



ORDO FRANCISCANUS SAECULARIS
- Initial Formation for Candidates -

Module 2: "HISTORY OF THE OFS"
sheet 2

2. The 'Order of Penitence' in History

Long ago, St Augustine encapsulated the Christian experience in the following way:

At creation—posse peccare [possible to sin]

After the fall—non posse non peccare [not possible not to sin]

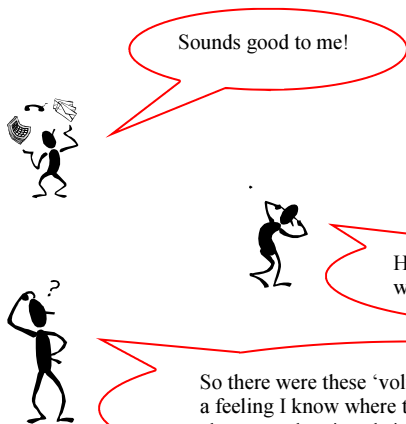
After baptism—posse non peccare [possible not to sin]

In paradise—non posse peccare [not possible to sin]

Baptism was often referred to as the 'first plank' [getting you on board the ship {ie the Church}]

Penance [sacrament of reconciliation] was the 'second plank' - forgiving post-baptismal sin [getting you back on board again]

The doctrine of penance is based on the obvious fact, therefore, that the Christian committing post-baptismal sin is not completely lost but can be pardoned by Christ after turning away from sin: 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' [1 John 1.8f]



Except there is a slight problem! By the 3rd Century, it was thought penance after baptism could only happen once! And, this conversion of heart had to be accompanied by external acts of penance—prayer, fasting, almsgiving, public humiliation. By the 4th Century those admitted to penance formed a special group the 'Order of Penitents' - and they tended to postpone admission to the end of their life!

Things improved in the 5th Century with 'voluntary penance': some entered the Order of Penitents who were not excluded as 'sinners', as a way of seeking perfection, remaining there for the rest of their lives.

ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE—

The Church came to understand penance as a repeatable sacrament, and the sacrament of penance developed into the three parts familiar to us: contrition, confession, satisfaction. In time, the latter 'satisfaction', was increasingly referred to as 'penance' or 'doing penance', and by the middle ages the penances given were often gross by modern standards, and Indulgences remitted this part of the sacrament. Inevitably this led many to see penance as action rather than attitude of mind. The Greek of the NT, 'metanoia' [change of mind, or conversion], was translated into the Latin as 'poena' - which originally meant the payment made as an atonement by a criminal, thus no longer meaning a turning away from sin and a return to the previous state of friendship with God, penance came to be seen as performing a punishment; the penitent, the one who acted rather than the one who was acted upon. The danger was, of course, that Christian life was coming to be seen as what man was doing for God rather than what God was doing for man. The Reformation of the 16th Century generated as much heat as light, but with the advent of the Second Vatican Council 'penance' once again meant 'metanoia' as we got used to speaking of the sacrament of reconciliation, in which true sorrow for sin [contrition] was expressed in admitting of faults [confession], resolved to live a life worthy of our calling [satisfaction].

Customs and rules from the 5th Century to the time of St Francis changed little

Accepted penitential practices included:

- Wearing penitential clothing
- Hospital work with lepers, pilgrims, in epidemics
- Rebuilding churches, burying the dead
- Dedicating oneself to a life of prayer
- Period of conjugal continence for period of time
- Avoidance of popular festivals, dancing, banquets
- Refusal of public office [judge/advocate]
- Refusal of military career, carrying weapons, war
- Abstinence from commerce
- No travel by horse or donkey

By the early 13th Century the Franciscan Family was up and running as:

- First Order—1209
- Second Order—1211
- Third Order—1215

- all were penitents, all were seeking Christian perfection in obedience to Christ: little brothers [Friars], poor ladies [Poor Clares], penitents living in the world [Secular (Franciscans)]



FRANCIS DID NOT SET OUT TO FOUND ORDERS; OTHERS FOUND FRANCIS. HE WAS THE FOUNDER OF THE MOVEMENT OF HIS OWN PENITENTS, THOSE WHO WISHED TO BE HIS FOLLOWERS AND BE A PART OF THE MISSION ENTRUSTED TO HIM: "REPAIR MY CHURCH!"

The *Supra Montem* Rule of 1289 has a special value as it constitutes an official Church document in regard to the Order of Penitents—

'In the name of the Lord. Here begins the rule and way of life of the brother and sisters of the Order of the Continent or of Penance, founded by St Francis in the year of our Lord 1221. And approved by authority of pope Nicholas IV in the year of the Lord 1289, on the fifteenth calends of September, in the second year of his Pontificate.'

System of *tariffed penance* [demands of penance reflected gravity of the sin] developed and led to *vicarious penance* [doing it on behalf of others]

This created a distinction between those doing *public penance* [for their sins] and those doing *voluntary penance* [those seeking perfection]

The time of Francis & the start of the Order of Penitents of St Francis

As a penitent Francis sought God with all his heart, and above all aimed at 'personal conversion'. Seeing the Church as the body of Christ he wanted to be its obedient son rather than its critic. As ever, there was much wrong with the Church of his time—heresy, corruption, slackness abounded—but he would repair this Church in accordance with his divine commission. He restored the Church through sanctity, not criticism. This is what St Bonaventure says: 'He went about the cities and towns proclaiming the kingdom of God not in words taught by human wisdom, but in the power of the Spirit. To those who saw him, he seemed to be a person of another world, as, with his mind and face always intent on heaven, he tried to draw them all on high. As a result the vineyard of Christ began to produce buds with the sweet smell of the Lord and, when it produced flowers of sweetness, of honour, and of respectability, to bring forth abundant fruit. For set on fire by the fervour of his preaching, a great number of people bound themselves by new laws of penance according to the rule which they received from the man of God. Christ's servant decided to name this way of life the Order of the Brothers of Penance. As the road of penance is common to all those who are striving toward heaven, so this way of life admits clerics and lay, virgins and married of both sexes.'

[Major Life IV, 6—written 1260/63, but citing Celano's First Life of 1228/32] Francis did not found the Order of Penitents as such, but he built on what already existed – the Third Franciscan Order was founded by St Francis in the context of penitential legislations of his time, without the necessity of seeking any specific constitutive approval from the Holy See. Official documents came later, but it cannot be absolutely asserted that the third Order of St Francis was "constitutionally approved" only with the bull *Supra Montem* of Nicholas IV, 18 August 1289, on the occasion of the promulgation of the new Rule of the Third Order of St Francis, without reference to other juridical agreements. If one wishes to look for papal approval by a juridical act, one should include also what is written in the *Legend of the Three Companions* with reference to the approval of the Three Franciscan Orders in these words: "each of these Three Orders was approved in its own time by Supreme Pontiffs." [XIV, 60]. We have to do here with papal approval that is both direct and indirect at the same time: indirect in that these Three Orders came into existence in conformity with the existing common law of the Church. Direct in so far as the Apostolic See has renewed and conceded provisions and privileges which are partly new and partly confirmed. The Rule of Nicholas IV...gave a common legislative organisation to all the Fraternities of the Franciscan Penitents.