

TAU Series . . . TOR 1

Bringing out of our storehouse the flesh and blood of our tradition in such a way as to feed future generations . . .

The Prophetic Heart (1994) — Joseph P. Chinnici OFM

The Volterra Letter:

The First Letter to All The Faithful

Thaddeus Horgan, S.A.

The Volterra Letter shows us the way to incarnate the Gospel's basic reality into our daily living as Franciscans.

Francis' highest intention, his chief desire, his uppermost purpose was to observe the holy Gospel in all things, and through all things and with perfect vigilance, with all zeal, with the longing of his mind and all the fervor of his heart, in order to follow the teaching and the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. He would recall Christ's words through persistent meditation and bring to mind his deeds through the most penetrating consideration (1 Cel 84; Omnibus, 299)

This citation from Thomas of Celano is, I believe, significant to our purpose. Seeking to deepen our appreciation of the *Volterra Letter* is for each of us the beginning of a persistent and ongoing reflection on the life-filled words of the new Rules of the Franciscan Third Order Regular and of the Secular Franciscan Order. The *Volterra Letter* (1) centers the Gospel in Franciscan life. It makes us conscious of the efficacious word of God. Through it Francis shows us the way to incarnate the Gospel's basic reality into daily living. Further, *it points out the sources Francis used to keep lively within himself, humanly speaking, the Good News who is Jesus Christ.*

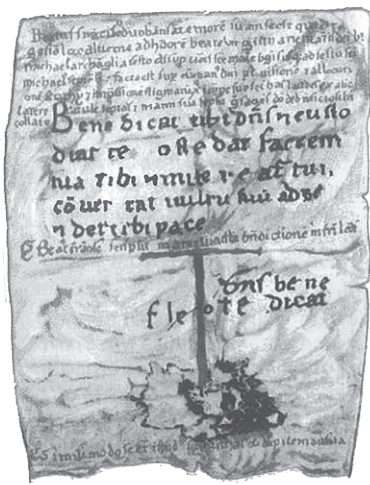
These were reflection, memory, and ongoing meditation. Even a quick look at his other writings reveals Francis' clear perspective on the Gospel. It is always Jesus Christ. He is our way to the Father.

To be a penitent . . . means to be a living vessel of God's transforming presence and power in the world.

Again, as Celano puts it, Jesus "occupied" Francis. Francis carried the Lord in his heart, his mouth, his ears, his eyes, his hands, and all his members (1 Cel 115; Omnibus, 329). He did so because God's unerring words of Spirit and Life state that no one comes to the Father except through Christ (Jn. 14:16). Jesus' life is the way God's love literally entered our world and touched the hearts of men and women.

Such love must be responded to. *This is the uncomplicated substance of Franciscan spirituality.* This is why Francis preached penance, or conversion of heart, and directed that it was to be proclaimed and lived by his followers (Reg NB 23:1). The matter was simple: whoever has received the gift of salvation must live as new creation, alive in Christ (Rom. 6:11). This is the response God wants.

While there is a simple directness to Francis' awareness of salvation, let us not think that it was simplistic. On the contrary Francis' awareness was not only persistent but penetrating. We see this — as with all things concerning Francis — in his deeds. His followers had to proclaim repentance because Francis knew that all people need God. All people are intrinsically poor, or gospel poor, without Christ. All people also are the object of God's selfless love. All, then, should respond to God. Again, cumulatively looked at, Francis' writings show that he understood *metanoia* as a continuous process of abandoning the effects of sinfulness throughout life, especially that of being separated from God, and of embracing the life of union with God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. To use Francis' words, all men and women need to replace the "spirit of the flesh" (Ep FidII 65; ef. AB 72) with the "Spirit of the Lord" (*ibid.*, 48; AB 70).



The TAU

From the time of Ezekiel the sign of the TAU, marked on the forehead of those turning to God in faith and repentance has long represented faithfulness and wholehearted love. It was used for healing and victory.

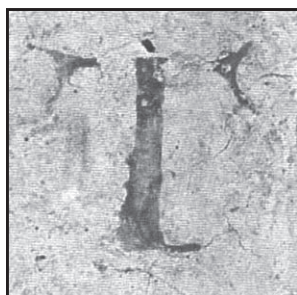
Pope Innocent III, evoked the sign of the TAU from Ezekiel when opening the Fourth Lateran Council in 1216 calling for the renewal of the Church, "Mercy will be granted to those to bear the TAU, a mark of a life of penance and renewal in Christ."

And so Francis, who was present at the Council, wanted to sign himself with the TAU, and his brothers along with him. The TAU became the sign of the little Band's mission: the preaching of faith and repentance (Rule of 1221:23).

Thomas of Celano, writing in 1252, notes, "The TAU symbol had, above all others, his preference. Francis used it as a signature for his letters, and he painted a drawing of it on the walls of all the cells." One of these paintings, believed to be created by Francis, is found in the little chapel of Mary Magdalen at Fonte Columbo in the Rieti Valley where Francis wrote his Rule.

Another very precious document, housed in the Basilica of St. Francis, is Francis' own handwritten blessing for Brother Leo — signed with the TAU.

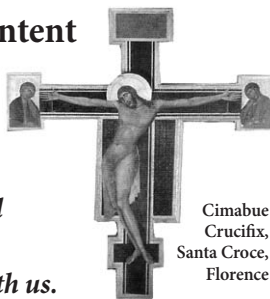
Above all else, the TAU meant mission for Francis: a mission to proclaim the Goodness of God by a wholehearted following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ because of whom all life is sacred.



The “spirit of the flesh” is a Pauline expression meaning that the person to whom it is applied is in the full range of his/her personality separated from God. As such, that person is the subject of sin and death. But God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying will has destined all people for transformation to glory. (2) It is in this sense that Francis uses the term in his writings. This demonstrates theological insight, we might say, but it more likely means that Francis was inspired to understand the process of redemption as it is presented in the whole of Scripture (especially the New Testament). He apparently reflected on it, kept it in the forefront of his memory, and made it the subject of his ongoing meditation. It seems to me that if we want to know well the Prologue to the new Rules of the Franciscan Third Order Regular and Secular Franciscan Order, all of this should be borne in mind because these truths are what underlie the words of the text.

Implicit Content

The cross is the expression of Christ’s selfless love and his covenanted relationship with us.

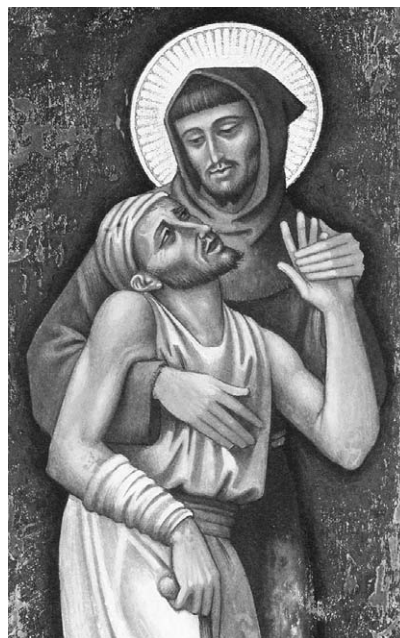


Cimabue
Crucifix,
Santa Croce,
Florence

REDEMPTION UNFOLDS in Salvation History as a series of covenants between God and his people. The covenants were unique relationships between the Lord and his chosen — relationships based on God’s choices. The fact that God chose us utterly fascinated Francis. The Lord made certain people his partners so that in and through them he would restore to humankind its original destiny of eternal life with him. God is always the initiator of covenant. Because he is God, his covenants are irrevocable. This fact awed Francis of Assisi especially in view of the fact that, as Genesis points out, humanity chose the way of “the flesh.” Yet God pursued his people, establishing partnerships with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), with Abraham (Gen. 15:9-12), with all of Israel (Ex. 20:34), and with the Davidic Dynasty (2 Sam. 7). It was God who established these partnerships, pushing his people (if you will) toward that moment when the Person of the Word established

not only a partnership, but a relationship between God and humanity. In Christ we become the children of God. What Jesus is to the Father we now become: viz., children of God. Moreover, we receive God’s life or the living relationship within the Godhead, the Spirit of the Lord. This relationship both draws us into the very inner life of God and bonds us together into the relationship of fraternity with the Lord. Jesus now is brother to all men and women who share his life. Behind the *Volterra* Letter’s words is Francis’ living consciousness of this most gracious choice and gift of God. These must be responded to and received. This is what Franciscan life is all about.

The call to turn from the spirit of the flesh to the spirit of the Lord meant from Francis to submit oneself totally to God’s salvation and to become part of God’s salvific activity in the world. This is why deeds are so essential, in Francis’ view, for anyone committed to the life of evangelical conversion. Deeds are concrete responses to the goodness of God. God’s love and goodness are expressed in the deed of his only Son coming into the world. He is near. He is concrete. In the Incarnate Son we know the way to the Father. To do the Gospel literally, Francis’ charismatic insight into Scripture, became for him (and his followers) the path to eternal life because in Christ God becomes brother to us (Ep FidII, 56; AB 70) and among us. This is the core of Gospel life.



Piero Casentini, from San Damiano, Assisi

The Redeemer on the Cross was Francis’ perception of the Christ. This was so not only because salvation was effected there (Adm VI and Ep FidII 11-14; AB 29, 68), but because there the Son totally gave himself to the Father out of love for us. One of the reasons Francis emphasized the Eucharist is that it makes present again to us our Redemption. It is a source of redeemed life constantly being renewed in us. Celano and Bonaventure, particularly, point out Francis’ devotion to the Crucified Christ (2 Cel 211; LM IX.2, XIV.4; Omnibus, 533, 699, 739), a devotion that led him to want totally to return in kind the selfless love of God for us expressed by Christ. Just as the Redeemer emptied himself for our sake, Francis wanted his follower to empty themselves of all selfishness and worldliness as their concrete response to God’s goodness. Nothing less than Jesus’ poverty and humility is projected as the way to respond. Such a deed manifests both one’s awareness of and one’s reception of God’s new and eternal covenant relationship into one’s own life. Not to accept it is mere foolishness, as the story at the end of the *Volterra* Letter points out.

Explicit Content

(Faith and Metanoia)

THIS STORY and its style make one wonder if the *Volterra* Letter truly is a letter. There is much internal evidence to support the claim that it is actually a sermon. Bernard Tickerhoof states the case:

What we have . . . is a didactic tool. The letter is the means Francis has chosen to reach a wider audience . . . The letter form has been imposed upon the material which seems to have a more primitive oral form behind it . . . In short, there is present in the *Volterra* Letter sufficient evidence that the basic content of the piece existed first in oral form, and seems to have many of the characteristics of homiletic material. The bulk of the letter may well be an early example of Francis’ preaching, and perhaps the purest example of it that we possess.”(3)

Celano implies that in his preaching Francis gave norms to those who heeded his call to *metanoia* (1 Cel 37). Could this be where he did so? It is very possible. The simple teaching style conveys a strong message:

“Choose God or perdition.” It is straightforward both in its positive and in its negative parts, and to the point. These are marks of Francis’ style. But this is in a decidedly oral style. Like most of Francis’ writings, it also is heavily biblical. Fr. Tickerhoof documents in his study (pp. 172-73) (3). Francis’ extensive use of Scripture, especially the Johannine texts. He sees a pattern, moreover, in their use by Francis:

In the letter’s **first chapter** the core of the John material is positive and is drawn from the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel. John here records a prayer of Jesus addressed to the Father summarizing Christ’s mission and praying on behalf of his disciples, the true believers, and for those who will come to believe through their preaching. Francis has chosen material from this chapter specifically bringing out the nature of discipleship in the lives of the penitents. For Francis the penitent has been given by the Father to Christ, and has been instructed through the words of the Son. The penitent has received this teaching and has come to believe. The life of penance is tied to belief. But not only that, for by their example and perhaps by their preaching they will also lead others to believe, and thereby to do penance.



In the **second chapter** we see the flip side of the coin. The material is drawn extensively from the eighth and ninth chapters of John’s Gospel, and is decidedly negative. The references are now no longer to the disciples of Jesus but to the Jews, representing for John those who are not true believers. The thrust of the Gospel is that while claiming to be begotten of God these non-believers are really children of the devil. Moreover, they have gone beyond the point where they can truly see their own origin. They are spiritually blind, so that while claiming to have the light

they show themselves to be unaffected by it. Francis has drawn from this image of the unbeliever and has applied it to those who refuse to take up the penitential life. While they claim to be Christians, their very actions show that they are self-deceived. They have lost true wisdom, and so they have created a black future for themselves.

In the Letter there are two key lines, it seems to me that spell out its explicit teaching. These are Chapter 1, line 1, and Chapter II, line 8. They summarize the pattern that Fr. Tickerhoof sees. Both call for faith. For Francis true faith is necessary for genuine conversion of heart. *That is the Letter’s explicit message.*

Comparing this text with **Chapter 23 of the 1221 Rule**, we see the same basic idea expressed. But there it is expanded. The orthodox faith-content, so dear to Francis, is stated (Reg NB 23:1-11). His consistency regarding this is evidenced by the text. In the *Second Letter to all the Faithful*, Francis presents the content of *faith and the deeds* that manifest the efficaciousness of faith in a true penitent. The emphasis he gives to this is so strong that, when it came to update the religious tertiaries’ Rule, the writers declared in Ch. I, article 2, that

the charism of this Order is not *metanoia* alone but “true faith and *metanoia*.” So fundamental is this to Gospel living after the example of Francis, that the writers of both the new Religious and the new Secular Franciscan Tertiary Rules chose this letter as the prologue to their respective texts.

The historical reason is important; the obviously explicit relationship it gives to the two branches of the Third Order is important too; but both of these are secondary compared to the paramount place of faith in the life of all penitents.

The Spirit of the Lord

“TRUE FAITH and penance” are the constitutive elements in the Franciscan process of attaining holiness. Reflecting Scripture (Mt. 13:23), Francis would say that his true followers are those who hear God’s word and understand it (Reg NB 22:9-25). Understanding for Francis means the assimilation of the word into one’s inner self. It then issues forth in deed befitting repentance. One without the other is not

authentic. In Chapter 22 of the *Regula non Bullata* Francis details the process pursued by the opening lines of the first chapter of the *Volterra* Letter. It is well to read the two texts together.



The first four lines of the Letter deal directly with the outward conduct of a true penitent. As always Francis has Jesus’ word in mind when asked to give guidelines to the penitents. He chooses the Lord’s response to the Pharisees, those self-deceived blind leaders of the blind. This is by design. In the second chapter of these guidelines Francis will once again allude to them. What is the word of the Lord that sets right their false example — and the false example of misguided unorthodox penitents of his day?

It is the shema (Deut. 6:4-9), the people’s remembrance creed and prayer of God’s loving covenant relationship with them. Nothing less than the total turning of self to God, because God has turned to us, will suffice or ever could suffice for an authentic penitential life.

This response too must be concrete. The Lord points out how (Mt. 22:39-40), and Francis repeats his words, directing us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Concrete transformation comes through the hearing of the word with an open and converted heart.

There is a certain rhythm to the first four lines of the *Volterra* Letter. Within yourself, Francis directs, love God, then manifest this by love of neighbor. Within yourself, be aware of the weakness of humanity, then fortify yourself with the strength of the Eucharist, the very presence of Christ alive among and within us. Thus fortified, go forth and do the deeds that originate from your converted heart. A converted heart for Francis is one that continually turns from the “spirit of the flesh” and open itself to the “Spirit of the Lord.” Certainly the tendency to sin and selfishness remains. But what becomes the conscious quest of the one filled with the Spirit is to be concerned only with what pleases the Lord. A converted person, then, is one on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, one in whom the Spirit of the Lord dwells.

Francis is not content with the biblical citation from John (14:23) which speaks of God coming to us; rather he focuses on the graced individual in his or her relationship to God and neighbor.

I believe he does so to stress that one who hears the word with an open and converted heart truly “understands” that word and is inwardly transformed. What comes forth, therefore, reflects this transformation (Mt. 15:15-19; 23:25-26; Mk. 7:18-23; Lk. 11:39-42). For Francis, this must always be concrete.

- What could be more self-consciously concrete than to describe oneself as a *spouse* because of one’s union with Christ?
- What could be more actual, biblically speaking, than to know oneself as a *brother or sister* to the Lord who, Jesus says (Mt. 12:50) does the Father’s will?
- What is more graphic than to be a *mother*, one who carries life — in this case God’s life — and who gives birth — in this case to Christlikeness — thanks to the workings of the Holy Spirit within the individual? This mystical language of Francis is far more down to earth than may first appear. Sister Kathleen Moffatt points out that the four fundamental values contained in the new Third Order Regular Rule are herein contained.(4)

Francis wants us always to be concrete because, as line 10 concludes, this God-giftedness must shine as an example for others. Once again we see how the life of



penance is tied to belief and to its lived manifestation so that others might believe and be converted. The rest of the Chapter reinforces this notion. Lines 11 to 13 repeat, almost in rhapsody form, our faith in the indwelling of the Trinity, while lines 14 through 18 repeat Christ’s High Priestly prayer (Jn. 17) for the sanctification of his disciples and for those who through them will come to believe.

Chapter 2 not only speaks of the self-deception of persons who fail to do penance because of Satan’s wiles, but also addresses the matter of those dominated by the spirit of the flesh (self-centeredness, selfishness, pride). These are totally opposite to those filled with the Spirit of the Lord. Self-centeredness causes spiritual blindness (line 7), which for Francis is

thorough. In lines 11 through 18, given his turn of phrase, one can almost hear him say that the ultimate stupidity is spiritual blindness. It makes one feel that he or she has or should have everything! Therefore Francis makes the tendency in our humanity to sin only to drive home his concluding point, which was his starting point: all should hear God’s word and “understand” it because it is spirit and life (lines 19-21).

To be a penitent, then, means

- to be *happy* in the Lord and blessed by God.
- to be a living vessel of God’s transforming presence and power in the world.
- this for all people and throughout life. That prophetic message needs to be heard today just as much as it did in Francis’ day. **Let us then bring forth worthy fruits of our conversion by proclaiming and living that message so that all may be one and the world may believe.**

1. The *Volterra* Letter in English can be found in *The CORD* 29:6 (1979), 166-6 in Cajetan Esser, *The Rule and Testament of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 221-26; in AB 62-65; and of course in the new *Third Order Regular and Secular Franciscan Rules*.
2. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary* (London: Herder and Herder, 1965), 60.
3. Bernard Tickerhoof, T.O.R., “A Gospel Spirituality,” *The CORD* 29:6 (1979), 170.
4. Kathleen Moffatt, O.S.F., “Of Penance and the Townspeople: The Language of Francis,” *The CORD* 33:9 (1983), 288-89.

SOURCE: Thaddeus Horgan SA, “The First Letter to All the Faithful.” *The CORD* 35.10 (1985): 303-10. Also in *Resource Manual for the Study of the Third Order Regular Rule*. ED. Kathleen Moffatt OSF. International Franciscan Conference, TOR — Rome, Italy, 2013.



Thaddeus Horgan, Atonement Friar, Graymoor, NY, was one of the seven member “Work Group” on the TOR Rule, representing the USA with Margaret Carney OSF. Thaddeus, theologian and Franciscan scholar, ministered in Jamaica, Washington, DC, Graymoor, NY and Rome, Italy. His *Turned to the Lord* publication for the Franciscan Federation USA, 1987 was Thaddeus’ signature piece faithfully recognizing the total and continuous giving of self; reconciliation as the imperative of Franciscan life, and response to the Love of God in Jesus as the uncomplicated substance of Franciscan spirituality. Thaddeus died at age 54 in 1990.

TAU SERIES #1 was prepared by **Kathleen Swan**, Sister of St. Francis of Philadelphia, Aston, PA. Kathleen, born in County Meath, Ireland, has shared her Franciscan life in ministry as an educator in Florida, South Carolina and Baltimore; her missionary life in Antiqua, WI and her pastoral experience as member of the Care Team in Assisi House, Aston, PA, together with persons who are in need at Anna’s Place, Chester, PA.

ART of “The Great Commandment” poster is available from Scarboro Missions, CA or www.columban.org.au/thegoldenrule.

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