

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 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.

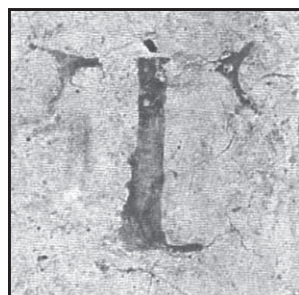
Pope Innocent III, evoked the sign of the TAU from Ezekiel when opening the Fourth Lateran Council in 1216 calling for the renewal of the Church, “Mercy will be granted to those to bear the TAU, a mark of a life of penance and renewal in Christ.”

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 Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis

### PROLOGUE

#### The words of St. Francis to his followers *Epistola ad fideles: RECENSIO PRIOR 1:1-19*

#### Testimony of The Sources

*Many of the people, both noble and simple, cleric and lay, impelled by divine inspiration, began to come to St. Francis wanting to carry on the battle (of conversion) constantly under his discipline and leadership . . . To all he gave a norm of life and showed in truth the way of salvation in every walk of life. (1 Celano 37)*

*Carried away by the force of his preaching, great numbers of people adopted the new rule of penance according to the form instituted by St. Francis which he called the “Order of the Brothers of Penance.” The way of penance is common to all those who are on the road to heaven and so this way of life includes members of both sexes, clerics and lay-folk, married or single.*

(Legenda Major of St. Bonaventure 4:6)

*Francis preached so fervently that all of the men and women of the village in their great devotion wanted to follow him and abandon the village (near Rivo Torto). But St. Francis did not let them, saying to them: “Do not be in a hurry and do not leave, for I will arrange what you should do for the salvation of your souls.” And from that time he planned to organize the Third Order of the Continent for the salvation of all people everywhere.”*

(Fioretti #16)

### HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The origin of the ancient Third Order was in the penitential movement that predated St. Francis by six hundred years. God’s call to enter the “Order of Penance” meant a public commitment to a life of continual conversion - following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, living gospel ideals often expressed in care of the poor, fasting, vigils, almsgiving and pilgrimage.

2. By the 9th Century (Carolingian period) membership in the ancient Order of Penance belonged to both penitent sinners as well as generous Christians committed to holiness while remaining “in the world.”

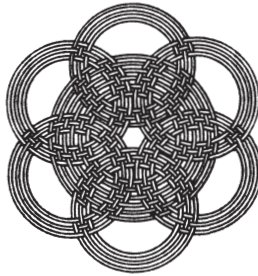
3. Soon persons described as “*conversi et conversae*” desiring to lead a chaste life of self-denial created yet another way of life: some living in solitude or associated with a monastery and a rule, calling themselves *fratres et sorores*. Their response to the gospel created a style of life which was relatively uniform according to fixed statutes called a “*Propositum*” or program.
4. The presence of *voluntary* penitents and voluntary “*conversi*” represents one of the distinct aspects of Christianity at the time of Francis of Assisi. It is actually through Francis’ *living* testimony and his preaching that the waning penitential movement was revived with a new outlook and a new mission as **The Order of Penitents of St. Francis**.
5. Francis and his first companions initially identified themselves as “*penitents from the city of Assisi*.” (L3C 37; A.P.211) His example encouraged other “*conversi*” to seek his direction.
6. In the Spring of 1209 the “Penitents of Assisi” walked to Rome to receive the approval of their gospel way of life from Pope Innocent III (L3C 49). They received the clerical tonsure (L3C 52, 2Cel 192, L.M.3:10), which signaled a moment of great importance: the “company of the poor” passes from the *state of penance* to the *clerical state*. From **Penitents to Minors - the First Order** is born. The new Franciscan penitential movement of the townspeople, inspired by Francis’ own life and teachings, will continue the original founding character of Francis’ gospel call. Francis and his companions have now entered the clerical state. ( N.B.In the medieval Church this is not the same as “ordained.” but neither is it simply “baptized.”) This is the reason why Francis had recourse to Bishop Guido’s court and not a civil court when he renounced his patrimony.
7. It is a fact that St.Francis provided guidance as well as example for the Umbrian Valley townspeople who were inspired to live the gospel in the spirit he witnessed. The document that has been preserved as testimony to this direction is sometimes called *The Volterra Letter*. Perhaps it was written around 1215, only 6 years after the beginning of the First Order, and three years after Clare left home. This Letter is now the Prologue of **both** the Secular Franciscan Order Rule (1978) and the Third Order Regular Rule (1982) thereby linking both in a dramatic way to the eight hundred year old communities of the **Order of Penitents of St. Francis**.
8. Initially much controversy surrounded the naming of the document now considered the **norm of life** for all who followed Christ in the spirit of St. Francis as *voluntary penitents*. The *Recensio prior* or **Earlier Version of The Letter To The Faithful** was discovered by Paul Sabatier in Codex 225 of the Guarnacci Library in Volterra, Italy (thus the name, “*Volterra Letter*”) Sabatier published it in 1900 under the title, “*These are the words of life and salvation: whoever reads them and puts them into practice will find life and salvation from the Lord.*” Kajetan Esser OFM, Germany, established a Latin critical text in 1975. The English translation was published by Raffaele Pazzelli TOR in 1978 in ANALECTA T.O.R.(14), Rome, Italy. This “almost certainly treats of that *forma vitae* (way of life) which, according to the first biographers, Francis drew up for his penitents.” (Leonard Lehmann OFM Cap., GREYFRIARS REVIEW, Vol 4;#2)

9. All the early documents, biographers and chroniclers of the Order affirm the significant influence Francis had on the three Orders. As of 1221 there exists over 60 *papal* documents from the *13th Century* dealing with the **Third Order**. In his encyclical letter *Sacra propediem*, January 6, 1921, Benedict XV affirmed, “*St. Francis was the true founder of the Third Order in the same way that he was of the First and the Second, and thus without doubt he was their wise legislator.*”

## SIGNIFICANCE and CONSIDERATIONS

*“This bright, joy-filled, horizon-opening description of the penitential life.”*

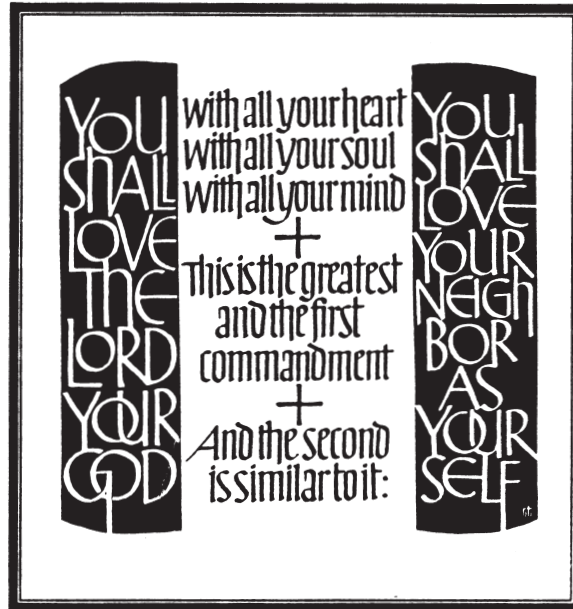
Regis Armstrong OFM Cap.



1. The *importance* of this *Recensio prior* is in the fact that it presents the **core ideas** by which Francis tried to shape the life of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance associated with him. (Esser)
2. In the Letter one finds evidence of Francis’ *new* consciousness of his authority, ability to inspire and his sense of mission. It demonstrates Francis’ enthusiastic and imaginative preaching.
3. Behind the message of this “Song of Exultation and Exhortation to Penance” is Francis’ *“living consciousness* of the most gracious choice and gift of God: Jesus is our brother ... To live this consciousness is to realize that in Jesus we have many brothers and sisters!” (Thaddeus Horgan S.A.)
4. This document points out the sources Francis used to keep lively within himself the Good News. It welcomes us to a humble and persevering contact with the **word of God**. (T.Horgan)
5. According to Kajetan Esser OFM, analysis of the text suggest that Francis had a greater knowledge of Scripture than modern Franciscan research in general is willing to acknowledge. There is genuine *theological depth* permeating the well-balanced division of the *Recensio prior*. (See accompanying article by Roland Faley T.O.R.)



## CONTENT



1. **“The Shema”** - “Hear O Israel” - fixes the Covenant at the center of one’s life; presents the **character** of *metanoia*, a radical turning from self in an “over-flowing *gratitude* to our *all-good God*.” (Faley and Esser)

“When proposing the **guidelines** of a life of penance to his followers, Francis makes the **great commandment of LOVE** the foundation of his whole *spiritual edifice*.” Pope John Paul II. 6/15/89 to the 107th General Chapter of T.O.R.’s, Rome.

2. **“... bring forth from within themselves fruits worthy of true penance.”**

This represents a radical departure from the medieval notion of doing *deeds* of penance. It can be significantly linked to Francis’ insistence on a life of *faith and repentance*; faith that is demonstrated by a heart open to the generosity of God. These “fruits” show themselves by an attitude of :

- *sine proprio*: appropriating nothing to oneself! - “The seed that falls to the ground.”  
Francis’ insightful guidance on the whole meaning of *kenosis* (Phil 2:6-11) is grounded in his **Admonitions**. Kajetan Esser O.F.M. calls these **Admonitions** - Francis’ “*Canticle of Inner Poverty*.”
- reconciliation: the practical expression of *repentance* is in forgiving and asking pardon  
*This* is the *imperative* of the Franciscan life. (T.Horgan)

3. ***“How happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things ... because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them... They are the spouses, brothers and sisters, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

The images of *spouse, brother and sister, and mother* illustrate the ACTION OF THE SPIRIT in realizing Christian conversion. All are different aspects of the *same* reality. One can associate the **four** fundamental values the 1982 Third Order Regular Rule to these images as indicators of the profound *“working of the holy Spirit”* in the heart of the penitent.

***“We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit with our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

•CONTEMPLATION

***“We are his brothers and sisters when we do the ‘will of the Father who is in heaven.’”***

•CONVERSION - POVERTY

***“We are mothers when we bear him in our hearts and bodies with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences, and when we give birth to him through a holy life which should enlighten others because of our example.”***

•MINORITY - HUMILITY

In this, the most mystical of all Francis’ writings, given to the townspeople of Umbria (and to penitents of all time), we glimpse Francis’ remarkable reverence for the working of the Holy Spirit in all those who turn toward a merciful God in faith and repentance. Allowing one’s heart to be directed by the Spirit of the Lord - united, obedient, humbled and fruitful - as *spouse, brother and sister, mother* of the Lord, characterizes for Francis the living of the Covenant of the Great Commandment implanted in the hearts of all peoples everywhere open to hear God’s word. The profound *simplicity* and *clarity* of Francis’ *mission* can be heard in this imagery.

**Raffaele Pazzelli T.O.R.** writes, “In *no other work* of St. Francis is such a highpoint of spirituality reached, nor will the person’s insertion in trinitarian life be expressed in more precise terms. ***This is the essence of the life of penance.***”

“Francis’ Directives for His Penitents”. **St. Francis and The Third Order.** 111-112.

4. “... *How holy and how loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable and desirable over all things it is to have such a Brother and Son, our Lord Jesus Christ who gave up his life for his sheep and prayed to God, saying: “Holy Father, keep in your name those whom You gave me in the world; they are Yours and You gave them to me. (Jn 17 ...)*”

The *Recensio prior* reveals a great influence on Francis of the Gospel of John. Johannine theology has been *intricately* worked into the text itself, leaving us with the impression that the primitive oral form of the letter may well have been a sermon on some aspect of John’s Gospel.

Francis has chosen material from Chapter 17 of John’s Gospel specifically bringing out the *nature of discipleship* in the lives of the penitents. It is through one’s *life-style* that one demonstrates true discipleship

- Bernard Tickerhoof T.O.R. - “Francis’ *Volterra Letter*: A Gospel Spirituality” -  
**The CORD**, June 1979

The use of John 17 reveals the *intimate* mystical experience of Francis with his God which is the inspiration of Francis’ **universal mission**. Without the *internal “filial”* expression of *Fraternity with his brothers* called to name together their experience of God, the *external evangelical mission* would be silenced.

-Walter Viviani

## CONCLUSION

*For the sisters and brothers of the Third Order of Saint Francis*  
 the the charism of penance is the particular way of  
*freeing oneself toward Love.*  
*LOVE* must be responded to! **This** is the uncomplicated  
 substance of Franciscan spirituality.  
*This is why Francis preached penance.*

“I believe the providential time has come for all Penitents of Saint Francis to *rediscover their proper specific vocation*, the particular characteristics of their own spirituality, the precise configuration of their proper mission in the world, in the Church and in the sphere of Franciscanism.

*To let this moment of grace pass fruitlessly,  
this providential occasion of renewal and authenticity,  
this conscious awareness that all the Penitents of Saint Francis  
are by identity of vocation  
associated in a rich penitential fraternity/ community.*

*this is, in truth, like closing one's eyes to the light of the Lord which passes in our midst and  
knocks at the door of every congregation, male or female,  
of the Franciscan Order of Penance.*

Lino Temperini T.O.R. "Penitential Spirituality in the Franciscan Sources"  
**The Assisi Congress on Formation, 1977**

### SOURCES for THIS STUDY

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