



***Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations***  
***In the Spirit of Saint Francis-- Conferences for Franciscans***  
***By Fr. Theodosius Foley, O.F. M. Cap.***

**M**

**Meditation – Self Denial in the Following of Christ**

**CHAPTER XII**  
**DOING PENANCE WITH FRANCIS**

In Order parlance both Francis and his friars refer to their religious life with one traditional term. Religious piety to them is a “conversion,” a constant turning to God. For this reason the Franciscan institute is essentially a penitential Order. Not only the First and Second Orders of regular religious, but also the Third Order, shares in this penitential aspect. All tertiaries, both regular and secular, have one official title given them by Francis, “Brothers and Sisters of Penance.” Even though in the entire Rule of Friars Minor, penance, in the sense of the virtue, is not mentioned once (the only reference to the term is in the seventh chapter, which deals with the Sacrament of Penance and with public penances imposed by superiors), the very substance of the Rule is a program of penitential practices, such as all-embracing obedience, chastity, fasting, prayer, the wearing of the coarse habit and pursuit of a lowly form of life proper to “followers of most holy poverty.”

In this respect Francis possessed the delicacy of Christ in the Gospels. Our Lord insists on penance as a necessary condition for salvation, but knowing the distaste with which human nature regards this austere subject, the ever-considerate and gentle Master nowhere draws up a frightening list of penitential exercises. He prudently leaves this to the disposition of His Holy Church and to the generosity of those concerned...

...Francis does much the same; he insists only on what is essential to living the Gospel in the Franciscan form of life. This minimum he must demand of every friar. He leaves the rest to be regulated by Constitutions, customs and superiors – with a wide field for personal endeavor as each one is convinced of the necessity of practicing penance in atonement for his own sins and in vicarious satisfaction for the sins of the world...

...Saint Paul refers to this in his oft-quoted words: “What is lacking of the sufferings of Christ I fill up in my flesh for His body, which is the Church” (Col. 1:24). All priests, all religious, all believers, as members of the Mystical Body, are called to this office of vicarious atonement. All are one in Christ; what the Head suffers, the members should share. The identical motives that urged Christ to suffer and die should also animate His members, namely, reparation to the offended God and the salvation of sinners.



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These are the highest and most sacred motives we can adopt. They should move us to great zeal and generosity in the practice of penance and atonement, which together form one of the four ends of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. On the cross Christ suffered alone, but in the unbloody repetition of this sacrifice on our altars He expects us to share His sacrifice with Him. He as our Head is the principle Victim for sinners; we as His members are invited to offer ourselves also, not in mere symbol or ritual, but by uniting our daily trials and voluntary mortifications to His sacrifice in the Mass. If we would only think of this at each Mass, what a priestly life we would lead, both fathers and Brothers forming on *victim caritatis* with Christ! At every Mass we ought to pray from our hearts the aspiration indulged for religious: “Heart of Jesus, Victim of charity, make me a living sacrifice to Thee, holy and pleasing unto God.” By “a living sacrifice” we mean one living the religious life as a joint sacrifice of atonement with Christ. What sublime significance this thought gives to our life! It would seem sufficient in itself, if we would only train ourselves to be conscious of it, to spur us on to traditional Franciscan generosity for Christ and souls...

...The redemption that was completed once and for all by Christ on Calvary is perpetuated in the Holy Mass and in the lives of religious and people until the end of time. Christ died for us once, a physical death. In sharing His passion and death we are not asked to die physically but morally, to our corrupted self; to offer ourselves in an unbloody manner as Christ does at every Mass. We are the living victims: *living* in a physical sense, *victims* in a moral sense. If we see in every penitential practice of the Order, or in every voluntary penance, a carrying-out of the morning sacrifice with Christ, our religious life will become a beautiful thing, full of glory to God, sweetness to us, and blessing to souls. This is what it is supposed to be. When it is not, it is because we fail to see; we are spiritually blinded, because “no one considers in his heart.”

Francis and all the great penitents of the Order were inflamed with this lofty ideal. It accounts for their “bringing forth worthy fruits of penance.” Their compassion with the suffering Redeemer was not a detached, personal thing but heroic co-operation with Him in His painful task. Of them the Messiah could not complain: “I waited for someone to pity Me but there was no one, and for some to comfort Me but I found none” (Ps. 68:21).