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Capuchin Vocation Update Province of St. Joseph

St. Francis and Entering Into Conversion

By Br. Vito Martinez

(In last week's Vocation Update, Capuchin Novice Br. Quan Nguyen reflected on his spiritual journey since high school. This week, fellow Capuchin Novice Br. Vito Martinez shares some insights on a four-step conversion model one notices in the life of St. Francis.)

By far, the most universal and popular saint in the Catholic tradition is Francis of Assisi. Due to the many stories about his life, he's been given many different titles: *Francis the Peacemaker*, *Francis the Nature-lover*, and of course *Francis: A Model of Human Liberation*. Yet as an ex-car salesman, it was *Francis the Playboy* that would draw me into his story. I was encouraged by Francis' conversion from his old self to the saint.

From 1 Celano: "Maliciously *advancing beyond* all of his *peers* in vanities, he proved himself a more excessive *inciter of evil* and a *zealous imitator* of foolishness. He was an object of admiration to all, and endeavored to surpass others in his flamboyant display of vain accomplishments: wit, curiosity, practical jokes and foolish talk, songs, and soft and flowing garments. Since he was very rich, he was not greedy but extravagant, not a hoarder of money but a squanderer of his property, a prudent dealer but a most unreliable steward." (1C:2)

As a Capuchin friar who used to spend time hustling deals on the car lot, I can relate with a lot of the adjectives used to describe Francis' early life. ***This*** was the man I was trying to be several years ago. Yet here I am years later, a Capuchin Franciscan Novice...preparing to take the vows of obedience, celibacy, and poverty.

While studying the life of Francis in conjunction with my own faith journey, a model for *conversion* arises. For if conversion is "*the renouncing of pervasive egoism and the turning to an altruistic love for objective truth, goodness, and beauty*" as Thomas Dubay writes, than this is surely what Francis experienced. Reading these stories of his conversion - the "God moment" on the way to Apulia, the renunciation of his father, the kissing of the leper, and many others - provide us an avenue to view our own conversions through a modern lens.

I discovered the necessity for such a model of conversion not just in my life, but as I started working with other people in ministry. As Chaplain and Volunteer Coordinator at St. Ben's Community Meal in Milwaukee, we often had groups of high school/college students come in to experience a meal with the homeless of Milwaukee. The effects of these experiences on the visitors were real, but I had no way to help these people reflect on these experiences as a way to explore conversion in their lives.



Vito Martinez, Rich Reinhardt, Parker Tiffany, and Quan Nguyen are in their second year of Capuchin formation. They are pictured here at St. Conrad Friary in Allison Park Pennsylvania. They share this year with novices from the other Capuchin Provinces in North America, plus Australia and the Vice Province of Guam/Hawaii.

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In the book by William Hugo OFM Cap., *Studying the Life of Francis of Assisi: A Beginner's Workbook*, a psychological vision can be applied to those stories of Francis and allow for personal reflection. By using the tools of Dubay and Hugo, a 4-stage approach to conversion emerges. It is a tool I have used not only to understand my own experiences, but in talking with others as well.

Old World View – We each have our “*subjective selfish*” ideals of how the world works. On occasion we have experiences that “offend” this world view – experiences that make us feel uncomfortable and uncertain. I am reminded of a girl on one of these Immersion Experiences. She saw a man sleeping outside in the snow, yet she couldn't comprehend *why* he was there. Couldn't he go to a shelter? Weren't there agencies to help him?

Francis' experience was no different. The Kissing of the Leper is a prominent point for this stage. While his world has already started changing, he meets a leper on the side of the road. Lepers in the 13th century were considered to be “away from God,” *objects* of terror and disease. Yet his experience tells him that God can be found in the poorest of the poor. Struggling between a personal message from the Divine and the social and cultural norms of his time, his world is fractured.



Here's a photo of the novitiate class as they began their year in July 2009.

Introspection - Several times during his life, Francis disengages from the rest of the world. After his experience at the San Damiano church where the crucifix tells him: “*Francis, rebuild my church,*” we find Francis pulling away from his old life as he tries to process these new conflicts. His desires for worldly things and vanity have left him. He gives away things that were once precious to him. His friends don't know him anymore, his father is unhappy with this change of attitude. Francis focuses on himself as he pulls away from the rest of the world.



Vito praying while staying at Capuchin Retreat just north of Detroit.

When I first started to experience the reality of poverty and homelessness in Milwaukee, I spent a lot of time gathering information. I looked not just at arbitrary numbers, but I looked at the things that had given me pleasure and how they were in contradiction to what I saw in the poor around me. I treasured the fact that I was away from my home in Michigan, as I lost interest in many of the old things that connected me to those friends. I struggled to deal with my privilege versus the plight of the homeless, the desire to enter into their experiences, and to find the ultimate drive for wanting to *do* something.

Integration – Many of the stories that we hear of Francis are just this: him integrating his new thoughts into his life. One of the pinnacle events is the renunciation of his father and all hereditary rights in front of Bishop Guido II. He chooses to live a life of voluntary poverty, relying only on God to provide for his needs. His decision to dismount his horse and kiss the leper is another key event in Francis' Integration. It is through these acts that he begins to re-insert himself into society as he attempts to reconcile the conflicts he felt in his old world view.

Upon entering Postulancy, I remember passing a homeless person in my vehicle and turning away. I was preparing to be a follower of Francis, yet I was unwilling to look for Christ in one of His poor. But I carried that experience with

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me, and sat with it at times during the year. As the year went on, I made different attempts to “make up” for that decision: spending Easter with several homeless, spending time outside in the cold with a couple living on the streets, listening to people talk about their lives, and just being present and viewing them as human beings.

New World View – After those experiences during my Postulancy, I returned home to Michigan, only to find that what used to bring me joy was no longer of importance. My outlook of the homeless had not only changed, my *self* was changed. My family and my close friends said they noticed a “difference” in me, but they couldn’t understand it. They experienced me as a warmer, more-caring human being...someone who cared about their interests and took time to listen (a stark difference from my days of selling cars).

In his Testament, Francis writes: “When I was in sin, the sight of lepers was too bitter for me. And the Lord himself led me among them, and I pitied and helped them. And when I left them I discovered that what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness in my soul and body.”

To compare the old Playboy Francis to Francis the Saint is comparing two different people. I doubt most of us will ever experience such radical conversion in our lives. The best we can hope for is to allow ourselves to be moved by specific incidents that challenge our world view; and rather than just avoid them or offer quick explanations like: “*They need to go get a job,*” or “*They should just go back where they came from,*” we stay with those experiences and allow them to change us.

My goal as a Capuchin friar is not to convert the world. After some profound experiences, I acknowledge that I cannot take someone through the proper stages needed for true conversion. I can only open people to experiences that might make them uncomfortable or challenge their current world view. However by tailoring their experiences around this model, and allowing people time for personal reflection, encouraging people to learn more and get involved, and showing that the ultimate motive for conversion is not simply to repair the *self* but as an act of *love for the other*, I feel that I am helping people enter into their own conversions..



Vito preparing for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Upcoming Vocation Weekends

Feb. 26-28 Milwaukee Ministry and Discernment Weekend

March 12-14 Pre-Postulancy Information Weekend, Milwaukee, WI

April 1-4 Triduum Retreat
St. Lawrence Friary and Seminary
Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin

Reservations are required.

New inquirers are welcome!

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and click on <How to Begin>

Check our Vito's blog at <http://vocationstory.blogspot.com/>

