

FURTHER ELEMENTS FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS CONVERSION ACCORDING TO FRANCIS

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“To do penance” was for St Francis, the first **‘gift’** he received from the Lord. Grace came upon Francis and God granted him the gift of a new mind, a new heart and a new conscience.

God transformed him for himself and for the others (cf module on “Vocation, charism and mission”):

The hand of the Lord was upon him and the right hand of the Most High **transformed him**, that **through him the Lord might give sinners confidence in a new life of grace**, and that **he might be an example of conversion to God**. (1Cel 2)

This is also our task as Secular Franciscans, for it is we who must carry forward the mission of Francis together with our brothers and sisters of the Franciscan Family!

OUR CONVERSION

What is the penitential task to which we must attend after we have chosen the *form of Gospel life* which the Most High revealed to Brother Francis?

What direction must the path of our conversion now take?

The main point and crucial centre of all the problems which beset religious life today, including our own secular Franciscan life, concerns precisely **the life of faith, how we live our faith**.

We live in a world which is negatively characterised by:

1. the clouding of hope, a hope closed to transcendence;
2. practical agnosticism and indifference about religion;
3. fear of the future;
4. a diffused fragmentation of existence;
5. an increasing flight from inter-personal solidarity;
6. an attempt to impose an anthropology without God and without Christ;
7. the emergence of a new culture, characterised by *moral and juridical relativism*, which sinks its roots into a loss of the truth about human beings.

¹ The core of this unit has been taken from the Lectio Magistralis of **Fr. Felice Cangelosi ofm Cap.** given on 15 March 2007, at the OFM Conventual General Chapter held in Assisi *‘The Lord gave me, brother Francis, to begin to do penance’*. I have introduced a number of changes and personal adaptations to better suit our formation purpose for Secular Formators.

Our "Profession" and our living it in a context of effective consecration (even though in a lay state) does not make us immune to the negative influence of today's socio-cultural context.

The re-foundation of our life, in the midst of the provocations from society and today's world, demands the response of **an authentic and more robust life of faith** to become the **pillar of our identity** and the energy of our apostolic life.

As true disciples of Christ and sons of St Francis, helped by divine grace, we must

1. **HOLD FIRM, until the end, to the Faith which we have received from God**, through the Church;
2. **PENETRATE ever more deeply into this Faith** with all our energy and just judgement;
3. **APPLY it more and more to our lives.**

This is why our **journey of conversion** must be characterised by a **constant return to the truth and rectitude of a life according to the form of the Holy Gospel**.

In exhortations from the Church, there often resound strong words such as conversion, following, disowning, detachment, radicality ... but if, and until, we do not find the courage to constantly renew our own rapport with God, we are not yet in the right direction towards our conversion.

Conversion is *theological*, because **we can discover the extent and direction of our change only by comparing it with the project of God and, concretely, with the person of Christ**, and not by measuring the change with personal standards or with those of other men.

CONVERSION IS ROOTED IN THE LOVE OF GOD.

The first change is not brought about by man who goes towards God but by **God who goes towards man**. It is this movement of grace and communion which makes change possible within us, and also offers us the model for that change.

Therefore, **conversion is a response**.

Jesus opened his preaching with these words:

*The time **is** fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God **is** near; be converted and believe the Gospel.*
(Mk 1, 15)

The indicative comes first (the time is fulfilled - the Kingdom of God is near), this is the announcing of a fact, the offer of the **gift of God** which opens up for us new possibilities of life and understanding.

After the indicative comes the imperative: **be converted**. This is the response to the gift.

Here is an event we must accept, to trust upon and according to which we must

remodel ourselves. **This is conversion.**

Consequently, **conversion is not a generic change**, nor is it an invitation to penance in the sense of **renunciation**, nor can it be reduced to a simple change on the moral level.

It is something different, and the evangelist Mark underlines it by recounting, immediately after, the call of the first disciples (1, 16-20), so as to teach us that *conversion is a leaving and a following*:

“Immediately they left their nets and followed him”; “leaving Zebedee their father in the boat with the other workers, they followed him”.

It is the search of freedom for a new project of existence, indicated by the verb *to follow*. Therefore, **to be converted means to follow the way of the Master.**

CONVERSION: A THEOLOGICAL OVERTURNING

Let us reflect on the Gospel passage about *the confession of Peter*: (Mt 16, 13-20; Mk 8, 27-30; Lk 9, 18-20) which is immediately followed by the first foretelling of the passion and the conditions for following Christ (Mt 16, 21-28; Mk 8, 31-38; Lk 9, 21-27).

We cannot but notice the contrast, which is pregnant with meaning:

On the one hand there is the faith of Peter who confesses Christ to be the Son of the living God, followed by Jesus words of praise;

On the other hand, immediately afterwards, there is the incomprehension of Peter at the foretelling of the Cross (God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen! [Mt 16, 22]) and the sharp reproof of Jesus: Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle (scandal) to me because you do not think the thoughts of God but of man. (Mt 16, 23)

This contrast throws into relief the decisive edge of the clash between **true faith and apparent faith**. To be a believer **it is not enough to confess** that Jesus is the Messiah, or to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. **It is essential to recognise and accept the way of the cross.** (*cf Kenosis*)

Also, the full affirmation of Jesus as Messiah and of his divine Sonship may run the risk of stumbling on human logic. The disciple could run the risk to attribute a divinity to Jesus which comes from ‘flesh and blood’ (cf Mk 16, 17), *a divinity according to man*, which conforms to the grand schemes of human dreaming.

WE NEED, THEN, A CONVERSION IN THE DEPTHS OF OUR BEING.

We are always tempted to “define” Christ. But the type of confession that Jesus seeks from us is not so much a matter of “defining” Christ but rather of making an **option for Christ, by committing our whole existence to Him.**

*Christ is not understood by way of definition.
Christ is understood by way of **conformity to him**.*

Francis of Assisi understood Christ in this way: by choosing the path of **following** him so as to **conform** to him and **be transformed** into the image of the beloved.

This is the reason why conversion implies, first of all, a THEOLOGICAL OVERTURNING:

The disciple is called to **convert his own messianic ideas and to accept the Mystery of Christ in its originality, which consists in the Cross.**

To be faithful to Christ means to welcome the mystery of the Cross and stamp it on our hearts. (*cf Kenosis*)

CONDITIONS OF FOLLOWING CHRIST

If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Mt 16,24; Mk 8,34; Lk 9,23).

Mark broadens this to all: *Then, calling the crowd and his disciples, he said to them...*

So the severe words of Jesus are addressed simultaneously to the crowd and to his disciples, in other words, to everyone. They do not concern just some specific vocations but simply **all Christians**. And they refer to **everyday life** and not some particular moments.

THE FIRST CONDITION: deny yourself.

The imperative which the evangelist uses has a variety of meanings, which we can list in ascending order:

- to say no to ourselves;
- not recognizing ourselves any longer as the person we had been until this moment;
- to consider ourselves like a stranger, someone unknown to ourselves, to disown ourselves;
- to repudiate what we used to be, with all its old interests, ideals, values.

Repudiating what we were before implies a reversal, an overturning of our perspectives; it implies giving a completely new orientation to our lives. It means **renouncing all personal projects in order to welcome the project of Jesus.**

To deny ourselves is the same as removing our ego from the centre of attention and eradicating it in order to place God at the centre. This implies a "death": a dying to our own logic, our own habits, our own point of view, ideals, dreams and so on - in order to rest naked, like Francis, on the naked earth.

To die to oneself means an **expropriation of self**²; it means no longer existing for

² Translators' notes: *expropriation* is literally a going out of oneself (ex = out of; proprio = self, or all that is our own)

yourself, **no longer belonging to yourself in order to be able to give yourself to others** (cf *Vocation, Charism, Mission, and Kenosis*)

THE SECOND CONDITION: take up your cross.

In order to grasp the real meaning of this expression, we need to start with the understanding of the people who would have heard Jesus at the time. His words would have evoked in their minds the picture of the condemned carrying their *patibulum*, or crossbeam, of the cross through the more crowded streets, so that they could receive the curses of everyone.

In this focus, the disciple becomes one condemned by the common mentality of the world, by the 'common sense' of people. The disciple is the object of derision, a renegade, to the 'right thinkers' of this world.

- to take up *his* cross, not the cross of another, not just any cross which might come our way. No, rather the cross prepared by God for each one of us.
- **Take** up his cross. **Take it, not 'to make' one.** We take (and welcome) the cross which the Father has prepared.

The cross is certain; it does not happen by chance when we follow Jesus. Following Jesus means that the cross is certain.

THE THIRD CONDITION: and follow me.

The verb used by all four evangelists to indicate this following is *akoluthèò* which expresses a *conformity* of life. So we are not talking about an episodic following but of **a full and total involvement**. This following indissolubly binds the disciple to the Master. This communion with the Master is living, permanent, personal. It means that we share feelings, ideals, work, friendships, anxieties, struggles, sufferings and so on, with Christ, because the Master asks to fill the whole of our lives with his life, with his whole person. Bonhoeffer spoke of "*undoing every bond in order to be bound to Christ*".

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL OVERTURNING

Having given the conditions for following him, Jesus then explains the reasons: *If anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, will find it.* (Mk 8, 35; Mt 16, 25; Lk 9, 24).

We are now confronted by the **second** overturning demanded by conversion. It is a consequence of the first and is an *anthropological overturning*: from an existence lived as a conservation, **we must pass to an existence lived as a gift**, just like Jesus, like the Son of Man who had to suffer and be put to death and rise on the third day. (Mt

therefore a stripping of oneself. It is a word used a lot in Franciscan writing, but more accessible in the Latin languages than in English.

16, 21; Mk 8, 31; Lk 9, 22)

The disciple cannot have a different destiny from the Master. But this was precisely what Peter did not want and showed it in his violent and instant reaction to the prophecy of the Passion, and later followed it up with his threefold denial.

JESUS WANTS US TO FOLLOW HIM "MORE" CLOSELY

In their accounts of the Passion, the synoptic Gospels say: *Peter followed Jesus from a distance*. (cf Lk 22, 54; Mt 26, 58; Mk 14, 54).

Paradoxically, Peter's denial is not linked to his abandonment of Jesus but to his attempts to follow him. Among the disciples, he is the one who most sought to follow the Master. However, the expression: *from a distance* shows us clearly the reasons for Peter's failure. It is not possible to follow from a distance. Jesus asks us to follow *closely and without looking back*.

LIKE JESUS

We can neither follow Jesus from a distance nor can we stand with him and at the same time keep ourselves safe. Nor can we stand with Jesus and have different ideas from his.

John, referring to the prophecy of Peter's denial (13, 36-38), notes Peter's protest: "*I will give my life for you*" (Jn 13, 37).

Peter had understood that it was necessary to give his life but he had not yet understood the *truth* about the Cross of Christ; he had not grasped that the disciple, in his turn, can give his life only after Jesus has given His.

It is not Peter who must die to save Jesus, but Jesus who must die to save Peter.

The Cross is the revelation of the Son of God who freely gives himself. The heart of Christian truth is not the gift of man to God (as Peter thought) but **the gift of God to man**.

This obviously implies that Peter, too, has to change the direction in favour of whom he has to give his life. He declares his readiness to give his life for Jesus, but not to die *like* Jesus, for the others.

The profound sense of Gospel conversion is rooted in this "*like Jesus*", because this "*like*" is the most demanding and surprising element of the Christian life, that is not a living and dying for God, but rather, to become *transparency* of God's love for all men.

To advance towards Christ

Peter needed to convert and Jesus led him to conversion.

Once converted, as the Gospel of Luke testifies, he assumes the ministry entrusted to him by Jesus (cf Lk 22, 32) and in the catechesis of his First Letter he strengthens his brethren by writing:

“He (Christ) is the living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen by God and precious to Him; set yourselves close to Him, so that you, too, may be living stones making a spiritual house as a holy priesthood to offer the spiritual sacrifices made acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”. (1Peter 2, 4-5)

Here we see another aspect of the dynamic of conversion, particularly included in the Greek word *prosercomai*, which exactly evokes the idea of a journey, of “advancing towards Christ”.

Conversion needs a spiritual movement, a dynamism of faith, just as it is said in Hebrews 10, 22: *“Let us draw near [proserchòmeta], sincere in heart and filled with faith, our hearts purified and free from any trace of bad conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”*³

In John’s gospel, this *movement towards Christ* is put in parallel with *believing in him*. Christ is the “living stone, chosen and precious before God” but he is also the stone “rejected by men”. “To advance towards Christ” and “setting ourselves close to the Risen Christ” necessarily includes *following his journey of humiliation*.

The journey of conversion involves a real and actual acceptance by us and into our very flesh of the entire Mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

Conversion consists in the process of conforming to the Paschal Mystery, as an event to celebrate every day of our concrete lives.

INFLAMED BY LOVE FOR CHRIST

This “binding ourselves to Christ” by conforming to his Mystery, is an expression of love which is **only possible if we become inflamed with love for Him**.

To begin to do penance after the **example of Francis** means to **constantly return to a life according to the form of the Holy Gospel in order to make your own the mind of Christ Jesus** (Ph 2, 5), to follow him along the narrow road of his self-emptying, his *kenosis*, becoming more and more like him each day, so as to be truly inflamed with love for Him.

Let us listen to Francis who speaks to us:

“With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude, with our whole understanding, with all our powers, with every effort, every affection, with all our deepest feelings, with every desire and wish, let us all love the Lord our God”. (RnB 23.8)

³ Personal translation from Greek. The official versions leave much to be desired. BL

Heart, soul, mind, intelligence, strength – all need to be focussed on God. The Poverello broadens what the Gospel asks (cf Mk 12.30; Lk 10.27) by adding that “all our strength, all our affections, all our deepest feelings (*totis visceribus*), all our desires and all our will” must be directed to the “Lord God” without excluding anything, so that our love may be perfect.

This is why, in his *Paraphrase* on the «Our Father», Francis prays:

Your will be done on earth as in heaven:

That we may love you *with our whole heart*

by always thinking of you;

with our whole soul by always desiring you,

with our whole mind by always directing all our intentions to you, and by seeking your glory in everything,

with our whole strength by spending all our energies and affections of body and soul in the service of your love and of nothing else.

This is an insistence which leaves no room for compromise: we must be completely engaged in loving God (*diligere Deum*) and giving ourselves wholly to Him.

The Poverello himself speaks of this in his burning exhortation to his priest brothers who administer the Mystery of the Eucharist with their own hands:

Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that he who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally! (Letter to the Whole Order)

After the urgency of omitting nothing and holding nothing back, follows the urgency of excluding all that may distract us from being with God:

“Therefore let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight,

except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, the only true God,

who is the fullness of good, all good, every good,

the true and supreme good, who alone is good, merciful, gentle, delightful and sweet,

who alone is holy, just, true, holy and upright,

who alone is kind, innocent, clean,

from who, through whom and in whom is all pardon, all grace, all glory of all penitents and just ones, of all the blessed rejoicing together in heaven”. (RnB 23. 9)

Notice how, in this exhortation, the words *nothing, nothing else* are repeated three times in order to underline how Francis, the man who so loved the whole of creation, wanted to exclude, categorically and forcefully, every object of love except God. The threefold repetition of *nothing* throws into relief the insuppressible need of Francis’ heart: he does not have, nor does he want to have, any love other than God, and precisely on this Love he wants to pour the fullness, the intensity and the depth of his own. For this reason, in the following verses, he repeats this *nothing* three more times, again energetically placing a triple negation on watch against all

that might impede his search for God, and also to reaffirm the urgency of union with Him:

*Therefore let nothing hinder us,
nothing separate us, nothing come between us. (RnB 23.10)*

This vision of an exclusive God who engages all human endeavours, is again strengthened in the superabundant exhortation which concludes Chapter 23 of the Regula non Bullata:

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 hearts and love, honour, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the most High and Supreme Eternal God, Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Saviour of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him, Who, without beginning and end, is unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, praiseworthy, sublime, most high, gentle, lovable, delightful and totally desirable above all else for ever. Amen (RnB 23.11)

The language he uses expresses the intensity of the Poverello's feelings. The verbs he uses are particularly indicative: *to desire, to want, to please and delight*, but above all notice the attributes he reserves for God: *tender, meek, gentle and sweet, lovable, delightful and desirable above all things*.

Dear brothers and sisters, there is nothing else to do but to seek, with all our strength, to please God always and to cling to Him as the psalmist says in Psalm 62/63. 9: *My soul clings fast to you*, or more precisely: my whole being remains firmly attached after you.

In the original Hebrew text, in fact, the noun *nefesh* is used with a personal significance (pronoun of the first person singular) and the verb *dabaq* to indicate an unshakable adhesion to God, something like becoming "*glued*" to him by an indestructible interior bond. God and the faithful soul are like two beings inseparably united in the same being, in the same love to constitute almost "one flesh" (cf Gen 2.24)

It is indeed written that "he who unites himself with God forms with Him one spirit" (1Cor 6. 17) and in the consecrated life the sign-image of *one flesh (one flesh only)* gives way to something real, to the highest level of reality, where the creature unites with one infinitely more real than all else, of whom the Psalm 62/63 says: "Your love is better than life, O God".

Only this Love is necessary and only in It - as Francis says - are "all our riches to sufficiency".

To this goal, dear Brothers and Sisters, we must be led by our daily "beginning to do penance"

**THIS IS THE TRUE CONVERSION FOR ANY FRANCISCAN
AND FOR EVERY SECULAR FRANCISCAN**