

Live Penance

2026 – 27 Academic Year Theme*

“**Live Penance**” can be taught to students as a joyful, Christ-centered way of life: a daily turning of the heart to God, a regular return to the Sacrament of Penance, concrete self-denial, and visible works of mercy. The Church teaches that penance is not merely an external act or a one-time event; it is an ongoing conversion expressed in prayer, fasting, almsgiving, reconciliation, justice, and the daily taking up of the cross. In the Franciscan tradition, that conversion is meant to be humble, gentle, peaceful, and merciful, not harsh, performative, or self-loathing. [1] [1] [2] [3]

The Meaning Students Need to Learn

Students should first be taught that penance begins in the heart. The *Catechism* says that Christ’s call to conversion does not aim first at “sackcloth and ashes,” but *at interior conversion*; only then do visible penances make sense. *Interior repentance is a “radical reorientation” of life*: turning away from sin, desiring change, trusting in God’s mercy, and receiving the grace to begin again. The biblical language is deeply personal: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise,” and St. Paul says that “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation.” Ezekiel also gives the same message in prophetic form: the Lord does not delight in the death of the wicked, but in the sinner who “turn[s] from [his] sinful ways and live[s].” [1] [4] [5] [6]

That means “**Live Penance**” should not be taught as self-punishment or as trying to earn God’s love. Rather, the Church teaches that penance is *the Christian response to mercy: we turn back because God has already called us back*. The sacrament of Penance is itself a whole consisting of the penitent’s repentance, confession, and intention to make reparation, while the priest’s absolution completes the sacramental action. In other words, the student is not being asked to “pay God back,” but to cooperate with grace and to let Christ heal what sin has damaged. [7] [8]

The Franciscan Tone: Firm, but Merciful

A Franciscan way of teaching penance must have a particular tone. St. Francis’s Rule orders prayer and fasting, but it also says the brothers should be “gentle, peaceful and unassuming, courteous and humble.” He also instructs ministers, when a brother sins, to prescribe penance mercifully and not to become angry or upset, because anger impedes love. That is crucial for students: penance must never become a culture of shame, superiority, or comparison. It should be a school of humility and peace. [3] [9]

Pope Francis gives the same balance from a contemporary pastoral perspective: he warns against both *rigorism* and *laxism*, saying neither truly helps the penitent, and he insists that confession is “not a tribunal of condemnation, but an experience of forgiveness and mercy.” That is an excellent principle for faculty, campus ministers, residence life staff, and student leaders. If students hear about penance only as a burden, they will miss the Gospel; if they hear only about mercy without conversion, they will miss the Cross. [10]

The life of St. Francis himself shows the same point. Pius XI recalls Francis's radical self-denial and fasting, but also notes that *he advised moderation* and did not want excessive bodily punishment. For students, that means the goal is not to imitate dramatic ascetical feats; the goal is to adopt Francis's spirit of conversion, simplicity, and detachment in ways appropriate to one's age, health, duties, and state of life. [11] [3]

Practical Applications for Students

The most effective way to teach "**Live Penance**" is to translate it into a pattern of ordinary habits. The Church already provides the basic categories: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving; gestures of reconciliation; concern for the poor; defense of justice; fraternal correction; examination of conscience; spiritual direction; acceptance of suffering; and taking up the cross each day. Those are not abstract ideals. They are concrete practices students can actually live. [2] [12]

Prayer as Daily Conversion

Students can be taught to begin and end the day with prayerful self-examination. A brief morning offering, a few minutes of Scripture, or a nightly examen trains the heart to ask: Where did I cooperate with grace today? Where did I resist it? The Church explicitly names prayer, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, and revision of life as forms of daily conversion. This makes penance interior, realistic, and repeatable. [12] [13]

A campus culture can reinforce this by encouraging communal prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours, and regular Eucharistic adoration, because the Church's living tradition includes liturgical prayer among the forms through which forgiveness and conversion are fostered. [13] [14]

Fasting and Self-Denial

Students should also learn that penance includes real, but proportionate, self-denial. The *Catechism* singles out Fridays and Lent as privileged times for penitential practice, with fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimages, and other voluntary self-denial. Franciscan life likewise emphasizes fasting, with exemption for obvious necessity. For students, that could mean skipping a snack, choosing a simpler meal, refraining from a comfort, limiting entertainment, or fasting from social media for a day or a time block. The point is not deprivation for its own sake; the point is to train desire so that the person is freer for God. [15] [3] [8]

The most important teaching principle here is that penance must fit the student's personal situation and spiritual good. The Church says the confessor's penance should correspond to the gravity and nature of the sin and to the person's spiritual good. So, in student formation, penance should be sincere and demanding enough to convert the heart, but never reckless, unhealthy, or disproportionate. [8]

Works of Mercy and Service

Penance must also become charity in action. The Church explicitly teaches that almsgiving is a chief form of interior penance, and that conversion is shown in concern for the poor, the defense of justice and right, and the practice of charity. That means Franciscan university can teach "**Live Penance**" through tutoring, service at shelters or food pantries, visiting the elderly, helping classmates, cleaning shared spaces, Corporal and Spiritual Works of

Mercy, or supporting initiatives that serve the vulnerable. A student learns very quickly that penance is not only “giving something up”; it is also giving oneself away in love. [2] [12] [8]

This is also the best way to connect penance with justice. Ezekiel’s prophecy ties conversion to concrete repair: the one who turns back is called to restore what was taken, to “do what is lawful and right,” and to live. That gives students a clear lesson: repentance is not vague regret; it is a willingness to put things right where possible. [6]

Reconciliation and Community Life

Students should be taught that penance is not merely private. The *Catechism* says those who approach the sacrament of Penance are reconciled not only with God but also with the Church, which labors for their conversion by charity, example, and prayer. That means “**Live Penance**” should shape dorm life, friendships, fraternity, and classroom culture. Students should be formed to apologize quickly, forgive generously, accept correction, and speak truth without cruelty. [1] [12]

A practical campus application would be small accountability groups or spiritual accompaniment groups where students briefly examine conscience, discuss habits of prayer and charity, and set one concrete act of conversion for the week. The International Theological Commission notes that penance unfolds in multiple ways, including speaking with others in a community about guilt and sin, gestures of reconciliation, fraternal correction, spiritual direction, and a change in living style marked by asceticism and renunciation. [13]

Sacramental Life

The sacramental center of this motto must be frequent confession. If a university wants students to “**Live Penance**,” then the Sacrament of Penance must be easy to access and normal to talk about. Pope Francis explicitly says parishes and communities should care for the celebration of the sacrament and that the faithful should know when priests are available; a theological study on authentic Catholic spirituality likewise stresses the importance of ready access to confessors. [10] [14]

A student who learns to prepare well for confession, confess honestly, receive absolution gratefully, and complete the penance faithfully is learning the very heart of the motto. The sacrament is not only about being forgiven; it is about being re-formed. It “consecrates” the Christian’s personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction, and the penances themselves help configure us to Christ. [1] [8]

A Simple Campus Pattern That Could Embody the Motto

A university could teach “**Live Penance**” with a repeated rhythm that students can actually remember:

- **Daily:** morning offering, brief examen, and one hidden act of charity or self-denial. This reflects the Church’s call to daily conversion and the many ordinary gestures by which penance is lived. [12] [1]
- **Weekly:** a Friday penitential practice, such as a simpler meal, a small fast, or a work of mercy, because Fridays are days of penance in memory of the Lord’s death. [15]
- **Monthly:** confession and, if possible, spiritual direction, because penance includes confession, reparation, and ongoing conversion. [7] [13]

- **Semesterly:** a retreat with Eucharist, confession, silence, and a service project, since the Church highlights penitential liturgies, pilgrimages, almsgiving, and charitable works as intense moments of penitential life. [15] [14]
- **Always:** a Franciscan style of speech and relationship — peaceful, humble, and courteous — because penance is meant to make the student more like Christ, not merely more disciplined. [3] [8]

Common Distortions to Avoid

This motto will only bear fruit if students are protected from three distortions. The first is **rigorism**: treating penance as severity without tenderness, or as a test of spiritual superiority. Church teachings explicitly warns against that.

The second is **laxism**: treating conversion as optional or sentimental, with no concrete change of life. The Church's teaching avoids both. It insists on interior conversion, but it also insists on visible fruits worthy of repentance. [10] [16]

A third distortion is **activism without prayer**. Service is essential, but the Church's teaching places prayer, fasting, and almsgiving together, not separately. A student cannot "do penance" merely by volunteering if the heart remains untouched; nor can a student claim interior devotion while ignoring the poor or refusing reconciliation. *Authentic penance joins the inner and outer life.* [2] [1]

Conclusion

To teach students to **Live Penance** is to teach them to live converted, reconciled, and free. It means helping them see that God's mercy is not the cancellation of conversion, but its beginning; that *the Christian life is a continual return to the Father*; and that the fruits of that return are prayer, sacrifice, mercy, justice, and peace. When students learn penance in this way, the motto becomes not a slogan for a year, but a school of holiness for life. [1] [1] [8]



* Assisted by Magisterium AI PRO,
<https://www.magisterium.com/s/c-16e1b720-e4a4-4d32-af07-81101e1b3fao>

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Chapter Two the Sacraments of Healing," §1421, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992,
https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_two/section_two/chapter_two.html.

[2] Ibid., §1434.

[3] Francis of Assisi, *The Rule of the Franciscan Order (Rule of St. Francis)*, §III "Concerning the Divine Office and Fasting; and How the Brothers Ought to Travel Through the World," 1223, <https://ofm.org/en/the-rule.html>.

[4] *The Holy Bible*, The New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSV-CE), §Psalm 51, 1993,
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2051&version=NRSVCE>.

[5] Ibid., §2 Corinthians 7,
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Corinthians%207&version=NRSVC>
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- [6] Ibid., §Ezekiel 33,
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel%2033&version=NRSVCE>.
- [7] CCC, §1491,
https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4I.HTM.
- [8] CCC, §1460, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4D.HTM.
- [9] *The Rule of the Franciscan Order (Rule of St. Francis)*, §VII “On the Penances to Be Imposed on Sinning Brothers”, <https://ofm.org/en/the-rule.html>.
- [10] Pope Francis, *Speech to participants in the course sponsored by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014,
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco_20140328_corso-penitenzieria-apostolica.html.
- [11] Pius XI, *Rite Expiatis*, “Encyclical of Pope Pius XI On St. Francis of Assisi,” §27, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1926,
https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_30041926_rite-expiatis.html.
- [12] CCC, §1435, “V. The Many Forms of Penance in Christian Life,”
https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4B.HTM
- [13] International Theological Commission, *Penance and Reconciliation*, §C.I.3, 1982,
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1982_riconciliazione-penitenza_en.html.
- [14] Romanus Cessario, O.P., “Miscere colloquia: On the Authentic Renewal of Catholic Spirituality,” *Nova et Vetera*, vol. 11, no. 3, St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology, 2013,
<https://stpaulcenter.com/emmaus-academic/nova-et-vetera-summer-2013-vol-11-no-3>.
- [15] [CCC, §143 “V. The Many Forms of Penance in Christian Life,”
https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4B.HTM.
- [16] Denzinger, Heinrich Joseph Dominicus. *The Sources of Catholic Dogma (Enchiridion Symbolorum)*, §1543, “Chap. 14. The Fallen and Their Restoration,” Herder, 1854,
<https://patristica.net/denzinger/#n1500>.