Conversion

Following the Lord Jesus on the path of humility

After the Spiritual Exercises guided by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, this year's Lenten meditations could only be inspired by the Christian experience of Francis of Assisi. The two saints are not far apart: Bernard died in 1153, Francis was born in 1181, less than thirty years later. It is as though the torch of following the Gospel were passed from hand to hand, through the centuries, without ever being extinguished.

This year marks the eight hundredth anniversary of Francis' death, and the Holy Father wanted the anniversary to be marked by a new special jubilee, inviting the entire Church to let herself be reached once again by God's grace through the witness of the Poor Man of Assisi. Francis is not just a saint to be remembered or admired: he is a man traversed by the fire of the Gospel, capable of rekindling in each of us the longing for a new life in the Spirit.

To retrace his spiritual journey, the first meditation focuses on his conversion and consists of five steps: the change of taste that grace brings about in sensitivity; the alteration produced by sin and the need for radical healing; humility as the true measure of human greatness; the choice to become smaller as a proper form of baptismal life; and finally, the continuous nature of conversion, which is not accomplished once and for all, but always begins anew.

1. The change of taste

What do we mean when we talk about conversion? It is a question that deserves to be placed honestly, because there are many possible answers, and not all of them are equally faithful to the Gospel. Traditional catechesis describes it as a return to God after the estrangement of sin. Moral theology highlights the dimension of change in conduct. The ascetic tradition insists on the need for penitential practices that discipline the body and the will. The Scripture, for its part, uses a term that cuts across and transcends all these perspectives: *metánoia*, a change of mind, of heart, of the profound way in which reality is perceived. Not a simple correction of course, but a transformation of vision; not just a revision of behaviour, but a revolution of sensibility.

Who is right? To some extent, all of them. But there is an order to be respected. Understanding where conversion really begins – what its source is – is not a theoretical question. It is the most concrete problem that exists. If we get the starting point wrong, we risk building on fragile foundations.

We know that evangelical conversion is first and foremost God's initiative, in which man is called to participate in full freedom. It is neither pure passivity

nor pure conquest. It is a response: the most suitable response human beings can give to the grace that goes before them and calls to them. Conversion happens in the most intimate point of our nature, where the image of God impressed upon us waits to be reawakened. It is as if something that has long remained silent suddenly starts to vibrate again.

It is here that the experience of Francis of Assisi proves to be precious. In his *Testament*, dictated a few months before his death, he writes:

> "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" (*Testament*, Franciscan Sources 110).

In recalling the essential stages of his journey, Francis first affirms that the initiative belongs entirely to the Lord. It was God who gave him the gift of beginning to do penance, that is, to enter into a journey of conversion. The "doing penance" that Francis speaks of should not be understood as an ascetic exercise by which to earn the grace of a new relationship with God. Rather, it alludes to a complete change of sensibility: a new way of looking at oneself, others and reality in the light of the Gospel.

This change begins in a very tangible way: when he begins to have mercy on others. This is the centre of his story. In that encounter with the lepers, the young Francis experiences a definitive reversal of taste: he discovers an unexpected sweetness precisely where he was not looking for it and where he did not even expect to find it.

At the moment that he gives himself freely to the poorest of society, forgetting himself for the first time, Francis finds the answer to that restlessness that dwelled in his heart: the bitterness of a life filled with many things but still empty of its essential value. That encounter brings about an inner upheaval in him: what previously seemed bitter to him became sweet.

This is the heart of conversion: not primarily an act of will, but an inner transformation, a mysterious shift in sensibility. This change does not eliminate our participation; it makes it truer, freer, more joyful. The effort does not disappear, but changes its sign. Conversion is no longer the attempt to straighten out one's life by one's own efforts, but a response to a grace that has redefined the parameters of our way of perceiving, judging and desiring.

Let us think, instead, about what happens when this transition is missing. If we were forced every day to eat food whose flavour we have never appreciated, we could do so through discipline, for a certain time, but without joy and with increasing fatigue. If we were to cultivate a passion without ever having experienced its pleasure and inner resonance, we would soon end up experiencing it as a burden. If we found ourselves building a life with someone without ever having experienced true love, that relationship would risk becoming a form of constraint. And if a religious person wore a habit,

performed gestures and uttered words in the name of a God known only by hearsay, without having any real personal experience of Him, he would end up experiencing a profound inner unease, which could also affect the people entrusted to him.

These are difficult situations to sustain over time. And something similar occurs when conversion is poorly conceived: when we ask ourselves – or even others – to adhere to a morality without having tasted first the sweetness of new life in Christ.

The "doing penance" that Francis speaks of is not a programme of voluntary austerity, but the beginning of a struggle to defend and preserve the treasure of a new flavour of things, finally recovered. It consists of faithfully nurturing the seed of new life that God has planted in the earth of our hearts.

2. The alteration of sin

To understand why conversion must be so radical – why it is not enough to correct some form of behaviour, why a true renewal of sensitivity is necessary – we must probe the depth of the furrow that sin has etched in us. We are talking about that hateful distance from ourselves, that struggle to truly desire the good that we recognize as such, that rift between what we are and what we want to be. Saint Paul talks about this with disarming honesty in the Letter to the Romans:

> "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer that I do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (Romans 7:15-18).

These words do not describe the condition of a sinner who does not want to change, but of who desires good and nonetheless finds himself committing the evil that he does not want. This is why conversion requires an entire lifetime: because the wound of sin does not relate only to a few mistaken choices, but touches more deeply the very way we are made.

To understand the origin of this condition, we must return to the beginning. The account of Genesis 3 does not simply speak of a transgression, but documents a profound transformation that took place in man after his act of disobedience. Even before God's reaction appears, the text notes two important things: man realizes he is naked, and he experiences the feeling of fear, trying to hide from God.

> "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3:7).

> "The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said,

> 'I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:9-10).

Fear and shame are the first fruits of sin. Not a punishment that comes from outside, but a change that arises within the human being. Before the fall, man and woman were naked and felt no shame. After sin, this balance is disrupted. A fracture appears: with God, with others, and even with themselves. Man no longer feels at peace; he continues to perceive himself as wrong and to view others with suspicion. This is why fear and shame appear. They are not superficial emotions, but the sign of grave unease: man senses within himself a rift between what he desires to be and what he discovers he is.

This is what sin produces. It takes away nothing from God: it changes us. The categories of our sensibility become confused: we no longer clearly recognize what is good, true and beautiful. So, we also lose the correct measure of ourselves, forgetting the greatness to which we are called.

We live in a time when the word "sin" seems almost to have disappeared from our way of thinking. In the collective consciousness – and sometimes even in the life of the Church – everything is explained as fragility, wound, limitation, conditioning. When sin is still mentioned, it is often reduced to a small mistake or weakness.

There is some truth in this view. The spiritual tradition has always recognized that human fragility cannot be reduced to ill will, and that judgment must be accompanied by mercy. The problem arises when this perspective substitutes the theological one instead of complementing it. If every sin becomes just a symptom, and every fault a dysfunction, something essential risks disappearing: the greatness of human freedom and its responsibility. If every choice is merely the result of our history, our traumas or our conditioning, then everything becomes explicable and, in the end, even justifiable. But if this is the case, freedom is only an illusion and moral responsibility loses its meaning.

Here a paradox appears. If the possibility of true evil no longer exists, we cannot even believe in the possibility of true good. If sin disappears, holiness too becomes an abstract and incomprehensible destiny.

This is why the Christian faith takes sin seriously. Not to accuse man, but to protect and affirm his greatness. To recognize that his choices really count, that his freedom is real, and that with it he can build or destroy: himself, others, the world. It also means recognizing that within us there is a true wound, that is not resolved by some adjustment, but instead requires profound healing.

Conversion is a demanding journey because it has the task of healing our existence by restoring our relationship with God, our Creator and Saviour. It is a gift of grace, but it takes shape in the concrete repetition of gestures and choices that we have begun to live in freedom and love. Its effectiveness depends precisely on the ability to preserve these gestures over time, even when they become tiring or repetitive. It is not a sterile effort: it is the fidelity

of those who have already glimpsed the meaning and value of what they are living and, precisely for this reason, continue to practise it with freedom and joy.

When Saint Francis, after his encounter with the lepers, feels something true and free within himself for the first time, his response is neither surrender nor renunciation: it is recognition. And when, in the little Church of the Portiuncula, he listens to the Gospel and understands that that those words are calling him by name, he reacts with a cry of joy: "This is what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart" (*First Life of Thomas of Celano* 22, Franciscan Sources 356).

Francis begins to do penance because in his encounter with Christ he finally rediscovers himself: the image of the new man "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (*Ephesians* 4:24), that image which sin had obscured and which grace was bringing back to light.

3. The rediscovered measure

In the history of the Church, Francis of Assisi is known for having embraced radical poverty, chosen as the essential form of his evangelical life. However, if we read his writings carefully, we realize that his love for poverty is never separated from a deep esteem for humility. In the *Regula non Bullata* he writes: "All the brothers must apply themselves to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Regula non Bullata* IX, Franciscan Sources 29). In a famous laud, he writes: "Holy Poverty, may the Lord protect you with your sister, holy Humility", explaining how the two virtues work together to purify man: "Holy Poverty destroys the desire of riches and avarice and the cares of this world. Holy Humility destroys pride and all the people who are in the world" (*The Salutation of the Virtues*, Franciscan Sources, 256,258).

For Francis, poverty and humility are never separable, because they emanate directly from the mystery of the Incarnation. In the *Letter to the Entire Order*, reflecting on the Eucharistic mystery, he exclaims: "O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!" (Franciscan Sources, 221). And, after the experience of the Stigmata on Mount La Verna, he turns to God, saying: "You are humility" (*The Praises of God*, Franciscan Sources 261).

The poor and humble Christ, for Francis, is not just one devotional image among others, but the most precise name of that God revealed in the Incarnation and in the Pasch of His eternal Word. In poverty and humility, he recognizes the very traits of God, which man is called to live since he is created in His image and likeness.

While poverty, in the radical form lived by Francis, concerns only those who feel called to such a vocation, humility is a path that every baptized person is called to follow if they want to fully embrace the grace of life in Christ.

It is therefore worthwhile to rediscover the authentic meaning of a word that is often misunderstood, starting with its etymology. The Latin *humilitas* is related to *humus*, the earth. The humble person is one who comes from the earth, who belongs to the earth, who does not forget that he is earth. The gesture of ashes with which we enter Lent – "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" – is not an invitation to sadness or self-contempt: it is a return to truth. It is the way in which the Church restores us to our most authentic measure, freeing us from the suffocating weight of what we are not.

Yet humility has often been misunderstood. In the classical world, this concept almost always had a negative connotation: it indicated what is insignificant, miserable, servile. Some philosophers (Spinoza and Nietzsche) then inherited this distrust, reading humility as either a sad passion born of the contemplation of one's own powerlessness, or the virtue of cowards who elevate what is merely weakness to a value. Even within Christian spiritual history, humility has been distorted: reduced to an exercise in self-contempt, to mortification for its own sake, sometimes even to a mask of hypocrisy. For this reason, it has become a word that is difficult to utter and even more difficult to embody.

But Christian humility has nothing to do with these counterfeits. Tradition has clarified this with lucidity: humility is not simply a virtue to be conquered by willpower. Rather, it is a way of inhabiting the world and relationships; it is the fruit of an experience – often marked by humiliation itself – that reduces the inflated image we have of ourselves and restores us to the truth. It is a gift of the Spirit even before it is an ascetic exercise.

Jesus knew this so well that He made humility the only quality that, in the entire Gospel, He explicitly asked us to imitate. He does not say: learn from me how to work miracles or to raise the dead. He says only: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). In that word He summarized His entire way of being in the world. The Fathers drew a radical conclusion from this: to live with humility does not mean adding something to a normal Christian life, but to understand it fully in the light of the Gospel. The humble person is, quite simply, the Christian. Saint Augustine, inviting Dioscorus to embrace the Christian faith, writes that in the way of truth, "the first part is humility; the second, humility; the third, humility: and this I would continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction" (*Letter* 118: 3.22).

Humility does not impoverish man: it restores him to himself. It does not diminish him: it restores him to his true greatness. This is why it is so closely linked to conversion. Original sin arises precisely from a rejection of humility: from not wanting to accept ourselves as human beings, finite and dependent on God. Conversion, then, can only be understood as a return to humility. Not a lowering of oneself below one's own reality, but a return to it. A descent from false self-esteem to one's own truth in order to discover that this truth, after all, has been blessed from the very beginning.

4. Becoming smaller

If we return to Francis' encounter with the lepers, we can grasp an even more surprising aspect of his evangelical intuition. Francis was a man who thirsted for fullness: he sought glory, pursued dreams, and desired to live intensely. Throughout his life he had strived to become "greater": a successful merchant, a knight, a man of prestige. But those aspirations had not given him what he was looking for. When, however, he finds himself in front of someone "smaller" than himself, the unexpected happens: his true greatness emerges. Not through conquest, but through embrace. Not by rising, but by bowing down.

Francis then understands something surprising: in the world created by God, the privileged place is that of the little ones. It is precisely in them that the "power" spoken of in the Gospel is manifested, that of becoming children of God. A child, in fact, is completely at peace with having to depend on a father. For this reason, he is not afraid to be himself and feels no shame in asking. From this freedom comes a particular strength: the ability to inspire goodness in others. The little ones, with their fragility, awaken mercy, which is perhaps the most precious energy in the world.

This is why the Poor Man of Assisi asks his companions to call themselves "friars minor". Not to seem humbler, but to truly live as little ones: men who do not occupy all the space, but rather open it to others. Being small, for Francis, is the practical way of embodying the Gospel: a radical openness and hospitality towards others.

To teach his friars the value of this secondary position, Francis exhorts them to go begging when work is not enough to guarantee the necessities.

> "And when it is necessary, they should go for alms. … And the brothers who work to get them will receive a great reward and enrich and benefit those who give them, for everything which men leave in the world will perish but they will receive a reward from the Lord for the charity and alms they have done" (*Regula non Bullata*, IX, Franciscan Sources 31).

For Francis, going and asking for alms was not a legitimate – perhaps even astute – strategy for obtaining food and other material goods. It was a way of activating mercy and generosity in others: to enable others to live the same experience he had experienced in his encounter with the lepers.

Jesus, in the Gospel, insisted a great deal on smallness as the key to the mystery of the Kingdom and as a condition for entering it. He compared the logic of the Gospel to a seed: tiny, but capable of becoming a tree that shelters birds in its branches. He explained to His disciples – always tempted by dreams of greatness – that only those who become small like children can enter the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, He said that those who want to be great must become small and make themselves servants of all.

Is this not, after all, the great secret of the Incarnation? Why did God, in wanting to take on our humanity, do so by becoming not only a man, but a

child, born in the womb of the Virgin Mary? Not only to inspire awe and wonder, but to awaken the best of our humanity. It is in front of someone who elicits neither fear nor competition that we stop being afraid and ashamed, and begin again to give what we are.

Becoming small, then, is neither renunciation nor diminishment: it is an essential dimension of being Christians. Certainly, not every form of smallness is authentic. Sometimes what we call humility is none other than a way – subtle and deceptive – by which we feed our insecurities, authorize our limits to dominate us or subtract ourselves from the effort of life and relationships. It is a counterfeit that wears many masks. But when we choose to become – not to remain – small, because we have recognized the smallness of God and felt accepted and loved by Him, then that choice is not a form of regression or renunciation: it is the face of the new man, restored to us by Baptism.

5. Ongoing conversion

If conversion is a change of sensibility that heals the imbalance produced by sin and restores us to the right measure of our humanity – that smallness that makes us partakers of God's nature – there is still one last step, perhaps the most demanding: recognizing that conversion never ends.

We often imagine conversion as a clear-cut transition: first sin, then the decision to change, and finally the path to holiness. It is a reassuring pattern, but life in the Spirit is more complex and more patient than we think. Sin, conversion and grace are not successive stages: in real life they are intertwined. We remain sinners, always in conversion and it is precisely in this way that we are sanctified by the Spirit. To convert means to continually begin again this movement of the heart, through which our poverty opens itself to God's grace.

This discourse is, after all, familiar to us: every Lent calls us to the responsibility of verifying the vitality of our baptism. Yet, when conversion takes on the concrete face of smallness, something in us resists. We accept change, but we struggle to let ourselves be resized. We prefer to strengthen ourselves rather than diminish our image and our needs.

Thus, the older self re-emerges, at times in evident vices, other times in more subtle and even religious forms: the need for recognition, the search for a role, egocentricity. This is why the struggle is real: it is the struggle to remain small and humble. It is that incessant inner work that frees us from our image of ourselves and enables us to truly serve, in a free and tangible way.

The Apostle Paul knows well the struggle to preserve the smallness and freedom of the children of God. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, accused of weakness while others – the "super apostles" – impose themselves by force, he rejects the path of boasting. Not because he lacked arguments, but because he understood something decisive: weakness is not a phase to be overcome, but the very form of his life in Christ. He writes:

> "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. … For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians, 12:9-10).

It is not just a personal gesture of humility: it is a theological declaration. Smallness is neither a strategy nor an external attitude, but the form of baptismal life. The Christian chooses to present himself in an unarmed way because he follows the Master, who emptied Himself and turned the cross into the wellspring of life.

However, we often think that evangelical smallness is possible only when everything is going well. In reality, the opposite occurs: it is precisely in conflicts and difficulties that it becomes most necessary. When instinct drives us to defend ourselves or to impose ourselves, that is when we see if we have truly learned the Gospel of the cross. Light, in fact, shows its strength not when everything is clear, but when darkness reigns.

The mystery of communion in the Church is based on this smallness, as the Holy Father reminded us in his most recent audience:

> "This is what constitutes the holiness of the Church: the fact that Christ dwells in her and continues to give Himself through the smallness and fragility of her members. Contemplating this perennial miracle that takes place in her, we understand 'God's method': He makes Himself visible through the weakness of creatures, continuing to manifest Himself and to act" (Pope Leo XIV, *General Audience*, 4 March 2026).

In days that are once again marked by pain and violence, to speak of smallness might seem to be an abstract discourse, almost a spiritual luxury. In reality, it is a practical responsibility, linked to the destiny of the world. Peace does not arise only from political agreements, nor from diplomatic or military strategies, but from men and women who find the courage to make themselves small: capable of taking a step back, of renouncing violence in all its forms, of not giving in to the temptation of revenge and abuse of power, of choosing dialogue even when circumstances seem to deny the possibility.

It is a demanding and daily task. We cannot postpone it or delegate it to others. Those who acknowledge themselves as children of God know that this conversion of heart concerns them personally. For this reason, we can adopt the words that Saint Francis, at the end of his life, marked by the stigmata, never tired of repeating to his brothers:

> "Let us begin, Brethren, to serve our Lord God, for until now we have made but little progress" (Saint Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior* XIV,1; Franciscan Sources 1237).

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, grant us wretched creatures to do, for your love, what we know you want, and to always want what pleases you, so that, purified within, enlightened within and set ablaze by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we may follow in the footsteps of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the help of your

grace alone, may we come to you, O Most High, who in perfect Trinity and simple Unity live and reign and are glorified, almighty God for ever and ever. Amen.

Father Roberto Pasolini, OFM Cap.
Preacher of the Papal Household