

Topics:

- Discernment of God's Call
- Being Open to a Life of the Gospel
- The Journey of Conversion
Conversion Journeys of Francis and Clare
and their influence on the OFS

Discernment of God's Call

God creates, redeems, saves for love. Our existence is the exclusive work of God. So, too, the call to salvation, through participation in divine life, is the exclusive work of God the Father. So, too, humankind's re-admission into the plan of universal salvation, due to human sin, is a gratuitous action of the Father, through Christ's redemptive work

God's call is central to understanding the relationship between divine initiative and human response. Those who are called by God are invited to discover their own spiritual image, the quality of their vocation. All are invited to the table of the Kingdom, and for all, free access to love. However, the degree of redeemed man's participation depends on the intensity of one's response.

The more one meets with God, the more intimate is one's spiritual communion with God; the more intensive the yearning, the more the friendship of the one with God grows.

Discernment calls for sensitivity and the capacity to search, both individually and as a fraternity. Decisions are not made alone, but always with our sisters and brothers. A listening attitude, especially to the Word of God, is fundamental in order to respond to whatever God truly expects of each one of us at this particular moment of our lives.

It is important that good initial formation provides opportunities for searching, listening, dialogue, and discernment. The privileged place in which to encounter God is the fraternity, the place of welcome, of human and spiritual growth, for accompaniment. We are formed in fraternity, sharing in life's experiences. No one is formed alone, nor can one be indifferent to formation.

Formation in the Order is carried out as a process of initiation, analogous with the Christian Initiation of the early centuries, a journey of growth—dynamic, gradual, integral, and continuous—which, while it is more intense in the first years, lasts for the whole of life. It aims to accompany and assist, enabling one to embark on a journey of genuine conversion.

Holiness means to be in relation; a way of being with God, living within the Trinitarian dynamic by which they are connected to the Father through the Son in the Spirit of God, poured out precisely to make us children of God.

Holiness involves decisions that are individual but accomplished within the context of fraternity; holiness is the universal vocation of all Christians (LG 40); holiness is understood not as a rejection of, or separation from, the world but as a way of being in the world.

Piety: one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; piety perfects the moral virtue of religion by engendering within the human person a filial affection for God and a loving regard for all people as fellow children of God; “pietas,” responsibility, sense of duty and devotion; piety implies fidelity, reverence, obedience, and commitment; called to live “temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age” (Titus 2,12) while expecting persecution (2 Tim3,12). As an aside, holiness can be learned, developed, and vital in the vocation journey. Piety, on the other hand, is a gift of God and cannot be learned. The person is awakened to be conscious of the beauty of the gift and the treasure that can be attained.

Being Open to a Life of the Gospel

It becomes necessary to understand our experience with Jesus’ experience of God. This is what we find in the Gospel: the encounters, the words and the silence through which Jesus enters the depths of the mystery of God. In God, Jesus discovers a love that is unconditional, free, and always open.

Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, has a relationship with each one of us. He knows us by name. He is the one who takes the initiative and invites us to trust and to follow Him. He is our companion on life’s journey.

The Word of God accompanies us. Listening to the Word in fraternity, we learn to read our personal and communal history in the light of grace—experiences, dreams and desires, failures and difficulties—are situations in which the life of Jesus is presented to us as the key by which to interpret whatever we propose in terms of formation.

The journey turns into a place of encounter, living in a shared responsibility, valuing the positive. The spirit of prayer and devotion are essential. To accompany means to create spaces that make responsibility, trust and transparency possible in all areas of everyday life: work, family, the use of money, new technology, etc.

It is only by living that we learn to live. Our experiences and encounters along the way are what constantly shape our identity. To build up the person we are, we have Jesus as a model, walking the paths of our humanity: Jesus, the Son of God, by becoming our brother, reveals our ultimate goal: to be brothers and sisters, only to become, at last, sons and daughters of God as well. (1Celano15)

The Holy Spirit is the first formator, allowing oneself to be molded and led by the Spirit, who pours into us the sentiments, emotions, affections and sensibilities of Christ, as well as the desire to be conformed to Him as the poor and Crucified One.

The candidate, under the action of the Holy Spirit, works toward taking responsibility for his/her own life. The process of formation begins with work on oneself. This requires openness, effort, sincere dialogue, a recognition of one's own limitations, the capacity to accept suggestions.

The formator is a companion on the way who is convinced of the beauty of the Gospel form of life, lives his/her own vocation with pleasure and joy, willing to share his/her experiences of the search for God, is humbled and docile to the Spirit, avoids the tendency to interpret events and arguments as the only view, and avoids the tendency of promoting one's personal and only devotion, and open to the Word.

The formator accompanies in the process of learning to be authentic in life; fostering growth; allows for personal initiatives so as to promote sincerity, creativity, and responsibility; has a realistic self-image, good self-esteem, emotionally balanced, accepts calmly that the formator does not have all the answers or all the skills; open to working together with the formation team; always ready to continue learning.

The formation team specifies what is required of each candidate once the journey of formation has begun. None of them acts individually, but all work in a co-ordinated way.

To live means never tiring of searching for the way. The horizon remains open, reminding us that the meaning of life is built up, step by step. This is initial formation, to engage in it with passion, and to journey in it trustingly.

In addition to Sacred Scripture and Franciscan sources are: fraternity life, where we test our capacity to establish human relationships that are mature; contemplation, where we purify our images of God through the experience of the God of Jesus Christ; and secularity, where our capacity to dedicate our lives of apostolic work and the observance of the evangelical counsels while living in the world, is put to the test.

Journey of Conversion

The vocation to a life of penance is a gift of God. It takes life from the initiative of God who wants all to be saved and to participate in His life. It's a call to higher intimacy, to a friendship that transforms.

Conversion begins with an attitude of openness, ready to listen and perceive inspirations which solicits something new (1 Sam3,10).

Penance for Franciscans is equivalent to the Biblical meaning of "metanoia"—intimate conversion of the heart to God, as a vital attitude, as a continuous state of being. It is not a question of "doing penance," but of "being penitent."

Penance is seen not only as purification from sin, but as an ever more profound insertion into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, dead and risen, so as to offer an increasing

response to God's love, who wants to make us co-sharers of His presence. It concerns a commitment to love which is responsible, and carried forward with generosity.

Jesus is the paradigmatic figure for holiness. In Jesus, grace makes us respond to the gift of holiness offered by God and the means by which we can grow in that holiness of which Jesus is the model.

The penitential life is fed by incessant prayer which nourishes friendship and communion between God and others. After the example of Christ, Francis considered prayer, both public and liturgical, as very important: "let us follow the word, the life, the teaching and the Holy Gospel of Him" (Rule 1221). "We must do everything according to the model we see shining in Him" (LM 12,1).

To experience the encounter with the Incarnate and Crucified Christ. (1 Celano 84): "the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupied his memory to the extent that he wanted to think hardly of anything else." As an aside: Crib. Cross. Ciborium.

St Clare wrote in her Testament (v5), "The Son of God made Himself our way, and our blessed father Francis who was the true lover and imitator of Him, has taught and shown us this way with words and example."

"Gaze into that mirror daily...so that you may adorn yourself, clothed entirely, inwardly and outwardly, with diverse flowers and garments of all virtues. Indeed this mirror reflects blessed poverty, holy humility, and a charity beyond words, just as, with the grace of God, you can contemplate them." (4th Letter, 15-18)

You recall, from the beginning, our first identification: "brothers and sisters of penance." The Fraternity is a sign and means of conversion; the very first Rule, the Prologue.

When the Religious and Seculars love each other mutually, the Spirit of God lives in them. God Himself, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit set up their dwelling among them. As a unity, called to share the divine life, they are brothers and sisters of Christ: "Oh, how holy and delightful...to have such a brother" (LF 9,56).

The Fraternity, summoned by the Holy Spirit in Christ's name, is an aspect of penitential life: members help each other to grow in the love of God, through reciprocal love, encouragement, fraternal correction, etc. Together they overcome difficulties.

A Fraternity which would really be a symbol and a means of conversion to God comprises:

- a serious and constant effort for union among the members;
- to see each other as the first friends of one's life;
- to challenge obstacles to the very meaning of fraternal life: individualism, self-centeredness, autonomy, absenteeism, dissatisfaction.

For Francis, the penitential life was realized within the Church, with the Church, and through the Church. There were many penitential movements in Francis' day, but not in harmony with the Church. His writings are animated by a profound ecclesial feeling. Francis is the Poverello of Christ and humble servant of the Church.

Therefore, "let us begin, brothers and sisters, because up till now we have done little or nothing" (1 Celano 103).

"Blessed are those who die in the exercise of penance because they will go to the Kingdom of heaven" (Rule 1221).

Let us pray that the Lord will dispose our heart to penance (Rule of St Clare, c9,22), and help us to persevere in penance to the end (1 Faithful 1,6; 2 Faithful 9,48).

And it is correct to put this task before the formators and all the brothers and sisters—to blend our hearts in prayer with the same words of Francis:

"All powerful, most holy, most high and supreme God—all good, supreme good, totally good, You who alone are good, may we give You all praise, all glory, all thanks, all honor, all blessing, and all good. So be it. So be it. Amen." (Praises for Every Hour 10).

Charism of St Francis

- central position of Sacred Scripture
- faithful adherence to the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation
- love of prayer and contemplation being made sensitive to God's will and capable of accepting it
- free and available to God and neighbor
- fraternity as a gift from God and the place where Gospel life takes place
- love for the Church and the hierarchy
- apostolic spirit
- devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who gave us the Lord of majesty, our brother

Charism of the Order

- living the Gospel in fraternity
- penance and works of mercy
- devotion to contemplative prayer
- humility in service
- corporal and spiritual works of mercy in one's own social and cultural arena
- realizing the universal call to holiness
- continuous conversion
- service to the infirm, the marginalized, and the poor

Spirituality of Penance

- a journey that leads to God under the impulse of love of God and neighbor
- our response to the love of God, and enlivened by His Spirit; a penitent in spirit and in practice
- acknowledging being a creature, totally dependent on God, and at the same time, confess the infinite greatness of divinity, and by comparison, the depths of one's own nothingness
- our vocation is a call to greatness, reached by means of continuous journey towards God-likeness
- penance-metanoia-conversion and works of charity are characteristic elements

The search for meaning awakes desire. Desire is the key, launching us into an encounter with reality. Desire is always clothed in concrete experiences. Desire connects us to Jesus. Desire inspires

us to share His sentiments, to be like Him. St Francis, *a man of desires*, allows God to transform his desire to be a knight into an even more sublime desire: to be like Jesus.

Prayer is desire. It's our affectionate reaching toward God, and God's desire for us. Francis understood that the desire for God is part of being human. We are wired for God. *"Desire above all things,"* he wrote, *"to have the Spirit of the Lord and His holy manner of working."* Inside the human heart, desire is like an architect—drawing sketches of the ideal love from the people it sees, from the books it reads, from its hopes and dreams—in the fond hope that the eye may see the ideal and the hand touch it. The absolute ideal of every heart indeed exists, and the ideal is God. Desire enlarges our capacity for God.

Prayer and desire are linked together. The path to God is through the burning love of the Crucified. One cannot enter this path unless one is a person of desire. If desire is the compass of our lives, the prayer focuses the direction. We cannot find this direction in the noise and clutter of the world.

We need to pay attention to our desires. Desires are the deepest cravings within us. Not desiring passing things, materialistic things. But the desire that is life-giving, a desire for a "Thou," not an "it." The desire for an "it" can obscure our desire for a "Thou."—God. Perseverance in prayer nurtures our desire for God, even when there is darkness and emptiness.

When things become meaningless, life fills up with fear that overtakes us, and prevents us from knowing who we are. Meaninglessness turns to loneliness, and loneliness to egoism, preventing us from seeing who we truly are. However, deep in the core of every human being, like an ever-beating heart, lies the desire for God.

We should be encouraged to enter into our hearts, into the chamber of solitude and silence where God dwells. In this place of “in-dwelling,” we can be truthful about our desires. Otherwise, if we fear our desires, we may be afraid to pray. And if we fear to pray, our lives can become fragmented. When we name our desires and let these desires become prayer, then grace enters in, the Holy Spirit takes root, God become intimately present, even in spiritual dryness and desolation.

Prayer is where we sort our desires and where we are sorted out by our desires. Everything can lead us into relationship with God as long as we keep the flame of desire burning, and let this flame enlighten the darkness of our hearts.

The life of Francis is full of questions: why do people kill one another? Why is there poverty and exclusion? Why suffering? On the way to Apulia, in his attempt to become a knight, he is awakened by a dream: *Whom do you wish to serve, the servant or the Master?*

Who can break the tendency we have to look only at ourselves? Conversion consists in changing our way of looking at things, moving from indifference to compassion, allowing what we see to affect and transform us.

God looks at us through the poor (lepers). These are the paradoxes of the Gospel: we are seen by those we do not wish to see. Only when Francis lets himself be seen by the eyes of the God of the poor (lepers) is he able to open his own eyes and learn how to look.

As we gaze into the eyes of Christ of the Cross of San Damiano, our eyes are filled with mercy. Something of His way of looking at us moves us from silence to listening, from solitude to solidarity, from contemplation to compassion. Here begins the process of transformation of our desires: we start by looking at things like Jesus, and end up seeing them as He sees them. And that's not all: you end up being another Christ. And even more: you yourself become another mirror, so that whoever sees you, sees Jesus.

Contemplation invites discipleship, and discipleship invites contemplation. Both sustain the meaning of our life as brothers and sisters. Together from the vantage point of fraternity, we extend God's gaze over the world prophetically, denouncing injustice and becoming witnesses to the hope and joy of the Gospel.

Saint Clare

"The Son of God became for us the way which our blessed Father Francis, His true and ardent lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example." (near the end of her life, what she sensed in 1212).

Palm Sunday: ladies dressed in their finest, proudly processed to the Bishop for a palm branch. Her attention was directed to the things of God. Conflict between Assisi's social yearnings and spiritual promise. Rather than approaching the Bishop, she remained in her place, prompting the Bishop to come to her. It was a symbolic gesture: her renunciation of the social conventions of the time with all its vanity and appeal to wealth with which they were imbued. The Bishop's awareness and reverence of the movement of God within her calling her to accept the "palm of martyrdom" in imitation of the suffering Christ. Clare followed the advice of Francis, accepted the palm branch, and Palm Sunday evening, her journey began.

She remembers that night: (To Agnes, about Pope Gregory IX, on "Privilege of Poverty): "What you do, may you keep doing and not stop, but with swift pace, nimble step, and feet that do not stumble, so that your movement does not even stir up the dust, may you go forward tranquilly, joyfully, briskly, and cautiously...trusting in no one and agreeing with no one because he might want to dissuade you from pursuing your founding purpose or might place a stumbling block in your way..." (2nd Letter, 12-13)

Clare's advice to Agnes: (concerned for her lack of peace and joy rather than about fasting rules, advised her not to let bitterness and confusion take over, and to keep eternity and the example of Christ and His Mother in mind) "...Our flesh is not bronze nor is our strength that of stone. No we are frail and weak...so offer to God your reasonable service seasoned with the salt of your discretion."

Both Francis and Clare would later direct their followers to desire, above all human endeavors, "To have the Spirit of the Lord and His holy way of working." This is how we, too, are to become saints: by using our talents and skills to give God reasonable service, seasoned with discretion. "Do the best you can with what you've got."

Francis and Clare saw through the alienating patterns that categorized people and separated them from one another, from the whole of creation, and from God.

Offers very few intellectual or practical formulas for making progress in the life of prayer, that prayer was a matter of falling and remaining in love, a process that defies plans, methods, or well-defined approaches. On the contrary, in light of the numerous reflections on the mystery of Christ in her letters to Agnes, she suggests that the development of a life of prayer comes only through focusing our attention on God. She writes: Pay attention, focus your *gaze* upon the suffering Christ; *consider* the mystery upon which you are reflecting that you may lose yourself in lovingly contemplating, *contemplate*, Christ; all the while *desiring to imitate* Him. This formula, paradoxically profound in its simplicity, reflects the insights of a woman eager to awaken affection in others for the God of her heart.

18 years later, Clare repeats it (4th Letter) in a much fuller way: “*Gaze* upon the mirror (Jesus) each day, and continually study your face in it, that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes...look at the border of that mirror...at the surface of that mirror, *consider*...then, in the depth of this same mirror, *contemplate*...” here we see the bond that exists between her practice of prayer and her pursuit of spiritual growth.