

The Birth of a New Order: A Reflection at the Founding of the Order of Franciscan Penitents

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The Feast of St. Andrew

Greetings in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! I am hoping that this will be the first of many Franciscan Reflections from the brothers and sisters of the Order of Franciscan Penitents (OFP), the new religious community in the Charismatic Episcopal Church. The Order of Franciscan Penitents was officially established on November 17, 2007 by Bishop Michael Davidson of the Central Province of the CEC. On that day the OFP was born, and Saints Francis and Clare Mission in Columbia, Missouri was established as a religious house for the whole church. Seven people took vows as Franciscans that day, four renewed vows from other traditions and three embraced vows as Franciscan brothers and sisters for the very first time. Three priests, four lay persons (two women and two men) became the first members of a religious community that has the potential to reach people worldwide. Each person takes their place in a new type of monastic community. The OFP is a community separated by distance but united by prayer, and common bonds of devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ formed by the teachings and witness of St. Francis of Assisi. The mission of the OFP is to be a witness to the world of the saving grace and love of Jesus. To be a Franciscan is to be an evangelist. To be a Franciscan is to be converted to a life wholly devoted to Jesus. The word "penitent" is understood in its purest form, conversion. The Franciscan is to be wholly converted to Christ, turning from worldly passions and being converted to a life devoted to our Savior.

The habit of the new order is nontraditional as well. The habit - religious dress of the order - is a silver ring. The habit is worn twenty-four hours each day, seven days each week. The ring is the perfect habit for the OFP. It allows each member to be a constant and continual witness to the vowed life of the Franciscan. As I reflect on the ring which I have worn for just two weeks now, and which my brothers and sisters in the order now wear, it is a constant reminder of the connection I now have with these special people. My daily prayers include all those in the OFP, and all those who will join or be friends of the order. My daily prayers include Bishop Michael, who himself kissed each ring at the institution of the order. My daily offices are blessed by knowing that every other member of the order is praying for me as I am praying for them. I look at the ring often. I roll it on my finger. I contemplate on the life of Francis who became such a strong witness to Christ, and whose example we strive to follow.

The design of the ring is very special. Sister Toni Almond, OFP designed the ring we wear as our habit. It has the cincture, or rope belt (girdle) worn in a traditional monastic habit lining the edges of the ring. Three knots in the rope represent the three vows taken by the Franciscan - humility, obedience, and simplicity (more on

those in another article). In the center of the ring is the Franciscan Tau cross - imagine a large "T". The Tau cross is the traditional symbol of the brothers and sisters of St. Francis. This was a symbol adopted by Francis himself. Imagine someone in a religious robe extending his arms out to embrace the world. Laying over the support beam of the cross (below the top of the "T" part) is the dove of the Holy Spirit - Imagine the wings of the dove in the shape of a triangle facing downward. This represents our unique witness to the world as members of the Charismatic Episcopal Church. But there's more. It occurred to me just the other day that when one looks at the ring upside down, it looks like a sailing ship. This image immediately turned my thoughts to the sailing ship that Bishop Davidson uses to illustrate the mission of the CEC in the Central Province. That mission finds its foundation in teleios - Christian maturity. The OFP is called to that mission the same as any parish in the province. We are called to Christian maturity and stability - called to teleios. When we wear the ring, the world sees the symbol of a Franciscan community guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The wearer sees that image as well, but I also see the image of teleios - the mission of the CEC in the world. By the grace of God, may the OFP extend its arms in loving embrace that all may find themselves in the Savior's arms.