

OUR WORK AS A MEANS OF DOING PENANCE

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Franciscan scholars now believe that St. Francis's *Earlier Exhortation* is in all probability the “primitive rule” known to have been given to the first lay followers of St. Francis but thought to have been lost forever. This first “norm of life” was prepared by St. Francis for our predecessors who were known as the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. This discovery is of such significance that the *Earlier Exhortation* was placed as the prologue of the 1978 Rule. It is an incredibly fortunate inclusion for us – for it contains St. Francis own heartfelt words to those laypersons of the 13th century who first followed the Gospel path we have chosen and now trod.

Francis being Francis – he wastes no time getting right to the heart of the matter. The very first paragraph of the *Earlier Exhortation*, in the section entitled *Concerning Those Who Do Penance*, contains the five principles of the penitential life-style he himself had embraced:

1) loving the Lord, 2) loving your neighbor, 3) turning from sinful ways, 4) turning toward the Lord through the Eucharist; and, as a result of all the above, 5) “producing worthy fruits of penance.” Francis' understanding of penance is not that of a list of proscribed penitential practices nor only a turning away from sin in repentance but also involves the positive dimension of turning in love toward our God and our neighbor and expressing that love through our actions.

Francis emphasized the need to do penance; it was in the doing that conversion would take place. So had it happened for him in embracing the leper and rebuilding San Damiano. Having a change of heart is not merely achieved in making an internal emotional adjustment but is achieved in the “doing.” Fr. David Flood, OFM beautifully expresses this dynamic:

“Franciscanism is not a set of ascetical disciplines. It is a way of dealing with the universe. One does not bend oneself to law and rule; one catches onto the rhythm of things....Francis runs through the motions of Franciscanism. People have changed because they engage in them; by doing them they change. One goes through the steps in order to dance and soon one is dancing and forgets the steps...Francis emphasized doing. Consciousness changes in doing the truth.” (D.Flood, *The Communitarium*, 3 1980, n.2, 20.)

As it happens, "work" is most of what we “do.” So it is important to ask: How does one “do penance” through work? We begin to answer this question by first turning to St. Francis, who in the Fifth Chapter of his First Order Rule of 1223, wrote

Those brothers, to whom the Lord has given the grace of working, should work faithfully and devoutly in such a way that with idleness, the enemy of the soul, excluded, they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, to which everything else must give service.

In calling his followers to work *devoutly*, our Seraphic Father intends to convey that work must fulfill his first principle of penance by serving as a means to give honor and glory to God. There is the story of Francis working on a piece of pottery. For a moment he became so absorbed in his task that he lost his awareness of God's presence. Realizing this, Francis smashed the pottery leaving it in shards. God would be first in all his work.

The second principle of penance, love of neighbor, is accomplished through working *faithfully*, that is, to work in the service of others. Fr. Daniel McClellan, OFM, explains that:

The very nature of work as "grace" means that its fulfillment is only possible when it is exercised for the many. When work becomes solely the measure of personal success, one is unable to plug oneself into the social matrix. Individual energy is turned inward and the result is confusion, isolation and alienation. Religious people call that sin.
(*To Evangelize American the Culture: A Franciscan Approach*, Franciscan Studies, Vol.47, 1987, Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University)

Our work in service of others, work as grace, usually occurs within the boundaries of our everyday lives – in our families raising children, our parishes, neighborhoods, workplaces, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other volunteer opportunities. This mindfulness of meeting the “other’s needs” is God-like in its self-emptying. Work must be a way of helping us to be poor so that we can be like God and thus faithful to that image in which we are made. God's poverty is a self-emptying on our behalf. Our work as service for others mirrors the way God expresses His love for us. As God, who was rich made himself poor for us, likewise we should be doing work that makes us "poor" as we expend our talents and energies on behalf of our sisters and brothers in Christ. Some of our work as Franciscans should involve a special sensitivity to serving the needs of the least among us, the *minores*. It may be the youngest or the middle child in a family, the co-worker who ends up being the office’s social outcast, the at risk teen, the unemployed, the one who is most in need of attention, or the countless other members of our society God puts into our lives so we can be Christ to them.

The third principle of penance is that penitents “hate their bodies with their vices and sins.” Francis did not always have the easiest time separating what St. Paul referred to as "the flesh"- our sinful tendencies epitomized in the seven cardinal sins - from the body - which is held in such great esteem by God that Jesus became one of us. For Francis it was no small thing that work served to prevent sloth or idleness. He knew from his own wayward youth how idleness led to indulgence in our sinful tendencies. Idleness truly was an "enemy of the soul" which work helped mitigate. Yet we have come to realize that we must take care of ourselves—body, mind, and spirit in order to be healthy so we can do the work God put us here to do. It is all about balance.

“Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ” was St. Francis’ fourth principle of doing penance. If penance or conversion involves a turning away from sin and toward a deepening relationship with God then receiving the Eucharist is the greatest means of entering into intimacy with the Divine. It is of great significance that God elevates human work in the Eucharist. Bread and wine, the "work of human hands," are the substances to be changed into His body and blood. And as these symbolic gifts are carried reverently to the altar at the offertory, the Church encourages us to offer up all of our work, our own personal sacrifices, all our successes and failures, our most menial tasks, to the God who loves us.

In a way analogous to his reverence for the Eucharist as the actual presence of the Lord, Francis saw the likeness of his Lord throughout the created universe. Creation was sacramental for Francis. All of creation, in varying degrees, expressed Christ through whom all things were made. Francis, consequently, received all of creation with tenderness and reverence, for each

worm, every leaf, evoked the image of the Lord through whom all these things were most nobly created. In imitation of St. Francis, the good work we are called to do requires careful and reverent attention toward the object of our efforts that is worthy of our esteem as part of a graced creation.

The "worthy fruits of penance" are enumerated in St. Francis's *Later Exhortation*, which expands on the earlier version. These fruits include humility, mercy, charity, patience, simplicity, and purity. These virtues should be embodied in our approach to the work we do. Attentive work done with love, done for God's glory, done in esteem for others and reverence for creation, done with diligence, humility and selflessness too; done with sensitivity to that intricate and beautiful "rhythm of things," the movements of the Lord's Spirit -- this is truly work that becomes a "sharing in the creation, redemption and service of the human community." *Work as a way of doing penance; work that dances.*

Dialogue Starter

1. How is work a means of "doing penance"?