

Chapter Seven, “Our Life in Penance”

By Daniel Crosby

This is a well-grounded, insightful and challenging chapter in our new Constitutions.

It certainly is not grounded in the shallow thinking that a “life of penance” means a life filled with penitential practices such as those we practiced in “the good old days.” For the most part, those practices did not help bring about in our lives *conversion to a Gospel way of thinking and acting*. They were just practices, difficult and/or annoying things we did; things we were very much relieved to get rid of after Vatican II.

All this is changed in the very first number of this chapter on true penance; it reflects solid biblical understanding: “While proclaiming the Kingdom, Jesus Christ called people to *repentance*, that is, to a complete transformation of themselves, through which they begin to think, judge and order their lives according to the holiness and love of God manifested in the Son.”

Complete transformation of themselves. Beautiful sounding words but also words we resist mightily. Most of us Capuchins are open to some sincere “tweaking” of our lives to reflect Jesus more completely, but a *complete transformation of ourselves*???? After we get beyond our inner resistance, we can legitimately ask, “How do I do this?”

The chapter goes on to describe a necessary twofold process, based on Francis’ own life and example. A life of penance, they tell us, demands first of all an “exodus,” a deliberate letting go of (or departure from) – as Francis did after encountering the leper – of our culture’s ways of thinking, judging and acting. Because our culture’s ways are more deeply embedded in us than Jesus’ ways, this is going to be painful, demanding that we “constantly strive to deny ourselves more completely each day.” This is the first, never-ending aspect of a Gospel “life of penance.”

The second part of the process, the Constitutions tell us, is “conversion.” As we strive daily to *let go of* worldly ways, attitudes and goals, so through “conversion” we strive to *take on* Jesus’ ways, attitudes and goals. Realistically, the Constitutions tell us that this will never happen simply in our heads or hearts. “Conversion” is a “disposition of the heart that *demand external manifestation in daily life*.” And of course, that’s where the challenge comes in for all of us. We might balk at any external manifestation – we can think it’s an imposition, smacking too much of external practices of the past.

But the Constitutions are correct: no genuine transformation of our entire selves can ever remain simply internal; it must be expressed externally or be exposed as fraudulent. But how do that? Chapter seven tells us, first of all, that “our life of consecration to God is in itself an excellent form of penance” as us “our poverty and humility, the hardships of life, our availability to serve God and neighbor and our efforts to cultivate fraternal life. . .” Practical, down-to-earth stuff: it’s all part of a life of penance, letting go of living for ourselves and taking on the mind and heart of Christ, every day. . .

Is that all there is to a life of penance, however? If so, we’d feel pretty comfortable, we’d be back in the category of “tweaking.” Two things the Constitutions say keep me from feeling overly comfortable: “Our life should conform to the gospel command to do penance, and should therefore be *simple and*

frugal in all things, as befits poor people” and “Mindful of the passion of Christ, after the example of St. Francis and of our saints, let us also practice voluntary mortification, willingly restricting ourselves in food, drink and entertainments, so that everything testifies to our condition as pilgrims and strangers.”

“So that everything. . .”: that’s the real challenge of these Constitutions and this chapter seven. But why do we still chafe and resist? After all, we’ve vowed to live forever this gospel life; to accept Jesus’ invitation “to repentance, to a complete transformation of ourselves. . .” As Francis said before his death, “Brothers, let us begin to do good, for up to now we have done so little.”

I cannot pass over the final aspect of this chapter: its concluding words about “brothers who are in difficulty.” Some of the most tender words of Francis are directed toward these brothers and their ministers, and they are repeated here -- beautiful, heartfelt words about mercy. I personally grieve over how, in these days of SNAP, Praesidium and easy accusations about real (or false) harm done by our brothers, this mercy and love so important to Francis and our Constitutions for “brothers in difficulty” seems to evaporate. What is wrong? What can we do to be true to this aspect of our Capuchin charism, this part of “Our Life in Penance”?