



The Minister's Message

BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF PENANCE

By Tom Bello, SFO
National Minister

When St. Francis called us into an Order, in the very beginning, and wrote our Rule, he considered and named us, "Brothers and Sisters of Penance." Let us spend a few moments in this Lenten Season unpacking our name.

"Brothers and Sisters" are, of course, a family, mutually interdependent, hopefully loving, certainly related by blood, in our case, the blood of the Lamb.

Beyond that, in the Prologue to our Rule, Chapter One, Concerning Those Who Do Penance, we read:

"All who love the Lord with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with all their strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love their neighbors as themselves (cf. Mt 22:39), and hate their bodies with their vices and sins, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and produce worthy fruits of penance.

"Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, because 'the spirit of the Lord will rest upon them' (cf. Is 11:2), and he will make 'his home and dwelling among them' (cf. Jn 14:23), and they are the sons of the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5:45), whose works they do, and they are the spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).'"

Thus, loving God and our neighbors, hating our sins, receiving the Sacred Body and Blood and producing worthy fruits of penance make us one family in Christ, just as Christ will say, "For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt. 12:50).

What then is penance? What are "worthy fruits of penance?"

"Penance" is our Lord's first call to us, seen in the very first words Jesus utters in what scholars tell us is the very first written Gospel: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15 NAB revised).

This is the call of Lent. This is that call in our Rule (Article 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 calls 'conversion.' Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily."

This is indeed our Christian journey, and St. Francis, in the Prologue to our Rule, presents a life of penance, a life spent turning away from sin and living in Christ, as the only possible response to our all-mighty, all-holy, all-loving God.

Living in Christ, living as Christ lived, then, produces the worthy fruits of penance: prayer, praise, humility, charity. For Francis and for his followers, Jesus Christ is the focus for our penance; Jesus Christ is the way of penance. The primary struggle of penance is, thus, that daily need to turn away from sin and self and to turn toward Christ and the Gospel.

Since Jesus is always present, so the kingdom of God is always present, if we only repent and believe the Gospel. This is that third of the marvelous Luminous Mysteries announced by our late Holy Father John Paul II: The Proclamation of the Kingdom and the Call to Penance or Repentance since we need to do it again and again day after day.

When I pray this third Mystery of Light, I try always to offer this decade of the Holy Rosary for us, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, the Secular Franciscan Order and for all our Franciscan family here and throughout the world. Might I beg you to do the same?

Let us pray: "Heavenly Father, in Your great mercy, You have called us to imitate and grow closer to Christ, Your Son, by following in the footsteps of Sts. Francis and Clare. Help us, please, to turn away from sin and to be faithful to the Gospel as Christ gives us the grace. Help us to go constantly from Gospel to Life and from Life to Gospel. Help us always to pray for and to support our brothers and sisters in our common call to Penance. Help us to offer ourselves, as did Your Son, in loving service of that kingdom where you live with the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen."