



# Franciscan Action Network

Transforming the World in the Spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare

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## **Baptism and Cross: A Lenten Franciscan Perspective on the Work of Social Transformation**

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*Indeed, all the striving of the man of God,  
whether in public or private,  
revolved around the cross of the Lord...*

*Just as, internally, his mind had put on the crucified Lord,  
so, externally, his body also put on the armor of the cross;  
and, in the sign by which God had vanquished the  
powers of the air ...  
the mysteries of the cross began to shine forth in him.*

~ Bonaventure, Major Legend of St. Francis, "The Miracles," Chapter I

The times in which Francis lived were marked by the sign of the cross in many ways. True, it was a time of fervent (perhaps even at times, overzealous) piety focused on the Crucified Christ. Francis, himself, child of his times, as all of us must be, had his own significant devotion to the cross of Christ. He was instrumental in developing the tradition of the Stations of the Cross, which still adorn the walls of many Catholic Churches. However, the passage from Bonaventure suggests a much deeper reality at work. Francis and those early Franciscan communities "put on the cross," more than just clinging to it sentimentally.

Can we relate the core of this Franciscan "cruciform" spirituality to dimensions of FAN's ongoing education and advocacy? What better time than the upcoming season of Lent – a time in which we as church are called upon once again to prepare catechumens for baptism and ourselves to observe the truth of how closely related that baptismal call and the cross truly are?

The rite of baptism still proclaims the words of St. Paul, obliquely referred to by Bonaventure above, words that remind all Franciscan and Franciscan-hearted people of the core of our charism: the mystery of the cross.



"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with ['put on'] Christ" (cf. Gal. 3:27). The implication in Paul's writings, as well as in Bonaventure's stylized telling of Francis' cruciform spirituality, is the same:

Baptism carries with it great responsibility to follow in the footsteps of Christ, even if it kills us! But it is precisely in the process of dying that we know what it means to rise.

We would be remiss if we failed to see that aspect of Francis' spirituality opening up to us through Bonaventure's crucial phrase about "the sign by which God had vanquished" all the powers of emptiness and pain on the earth. There is great richness in this insight for all Franciscans and Franciscan-hearted people. It carries particular significance for those of us who are members of FAN.

The work of education, lobbying, and activism to bring about social change is no easy path. This is true particularly as we stand at a moment in history when a worldwide economic crisis, ecological endangerment, violations to human rights and dignity, and hostility and fear directed toward many of our immigrant brothers and sisters impinge on our minds, hearts, and spirits. Many who start out hopeful and energetic in this work become discouraged when it seems that genuine social transformation takes too long, is too messy, or doesn't occur on our schedule. Some of us may break down in the face of too many tasks and surrender; others may become ideological to the point of disrespecting those with whom we disagree politically. Still others may reject this work as "too political" or find excuses to stay as far away as possible.

Such experiences are painful, and the effort to live out our baptismal and Franciscan call in a politically polarized church and world can be profoundly challenging. It can be its own cross.

At the same time, we know such painful realities are nothing compared to those who find themselves homeless, unable to feed or care for their families. They shrivel when compared to the fear and hatred directed toward the undocumented immigrant. They fade in comparison to those, who in the darkest places of our world endure torture and bleed at the hands of the state, and, like the One who was whipped and mocked, stripped naked, and nailed – muscle and bone – to the cross.

And we begin to understand (again) that our call as Franciscans, as Franciscan-hearted people, and members of FAN is to permit ourselves to feel that pain – our own and the unimaginable pain of others.. Our call is to allow our lives to "revolve around the cross" that marked us in baptism; to "put on Christ" and to stretch out our own hands and feet toward this hard, slow, humbling, and exhausting work of translating Gospel values into public policy, knowing in the depths of our being what Francis knew: "I have been crucified with Christ, therefore, I no longer live; but Christ lives in me" (cf. Gal. 2:19-20).