



**Annual Franciscan Federation Conference
Keynote Address – Joanne Schatzlein OSF
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**Talk 2
Penitential Pilgrimage: A Call To Conversion**

INTRODUCTION

Opening quote from the TOR:

“With all in the holy Catholic and apostolic Church who wish to serve God, the brothers and sisters of this Order are to persevere in true faith and penance. They wish to live in this evangelical conversion of life in a spirit of prayer, of poverty, and of humility. Therefore, let them abstain from all evil and persevere to the end in doing good because God’s Son himself will come again in glory and will say to all who acknowledged, adored and served him in sincere repentance: “Come blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world” (Mt 25:34) #2

We are penitents, called to a life of conversion, ultimately to take possession of the kingdom prepared for us.

As a student at St. Bonaventure University many years ago, it was such a revelation to me when I was studying Kathleen Moffat’s work about the history of the penitential life. In those days I was attributing many things to Francis as the great originator. Then I discovered that restoring churches was a role for the early penitent, along with fasting, wearing sackcloth, not taking up arms, proclaiming one’s sin publicly etc. Because these requirements were so difficult, “voluntary penitents” emerged, and it is their heritage that we Third Order Franciscans base our lives on.

MEDIEVAL PENITENTIAL PILGRIMAGES

To understand the reasons for this type of pilgrimage, one must understand the Medieval notion of GUILT. For the medieval person, God appeared to control the entire natural world from moment to moment. He was the direct and immediate cause of everything.

I love the ICEL Translation of Psalm 147, which captures the causative nature of God: The Psalmist is reflecting on God’s power over the forces of nature, sending snow like wool and scattering the frost like ashes.



*The Lord hurls chunks of hail.
God Speaks, the ice melts
God breathes, the streams flow...ending with Halleluia!*

For ordinary people in those times evil was more than an abstract force; to them it was real, visible and tangible, capable of inflicting actual physical damage. There was a learned correlation between someone's sin and the consequences of illness and disease. It wasn't until the eighteenth century that people were prepared to concede to nature any power of its own. Since they could not control these irresistible forces, be it forces of evil or weather related, the only remedies available were supplication and the performance of pious acts considered likely to propitiate them.

As **Jonathan Sumption** says in his book entitled *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God*, "The cult of the saints was the counterpoint of the fear of evil." The saints were seen as "an army of auxiliaries in the cosmic battle against evil." And later Sumption quotes a theologian of the twelfth century: "The relics of the saints...were the means whereby the faithful might resist the power of evil in the world. They gave health to the bodies of men [and women] and absolution to their souls." (p.11, 20-21.)

The Penitential Pilgrimage **served several purposes** in the life of Medieval persons:

- It served as a **second baptism**. Again to quote Sumption: "By inflicting severe physical hardship on pilgrims, it satisfied a desire for the remission of their sins and opened up to them the prospect of a 'second baptism.' By showing them the places associated with Christ and the saints, it gave pilgrims a more personal, more literal understanding of their faith." (p. 160)
- This type of pilgrimage was **imposed for serious, scandalous sins**. (The Irish were the first to begin assigning pilgrimages as penance.) Of note, the primary group committing sins of scandal consisted of members of the clergy and the nobility! "Public penance, which usually meant pilgrimage, was imposed for public sins with overtones of scandal, notably sexual offenses of the clergy...The scandalous overtones were obviously strong in the cases involving clerics or noblemen, and it was above all these classes who were wont to be sent on long pilgrimages." (138-139)
- **Judicial penitential pilgrimages** differed from voluntary pilgrimages undertaken as an act of personal piety in that they were imposed as a matter of law to serve a punishment for a serious offense committed. The judicial pilgrimage was more fearsome in theory than in practice, since by the 10th century penitents could readily be absolved and reconciled to the Church immediately after confession. Or a sinner could be released from his penance by paying for it. We won't go into the implications of that!
- Certificates and documents were required to bring back to the court or the Church, proving that a person had actually served their pilgrimage sentence.



- **Preparation:** While today being sent on a pilgrimage would not be experienced as a “penance” perhaps it would be more reflective of its intended goal if we understood what pilgrims had to do prior to an imposed pilgrimage:
 - **Make out a will** making it clear how possessions were to be disposed of should a person not return.
 - Pilgrims were advised **to travel out of a sense of poverty** ... rich pilgrims often made generous donations to the poor prior to leaving on pilgrimage.
 - The pilgrims were asked to **make amends** for any wrongs done. **St. Louis IX of France** is a great example of this. Prior to leaving on a crusade, Louis sent commissioners out to the provinces of his kingdom, asking what wrongs might have been done in his name and then made amends to each in the name of the King.
 - **The lot of one poor penitential pilgrim** is described: “He throws away his weapons and wanders far and wide across the land, barefoot and never staying more than a night in one place...He fasts and wakes and prays by day and by night. He cares not for his body and lets his hair and nails grow freely.”

Is there something in this preparation that might be helpful to any one of us in our preparation for pilgrimage?

SIN AND THE NEED FOR PENANCE TODAY

M Scott Peck’s book: *The People of the Lie*

There are books that make impressions that last a lifetime and this is one of them for me personally. I realized how immune I had become to the notion of sin, innocent sin if there is such a thing. Peck believes that it is this numbing of social consciences that is leading us to such acts of violence today. Violence begins in small ways, i.e. vicious words, alienation, taking little things rationalizing that “the company” owes me, cheating in school or on tax forms, stretching the laws to the limits, and on and on.

One story I will always remember involved a father who had lost an elder favored son to drowning. In his grief at this loss, he totally ignored his second son, and as a Christmas gift gave this son a gun. This child got the message...”Why don’t you just go and shoot yourself.” While this is a radical example, what ways do we do the same thing, giving subtle or not so subtle messages to people that are alienating, denigrating, putting them in their place, making sure they know where they sit on the proverbial totem pole!



Michael Cusato, OFM

Of all the definitions of the notion of sin today, I think Michael Cusato, OFM, current Director of the Franciscan Institute, has described it best in two articles he wrote in THE CORD entitled, “*To Do Penance: Facere poenitentium.*” (57.1) and “*The Tau: The Meaning of the Cross for Francis of Assisi.*” (57.3)

He describes Francis’ reflection in his Testament on his call to a life of conversion and specifically to be a penitent:

“..to do penance, for Francis, was quite simply a renewed way of life, or in his term, a forma vitae that was meant to be the way that one lived the entirety of one’s life. Penance was and is one’s way of life in Christ.”

Michael goes on to say that

“‘to do penance’ is more than simply going to confession, having one’s faults erased by the sacrament, then resuming one’s life trying to do better than before. No, ‘to do penance’ means to begin to consciously distance oneself from and reject all those attitudes, values, behaviors and actions that further fragment the human fraternity of creatures, setting oneself over and against another. This is authentic conversion; this is the root of a penitential spirituality; to do this, daily and for the rest of one’s life, is to ‘produce fruits worth of penance.’” (p. 12)

He states this notion of sin in a similar way in his second article:

“The doing of penance to undo the consequences of their sin, in the Franciscan family, is quite simply the distancing of oneself from everything that threatens to break the bonds uniting this human fraternity, setting human beings over each other and against each other. This is the specific coloration of the minorite notion of conversion.”

FRANCIS’ STANCE

It is at **Poggio Bustone** that we see Francis as a sinful person, wondering how God could forgive him for his failings. The statue that is located just above this sanctuary is a profoundly beautiful image of the encounter between Francis and God which Thomas of Celano describes for us:

“One day he was marveling at the Lord’s mercy in the kindness shown to him. He wished that the Lord would show him the course of life for him and his brothers, and he went to a place of prayer, as he so often did. He remained there a long time with fear and trembling before the Ruler of the whole earth. He recalled in the bitterness of his soul the years he had spent badly, frequently repeating this phrase: “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.” Gradually, an indescribable joy and tremendous sweetness began to well up in his heart. He began to lose himself; his feelings were pressed together; and that darkness disappeared which fear of sin, had gathered in his heart. Certainty of the forgiveness of all his sins poured in, and the assurance of being revived in grace was given to him...he seemed changed into another man” (IC: 26-27)



What Francis came to understand so succinctly is **God is God and we are not**. How that short phrase sums up who we all are in the great scheme of things. We are not God.

This experience of God explains why for Francis the Porziuncola became so important. It was here that Francis experienced deeply his call to live the Gospel. Given his experience of forgiveness, we understand why he was so eager to share this experience with everyone in his seeking the **Portiuncola Indulgence**. Indulgences are a treacherous path to walk for us...the notion that by saying some prayer, or visiting some place we can erase some of the punish that might be assigned for us. For Francis, he recognized that the poor could not afford pilgrimages to far off places, and so he desired to make the indulgences available to them as well. And so he petitions the Pope, and indeed is granted this indulgence. Of course this led to negative reactions on the part of the Cardinals, who realized that pilgrimage monies would be diverted to the Porziuncola from the other more popular shrines.

It is interesting to read a non-Franciscan's description of the Porziuncola Indulgence. **Jonathan Sumption**, previously cited, shares the following:

“The indulgence which finally opened the floodgates was the indulgence of the Portiuncula. St. Mary of the Portiuncula was the small chapel near Assisi which had been made over to the use of St. Francis and his earliest followers. It was here, in 1226, that Francis died. By the middle years of the thirteenth century the Franciscans were claiming that the founder had secretly obtained from Honorius III a plenary indulgence for the chapel which would, if genuine, have been the only plenary indulgence in existence other than the crusading indulgence. Its authenticity was disputed from the outset on several grounds. It was said to be prejudicial to the re-conquest of the Holy Land. The Portiuncula chapel was said to be too obscure to enjoy an indulgence which was denied to the greatest churches of Rome. It was an incitement to sin, others alleged; it brought other indulgences into contempt. These arguments, which could never have been advanced a hundred years later, are alone sufficient to show how novel and unfamiliar the idea of a plenary indulgence for pilgrims was in the thirteenth century. A commission of enquiry met in 1277 to examine the authenticity of the indulgence, and much scholarly ink has been spilt over the matter ever since. It is, on the whole, unlikely to be genuine, and even if Honorius III did grant an indulgence to the Portiuncula, it was certainly not a plenary one. None of these considerations, however, weighed very heavily with contemporaries. By 1295 the number of pilgrims was already greater than the friars serving the chapel could deal with, and in the early years of the fourteenth century the brothers were stated to be dealing daily with cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors, kings, dukes, counts, and barons. However dubious its origins, the pilgrimage of the Portiuncula was among the most prosperous in Europe. It was the first pilgrimage which owed its success entirely to the skilful advertisement of the indulgence.”

A CONSCIOUSNESS EXAMEN FOR PILGRIMS

At the end of our days we often reflect on what happened in the course of the day, and how we did or not did respond to the graces God may have made available to us. I think a pilgrim's “**examination of responsiveness**” could include the following:



- **How willing was I to be inconvenienced** in the course of this day? How did I react when that inconvenience happened? For modern day pilgrims, the inconveniences we let go of are simple...no ice, funny flushing and often dirty toilets, no toilet paper...even more, loss of control over one's day. Do we respond with impatience?
- **How faithful are we in seeking out a serious conversation with the God of Mercy** as Francis did at Poggio Bustone?

In her reflection on *"The Spirit of Prayer"* in The Cord TOR anniversary edition (57.4), **Mary Elizabeth Imler OSF** suggests that:

"The penitential life is fed by constant, incessant spirit in prayer, praying our experiences. There is an 'inhaling' and 'exhaling.'...Through prayer the poor penitents humbly hold out their hand to God, begging to be sustained with God's love on the journey of conversion into holiness." This is powerfully echoed in **Nan Merrill's** translation of **Psalm 147: Divine love severs the veil that separates realms of the profane and sacred; Holiness radiates through all touched by Divine Love, a refining Fire!"** Are we willing to submit to the constant refining power of a Merciful God?

- **What attitudes and behaviors of mine fracture, fragment or distance myself in relationships with others,...with the earth?** How conscious are we of how our every action impacts not only ourselves but our cosmic brothers and sisters?

TOR CALL TO REPARATION IN THIS PENITENTIAL PILGRIMAGE
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In closing, I again quote **Mary Elizabeth Imler** who invites us as penitents to "Fix our Gaze on Christ:"

"In seeking the Christ Incarnate, we shall see God's face at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal paths that cross. This is literal in our gazing on the San Damiano icon as well as our itinerancy of journeying toward the crossroads in private moments of devotion and contemplation spilling over into deeds of compassion."

It began with the San Damiano Cross for Francis...the call to restore a church, to rebuild a house. This same cross became the center of prayer for Clare and her sisters, and Jesus crucified was the focal point of her mirror imagery.

This is the Christ we reflect to others. This the ultimate experience of a pilgrim longing to be embraced and forgiven by a Merciful God, who assures us that this irrevocable deed of forgiveness has already been accomplished in the Word Made Flesh, Jesus Christ.

