

Oh, Sweet Conversion!

Jean Moore, FSPA, from La Crosse, Wisconsin

1 The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in the way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. 2 And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. 3 And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world. (St. Francis of Assisi, Testament of 1226.)

These words of Francis were dictated by him shortly before his death with the intent to clarify what motivated him in his life: conversion. This is the account of his often-told encounter with the leper. How does this relate to us in the 21st century? Perhaps a little “unpacking” of Francis’ way of expression can help us understand.

The testament begins with the call by God to begin doing penance. Doing penance didn’t mean the same then as it might mean to us today; it meant doing works of mercy, or charity. In fact, there were many people called at this time in history to do works of mercy, or charity, for the needy, the disenfranchised, the sick, the poor—just as there are today. In medieval times, they were known as “penitents” and it was to this movement that Francis had dedicated himself. At the time of Francis, the neediest in society were the lepers. Francis expresses the bitterness he experienced at seeing lepers; similar to what we might say “leaves a bitter taste in our (proverbial) mouths.”

The testament continues with another call by God to be among them and to show mercy to them. Francis responds with the “sweetness of soul and body” he experienced among them. This phrase implies that Francis “tasted” them; we often hear of how Francis kissed the leper. It also means that he was close to them; their odor wafting through him. The “sweetness of soul and body” is an expression of the freedom Francis felt as he “tasted” life among the lepers. He reflected upon this experience: . . . afterwards I delayed a little . . . and he changed his way of being: . . . and left the world. Literally, in Latin, he exclaims that he “left the century,” i.e., the normal way of doing things, as society was dictating.

In this account by Francis of his signature event of conversion, we see the elements of 1) a call by God, 2) an intense experience with, 3) contemplation or reflection, and 4) transformation. It is an invitation to each of us to listen to what God might be calling us to; to engage purposefully and intensely with others outside of our everyday circle, or with those whom we consider “distasteful”; to contemplate our experiences in light of our whole being; and to respond in a way that transforms our very being! Clare of Assisi, in her Second Letter to Agnes of Prague, 20 speaks of this process as “gaze, consider, contemplate, and desiring to imitate your Spouse.”

While watching television these days, a person couldn’t help but see the ads with “Chad,” the young, hip spokesperson for Alltel who talks about “My Circle.” The other phone plans have “techno-geek” type spokespersons who are seen as losers, implying that if you are in “someone’s circle” you are cool. In addition, political rhetoric talks about the “axis of evil,” “terrorists,” “illegal aliens,” and other terms to separate “us” from “them.” We are inundated with messages that tell us who is “in” and who is not; who is acceptable and unacceptable; who is welcome and unwelcome.



Perhaps one way to listen carefully to the call from God is to gaze around you and notice who is “in your circle” and who, or what, “leaves a bitter taste” in your mouth.

Who do you try to avoid? Against whom do you speak? What might happen if you were to “embrace” that person or group by getting involved or inviting them in, by listening to, or learning about them?

Francis’ conversion experience is a powerful example of how we, too, can open ourselves to the call of God to transform our ways of thinking, believing and acting. God wants us to experience the freedom that comes when we are in relationship with each other without the walls of fear and isolation. And God wants us to experience God’s goodness (sweetness), as written by the psalmist: *Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus.* O taste, and see that the Lord is sweet. (Psalm 34), or as we often sing, “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.”

Franciscan Reflections

The following are articles from the *The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis* and reflection questions to enhance your Advent Season.

From Words of St. Francis to His Followers

All who love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, and with their strength (cf. Mk 12:30), and love their neighbor as themselves (cf. Mt 22:39), and who despise the tendency in their humility to sin, receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and bring forth from within themselves fruits worthy of true penance:

How happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them because “the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them” (cf. Is 11:12) and God will make his home and “dwelling place (cf. Jn 14:23) with them.” They are children of the Father (cf. Mt 12:50) whose works they do. They are spouses, brothers and sisters, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 12:50).

We are his spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit with our Lord Christ. We are his brothers and sisters when we do the “will of the Father who is in heaven” (cf. Mt 12:50). We are mothers when we bear him in our hearts and bodies (cf. 1 Co 6:20) with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences, and when we give to him through a holy life, which should enlighten others because of our example (Mt 5:16).

- ❖ In your personal life, what principles and ideals would you include in your own “Rule”?
- ❖ With which metaphor (mother, brother, sister, spouse, etc.) are you most comfortable when describing your relationship to Christ? With which are you least comfortable? Why?

Our Identity: Article 2

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 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.”

- ❖ When did you first feel the call to be a Franciscan—either as an affiliate or a vowed religious? How long was the journey from that moment to your first formal commitment?
- ❖ How can your commitment to Franciscan values be seen

in your daily life? How do you “persevere in true faith and penance”?

Acceptance into This Life: Articles 7 and 8

When their initial formation is completed, they are to be received into obedience promising to observe this life and rule always. Let them put aside all attachment as well as every care and worry. Let them only be concerned to serve, love, adore and honor God, as best they can, with a single heart and a pure mind.

Within themselves, let them always make a dwelling place and home for the One who is Lord God almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, so that, with undivided hearts, they may increase in universal love by continually turning to God and to neighbor (Jn 14:23).

- ❖ How has your life changed since you became an affiliate or sister?
- ❖ How do relationships help you live as a Franciscan?

The Spirit of Prayer: Articles 10 and 11

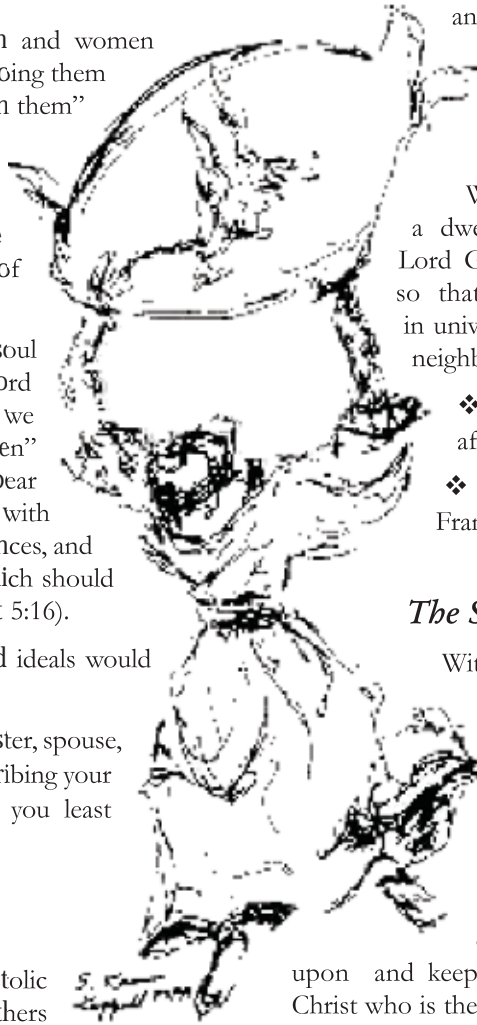
With all creatures the brothers and sisters should praise the Ruler of heaven and earth (cf. Mt 11:25), and give thanks, because by the holy will and through the only Son with the Holy Spirit, God created all things spiritual and material, and created us in the divine image and likeness.

Since the sisters and brothers are to be totally conformed to the Gospel, they should reflect upon and keep in their hearts the words of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the Word of God, as well as the words of the Holy Spirit which “are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63).

- ❖ How, where and in what circumstances do you pray?
- ❖ What type or style of prayer is most engaging for you? Why?

The Way to Serve and Work: Articles 18 and 19

As poor people, the sisters and brothers to whom God has given the grace of serving or working should serve and work faithfully and devoutly. Let them avoid the idleness, which is the enemy of the soul. They should not be so busy, however, that they would extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, which all earthly goods should serve.



In exchange for their service or work, they may accept anything necessary for their own temporal needs and for that of their sisters or brothers. Let them accept it humbly as is expected of those who are servants of God and followers of the most holy poverty. Whatever they may have over and above their needs, they are to give to the poor. Let them never want to be over others. Instead they should be servants and subjects to every human creature for God's sake (1 P 2:13).

- ❖ Who are the minors in your life? How do you serve them?
- ❖ Recall a time when someone served you. What did you learn about serving others from it?

The Life of Poverty: Article 22

The truly poor in spirit, following the example of the Lord, live in this world as pilgrims and strangers (cf. 1 P 2:1). They neither appropriate nor defend anything as their own. So excellent is this most high poverty that it makes us heirs and rulers of the kingdom of heaven. It makes us materially poor, but rich in virtue (cf. Jm 2:5). Let this poverty alone be our portion because it leads to the land of the living (Ps 141:6). Clinging completely to it let us, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, never want anything else under heaven.

- ❖ What does it mean to be a "pilgrim and a stranger in this world"?
- ❖ What is the most important possession (not a person) that you own? Why is it so important to you? Under what circumstances would you be able to give it away?

Love of Our Brothers and Sisters: Article 23

Because God loves us, the brothers and sisters should love each other, for the Lord says, "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12). Let them manifest their love for each other in deeds (cf. 1 Jn 3:18). With confidence let them make known their needs to one another so that each can find and offer to the other that which is necessary. Blessed are those who love the others when they are sick and unable to serve, as much as when they are healthy and of service to them. Whether in sickness or in health, they should only want what God wishes for them. For all that happens to them, let them give thanks to our Creator.

- ❖ Describe a time when you felt unconditionally loved. What are the details that surround that love relationship?
- ❖ Who is easy for you to love? Who is difficult for you to love?



The Obedience of Love: Article 25

Following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who made his own will one with the Father's, the sisters and brothers should remember that, for God, they have given up their own will. Therefore, in every chapter they have let them "seek first God's reign and justice" (Mt 6:33), and exhort one another to better observe with greater dedication the rule they have professed and to follow faithfully in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let them neither dominate nor seek power over one another, but let them willingly serve and obey "one another with the mutual love, which comes from the spirit" (cf. Ga 5:13). This is the true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- ❖ In your vocation, who do you "willingly serve and obey"? How is this physically manifested in your actions?
- ❖ To enable your ongoing conversion, where are you able to be "repeatedly renewed in your living and ministry"?

The Apostolic Life: Articles 30 and 31

As they announce peace with their lips, let them be careful to have it even more within their own hearts. No one should be roused to wrath or insult on their account; rather, all should be moved to peace, goodwill and mercy because of their gentleness. The sisters and brothers are called to heal the wounded, to bind up those who are bruised, and to reclaim the erring. Wherever they are, they should recall that they have given themselves up completely and handed themselves over totally to our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they should be prepared to expose themselves to every enemy, visible and invisible, for love of the Lord because he says: "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10).

In that love which is God (1 Jn 4:16) all the brothers and sisters, whether they are praying or serving or working, should strive to be humble in everything. They should not, because of a good work or word God does or speaks in or through them, seek glory or rejoice or exult interiorly. Rather, in every place and circumstance, let them acknowledge that all good belongs to the most high God, Ruler of all things. Let them always give thanks to the one from Whom all good proceeds.

- ❖ Name a peaceful person. What characteristics or actions make this person a peacemaker?
- ❖ How do you "give witness by word and work to God's voice and make known to all that only God is all-powerful"?

Getting to Know You . . .

Chandra Sherin

Norene Bollech, FSPA

Chandra Sherin is a certified Reiki master/teacher as well as an artist, doing painting on her own and also commissioned art. Recently she was asked to paint the central banner at Newman for the return students in fall. She has earned a B.A. degree in ministry and studio art and an M.A. in servant leadership, both at Viterbo University.

She and her husband, Jeff, have been married eight years and have a daughter named Samara who entered first grade this fall at Roosevelt Coulee Montessori School.

Chandra has significant volunteer ministerial experiences including Catholic Worker Houses both in Texas and La Crosse, Franciscan Spirituality Center, two years in AmericCorps, chaplain at the hospital, and lecturing at Newman Center, the parish in which she is a member. Currently she is a mom and caregiver, providing Reiki for others, painting personal pieces as well as commissioned art, activist for justice issues and is a member of the FSPA Justice and Peace Committee as well as the Affiliation Committee.

Chandra's mother attended Viterbo when Chandra was in 7th grade. Her mother connected her with Sister Arlene Laverdiere who gave Chandra voice lessons. That began her relationship with the FSPA and Franciscan values, which continued through middle school, high school and on to her own years attending Viterbo. Sister Arlene and Sister Laurian Pieterek were great friends and teachers for her.

In 2000 Chandra prepared for prayer affiliation and became an affiliate in 2001. She has made one renewal. The following are Chandra's words, "I love creating and contemplating. I seek the Holy Spirit daily. I want to accomplish more with greater balance and peace without being 'too busy.'"

"I hope for authenticity, sincerity, courage, bold hope, conviction and goodness to continue on for FSPA and affiliation into the years. I love being a wife and mom. I believe in prayer and Jesus' compassion and presence with us. I am an artist and naturalist. I find bliss in nature, in all of creation. I have hope and I deeply appreciate the FSPA's friendship and presence in our lives, in this world."



Congratulations!

- Nancy Alm on the renewal of her covenant affiliation.
- Grace Nicholson-Maly and Emily Dykman for being appointed to the Affiliation Committee.

Did You Know?

The Affiliation Office has sent 15 information packets to people interested in affiliation within the last two months.

Caring Hearts – Helping Hands

Linda Kerrigan from La Crescent, Minnesota

This column space in *Connections* is intended for all affiliates and companion communities to invite others to share information about ministry or service projects benefiting individual or community needs.

At this time, the Common Hearts companion community is accepting cash donations and/or gift card donations (Target, Shopko, Penney's, etc.) for a family in Rushford, Minn., who experienced significant loss and damage of property in recent flooding.

We learned of this need through "Flood of Love," a project undertaken by the Root River Community Church which is responding to a number of families whose financial expenses exceed that covered by FEMA. Families are being "adopted" by local groups to assist with monetary needs and/or replacement of household furnishings and personal effects.

If you would like to help us help our adopted young couple, Kelly and Jeremiah, who happen to be expecting a baby in April, please contact Margaret Bluske at 608-304-0266 (cell) or Sheila Garrity at 507-895-6436.

Please do not let this column go unwritten! Connections has generously offered this space for your use and welcomes any information you have on a current or upcoming project you or your companion community may be working on. Remember, we are all here to assist one another in ministry and can best do so by being aware of needs. Call or e-mail your information directly to Marci at mmadary@fspa.org/phone 608-791-5610.

Cluster Days

The Affiliation Office will be hosting Cluster Days for affiliates and sisters in the spring of 2008. The theme will be: **Compassionate Community**. It is recommended that companion communities attend as a group. They will be held:

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| February 2 | Verona, WI | St. Andrews Parish |
| February 15-16 | La Crosse, WI | St. Rose Convent |
| February 22-23 | St. Paul, MN | WomanWell |
| March 28-29 | Hiawatha, IA | Prairiewoods |
| March 14-15 | Arbor Vitae, WI | Marywood |
| April 4-5 | Spokane, WA | CORE (Clare Center) |
| April 25-26 | Boulder City, NV | Life Giving Springs Spirituality Center |

Pray for . . .

- Gordon Davis
- Family of Katie Richel on the death of her cousin
- Diane Vaaler Withers on the death of her mother
- Sister-in-law of Beth (Wopat) Prairie
- All of the family members of affiliates who are serving in the military in the Middle East