

## BEING A BAND OF PENITENTS

### Historical background<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Caldwell K. Franciscan Penitence in The Cord (1996)

Francis referred to the Third Order as 'A Band of Penitents.' In Francis' time 'Penitents' were lay people who presented a formal statement about how they intended to live their lives to the Bishop or his representative. Thereafter the Penitent wore distinctive garb and performed works of penance and charity such as fasting, prayer and care for the sick or travellers. Penitents included married and single people living in their own homes as well as oblates attached to religious houses. Becoming an official Penitent was still a common practice during that time and there existed a formal 'Order of Penitents' in the Church.

Francis himself became a Penitent between 1206, the date of his initial conversion when he turned back from going to war in Perugia, and the beginning of the Brotherhood in 1208. It was during this time that Francis cared for lepers, repaired three tumbledown churches and embraced a Life of Penance. In these actions we can see facets of the Franciscan charism of humility, love and joy, and of prayer and service, reflected in Francis' early rule of 1221 - as well as the recognition of the need for penitence when he reflects that *"all we have of our own are vice and sins"*.

### What do we mean by penitence?

Penitence refers to the feelings of sorrow and regret arising from knowledge and recognition of the shortcomings which continually mark all our lives, individual and corporate, and in accepting God's forgiveness for them. True penitence is characterised by acknowledging that in all things we are totally dependent on God and his grace. This can lead us into a true *metanoia* – a complete turning and reorientation away from ourselves and towards God. It is knowing that it is through Grace alone that we are enabled to re-dedicate ourselves afresh to His service. Francis believed that penitence led to spiritual joy and mentioned the gracious gift of the penitential life in his Testament: *'The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to do Penance'*.

### The penitential life and the Franciscan Way<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>FoxTSSF John

A personal desire therefore for us as Tertiaries, is that through true penitence and recognition of our dependence on God's grace, we may be enabled to confront the sin in ourselves and the sin in the world, to accept God's mercy and forgiveness, and thus be enabled to emerge in renewed freedom, peace and joy. Penitence and accepting God's forgiveness is a continuous process and if we truly engage with it becomes, not a setback, but a way of life; and through which we are given the grace to gradually see our shortcomings more clearly and honestly.

What does this mean in practice? Fasting and vigils sackcloth and ashes? Rather - the true penitent will *'carry within him/herself an inner peace and happiness which others may perceive, even if they do not know its source (Principles Day 28)'*

This can only lead to a life that will be more God-like, befitting the Kingdom of God, and this will affect all that our life encompasses. Its reality will depend on the leading of the Spirit that is renewing the internal life, leading to a deeper appreciation of the choice for God.

We are called to preach the gospel and witness to the gospel life in a manner that will be an apparent break from the value systems of secular powers. Do we reflect enough on such major issues? Do we allow Penitence and the acceptance of Gods forgiveness to dictate the quality of our actions and behaviour in daily life? Being genuinely penitent implies a deep and honest appreciation of our shortcomings day by day, individual and corporate. And in bringing these to God in confession, and in accepting His forgiveness, we may be moved a little closer to those gospel standards Christ gives us.

So, for Franciscans, as for all Christians, true penitence leads to an honest, relevant gospel life for today. Once the penitential charism flows through our lives, and as we share it with our brothers and sisters on fire with this same charism, we may indeed move a little closer to building into a true" Band of Penitents."

### **Further material**

The following may be of help:

Manual A-14	The Principles Day 16 ..."Lastly we are encouraged ...
Manual C-1	Third Order Litany
Assisi Booklet 4	Thinking about Fasting
Pltchford Susan	Chapter 5 "Penitence: Show me your scars" in Following Francis, Morehouse Publishing 2006

### **Bible passages for reflection**

2 Samuel 12  
Psalm 51, Psalm 139  
Isaiah 58, Isaiah 43.1-7  
Matthew 5  
Mark 10:5  
Luke 6. 20-49, 8.9-14, 16.19-31,19. 41-44  
John 7.37-39  
Romans 7.14-24

### **How to use this material**

- As part of one's personal annual review
- For personal reflection, maybe on Retreat
- As a basis for a Local Group discussion