

# The Order of Penitents

## Amos 7: 7-8 The vision of the plumb line

- I had another vision from the LORD. In it I saw him standing beside a wall that had been built with the use of a plumb line, and there was a plumb line in his hand. He asked me, “Amos, what do you see?” “A plumb line,” I answered. Then he said, “I am using it to show that my people are like a wall that is out of line. ..”

There is a call to discipleship that demands the total gift of oneself - change your life. This reflects the change of heart demanded of disciples. Harsh, ascetical practices are absent in the lifestyle of Jesus - there is a different way of acting. Change of heart is to be reflected in actions. The Prodigal Son teaches that the Father desires reconciliation of the human person, requiring conversion of heart, mind and life. The un-reconciled elder son remains jealous, proud and hard of heart

**The message of the apostles** was - repent/reform, turn to God so your sins will be wiped away. This is necessary before baptism which brings about forgiveness of sins. Faith "believe the good news" of Jesus is a fundamental requirement for Christians. Reconciliation with the Father is achieved only through Jesus, (Jn 14:6 - the Way, the Truth and the Life). Repentance is to be effected through Christ.

The codifying of the penitential practices of the Church weakened and almost resulted in the disappearance of the biblical notion of penance as metanoia. As of this period, penance no longer becomes a way of life in humility and trust, where the person becomes open to the will of God and desires to praise him, but instead becomes a series of external acts that became an end in themselves.

# Understanding Penitents/Penance

- Contemporary understanding of penance is quite restricted and narrow. This has led many scholars over the years to find a different word to apply to Francis and his brothers: generally *metanoia* is used.
- Oxford Dictionaries defines this as “A change in one's way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion:” What he demanded of people was metanoia, repentance, a complete change of heart”.

From *De Illis qui faciunt Penitentiam*” (p122)

- “For Christians in the early thirteenth century, ‘doing penance’ did not mean simply repenting of one’s sins and receiving the sacrament of penance. Penance was a state’. The took quite literally the Gospel admonition ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand’. ..Conversion, this response of repentance, was established, realised and deepened throughout life in ‘penance’.

# Penitents

By the 11<sup>th</sup> century there was a distinct class of people in the Church - the Penitents..

At the time of Francis, a religious was defined as someone who made profession to a rule and wore a particular habit - as the Penitents did.



# Common Characteristics of Penitents

- They wore a habit
- They engaged in a range of charitable works such as at Leprosaria, helping at pilgrim hospices, with the poor or others in need
- Some would attach themselves to a monastery helping with its diverse work
- Prayer life was central
- If married, no marital intercourse, at least at certain times with the church year.
- Fasting and abstinence

Some lived as pilgrims, others as hermits and recluses, still others dedicated themselves as oblates to the service of a local church. Others associated themselves with organized work of charity. The one thing they had in common was that they had undergone a religious conversion - hence why they were - sometimes known as the conversi

The Church extended to them the privileges of the clergy.  
(Pietro Bernardone's case against his son, Francis, was  
passed by the magistrates to the Bishop).

This privilege of the clergy is why they were classified as  
religious. Our understanding of religious today is much  
narrower and more specific.

Pope Innocent III 1201 recognised a group of penitents called the *Humiliati*, giving them a proposed form and way of life *Propositum vitae* and in 1206 the same was given to the Poor Catholics. These documents predate the Franciscan penitential movement but were a model for the *Memoriale Propositi* that was to give groups of Franciscan penitents legal recognition and protection

# The Humiliati

- A lay community in Lombardy
- Evolved into 3 integrated orders, cared for the needy including lepers
- They sought to follow according to the letter of the gospel and expound the truths of faith – as the apostles did.
- Initially recognised 1179 but lost papal approval because preached in public. They sought approval again and it was Innocent III who approved their order in 1199.
- 3 orders – married not obliged to continence, living celibate and in community, clerics who served these 2 orders

## Franciscan Penitents:

Francis' early companions were known as penitents from Assisi. They uniquely included itinerant preaching ie they exhorted listeners to do penance which meant to change their behaviour towards God and neighbour. First was to recognise they were sinners who attributed to themselves the merit of the good things God has given and directed action to exaltation of self. A penitent would come to know that God loves the world and all creatures. Once they underwent a change of heart, they could turn towards others especially those in greatest need who were living images of the poor, humbled Christ.

# Franciscan Penitents: Wider Movement

- Franciscan penitents fitted into the penitential movements of the time, whether they lived in their homes or dedicated their lives to a particular service. Those living in their homes would meet regularly to deepen their spiritual lives and to embark on local projects, often seeking the guidance of a friar. There had been a religious revival in the previous century and more ordinary people wanted to learn about Scripture as access to education became more available. Teaching doctrine was forbidden but they could preach penance.

Some Penitents chose to live in community and Francis admitted recluses and hermits to the Order of Penitents (Bartholomew of Baro was received by Francis in 1222-3. He then set up a community). There were two types of groups - those who lived in community and those who remained in their homes.



# THE MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221

- The "title" is believed to have been:
- "Here begins the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance in the names of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. A Memorial of the Propositum of the Brothers and Sisters living in their own homes, begun in the year of the Lord 1221 (reformed in the year of the Lord 1228) in the time of Pope Gregory IX, May 29th."

The author could have been Hugolino, the Cardinal Protector of the friars minor. It was the Church's official response to the need for a more organized structure for Penitents - as various fraternities were springing up throughout Italy.

Dress - this was important in the Middle Ages - it indicated one's position in society.

Abstinence and fasting

Prayer - as "clericals" prayed following clerical observances which might mean attending liturgies

Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist

Not bearing arms was something that would mark penitents out clearly. Not taking oaths could cause resentment. Both these meant penitents removed themselves from the service expected from their lords and masters.