



Franciscan Renewal Working Papers

Contemplation, Conversion and Renewal

Kevin Kriso, OFM



In a nutshell

Our spiritual journeys, both fraternal and personal, are key to understanding why we pray, communally and individually, as we deepen our relationship with God, discern His will for us and continue to share the good news that everybody belongs and everybody is loved. We are all related. We are all called brother. We grow into this reality through prayer and contemplation, through embracing renewal, by taking deep within us the concept that conversion is a lifelong journey. Contemplative practice is fundamental to the renewal of Franciscan life. Contemplation opens up within us the willingness to undergo further conversion. This paper calls for the renewal of Franciscan contemplation through practices, retreats and spending time in hermitage. Each fraternity, animated by a guardian or local leader, can commit itself to contemplative practice in fraternal life planning, and in a spirit of fraternal charity, hold each other accountable to this plan. None of this will succeed, however, without a willingness on the part of individual friars to deepen their contemplative practice with an eye to renewal.

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As people of prayer, Francis and Clare looked and listened for God in their everyday lives and were informed, transformed, converted and renewed by their contemplative experiences. Throughout Franciscan history, striving for a deeper contemplative fraternal culture has been foundational to the renewal of our way of life, our own personal conversions, and our actions. Spending time with God in contemplation can only renew our vision, move us to conversion and transformation and lead us to reach out. The following section of Francis' Testament reveals the relationship between contemplation, penance, conversion, renewal and action.

“The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. 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.”¹

Renewal of Contemplation is Fundamental to the Renewal of Franciscan Fraternal Life and Mission

God called Francis to “do penance” by doing something outside his “comfort zone.” His way of doing penance was to encounter the lepers. In the process, Francis experienced the inbreaking of Christ in his very being. Something “shifted” within Francis. As his heart was opened by God, Francis discovered something precious and sweet in what he used to experience as bitter. He saw the incarnate beauty of the lepers and came to love them. Engagement with the world through contemplation and reflection transformed his heart to act compassionately and justly. Contemplation moved him to a more inclusive way of seeing. Ilia Delio writes that Franciscan Contemplation “is a deepening of love, a continuous action of ongoing transformation, since nothing is more liberating and active than love. This love not only enables one to see more clearly and deeply into the depth of the Spouse, the heart of Christ, but to feel and taste the hidden sweetness of God.”² Love renews us.

Today we as individuals and as fraternities, are called to open ourselves and welcome the invitation of deeper love. If we take time to notice how God is illuminating our paths and our experiences, renewal unfolds. Our understanding can undergo a loving shift, and change our actions. As lovely as this sounds, being open to renewal requires a kind of penance, humility, an acknowledgement that we don't know everything and maybe what we have been doing is no longer working. Facing things we don't want to face, but need to, requires courage. God's love and grace can take us there and sustain us.

Later in the Testament Francis notes: “And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one told me what I had to do, but the Most High revealed to me that I should live according to the Pattern of the Holy Gospel.”³ What started out as Francis' personal search for God became a spiritual movement, a fresh form of evangelization, a fraternity that is deeper than living a “common life.” He did not set out to found a religious order.



He merely wanted to live the Gospel himself but God sent him the gift of brothers and love was made visible through the fraternity.

Near the end of his life, Francis had another contemplative experience: his encounter with the winged seraph that resulted in his stigmatization. At that time, Francis was experiencing a period of great distress as he feared the direction the brotherhood was taking. From one perspective, Francis merely sought consolation in solitude at La Verna. However, he experienced more than consolation; he experienced transformation.

“The Seraph’s beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision. While he was unable to perceive anything clearly understandable from the vision, its newness very much pressed upon his heart. Signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man hovering over him.”⁴

God touched him, marked and transformed him during this encounter. As Francis faced concerns about the Order in his day, where the growth in numbers was driving the abandonment of the ideals, we also have concerns about the Order in our own day. We face the fear of diminished numbers and weakening of Franciscan religious life in the United States. No one actively seeks out this kind of stigmatization, but we are invited to give ourselves and our problems over to God and the sometimes-painful process of transformation. We have a choice. We can run and hide or go more deeply into the life of God bringing our needs and fears to God. Will we take up the invitation?

An old adage goes: “When you turn on the lights you get to see the cobwebs that are in the corners.” It requires courage to “turn on the lights” of perceiving reality because we find cobwebs of less than loving attitudes lurking there. Contemplation brings us into greater communion with God while it also opens the eyes of our heart to understand reality at a deeper level. Our pilgrimage to a renewed Franciscan life depends upon entering into contemplation and allowing God to change us in the process. Happily, contemplative inquiry also illuminates our gifts and treasures. Another adage goes: “When you stop running, you are able to check your pockets and find the gold you did not know you had.”

Finally, at the end of his life, Francis passed on contemplative discernment to the friars. He said, “I have done what is mine. May Christ teach you yours.”⁵ Francis only came to know God’s will for him by spending time with God in contemplation. He asks us, his brothers to do the same so as to learn from God what is each of ours to do.



Franciscan Contemplative Practice

“A long, loving look at the really real” is a popular contemporary definition of contemplation. Contemplation is an open-eyed form of prayer that emphasizes perception and apprehension. Contemplative prayer can most certainly take place in the context of liturgical prayer in common or in intercessory prayer, but perhaps more so in silence and solitude.

Francis left us with neither a definition nor primer of contemplation but he was nevertheless a contemplative. Many of his theological insights can only be fully understood as the fruit of contemplative practice and perspective. From the Admonitions Chapter 1:

“The Father dwells in inaccessible light, and God is spirit, and no one has ever seen God. Therefore, He cannot be seen except in the Spirit because it is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer.”⁶

Notice the emphasis on seeing, perceiving and understanding. Francis instructs his followers to adopt this more “spiritual” way of recognizing Jesus’ humanity and His presence in the sacraments.

“Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the Virgin’s womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of a priest. As He revealed Himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so He reveals Himself to us now in sacred bread.”⁷

Francis also perceived God’s revelation in Creation. In his Cantic of the Creatures, Francis praises God through sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, etc. Each element of creation reveals God in some important way. He goes so far as to call all created things as “sister” or “brother,” understanding there is a sacred bond between us. This way of looking at reality is quite different from what is common in our society. Many people see others and the natural world only for they can economically provide. Because of his embrace of a poverty that respected the inherent dignity of each creature, Francis’ contemplative perspective rejected ownership. Instead of ownership he felt *caritas*, the lavish way that God loves everyone.

In a deceptively simple passage of her second letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare on the other hand does provide instructions in contemplation. She invites her reader to gaze, consider, contemplate and imitate Christ as spouse.⁸ In a few words, Clare provides a framework for understanding contemplation, a proposal for a journey of contemplative encounter with Christ, and our response of imitation. Several helpful books are organized around this four-part movement: Ilia Delio, OSF’s, “Franciscan Prayer,” and Dan Riley, OFM’s, “Franciscan Lectio.”⁸ Clare’s instructions in contemplation highlight this major distinguishing feature of a Franciscan approach.



For Francis and Clare, contemplation was a penetrating loving gaze that gets to the heart of reality. This form of prayer invites us to look into the depths of reality and see all of creation's components in their true relation to God. When invited into our heart, the Holy Spirit invites us to perceive the invisible presence of God hidden in the depths of ordinary reality. This kind of shift in perception results in a shift of behavior, in other words, conversion of life.

Contemplation and Conversion

Francis was led to personal conversion and life and ministry among the lepers and an understanding that the whole world is his brother or sister. His vision was transformed, as was his style of evangelization. Franciscan contemplation establishes the conditions in our hearts and lives that make merciful and loving evangelization possible.

As already stated, there is a penitential aspect to contemplation. As we gaze on and ponder our personal and fraternal lives, we find aspects of our lives that are detrimental. If "our interior life is contaminated and blocked up with resentment, envy pride, lust, anger we see the world through all of these things and it will be a very dark panorama. Self-knowledge and conversion are paramount to cultivating the contemplative dynamic."⁹ We need to acknowledge our spiritual and emotional blocks, which is not always easy. We may need it due to envy, pride, resentment and anything that blocks the flow of God's love within us. Perhaps we need penance for possessiveness of ministry or opinion, conscious or unconscious bias or racism against people who are different from us, seeking a comfortable life, selfishness or grudges. God invites us to be to be changed. Penance ultimately means we are turning to God and when we are in God, we get to experience the wonders of God.

Penance can help us to cultivate a benevolent, non-critical, non-judgmental gaze toward ourselves and others. It helps us to make a loving response to difficult people and circumstances, to see what used to be bitter as sweet. We can and should ask ourselves, "Who is characterized as a "leper" today?" An encounter with such people may very well be the key to what continues to convert us, because when Francis encountered the leper, it was not *like* he was meeting Christ. He *was* meeting Christ.

The Franciscan contemplative approach to living can root and focus our fraternal life and mission. The Nairobi Plenary Council (2018) called friars to contemplatively listen to the voice of the Spirit as a means of weaving conversion across all aspects of our lives, internal/spiritual and external/structural, fraternal/evangelical.



Clarifying Franciscan Contemplation and Forming Consensus Around its Meaning

Some friars believe “contemplation is for the elite who have a bent for such things.” Some eras of formation to religious life have conveyed this message. However, this does not reflect the depth of our Franciscan tradition as we know it today. Iliia Delio notes that “no person is too ordinary to contemplate God. It is essential to living the Christian life.”¹⁰ Francis himself writes in the Earlier Rule, “Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there (in our hearts) Who is the Lord God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit...”¹¹

Other friars say, “We’re not monks. We’re friars. We are an active, not contemplative, order.” Dennis Shafer, OFM, of the US-6 Contemplation/ Houses of Prayer Interest Group, writes that some friars believe contemplation takes valuable time away from their ministries. If we step back a little to take some quiet time, our ministries and the people we minister to will suffer. Dennis also perceives the word contemplation invokes “fear of a return to a quasi-monastic lifestyle” that many experienced during initial formation, or the burdensome canonic requirements of the Divine Office for clerics. No, we are not monks, but monks and monastic spirituality do not hold the sum and total of Christian Contemplation. Franciscans also have our own Contemplative tradition.

In the words of Dan Riley, OFM: “Our (Franciscan) charism begins with the contemplative conviction that God is working and present in the world. We need to connect and cooperate with this active presence of God. The Kingdom of God is within. We need to take time in silence to look and see deeper which leads to wisdom to and a Cosmic Vision, to engage the world at a deeper, non-superficial level. We want to hold the world in contemplation and give voice to our contemplation by moving to action for justice.”¹²

Contemplation is not “one more thing we have to do.” It is a disposition we take as we go through the world. Franciscan Contemplative Prayer does take time and effort but as we pray we *become* a prayer. Franciscan contemplation is not antithetical to action and evangelization. It actually leads to more effective action. When we enter a contemplative practice, our idea of mission widens. We find the fruits of activity belong to God and we are God’s instrument for action. The third criticism is: “contemplation has a definition that is so elastic it is meaningless.” Perhaps this definition of Franciscan Contemplation can help. The Franciscan contemplative approach happens moment by moment, day by day. It is about living in the presence of God all the time, not only for times set aside for prayer or retreat. It happens concurrently with our daily lives. Franciscan contemplation is about being more present to the world with deeper contemplative eyes and ears. “(W)ithin the Franciscan charism ... all creation is penetrated with the active presence of God. We don’t go to any particular place to bring God to it, rather we go through life contemplating God’s active presence and listening to His voice revealing itself in everything in everyone and everywhere.¹⁴” Franciscan Contemplation is about having a contemplative stance before, during and after our



ministerial actions. We are active and contemplative at the same time. All of us are called to be contemplatives and it is possible for all of us to be contemplatives.

Renewing Contemplative Fraternities in Mission

The 2018 Plenary Council of the Order, held in Nairobi, Kenya, made clear the importance of approaching our identity and all our activities through the lens of contemplation. In other words, to place God first.

“During our reflections in the PCO, the theme of fraternity appeared several times and, specifically, the theme of our call to be and to live as a contemplative fraternity in mission. This means that personal and community prayer is recognized as a priority together with the life of fraternity.... This is to stress the centrality of God in our fraternal life – this is also described in the General Constitutions with the expression “in a spirit of prayer and devotion” (GGCC 1:2). This constitutes the first element of a radically evangelical life (cf. 2Test 14-15), the only dimension placed before fraternal communion. It can then be seen that the first consequence of our communion with God and in God is fraternal communion.”¹³

The call of the Plenary Council to renew and revitalize our lives in the midst of a constantly changing world identifies two essentials in Franciscan life. The first is to have a deep and abiding relationship with God. The second is to have the desire to be open to ongoing formation and conversion of mind and heart. This is why the Council insists we understand Franciscan life as Contemplative Fraternities in Mission. The Council also encourages us to foster renewal and revitalization by careful, prayerful, thorough writings of our Contemplative Fraternity in Mission Life Plans.

As already stated many of us have not been formed for or really understand Franciscan contemplation. Therefore, it is important for the renewal of our charism to clarify our understanding of this critical element of our vocation, and form a shared understanding of its centrality to our way of life

A Call to Prayer and Action

Franciscan Contemplation can feed and guide the renewal of our personal lives, our fraternities and our mission. The following are offered as suggestions to develop a Franciscan Contemplative outlook and practices.

As a New Province: A few years ago, in an unpublished document, the US-6 Houses of Prayer and Contemplation Interest Group proposed that a Contemplative Prayer and Devotion Commission or Office be set up to resource and facilitate the gathering and sharing of wisdom, experience, traditions and methods for reflection, along with encouraging the practice of contemplation among fraternities. The Commission or Office can make available Models of Franciscan Contemplation that can be used by fraternities and individuals. The actual lived contemplative life of many of our fraternities



is another source of riches that should not be overlooked. Regional directors and guardians will be important disseminators of the information and practice, to include gathering those parts of our documents that speak about the need for prayer and contemplation, such as the Nairobi document, our Rule and Constitutions and many other related documents. Hermitages and houses of prayer are part of our heritage (the Carceri, Poggio Bustoni, La Verna) and can be very helpful in our ongoing formation, transformation and renewal to face the complexities of a rapidly changing world. The new Province should support the foundation of hermitages and houses of prayer.

As Fraternities: Our new province is asking each fraternity to work on a Life Plan, a fraternal road map to serve as a tool for renewal and revitalization of Franciscan Life in the local fraternities. Each Life Plan should be crafted carefully and collaboratively. Every friar is called to have input. Life Plans are theological documents in as so far as they specify the intention for how that fraternity will realize itself as a Contemplative Fraternity in Ministry.

Contemplation, conversion and renewal will happen at the fraternal level as we pray or celebrate Mass together, share our lives and faith, our prayer lives, ministries and life in general on deeper levels. We will discern how we are able to support each other amid these aspects of our lives. These discussions are necessary, otherwise we are not living a fraternal life, but a common life. Our name “friar” is not a title. It is a relationship with our brothers and all of creation.

As Individuals: Nurturing the contemplative element of our individual lives is also critical. If we are not men of prayer, celibacy, poverty and obedience will mean very little. We are called, and it is beneficial, to step away from everyday life and to take special time to reflect on the mysteries of life, put on the mind of Christ and follow in His footsteps. Personal prayer, spiritual direction and retreats are essential to consider what we need (prayer, ministerial training, counseling) to better equip ourselves to work for the good of the fraternity, the good of the Order, the good of God’s people. We are being given an amazing opportunity for renewal, to better understand our identity as those created and loved by God, to discover the best part of ourselves that we desire to put forward.

About the author

Kevin Kriso, OFM, holds a master’s degree in pastoral counseling from Loyola University in Baltimore, a master’s in theological studies from the Washington Theological Union, and a doctorate in pastoral counseling from Boston University. His ministry has included serving at St. Anthony Shrine’s Franciscan Counseling Service in Boston, St. Francis of Assisi Parish on Long Beach Island, N.J, at the Franciscan Counseling Center, working with the friars in post-novitiate and accompanying them on their spiritual journey and at Mt. Irenaeus as part of the Mount Companion Ministry.

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¹ *Francis of Assisi, The Testament*. In "Volume I Francis of Assisi: Early Documents" (FAED), Edited by Armstrong, Hellmann, Short. New City Press, 1999, page 124.

² Delio, Ilia, OSF, 2022. *Franciscan Prayer*. Franciscan Media, page 127.

³ *The Testament*.

⁴ I Celano 94, FAED, page 264.

⁵ *The Testament*, FAED, page 125.

⁶ Admonitions 1, 5-6, FAED, page 128.

⁷ Admonitions 1, 16-18, FAED, page 129.

⁸ Riley, Daniel, OFM, 2022, *Franciscan Lectio: Reading the Word through the Living Word*. Paraclete Press.

⁹ Evans, Gerald, OFM. 2018. *Franciscan Evangelization a Graced Contemplative Endeavor*.

¹⁰ Delio, p 127.

¹¹ Francis of Assisi, Rule of 1221, chapter 22, verse 27, FAED, page 80.

¹² Riley.

¹³ Order of Friars Minor, 2018. "Those Who Have Ears, Let Them Listen to What the Spirit is Saying to the Friars Minor Today." Document of the Plenary Council, Nairobi, Kenya.

