

TOR-VIAN NOTES

Core Values of the TOR Rule

Core Value #1: Continuing Conversion

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, TOR, Loretto, PA



Article one of the Rule of the Third Order Regular states that our form of life is to observe the holy gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, in poverty, and in chastity. Article two goes on to say that we wish to live out this commitment by embracing four key values: conversion, prayer, poverty and humility. For the people we serve in parishes, schools and other ministries, we like to think that these core values can also be a gift to you and an invitation to adapt them to your own way of life. In this series of TOR-VIAN notes we'll look for connections between the values we friars strive to live and the opportunities they suggest for you.

The call to conversion is at the heart of Jesus' mission. He says at the beginning of Mark's gospel: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel." The word repent means to be converted or changed. On Ash Wednesday we heard this expressed as: return to me with your whole heart.

And we know well that such turning is not a one-time thing but a lifelong task. It is why Lent occurs every year – and confessions are heard every Saturday, at least!

Francis of Assisi understood well this process of continuing conversion. From the time he first decided "to leave the world" at age 24 until his death, his conversion was a work in progress. His biographer said of him: he died singing, at the age of 44, in the twentieth year of his conversion.

Change is a lot easier to talk about than to practice. One Franciscan scholar likes to say: conversion lies just beyond my point of resistance. So, a starting point in the process is to recognize and name that point of resistance.

The season of Lent offers us many opportunities to do just that: starting with our personal discipline and faithfulness to prayer, then reaching out to look at family responsibilities and relationships and beyond. As we open our eyes to both our inner lives and the signs of the times, where do we hear the Lord's invitation to a closer walk with him?

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Core Value #2: Relational Prayer

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Franciscan prayer is rooted in relationship with Jesus, especially his birth, his passion, and his gift of the Holy Eucharist.

Saint Luke gives us a dramatic example of how prayer can revive and strengthen those relationships in the account of the two disciples going home to Emmaus on Easter night (Lk 24: 13-35). The disciples vented their weariness and discouragement to the stranger who walked with them. When they offered him hospitality, not realizing it was Jesus now risen from the dead, he revealed himself in the breaking of bread. And the journey that began in sorrow now made a U-turn, and they went back joyfully to rejoin the other disciples in Jerusalem. Their encounter with Jesus had revived them in hope and renewed their relationship with him.

Prayer for Saint Francis was the centerpiece of his life. It was the place where he experienced Jesus most deeply and from which all the activities and relationships of his life flowed. Francis spoke only of the God he came to know by experience, especially in times of darkness and pain. His prayer was inspired by the Word of God, especially the psalms and gospels, by the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, by his brothers and sisters, especially the poor, and by the wonders of God in creation.

Franciscan prayer is rooted in relationships and experience more than in a system or a structure. It can begin by meditating on a gospel passage or on the joys and anxieties of daily life. Like the ripples from a pebble cast into a pond, prayer can stretch out to every part of our selves and every stage of our lives.

Saint Clare of Assisi prayed for forty years before the cross of San Damiano, the one from which Saint Francis heard the voice of Christ. She referred to that cross as a mirror in which she could see a reflection of her own life in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. Gaze upon him, she said, consider and contemplate him, and then imitate him. Let the pattern of Jesus life be the pattern for your own.

Another wonderful example of how our relationship with Jesus, expressed in prayer, can overflow to all the parts of our lives.

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Core Value #3: Practical Poverty

Articles by Fr. Peter Lyons, TOR, Loretto, PA



Franciscan poverty has long been a hot topic of conversation. Saint Francis himself grew up in a comfortable household and developed a taste for the finer things in life. But all that changed when his encounter with the lepers opened his eyes to see “how the other half lived”.

As his conversion continued, Francis came to reject all material possessions, not because they were evil, but because he wanted to imitate Jesus. Though rich beyond measure, Francis said, Jesus emptied himself for our sake and chose poverty in this world. The generations of Franciscans after Francis had to wrestle with this ideal since they needed to support the growing number of members, especially the elderly and sick.

The TOR branch of the Franciscans has its roots in the secular Franciscan movement. Francis instructed his lay men and women followers to stay in their homes and live the gospel in their own setting. Needless to say, they still had to earn a living, so the idea of poverty for this class of Franciscans meant to work for a living and donate any surplus income to the poor.

When the Third Order Regular was separated from the Secular Third Order in the fifteenth century, we inherited the same understanding of poverty. Work for a living, pool your income (it all goes into a common cookie jar), and give any surplus to the poor.

How does this apply to the lives of working people today? Let us count the ways:

- The volume of goods we accumulate in a lifetime can become a burden for family members who must sort it all out when we’re gone. Think about “de-cluttering” your life before you leave this world.
- This applies even more to the other kinds of baggage we accumulate: the hurts, resentments, and grudges we cling to – and which too often cling to us.
- Stewardship of time is a true expression of Franciscan poverty. Visiting the sick and shut-ins, welcoming the newcomer to the church, the stranger to the neighborhood.
- In the face of so many divisions in our society today, practicing civility and kindness can be a true expression of Franciscan poverty.

These are but a few suggestions. Think of it as an invitation to expand the list with your own examples.

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Core Value #4: Holy Humility

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The fourth of the core values of our TOR tradition is humility. Here's how it's described in our Rule of Life: "We are to be gentle, peaceful, and unassuming, mild and humble, speaking respectfully to all; not quarrelsome, contentious or judgmental." These are words of Saint Francis himself, and while we often struggle to live up to them, we owe it to Francis to keep trying.

It should be noted here that all four of these core values are intertwined. All of them give expression to our call to continuing conversion. All are supported and informed by prayer. All are reflected in our lives of poverty. And, sadly, we must also note that failure in any one of them compromises the others as well.

Franciscan life is rooted in relationships rather than hierarchy. We are all brothers and sisters. Those called to serve as ministers exercise an office only for a time, and freely surrender it when that time comes. And even while holding office they remain brothers and sisters to one another.

But through the life experience of Francis that vision kept expanding – from a little band of brothers in Assisi to a missionary outreach that reached the entire church, then to friendly dialogue with the Muslim world, and finally to all creation. In the Cantic of the Creatures composed at the end of his life Francis saw all creatures as brothers and sisters.

Can the challenging vision of Saint Francis find a home in today's world? As one example, Pope Francis has drawn upon the Cantic of Saint Francis as the foundation of his effort to safeguard the natural environment, God's gift for all generations: a Franciscan mission that includes all Franciscan-hearted people.

Here's another way we can all practice this Franciscan virtue of humility. All of us know people – some very close to us – who no longer practice the Catholic faith. We also know the troubling statistics about the numbers of young adults who are leaving the church. Complaining and criticizing does not work; nagging can lead to further alienation.

The Franciscan virtues named above – gentle, peaceful, and unassuming, not quarrelsome, contentious or judgmental – may in the long run open a way for our wandering sheep to find their way back home.