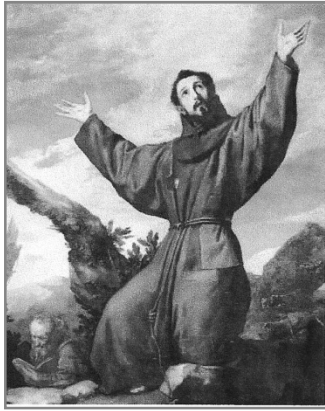


Franciscan Living



By Jusepe de Ribera

Conversion: But it's Hard!

By Francine Gikow, SFO, Staff Editor

“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’.”
SFO Rule, II, #7)

Secular Franciscans have committed to change. Our original name, as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, means conversion (change). By virtue of our dedication to the way of St. Francis, we profess to make the lifelong effort to change ourselves. As St. Clare says in her Third Letter to Agnes of Prague, “Transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself.” We are to become the Gospel by our lives. This is radical change, and by being radical, in essence, it means that it is not easy.

So, let's take a look at conversion. Conversion begins when we are graced with a new awareness of a need for change. This grace, coming from God, may be like a subtle, growing discomfort, or it might manifest itself as a sudden hit from a “two by four board,” as one of my sisters in Francis likes to describe her experience. We might have a growing concern or unease that our life does not conform with our ideals or we might be struck in a sudden moment of realization that what we do, is not loving. In any event, this awareness of a need for change is grace - a free gift from God. We can pray for this gift of awareness, but we cannot earn it. It comes in its own time. However, we can ask God to help us to develop sensitivity toward what is “of God” versus what is “not of Him” (discernment of the spirits). A Spiritual Director is invaluable in this effort. This growing awareness is really the beginning of a love story where God's love for us is enticing us to

expand our love toward greater things. As described in the Song of Solomon (7:10):

“I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me.”

Now comes the hard part. After we become aware of the need for change, we must respond. We can't ignore it and do nothing. We must acknowledge it and examine our life. This takes courage, especially if we are forced to examine our fears, our habits, or prior experiences in order to allow us to be free to love more deeply. Sometimes our own history prevents us from embracing change. We have to let go of whatever is keeping us from opening ourselves to greater love and this can be a challenge!

I find it helpful to write down what is encouraging me to change, so that I can keep in mind the call for conversion. I also write down my fears and concerns in a spiritual journal. There I can pour out to God, all of my objections as to why I feel the change is hard. I sit with it awhile - sometimes days or weeks, but God is there working in my soul, enticing me forward with His love. God does not rush us. He is patient with us in His loving. He helps us let go of what is hindering us from following Him.

However, there comes a time when all of the prayer about our concerns comes to an end and a commitment to change must occur. Then prayer becomes a prayer for courage, since it takes courage to change ourselves. It takes a leap of faith. We become poor to ourselves as we lean on our faith in God, who is our strength.

Often I say a little prayer which I repeat throughout the day: “O my God, I trust you (or hope in you or love you), help me to trust you (or hope in you or love you) always.” This is a prayer of will - I will it, so therefore, I will do it. Sometimes, we have to practice the virtue we want, in order to let our belief catch up. We act as if we have the courage to change, and eventually we do!

Ultimately, we must put aside ourselves and look only towards God. If we are always thinking about our fears, past history or concerns, we lose sight of God. God is THE way for us, our love and our very life. In a way, thinking about our own concerns can be another form of selfishness. We put “me” before God. That is why the desert fathers encouraged self discipline. It is the discipline of will toward God. We do not force; but we gently let go of our concerns so that we are free to find God in a new way and become His alone. It is a love story - the original love story between God and you.

God entices. God invites. God loves us to turn towards Him. He loves us in our very inner being and wants us to love Him more. We only respond to His love.

“My beloved is mine and I am His.” Song of Solomon 2