In other words, God converts us and empowers us. God wants our hearts, not our sacrifices. Isn't that hard to swallow?



Isola Maggiore, Lago Trasimeno

SFO GC 13.1: Secular Franciscans, called in earlier times "the brothers and sisters of penance," propose to live in the spirit of continual conversion. Some means to cultivate this characteristic of the Franciscan vocation, individually and in fraternity, are: listening to and celebrating the Word of God; review of life; spiritual retreats; the help of a spiritual adviser, and penitential celebrations. They should approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently and participate in the communal celebration of it, whether in the fraternity, or with the whole people of God.

In writing to a Poor Clare St. Bonaventure said: "Your heart is to be an altar of God. It is here that the fire of intense love must burn always" If this is true then the first church is in the human heart. There is no sense going to church (a building) for prayer if one has not entered into the church (dwelling place) of one's heart. This is what Francis did at *Trasimeno*. He entered the church of his heart. He made of his heart an altar for God. His choice to spend Lent on an island was not of his doing, or some pious romantic fling. He was captured, seized, by the Spirit of God. This moved Francis to contemplation and adoration. **May our Lent lead us to the same.**

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