



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
Fr. Seraphin Conley, T.O.R.—The Cord, vol. 41., no.6. 1991
http://www.franciscanfriarstor.com/archive/resources/stf_penance_and_minority.htm

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Meditation – Franciscan Minority

In the *Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis*, besides the basic charism of continuous penance lived out in fraternity, we also find the characteristic of "minority." This quality of minority is something shared by all brothers and sisters of the Franciscan movement although it is so characteristic of the First Order that it forms part of the name. Many religious communities, founded or guided in their origins by friars of the First Order, perhaps more readily, recognize themselves in this quality than in that of "penance" which is still somewhat unfamiliar to them. In what does this minority consist?

The ordinary understanding of "minority" considers it as a state of dependency or inferiority. Certainly, if not all evil, it is thought to be something undesirable or to be avoided. So why would someone choose to embrace minority as a permanent way of life? It is here that we find the connection of penance and minority in the Franciscan vocation.

St. Francis is undoubtedly acknowledged to be a person who didn't just preach about minority, or involve himself in the occasional humble action, but really embraced minority as the way of life for himself and his Friars Minor. In the second version of the "Letter to the Faithful," Francis gives the key ideas for understanding the deepest meaning of minority:

The Son of God DESCENDED from heaven and assumed the weakness of our human flesh; CHOOSING poverty for Himself and His Mother;... should offer himself for us as a Sacrifice and Victim on the Altar of the Cross, not for His own good, but to liberate us from our sins, LEAVING US AN EXAMPLE SO THAT WE SHOULD WALK IN HIS FOOTSTEPS.

Only against this background can we really understand the meaning of our Franciscan vocation to a life of evangelical penance lived in minority: it consists in allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us as Francis was led into what Fr. Henri Nouwen refers to as "The Way of Downward Mobility" to follow in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to participate in His Way of the Cross. Our ministry, our "bringing forth the fruits of penance" is possible because we do not belong to the world just as Christ did not belong to the world. So, in his "Letter to the Faithful" (Penitents) Francis recalls the "Priestly Prayer of Jesus" in which He asks the Father not to remove the disciples from the world but to protect them from the world. With these same words the Poverello asks God to protect his followers from the temptation to compromise their vocation to a continuous and radical conversion from the values of our culture to those of the Gospel.

There is a statue of Pietro and Pica Bernardone in the Piazza of the Chiesa Nuova of Assisi. Pica holds in her hands the chains with which her husband tried to bind his favorite son to the way of life which he had planned for him, and there seems to be a vacant or puzzled expression on his face.



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Perhaps, he never came to understand the vocation of Francis.... even if he had lived to see the sensational fame of his son. Think about the baffled rage of this father confronted with the "madness" of Francis. Pietro Bernardone did not forbid his son the choice of a more intense Christian life. He was even disposed to invest more money so that Francis could give generously to the poor. As strange and expensive as it might have been, even this would have been acceptable. The prestige of the Bernardones would have grown in the esteem and regard of the "important people," the maggiore, of Assisi. The bafflement ... the scandal for Pietro Bernardone was that Francis refused "Upward Mobility" and chose the way of "Downward Mobility"!

Francis publicly chose to turn his back on the world of social and economic security, of moving up to the power and honors dreamed and schemed for him by his father. Instead, Francis chose to descend into the status of the minore, the lower class to share their poverty, their marginal status in society and their absolute unimportance in the eyes of the World. This was a scandal and a tragedy for Pietro Bernardone which shattered the very sense of his way of life, of all he had stubbornly planned and worked so hard to achieve.

...It is this option [minority] of Francis which is our inheritance as we follow our vocation to penance in minority. Our descent into minority means that we too, in our personal lives and in our ministries are to turn our backs on the temptation to be *powerful, spectacular, relevant*. These are the values of our culture which promise us and our apostolates a privileged position among the maggiore, the VIPs. To be relevant means to prove by our business, or by our results that we are worthy of appreciation. To be spectacular means to deny that anything good can be ordinary or come through simple ways and to hide our self doubt by seeking to be popular, to be loved, to be praised. To be powerful in a competitive society is the need to be No.# 1, The Best, to be in control. Even our ministry/service can be turned into a Power Base! The Word and Sacraments, or our apostolic skills can be used as our 'professional tools'. They are needed by the people and we control them and thus have power.

... powerlessness reveals God's mercy. Jesus sent His apostles out with nothing for their journey. They were sent without personal power so that they could reveal God's powerful love. This is what Francis had in mind when he quoted Christ's words in his prayer that his Brothers and Sisters of Penance would be faithful to the evangelical value of minority and remain on the "Path of Downward Mobility." His message was direct and simple: You are not of the world but of God and so you have no need of the world's methods to validate your call or your service.

...Minority then which flows from this new vision of life resulting from the process of conversion/penance supports us in our effort to live in the world but not be of it. Choosing the "Path of Downward Mobility" makes us true sons and daughters of Francis, conforms us to Christ and enables us to witness to Him in the world.