

sense to more people. I am excited about exploring our call to “forms of life.” But that is the subject of another NewesLetter. I still have some more thinking to do.

The summer also gave me the space to prepare for what lies ahead in the next three months. I begin teaching the worship class at Fuller again next week. The day the class begins I will also be doing some consulting for a group thinking about starting a ministry nearby. The week after that I leave for the annual Vineyard Mission Leaders Meeting in Colorado Springs, where I will be doing spiritual direction giving a talk on vocation, and gathering a few folks to explore my new ways of talking about calling, mission, and “forms of life.” By November I will write some kind of paper on the subject I am currently exploring: “Who Should Be Poor? How Poor? And Why?” I will probably write some kind of semi-technical essay and then produce a video or two to communicate the topic to a different audience. I am learning to “speak in different languages” these days.

Also in November I have a book review due on Pentecostal mysticism for the journal *Spiritus*. I will be giving one presentation on the Holy Spirit and spiritual formation for the Evangelical Society meeting and another on the philosophical and charismatic theology of Donald Gelpi (my old doctoral mentor) at the American Academy of Religion.



In January I will travel to Pasadena to offer a presentation for the Fuller Theological Seminary Center for Missiological Research on the relationship between Formation and Mission, drawing from my recent *Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls*. Then in February I will be at Houghton College speaking and leading groups to consider Monasticism(s) Old and New. I have a full season up ahead, so I am glad for the summer to prepare in quiet. . . . And to explore medieval monasticism more deeply.

Reflections - Confraternities of Penitence: A New Wave?

I remember walking below the cathedral of San Rufino into a basement. In one room in that basement I saw a sign saying “Confraternity of the Penitents.” I remember looking at that sign and saying to myself (and later to a friend) “That’s what we need today: new confraternities of penitents.” It was 2011 and I was visiting Assisi, Italy as part of a celebration of the 25th anniversary of InnerCHANGE a group who ministers to people experiencing poverty.

I was charged with doing a few teachings on location about Francis and Clare of Assisi, providing something of a historical background and contemporary application to their tour of Assisi and their vision for the future – and along the way I got to see the sites myself (sweet gig!).

Though my memories of the exact location have faded some, I have never forgotten my conviction from that experience. Indeed, I am more convinced of it now than ever. We need new confraternities of the penitents.

So now I guess I have to explain what I am talking about. What in the world is a *confraternity* of the *penitents*? Let’s first consider “confraternity.” A confraternity (or a *consorority* for women, but I seldom see this term and sometimes see the world “confraternity” referring to mixed groups) is basically a



club for mutual support and activity. In previous centuries monasteries offered *fraternity* toward those offered special service or special donations. By virtue of their fraternity with the monastery these individuals would perhaps be mentioned in regular cycles of monastic prayer (both during life and after their death). They might be allowed burial at death within the monastery grounds. And they might also be invited to special services or gatherings in the monastery.

In time (and perhaps guilds), the practice of monastic lay *con*-fraternity A confraternity mutual religious support. In a matter of the relationship of the laity, but rather of the laity gathering in a church or monastery. Usually they would have some sort groups (the *Laudesi*) especially the *Laudario di Cortona!*). Others out to distribute them among the encouraged one another in their



influenced by the local trade fraternity developed into a kind of was an informal institution of confraternity it was not simply a monastery with the supporting meeting together, perhaps room, for religious purposes. of worship service together. Some enjoyed singing hymns (check out collected funds or food and went poor. And some of them penitence.

The history of Christian confession and penance is too long and complicated for me to share here.



Suffice it to say that by the twelfth century – right when many laity were becoming aware of the worldliness of the Church at that time – officials made it possible for people to make special commitments to live a devout Christian life without joining a convent or monastery. One (later) example of such a commitment by one Henry Andrew was recorded in a local church register stating, “I, Henry Andrew, vow to God and to Our Lady, and to all the saints, to be chaste from this time forward, and to live in fasting, prayer and works of piety, and that I

shall never quit this habit while I live.” This was a what it meant to become a *penitent*. An individual or a

married couple (Henry Andrew's wife recorded a similar commitment) would live out their lives at home and work in repentant/penitent devotion to Christ.

As you can imagine these two trends – the development of confraternities and the development of lay commitment to penitence – were combined in the creation of *confraternities of the penitents*. Very little research has been done on these early lay fellowship communities. But I consider them important because they form an important backdrop for understanding Francis of Assisi and the development of “Third Orders.” Furthermore, I think that a look at these confraternities of penitents might offer some interesting wisdom regarding our own pursuit of devotion today. In what remains I will summarize five features of penitential confraternities, considering how we might learn from them today.

First, penitential confraternities were occasions for *fellowship* among kindred God-seekers. There were all kinds of occasions for “fraternizing” in the medieval secular world: taverns, jousting fairs, feasts with entertainment and so on. But where could you share life informally with fellow Christians apart from the trappings (and temptations) of the world? Was there any environment where those who really wanted to serve God in the midst of their ordinary family and work lives could enjoy one another *in Christ*? The monthly gatherings of the confraternities of the penitents functioned as that place. They would worship together, sing a few songs or plan activities. Then often, at the end of their gathering, they would share a meal together. And when you share a meal you share life, right? Oh, for those gatherings where we share food and our Christian life at the same time!

Second, these groups would serve as an environment where real commitments to real Christian values could be honored and affirmed. A commitment to chastity – even when it might mean simply fidelity to one's spouse and times of abstinence during certain seasons of the year – was not a light commitment. The decision to live modestly and not to focus attention on financial security or material luxuries was not a light commitment. Towns and church leaders frequently released penitents from some civic responsibilities so that they could devote more attention to Christ. Consequently, the act (and the ceremony) of joining a penitential confraternity was a big deal. This moment both expressed and sealed the godly *intention* of the members. They put on new clothing at that ceremony, symbolic of the new life they intended to lead. This clothing and this life would become their “habit” till death. Oh, for groups today that provide occasion for us to both seal and to express our serious commitments to real Christian values!

Third, these groups served as a *support* to the members. It is one thing to make a commitment to live a holy life after attending a conference or hearing a sermon. It is quite another thing to keep that commitment for the rest of your life. It is very hard to make the journey alone. It is especially hard for us to grow in Christ, to improve in those areas of our weakness, without help. I have no doubt but that this is one reason why the confraternities developed. Members would regularly review their commitments together, rehearsing (in the midst of a secular world and sometimes a worldly church) what a Christ-centered life was and why they wanted to follow Jesus. I can so relate to this. Sometimes I just need to be reminded once again what is really important. They also offered encouragement and care toward each other, for example, visiting one another in times of sickness or trial.



A penitential confraternity also served as a vehicle of mutual *accountability* as members would periodically confess their failings to each other and even pay fines or do other works of “penance” for failures, to encourage them to keep their commitments. Members would agree to live a basic “rule” or pattern of life that – adapted to their own situation – helped them take appropriate next steps of growth in maturity in Christ. Other members would help them keep or adjust that rule, hopefully in a spirit of love and encouragement.

And finally, penitential confraternities also served as an environment for *team service*. As I mentioned, some of these confraternities would go out and deliver donations to the poor or offer care to lepers and others in need. Some would devote some effort to the supply and care of the church buildings, making sure candles and cloths were in good order (we do speak of altar *guilds*, right?). Some devoted time to civil service (maintaining bridges, for example) or other kinds of social action. The point, however, is simply to see how the confraternity acts as a gathering point for a community of people who refuse to be conformed to the world and yet at the same time are together given to serving the world (and the church) with the love of Jesus. We can certainly use more mission groups today!

I hope by now that you are getting my point. A gathering for authentic Christian fellowship. An occasion for sealing and expressing serious commitments to real Christian values. A family of support, reminding us of what is important in life and encouraging us to persevere in the journey. A community of loving accountability, taking the further step of mutual responsibility for one another’s maturity. And finally, a team of servants, presenting together what we have to offer the church and the world for the

glory of God. I have seen many groups that resemble penitential confraternities over the years: Promise-Keeper groups, Renovaré groups, Bread for the World groups, mission groups, many one-on-one or group spiritual-direction relationships. I think that Christendom (and frankly, the world as well), is hungry for more of this today. I think we are especially hungry for groups that embody all five of the features I have mentioned here. What do you think. Was I right back in 2011? Confraternities of the Penitents: a new wave?

May our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – make all things new in your life and in the lives of those you love.



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