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THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER  
LIVING MEMORY OF THE EARLY FRANCISCAN PREACHING

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**«Francis go, repair my church!»**

In order to understand a prophet in the Bible, we have to know the story of his vocation. We must always go back to that moment when the prophet was seized by the power of God who told him: "Go to these people and tell them ...". Francesco also had his call, his "Go!" and it was when, from the Cross of St. Damian, a voice (we do not know whether it was real and physical, or only internal) said to him: "Go Francesco and repair my Church which, as you can see, is falling into ruins!".

To discover the early Francesco we must therefore see what he says to the Church after what Christ asked him; we must examine how he understood and realized his "mission". In order to do that we have some guiding lines. One of them is undoubtedly the preaching of Francesco the day after his conversion. Let's look at Francesco's writings or about Francesco, to see what he starts preaching and telling people, after he heard that "Go Francesco!".

It is surprising but everyone has noticed it: Francesco almost always speaks of "doing penance". In his preaching this expression has the same place that the following sentence has in Jesus' preaching: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!". In his Testament he recalls the beginning of his new life as follows:

“The Lord granted me, Brother Francesco, thus to begin *to do penance* because, as I was in sin, it seemed too bitter to see lepers and the Lord himself led me among them and I showed them mercy. And I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. And then I stayed a while and left the world”<sup>1</sup>

Tommaso da Celano relates that, since then, Francesco began to preach penance with great fervor and exultation, edifying everyone with the simplicity of his word and the magnificence of his heart.<sup>2</sup> Wherever he went, Francesco said, recommended, begged them to do penance. Shortly after the conversion, he embarked on a journey to the Marca of Ancona, just him and Fr. Egidio. Francesco, as soon as he saw some people gathered, used to start crying, begging them to do penance. Egidio, who could speak even less than him, used to take aside those who had listened to Francesco to tell them: pay

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<sup>1</sup> Testament of St. Francesco [Franciscan Sources], nr. 110

<sup>2</sup> Franciscan Sources [FS], 358.

attention to what that man tells you, because what he is saying may sound simple, but it comes from God! That was all their preaching and the people were crying and converting.<sup>3</sup> And everyone wanted to know who they were and although - notes the biographer - it was annoying to answer so many questions, they simply confessed to be penitents of Assisi.<sup>4</sup>

*Penitents of Assisi*: this is how Francesco and his companions considered themselves. In the *Legend of the three companions*, we read that Francesco exhorted the friars by saying:

“We go out into the world, exhorting everyone, by example more than by words, to do penance for their sins and to remember the commandments of God. Do not be afraid of being considered insignificant or unbalanced, but announce penance with courage and simplicity. Trust in the Lord who has conquered the world! He speaks with his Spirit in you and through you, admonishing men and women to be converted to him and to observe his precepts”.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Regula non Bullata* (the First Rule), he uses accents that are even more passionate: "All peoples, races, languages, all nations and all the men of the earth, who are and will be, we all minor friars, useless servants, humbly pray and beseech you to persevere in true faith and *penance*, for otherwise no one can be saved".<sup>6</sup> Finally, sister death arrives for him and in describing her, the biographer sums up his life: "Therein (in S. Maria degli Angeli), being fulfilled the forty years of his life and the twenty years of *his perfect penitence*, the year of the Lord 1226, on the 4th of October, he migrated to the Lord Jesus Christ ».<sup>7</sup> In the Testament, the story of Francesco with the theme of penance and closes with it.

I insisted on the subject of the penance because the Secular Franciscan Order was born precisely from this early preaching of Francesco and his companions and it keeps this memory alive through all the historical changes. The OFS original rule is the letter of Francesco entitled "Exhortation to the brothers and sisters of penance". It constitutes the prologue of the current Rule, promulgated by Paul VI in 1978 and embodies its original spirit and intuition.

### **What did Francesco mean by "doing penance"?**

We must ask ourselves a question: what did Francesco mean by the word "penance"? In this regard we have unfortunately fallen into the serious error of reducing Francesco's message to a simple moral exhortation, to a "beating the chest", to grieve and mortify, to expiate sins, while it has all the vastness and the breath of the gospel of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> FS, 1436-1437

<sup>4</sup> FS, 1508

<sup>5</sup> FS, 1440

<sup>6</sup> FS, 68

<sup>7</sup> FS, 1824

Francesco did not urge to do "penances", but to do "penance" (singular!) and this, as we shall see, is quite different.

To better understand what it is about, we need to refer to the Latin expressions used by Francesco. Let us not forget that Francesco wrote the Canticum of the Creatures in Italian and he is therefore considered one of the initiators of our language; but, apart from a few cases, his language was Latin. He preached in Latin, certainly not the classical one, but still Latin. And what do we find in the Latin text of his writings, that is translated as "doing penance"? What do we find, for example, in the Testament, when he writes: "the Lord made me, Brother Francesco, start doing penance"? We find the expression "*poenitentiam agere*".

Now we know that Francesco wanted to preach the gospel *sine glossa*, simply and purely. His early rule, orally approved by Innocent III, was only about a hundred of evangelical sentences. He loved to express himself with the words of Jesus himself. And that word - to do penance - is the word with which Jesus began to preach, the one that, in the beginning of His ministry, He repeated in every town and village where He went. The evangelist Mark says that:

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the gospel!” (Mk 1,15)

The word that today is translated as "convertitevi" in the Latin text, used by the Poverello, sounded "poenitemini", do penance. Francesco did nothing but revive the great announcement of Jesus, His "good news". Therefore for a better understanding of the announcement that Francesco gave at the time, we must start from that word of Jesus.

Before Jesus, conversion always meant a "turning back" (the Hebrew word, *shub*, means reversing the course, retracing one's steps). It indicated the act of someone who, at a certain point in life, realizes that he is "out of the way". Then he stops, he has an afterthought; decides to return to the observance of the law and to re-enter into the covenant with God. That makes a real "turnaround". The conversion, in this case, has a meaning which is fundamentally moral and suggests the idea of something painful to be accomplished: to change the way of life, to stop doing this and that.

This is the usual meaning that prophets give to the word "conversion", up to and including John the Baptist but on the lips of Jesus this meaning changes. Not because He enjoys changing the meanings of words, but because, with His coming, things have changed. "The time has come and the Kingdom of God has come near!" In this case, conversion means no longer turning back to the old covenant and observance of the law, but rather means taking a leap forward and entering the kingdom, grasping the salvation that has come to men gratuitously, for free and sovereign God's initiative.

Conversion and salvation traced places. No more the conversion first and then, as its consequence, the salvation but the contrary: first salvation, then, as its requirement,

conversion. Not: repent and the Kingdom will come among you, the Messiah will come, as the last prophets were saying, but: be converted because the kingdom has come, it is among you. To convert ourselves is to take the decision that saves, the "decision of the hour", as the parables of the kingdom describe it. "Repent and believe" does not mean two different and successive things, but the same fundamental action: convert, that is, believe! Get converted by believing!

All this requires a true "conversion", a profound change in the way we conceive our relationship with God. It requires passing from the idea of a God who asks, who orders, who threatens, to the idea of a God who comes with full hands to give us everything. It is the conversion from "law" to "grace"; it is the message of gratuitous justification through the faith that was so dear to St. Paul.

Every religion or religious philosophy tell men what they have to do in order to save themselves, both ascetic practices or intellectual speculations. They start with duties. Christianity does not begin by telling men what they must do to save themselves but what God, in Christ, did to save them. There are duties and commandments even in Christianity and there is one that is considered "the first and greatest of all": to love God with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself. Very true but the commandments and duties are placed on the second level, not the first. Above all there is the plan of the gift. Christianity is the religion of grace!

I don't know weather Francesco had this in mind, I don't think so. In his time there was less need to affirm this hierarchy between faith and works. Faith was a fact given for granted; people lived in a Christian society where everything was imbued with faith, despite all the inconsistencies in practical life. What was therefore necessary to preach to the people was the concrete consequences of believing. Today we no longer live in a "societas christiana", in some ways we live in a post-Christian society. We must therefore return to re-establish the hierarchy followed by the apostles.

In the apostolic Church, the distinction between Kerygma and Didaché was clear, that is between the announcement of faith of the Easter mystery of Christ and the moral teaching on the vices to be avoided and the virtues to be cultivated, in particular the most important virtue which is the charity. It was equally clear the conviction, especially in Saint Paul, that faith does not blossom in the presence of moral teaching but in the presence of the Kerygma, the announcement of the death and resurrection of Christ: " If you declare with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom 10: 9).

In obedience to the canonical prescriptions of the time and to the explicit recommendation of the pope, Francesco, in the Rule, points out as the content of the preaching of the friars "the vices and virtues, the pain and glory" but if the evangelical meaning of the word "repent and believe" was not in the mouth and in the pen of Francesco, it was in his heart. His whole person loudly proclaimed the joyful sense of the discovery of the hidden treasure and the precious pearl. He does not sell all his possessions to find the hidden treasure but because he had found the hidden treasure. Even for him, the gift had preceded duty. Francesco did not need to announce with words

the Ester mystery - the cross and resurrection of Christ - because his person had become a living image of it; his life was his preaching.

Today we Franciscans are called to make explicit what in Francesco was implicit or unspoken, to proclaim what Francesco *experienced* and not just what he left *written*. He wanted just one thing with all his strength: to relive the gospel and preach the gospel. Imitating him in this, which was the longing of his whole life, means that we do not limit ourselves to preach always and first of all "the vices and virtues, the pain and the glory"; it means that we don't have to limit ourselves to a moralistic preaching, that we do not reduce Christianity to an ethical doctrine but that we must proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified, with the joy and enthusiasm of Francesco.

The apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis "Evangelii gaudium", The Joy of the Gospel, is all imbued with this Franciscan spirit. It begins with the words: "The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who meet Jesus" and who embodied the truth of these words better than Francesco of Assisi?

### **“And Peter said: Repent!”**

Now we need to take a step forward. In the cry of Francesco: "Do penitence" there is something else that we must discover, taking into consideration a second text of the Scriptures.

Let's think back to what happened on the day of Pentecost. The roar of an impetuous wind was heard, flames of fire were seen "and all were filled with the Holy Spirit". Since the Holy Spirit is the personal love of the Father and the Son, to say that everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit means that everyone was filled with the love of God. God! Paul also explains Pentecost: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us". (Rom 5: 5)

After this, the apostles expose themselves. The anointing of the Spirit completely transformed them into burning torches. They proclaim enthusiastically "the great works of God" and everyone understands them. Some suspect their mental condition. Peter reassures them that they are not drunk but he does it quickly, without lingering long. He has something much more important to say. "Jesus of Nazareth! You crucified him, God raised him up and made him Lord ". (Acts 2, 22 next)

Hearing these things, they had remorses in the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles: "Brothers, what shall we do?" and Peter to them: "Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ". (Acts 2,37-38)

In the Latin text known by Francesco, instead of the word "repent" there was the expression "*poenitentiam agite*", that is to say again "do penance". Thus we discovered the two great sources of Francesco's preaching, the two cries that he wanted to make resound again in the Church: the cry with which Jesus began the announcement of the Kingdom and the cry with which the Church began its preaching on the day of Pentecost.

The word used by Peter is identical to that of Jesus: the same verb, the same imperative way, the same second person plural: *metanoete* but the word has been enriched with a new meaning, due to what happened in the meantime. The rejection of Jesus from the world, His death and His resurrection. That is why, instead of translating the term with convert yourself as in the first case, it is translated with *repent* or *mend your way*.

In short, it is no longer just a matter of believing in the Gospel, it is also a matter of recognizing and repenting of the sin. Francesco often speaks of "doing penance for sins". This is now the door to enter the Kingdom and to experience a new Pentecost: "Repent, then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit".

What does the famous word *metanoia* mean? What is true repentance and true contrition? Literally this word means a change of thought, of the way of seeing and judging things, a mental revolution. But it is not about abandoning the old way of thinking or the worldly mentality of the past, to form a somewhat more spiritual and evangelical one. True *metanoia* is abandoning one's way of thinking and embracing that of God, seeing oneself and our life as God sees them.

Francesco has known the true *metanoia*. He entered the heart of God and saw sin as God sees it, from within His paternal love without limits, He saw it because of what He did to Christ on the cross. And he cried, he became blind from crying, not just because of the illness. His tears were of love and pain, like those that Jesus poured on Jerusalem.

I asked myself: what kind of sin would Francesco ask us to repent, in particular if he returned back to preach today? A word of Jesus gave me the answer to this question: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all the rest will be given to you in addition". In fact, if not in words, we have simply overturned the terms: we first seek all the rest - health, business, pleasure, fun - and if some time is left, perhaps an hour on Sunday, we think of God, of Jesus Christ and of the things of up above.

We preserve the parable of the wedding guests: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king, who made the marriage of his son. He sent his servants to call the guests to the wedding ... but those, not caring about it, went away, who to his field, who to his trade" (Mt 22, 2-5). For many, God has become a "secondary" interest but God can never be a secondary interest. It's almost worse than not knowing Him at all! Last month I was in the chapel of the hermitage where I have lived for years with some Capuchin Poor Clare nuns and I commented on the Gospel of the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time. This Gospel passage speaks of the Nazaretans who, resentful of His preaching, push Jesus "on the edge of the mountain on which their city was built" (Lk 4,29). I pointed out how we do the same when we relegate Jesus to the edge of our lives, we put him on the sidelines, putting so many other things before Him.

### **The Tau on the forehead**

To Francesco the meaning of penance was entering God's heart, sharing His suffering, seeing things from that center, where everything, especially unfaithfulness and sin, takes on its true appearance. One thing, best of all, reveals to us what it means to do penance

for Francesco: his incredible devotion to the Tau. There is a story behind this devotion that is worth remembering. In the prophet Ezekiel we read:

Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it". (Ez 9,1-4)

In the speech with which the elderly Pope Innocent III opened the IV Lateran council in 1215, he took up this symbol. He would have liked, he said, to be himself the man "dressed in linen, with a writing kit at his side" and to go personally through the whole Church to mark a *Tau* on the foreheads of people who agreed to enter a state of true conversion.<sup>8</sup>

He could not do it in person because of his old age (he died three months later), but that day, hidden in the crowd, probably there was also Francesco of Assisi hidden in the crowd. It is certain that the echo of the Pope's speech came to Francesco's ears and he embraced this appeal and made it his own. From that day on he began to preach penance and conversion even more intensely than before and he started making the sign of the *Tau* on the foreheads of the people who met him. The *Tau* became his seal. He used to sign his letters with it, he drew it on the cells of the friars.

After Francesco's death, Saint Bonaventura said: "He had from heaven the mission to call men to cry, to moan ... and to sign the *Tau* on the foreheads of those who groan and cry".<sup>9</sup> This is why Francesco was defined as "the angel of the sixth seal": the angel who bears himself the seal of the living God and marks it on the forehead of those who are elected. (cf. Ap 7,2 f.)

I know that the symbol of the Tau is particularly dear to the brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order and therefore I ask the Seraphic Father to continue from heaven to put this sign on their hearts and on our hearts, as he put it on the forehead of people.

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<sup>8</sup> Innocent III, *Sermo VI* (PL 217, 673-678).

<sup>9</sup> S. Bonaventura, *Legg. magg.*, 2 (FF, 1022).