



ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM MINISTER GENERALIS

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Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist

To Provincial Ministers, Custodians and Presidents of Foundations.

To all Friars of the Order of Friars Minor

Dear Brothers,

May the Lord give you peace

On 14th November the 5th World Day of the Poor will be celebrated and just two days before that on Friday 12th November, Pope Francis will be a pilgrim at the Portiuncola, in the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels, to meet 500 poor people, coming from different parts of Europe, to listen to and converse with them. Once again the Pope has given an eloquent witness through his deeds.

I will be present, along with other brothers, for this moment. I will be there representing all of you.

On hearing the news of this visit, together with a great joy, I felt strongly for all friars the challenge of this gesture, which will be made exactly in the place where all of us were born.

The Pope does not limit himself to writing a message, but meets us in the flesh, the same flesh of the poor that is the sacrament of Christ, who for love of us made himself poor and wished to be identified with the poor.

I am reminded of the words of St. John XXIII, a secular Franciscan, who one month before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, spoke with a prophetic voice:

The Church presents itself as it is, and as it wants to be, the Church of all, and particularly the Church of the poor (Radio broadcast to all the faithful 11th September 1962).

This awareness of the Church of every time, finds an extraordinary witness in St. Francis, who as the Pope reminded us in his message to our recent General Chapter:

Renewing one's own vision: that is what happened to the young Francis of Assisi. He bears witness to it himself, recounting the story in his Testament as to what gave rise to his own conversion: his meeting with the lepers, when "that which was bitter to him changed into sweetness of body and soul" (Test 1 -4). At the root of your spirituality is this meeting with the least and with those suffering, in the form of "showing mercy". God touched the heart of Francis through mercy being shown to his brother, and he continues to touch our hearts through our meetings with others, above all with the most needy. The renewal of your vision can only start from here with a new manner of looking at a poor and marginalized brother, a sign, almost a sacrament of the presence of God. From this new manner of seeing, from this real meeting with one's neighbor and with their wounds you can be endowed with new energy to look forward to a future as both brothers and minors, as you are, according to the beautiful name of "lesser brothers", which St. Francis chose for himself and for you.

I ask myself, listening to my conscience and the voice of the Lord, and I do so with each one of you:

- To what extent am I aware that meeting the poor is at the heart of my life as a friar minor in the footsteps of Jesus, “He, who was rich above all others, (and) wanted to choose in this world, together with the most blessed Virgin, poverty” (2LFI, 5: FF182)?

- How many times have I had a meeting, a shared experience with the poor in a concrete fashion? Do I feel that this has “bothered” me and I have begun again my journey? Or otherwise?

- Do I often defend myself thinking that this is a dimension which is more social and less religious? Though according to the prophets in the Scriptures, aren't the poor the mirror in which we look if we are still believers? God loved them and wished that his Son be one of them. The same goes for the Apostles and for the friends of the Lord throughout history, not least with St. Francis, St. Clare and St. Elizabeth. Will meeting the real face of some poor people and their real suffering, with their smell and sometimes unpleasant presence, together with the questions they ask of us, finally move us both emotionally and physically? Will they lead us to convert? Will they make us come out of our, often too comfortable, dens?

For this, as your minister and servant and in communion with the General Definitory, after prayerful consideration I am asking in this letter that all the friars in the Order and in the different fraternities of the world, to make time during the month of November for a concrete meeting with the poor. Not on their own, but as a fraternity, at least two by two (see Luke 10,1), in order to have a simple meeting of presence, closeness and service for one of them, knocking at their door, as the Holy Father wrote in his message for this 5th World Poor Day. Let us listen:

We cannot wait until the poor knock at our door, we must urgently seek them in their houses, in the hospitals and in care homes, on the streets and in the dark corners where they sometimes hide, in refuge and care centers. It is important to understand how they feel, what they are experiencing and what desires they have in their hearts. Let us make our own the words of Don Primo Mazzolari: “I want to beg you not to ask me if there are poor people and who and how many they are, because I fear that such questions are only a distraction or pretext to avoid a precise direction to the conscience and the heart... I have never counted the poor, because you can't count them, you embrace them, you don't count them” (Adesso no. 7, 15th April 1949). The poor are in our midst. How evangelical would it be if we could truthfully say that we too are poor, because only then will we succeed in truly recognizing them and making them part of our lives and an instrument of salvation.

In the General Chapter we asked ourselves again about our identity and recognized it in fraternity and in minority. We can discuss the matter interminably but always find ourselves at the same point.

We are happy that the Holy Father is coming to the Portiuncola: he certainly honours the place and us by his visit, but at the same time he is pushing us to come out of ourselves and our houses and everyday business to meet the poor, to discover that our identity is here, it is awaiting us, giving us new light and that it is possible to live it today with joy even amongst all the difficulties.

I believe that a step of this kind is possible for all of us: for the Ministers and all the brothers; for the young as well as the old; for friars engaged in pastoral care as well as those who study; for novices and postulants as well as their formators; for the evangelizers and the

missionaries; for those who are solid in their vocation as well as those who are questioning themselves and perhaps looking elsewhere.

This is because meeting the poor is not an activity nor is it an ideology: it is a door towards mercy, which is always open. Let us choose to cross the threshold together and I believe that we will experience a great surprise of the Spirit, an important new beginning in our Gospel life. It does not matter whether we are saints or sinners: the poor welcome that poor person that is in each one of us, they recognize him, and if we approach them without arrogance or fear, they help us to walk and sustain us in our journey.

If Pope Francis dreams of a Church of the poor, I dream that in our universal Fraternity we may know how to rediscover and meet once again the face of the poor and the little ones, with their different names and conditions. I believe that from this meeting experienced through our vocation, we friars will receive a special grace and be able to choose again to become poor, reconsidering our relationship with things, with money, with power and with our affections. God knows how much we need this, so as not to extinguish ourselves in a too comfortable and guaranteed life, so far away from the condition of the poor that we no longer feel the thirst for Christ and for a new and genuine humanity capable of giving.

“The poor are our teachers” (CG93 §1): let us be evangelized by them! The Lord is waiting for us with them and is ready to gift us with great surprises. Let Him do it to us, beloved brothers in the Lord, let us not resist that desire, that breath of the charism which the Spirit evokes in us still, with a force that we, on our own, do not know how to find. I pray, and let us all pray, for this.

I ask you in the name of St. Francis: let us try to take this step towards the poor in the month of November and we will be surprised by the outcome! The Lord goes ahead of us and awaits us on this journey: let us choose a gesture, let us go to a house, a hospice, the friars’ infirmary, a prison, a hospital, a migrant center, an area of the periphery, a welcome center or so many other places to see Christ in his vicars, the poor. And let us allow ourselves to be found by Him, who wishes to attract us still and to light up our lives.

I will happily receive from you who wish to do it, a restitution, a little account of the meeting you had with some poor people, on how it has kept alive the flame of our faith and our vocation. We can begin to write the tract of Franciscan life that has been given to us and asked of us in our time, so that we may transmit it, with our words and our lives, to the next generation.

May the Lord bless you and St. Francis sustain you in this blessed yet difficult time with the desire of a new beginning of our vocation as brothers, lesser and poor, to find the face of our Lord on the streets of the men and women of today, capable of meeting and giving witness.

I embrace you with fraternal affection.

your minister and servant



Fr. Massimo Fusarelli OFM

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