

## EXPERIENCING THE GOODNESS OF GOD THROUGH FRANCISCAN VALUES FRANCISCAN CONVERSION

**Module:** Conversion

### **Greeting and Introductions**

Using a series of readings and reflective questions, this module invites participants to come to a deeper understanding of the Franciscan **process** of conversion. Francis emphasized that turning to God and being conformed to Christ is never accomplished once for all. Conversion is an ongoing religious experience.

It is divided into four Movements of conversion. These movements can be experienced one movement at a time or all used as a retreat.

**Level:** Intermediate knowledge of Franciscanism

**Time:** 1 ½ hour for each Movement.

### **Movement I: Love; allowing events to influence your life.**

#### **Opening Prayer:**

Spirit of peace,  
quiet our hearts,  
heal our anxious thoughts,

Breath on us your holy calm  
so that in the stillness of your presence  
we may open ourselves to trust  
and be transformed. AMEN

#### **Hymnal: A Worship Book**

After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than all else?” “Yes, Lord,” he answered, “you know that I love you.” “Then feed my lambs”, he said. A second time he asked, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” “Then tend my sheep.” A third time he said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time, “do you love me?” “Lord,” he said, “you know everything; you know I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

“And further, I tell you this in very truth: when you were young you fastened your belt about you and walked where you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast and carry you where you have no wish to go.” —**John 21: 15-19**

#### **Reflection:**

Cardinal Henry Newman, now a “Blessed,” once said, “My parish at Littlemore wanted nothing more from me than to be left alone.” In that common church situation, no real transformation or growth of persons is going to happen. Such people are too well defended with

dogmas and certitudes. Religious people have a very difficult time changing because God is always on *their* side. Mediator and negotiators who work with groups say that church groups are often the very hardest groups to change. I have seen this to be true myself. Cardinal Newman later said that “to be human is to change and to be a saint is to have changed often.” Saints were people who put themselves in situations where they would be forced to change. They allowed events to influence them.

**Richard Rohr OFM, adapted from *How Men Change: A Thin Time* (CD, DVD, MP3)**

Francis at age twenty-two had been living the good life, son of a well to do cloth merchant of Assisi. Wanting to live a life of glory and valor he found himself fighting a war on the plains of Perugia and was captured in utter defeat. For an entire year he was kept in a cold dark dungeon in Perugia until his father, Bernardone, ransomed him. But even in the midst of such circumstances he kept up a positive attitude.

“He smiled, joked, and sometimes even managed to get his companions to laugh, dejected as they were. What wellspring of invisible happiness was he drinking from to escape the tortures of neurasthenia? Some of the prisoners had fallen sick; he helped them as best he could, but his perpetual good cheer ended by becoming an irritant. In moments of exasperation they asked him how he could rejoice with chains weighing down his ankles and wrists. One day he gave a stupefying answer, ‘I rejoice because some day I shall be venerated as a saint all over the world.’ And not two months before, Francis had been reveling with inexhaustible vigor in wine, women, and farandoles.”-**God’s Fool, Julien Green**

### **Reflection questions:**

What events have influenced your own conversion?

Have you found yourself in personal dark dungeons that gave you contemplative space to rethink life?

How have you felt the pull of God’s love lead you to places you would not have chosen yourself?

Have you purposely placed yourself in situations to help with your own conversion, to bring you more life?

### **Prayer:**

**Leader:** Francis in his own process of conversion needed to abandon his own family, father, with God, Our Father. “The life of Saint Francis as seen through his writings is one of maintaining a relationship with his Father, of seeking always to do His will, and of making his way to Him after the model of His son.

Standing naked before his father, his bishop and fellow citizens of Assisi, Francis proclaims, “Listen, listen, everyone. From now on I can say with complete freedom, ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ Pietro Bernardone is no longer my father, and I am giving him back not only his money-here it is-but all my clothes as well. I shall go naked to meet the Lord.”

So it is not surprising then when the brothers asked Francis how to pray he responded:

**Together:**

YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN:  
That we may love you with our whole heart by always thinking of You  
with our whole soul by always desiring You  
with our whole mind by directing all our  
intentions to You and by seeking Your glory in everything  
And with our whole strength by spending all our  
energies and affections  
of soul and body  
in the service of Your love and of nothing else  
and may we love our neighbors as ourselves  
by drawing them all with our whole strength to Your love  
by rejoicing in the good fortunes of others as well as our own  
and by sympathizing with the misfortunes of others  
and by giving offense to no one.

**Movement II: Service in humility**

**Prayer:**

God be in my head  
and in my understanding  
God be in my eyes  
and in my looking;  
God be in my mouth  
and in my speaking;  
God be in my heart  
and in my thinking;  
God be at my end  
and at my departing. AMEN

**Hymnal: A Worship Book**

**Leader:** Saint Francis's desire to serve in humility, even in the passing over of his own death, provides the key to understanding the Poverello. His relationship to God, to the Church, to his brothers and sisters, and to all the elements of creation is a relationship of service. *The Admonitions* develop the aspect of what it means to be a servant of God. Francis teaches that service is the way of undoing the sin of Adam, and it is the "holy manner of working" that is the Spirit of the Lord always hints toward the other, and thus the Spirit-filled person is the true servant. Therein is the poverty and humility of Saint Francis of Assisi.

**Francis' Conversion**

*Francis started, and when his horse shared in the movement, and his first impulse was to turn and flee as fast as he could. But there were the words he had heard within himself, so clearly before him- "what you used to abhor shall be to you joy and sweetness" ...And what had he hated more than the lepers? Here was the time to take the Lord at His word-to show his good*

*will...And with a mighty victory over himself, Francis sprang from his horse, approached the leper, from whose deformed countenance the awful odor of corruption issued forth, placed his alms in the outstretched wasted hand-bent down quickly and kissed the fingers of the sick man, covered with the awful disease, whilst his system was nauseated with the action.*

*The next day, Francis voluntarily wandered down the road he had hitherto always avoided...And when he reached the gate to the leprosarium, he knocked, and when it was opened to him, he entered. From all the cells the sick came swarming out-came with their half-destroyed face, blind inflamed eyes, with club feet, with swollen, corrupted arms and fingerless hands. And all this dreadful crowd gathered around the young merchant, and the odor from their unclean swellings was so strong that Francis against his will for a moment had to hold his breath to save himself from sickness. But he soon recovered control of himself, he drew out the well-filled purse he had brought with him, and began to deal out his alms. And on every one of the dreadful hands that were reached out to take his gifts he imprinted a kiss, as he had done the day before.*

As a result of this experience of coming close to the most despised, Francis was filled with wonder and joy. Thereafter he sought contact at the margins time and time again, gradually allowing his own process of conversion to be informed by the experience of encounter with the poor.- **St. Francis and the Foolishness of God** by Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Stuart Taylor

Francis' conversion did not start with the encounter with the leper. One could say his life of debauchery and estranged relationship with his father was a first part of that process, but his life of somewhat solitude in prison which made for a stark contrast to his previous life gave him plenty of time to think. Francis' conversion process was informed by his experiences with the poor. Francis' spirituality was very incarnational, that is, he believed there was Christ in everyone, especially in the poor. The following four values are relational and like Cardinal Newman states can place us in situations that can often lead to our own conversion helping us understand how Christ is present in others.

### **Reflection questions:**

Have there been times in your life when, out of service, you did something that at first was repugnant, but over time changed your life and perspective?

Have there been opportunities you missed along the way when the Spirit through another person/circumstance was inviting you to deeper conversion? When were the times you listened and said, "Yes!"?

### **Prayer:**

Christ on the cross bows his head,  
Waiting for you.  
That he may kiss you;  
His arms are outstretched,  
That he may embrace you,

His hands are open,  
That he may enrich you;  
His body spread out,  
That he may give himself totally;  
His feet are nailed,  
That he may stay there;  
His side is open for you,  
That he may let you enter there.  
**-St. Bonaventure**

### **Movement III: Four Values of Franciscan Conversion (inspired by Marie Dennis, Engaging Spirituality Process)**

#### **Prayer:**

God of guidance, quicken your Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds so we may follow what is right.

Give us direction so we may know which way to choose and which to refuse; which course to claim and which to reject; which action to take and which to avoid.

Enlighten our minds, purify our hearts, strengthen our wills, and lead us to live as faithful followers of Jesus all the days of our lives. AMEN **Hymnal: A Worship Book**

**Leader:** What Clare highlights is the Christian message-death leads to life. Love, by way of suffering, leads to the fullness of love. If we accept Clare and Bonaventure's spiritual path, then we must admit that it takes a spirit of poverty and humility to penetrate the mystery of the Christian God. Too often, we look for God in all the wrong places. We expect to find a God of power and might but instead we encounter a God of crucified love. To know this God we must let go of our fears, expectations and speculations of what God is like and freely enter the mystery of the cross. We can enter this mystery by entering into our own hearts, the mystery of our own humanity with its joys and sorrows, gifts and wounds. Here is where God dwells, in the midst of our fragile humanity, the God who bends low to embrace us in love. **-Ilia Delio O.S.F.**  
**Franciscan Prayer**

**Accompaniment-** After this the Lord appointed a further seventy-two and sent them on ahead in pairs to every town and place he was going to visit himself. **-Lk 10:1**

When the brothers go about through the world, they should carry nothing for the journey, neither (Lk 9:3) a knapsack (Lk 10:4), nor a purse, nor bread, nor money (Lk 9:3), nor a staff (Mt 10:10). And into whatever house they enter, let them first say: Peace to this house (Lk 10:5). And, remaining in that house, they may eat and drink whatever their hosts have offered (Lk

10:7). They should not offer resistance to evil (Mt: 5:39), but if someone should strike them on one cheek, let them offer him the other as well (Mt 5:39, Lk 6:29) And if someone should take away their clothes, they should not deny him also their tunic (Lk 6:29). They should give to all who ask; and if anyone takes what is theirs, they should not demand that it be returned (Lk 6:30)-  
**Chapter XIV The Manner of the Brothers' Conduct in the world, Rule of Franciscans.**

Accompaniment means to walk with someone, to be with someone. Where ever Francis and his companions went they were seldom by themselves. They walked with each other, they walked with the poor, they walked with and in the midst of nature. In fact Francis forbid his brothers, with the exception of those who were ill, to ride horses. He wanted them to walk everywhere as the poor had to do.

**Relinquishment-** Jesus said to him, "If you wish to go the whole way, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and then you will have riches in heaven; and come follow me." –**Mt 19:21**

We see in the above story of Francis and his father, of Francis letting go of all family and wealth. In Chapter VII of Francis' Admonitions he states: Therefore, none of the brothers, wherever he may be or wherever he goes, should in any way carry, receive, or have received either money or coins, whether for clothing or books or payment for any work-indeed, for no reason-unless it is for the evident need of the sick brothers; for we must not suppose that money or coins have any greater value than stones. Therefore, let us who have left all things behind (Mt 19-27) take care that we do not lose the kingdom of heaven for so little.

**Solidarity-** And now there appeared to him an angel from heaven bringing him strength and in anguish of spirit he prayed the more urgently; and his sweat was like clots of blood falling to the ground. -**Lk 22:43-44**

Francis identified so strongly with the poor and with the passion of Christ that he was given the gift of the stigmata.

Chapter IX of the Admonitions states: All the brothers should strive to follow the humility and the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ and remember that we should have nothing else in the whole world except, as the Apostle says, 'having something to eat and something to wear, we be content with these (1 Tim 6-8) And they must rejoice when they live among people (who are considered to be) of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside.

**Community-** The whole body of believers was united in heart and soul. Not a person among them claimed any of his possessions as his own, but everything was held in common, while the apostles bore witness with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. They were all held in high esteem; for they have never a needy person among them, because all who had property in land or houses sold it, brought the proceeds of the sale, and laid the money at the feet of the apostles; it was then distributed to any who stood in need. -**Acts 4:32-35**

It is ironic that Francis had no desire to start a new religious order. His devotion to God, Christ and the Holy Spirit was so infectious that hundreds, then thousands came to associate themselves

with Francis. So his rule simply starts this way: The rule and life of these brothers is this: to live in obedience, and chastity, and without anything of their own, and to follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who says: "If you wish to be perfect, go (Mt: 19:21) and sell everything (Lk 18:22) you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow me. (Mt 19-21) What was the bond that was to hold the community together? It was simply to follow Jesus and to love one another.

All four of these values calls Franciscans to "place" themselves in situations where they are challenged to change, a constant call to conversion. When we walk with someone to listen to their stories, their pains, their joys it touches our hearts in ways that moves us to consider new ways of living our lives. The needs of others often invite us to give up a part of ourselves either emotionally or materially relinquishing what we have so that others might live. When we begin to walk with others and meet others needs the invitation then is to stand in solidarity with them against the larger forms of evil and injustice. It is through this four-step process when done in love and mutuality that community is formed. Francis constantly admonished his brothers to serve one another!

### **Questions:**

Have there been times in your life when you walked with someone? How did it touch you and /or them?

Have you ever been in a situation when you voluntarily or were forced to relinquish material possessions? What was the process or feelings you had to deal with to work through the "letting go"?

Have you ever stood in solidarity with others? How did it change your world and inner view of life?

What experiences of community have you experienced? And how did it change you?

What stumbling blocks keep you from living any of these four values?

### **Prayer:**

Believing, hoping and loving  
With my whole heart, with my whole mind  
And with my whole strength,  
May I be carried to you, beloved Jesus,  
As to the goal of all things,  
Because you alone are sufficient,  
You alone are good and pleasing  
To those who seek you and love your name  
For you, my good Jesus,  
Are the redeemer of the lost,  
The savior of the redeemed,  
The hope of exiles,  
The strength of laborers,  
The sweet solace of anguished spirits,  
The crown and dignity of the triumphant,  
The unique reward and joy of all the citizens of heaven,

The renowned offspring of the supreme God  
And the sublime fruit of the virginal womb,  
The abundant fountain of all graces,  
Of whose fullness we have all received.

**-Bonaventure**

#### **Movement IV: The Fruit of Franciscan Conversion/Prayer: Joy**

##### **Prayer:**

Savior of the earth's children, you came as a little child to lead us to wisdom and love.

When you grew up, you welcomed the children and told us the kingdom belongs to them.

Call us to a child's tenderness, humility, energy, and love, for Jesus' sake. AMEN **Hymnal: A  
Worship Book**

But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control. **-Galatians 5:22**

Franciscan prayer is evangelizing. It is an awakening to the Good News of Jesus Christ and to the love of God poured out for us in Christ. Those who seek God along the path of Franciscan prayer are to be transformed by the one they seek, the one they claim to love. Prayer centered on relationship with Christ, The Word of God incarnate, cannot help but change the life of the believer and the way one lives. Those who enter into Franciscan prayer, therefore, must be ready for change, they each must be willing to become "another Christ," for this is where the path of prayer leads, to a new birth of Christ in the lives of the believers.

To be human is to be on the way to salvation, that is, to be brought into relationships of wholeness and healing in union with God. Prayer leads to salvation because it leads to the happiness of being a lover of God. **-Ilia Delio O.S.F. Franciscan Prayer**

**Questions:** It is perhaps the Joy of Francis (completely centered in his relationship with God, Christ and Holy Spirit) that attracted so many people to his ministry. So we ponder...

In their book, Benedict's Way, Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan O.S.B share, "Joy isn't something that simply happens to us. Joy is a decision we have to make-or not. You and I are responsible for whether or not we experience joy. Joy isn't going to happen if we pamper ourselves. Instead we need to consider what is preventing the joy. There are a lot of things that can choke joy. But here are ten to think about:

1. Fear

2. Cynicism
3. Boredom
4. Low self-esteem
5. Taking life too seriously
6. Loss of wonder
7. Greed
8. Guilt
9. Bitterness
10. Busyness

This is not a complete list but what might be your joy choker?

How has prayer changed for you and changed you over your lifetime? Has it led to any sense of wholeness/healing in your life? Have you ever felt joy/happiness because you felt and sensed God as lover?

**Leader:** The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world. –**Francis, The Testament**

**Final prayer:**

Where there is charity and wisdom there is neither fear nor ignorance.

Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance.

Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither covetousness nor avarice.

Where there is inner peace and meditation, there is neither anxiousness nor dissipation.

Where there is fear of the Lord to guard the house, there the enemy cannot gain entry.

Where there is mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart. –**The Admonitions XXVII How Virtue Drives Out Vice**

## RESOURCES

Benedict's Way, an ancient monk's insights for a balanced life, by Lonni Collins Pratt, Daniel Homan O.S.B., Loyola Press 2000

Center for Action and Contemplation, PO Box 12464, Albuquerque, NM 87195,  
[cac@cacradicalgrace.org](mailto:cac@cacradicalgrace.org)

God's Fool, The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi by Julien Green, Harper and Row 1985

Francis and Clare, The Complete Works, The Classics of Western Spirituality, translation and introduction by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. CAO. And Ignatius C. Brady, O.F. M., Paulist Press 1982

Franciscan Prayer by Ilia Delio O.S.F., St. Anthony Messenger Press 2004

Hymnal: A Worship Book, Faith and Life Press, 1992

Just Faith Ministries, PO Box 221348, Louisville, KY 40252, [www.justfaith.org](http://www.justfaith.org)

St. Francis and the Foolishness of God by Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Stuart Taylor

Orbis Books 1993

*"This truly wonderful book introduces you anew to the person of Francis—the 'truly catholic' and always contemporary saint. There will be no Christianity as usual for those who read this book." Richard Rohr, OFM*