

MEETING OF NEW VISITATORS GENERAL

General Curia, 15-19 November 2021

The Canonical Visitation: Time of Communion through the Participation of All, at the Service of Mission.

When we speak of canonical visitation today, we must go back over its fundamental elements in the universal law of consecrated life and our legislation, on the firm roots of our tradition, and also be able to express this reality in a new way that it may be effective. Therefore, in this reflection, I will start with some indications of method and then pause to consider the institutional and ecclesial dimension of the canonical visitation. I was inspired by the letter published for the launch of the synodal journey in the universal Church, in which I believe I can find elements that are also particularly useful for us.

The three words chosen as the subtitle of the 2021-2023 Synod provide us with this perspective: **the Church is communion**, which is expressed and **cultivated through the participation** of all but cannot remain inward-looking, being **at the service of the mission**.¹

1. Indications of Method

“Superiors [...] are at stated times to visit the houses and the members entrusted to them, in accordance with the norms of the same law”. The significance of canon 628 §1 is to remind us of the obligation of this visitation. Proper law must provide for specific periodic visits. Visits that create a personal and community dialogue. Without prejudice to the freedom of each person to express themselves or not with the Minister or the Visitor. However, there is no doubt that the Minister or Visitor has the right to be informed - with prudence and discretion - of personal and community situations. The Minister or Visitor “has the right to know, and the religious have the duty to express everything that concerns religious life and discipline, both as a whole and as it relates to individual religious, especially to superiors, according to the spirit and nature of each institute. For example, questions concerning the internal forum or the strictly intimate life of oneself or others, or the affairs of relatives, are not legitimate, and religious are not obliged to answer them”². There is no obligation imposed on individual religious to present themselves to the Visitor, even though in our tradition speaking with the Visitor is seen as an exercise of the vow of obedience and a practice which it is rare for any brother to avoid. I would say that this is still a resource that we need to make the most of because it is one of the few moments in which one can have personal contact with each brother, as the Rule says and asks very clearly:

Let the brothers who are the ministers and servants of the others **visit and admonish their brothers** and humbly and charitably correct them, not commanding them anything that is against their soul and our rule. Let the brothers who are subject, however, remember that, for God’s sake, they have renounced their own wills³.

In this spirit, the Visitor’s style calls for humility and charity and profound respect for each friar’s human and vocational life and for what our Rule and Constitutions indicate.⁴ The Visitor is not

¹ For what I am saying I have drawn on the reflections of Pier Luigi Nava, “La visita canonica. Indicazioni di metodo e linee programmatiche”, in *Consacrazione e Servizio*, n. 5, May 2002.

² A. Calabrese, *Istituti di vita consacrata e Società di vita apostolica*, LEV, Vatican City, 1997, p. 136.

³ Rb X:1-2.

⁴ Cf. GCC 213.

above anyone, least of all the Rule. Instead, he is at the service of ensuring that the Rule continues to be the reference framework for the brothers.

The friars are reminded that they have denied their own will, that is, that they have surrendered their lives to God: this is the truly spiritual context of this exercise of mutual obedience, the Canonical Visitation.

After mentioning the legislation on the canonical visitation, let us take a passage from D. Bonhoeffer to explain what I have decided to call the institutional and ecclesial objective of the canonical visitation: “[...] the charisms, given to individuals by the Holy Spirit, are rigorously regulated by diakonia to the community, since God is not the God of disorder, but of peace (1 Cor 14:32ff.). The Holy Spirit manifests Himself (ἡ φανέρωσις τοῦ πνεύματος, 1 Cor 12:7) so that everything may be accomplished for the benefit of the community [...] Thus the community is certainly free to shape its own structures according to necessity; but if its structure is affected from outside, then the visible form of the very body of Christ is affected”.⁵

In other words, the objective of a Canonical Visitation can be framed in two closely complementary dimensions:

- a review of how visible and legible the inspirational framework and values (Rule) of the fraternity are (“visible form of the same body” = **institutional objective**)
- and whether each Fraternity and Entity interact on the ecclesial level according to an Order/Province project (“Diakonia to the community” = **ecclesial objective**) rather than individual projects.

Let me now present some food for thought about these objectives.

2. Institutional objective: realities of communion and participation

A first vital objective to pursue - through the canonical visitation - is an **exercise of re-centring and re-cohesion of the fraternity around the nucleus of inspiration and essential elements that in our tradition has been taken up from the Rule**, called not for nothing the marrow of the Gospel, the covenant of alliance. Within the Rule, together with the Constitutions, we find the **cornerstones of our life, which give visible form to the body that we are and allow communion to take on consistency**. If this reference framework becomes worn out or even wounded and emptied, it is difficult to think any more about the meaning of communion and participation, and the mission itself is reduced to the commitment of the individual or even deprived of significance and momentum. The Visitor does not just go to check that everything is done correctly, and the rules are observed. The first service seems to me to be that of **checking this internal coherence, this visible form of the body of our fraternity**, the reference to the common framework of inspiration outlined for all the brothers in the Rule and Constitutions. Obviously, taking into account the time, place, and historical and environmental context in which that fraternity and that Province live.

All of this is in the context of what Z. Bauman has described as a **crisis in the “epistemological foundations of community experience”**. The late scholar observed how today, “no grouping of human beings is experienced as a ‘community’ unless it is made ‘cohesive’ by profiles bound together by a long history and an even longer expectation of frequent and intense interaction. It is this experience that is lacking today, and it is its absence that is interpreted as the ‘decline’, ‘disappearance’ or ‘eclipse’ of the community”⁶.

⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Sequela*, Queriniana, Brescia 1997, p. 234.

⁶ Z. Bauman, *Voglia di comunità*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2001, pp. 47-48.

The Rule and the Constitutions belong to the “epistemological foundations of the experience of community” in Consecrated Life. They are woven into the common narrative of an Order/Province and a fraternity. **The event of the Canonical Visitation should assess - in the network of our fraternities - whether the visibility of the Rule is lived as a resource that forms a body and gives coherence to the common charismatic/missionary narrative.** Whatever is found not corresponding to this visibility should be viewed not so much in a moralistic sense as non-compliance but as a sign of what can be done to take a step forward. It will be essential to assess how many resources an entity has in personal and institutional terms to restart. To get up again from sometimes more serious situations in which the visibility of the charism, the professed Rule, the evangelical counsels, and the quality of fraternal life and mission is significantly compromised.

These situations of profound loss of the human and vocational quality of life that we have among us cannot paralyse us and force us to resign ourselves to remaining at the minimum possible. The Visitor is entrusted with the task, in constant dialogue with the friars in the Entity and with the Minister and the General Definitory, of identifying, pointing out and promoting the points from which it is possible to restart for a renewed impetus and accompanying the Province in making the necessary choices, even if at times painful, to free up these energies. Our future depends on it. A problem that is buried or postponed today will erupt with greater force tomorrow, and unfortunately, there is no shortage of examples.

3. Ecclesial objective: at the service of the mission

The second objective - complementary to the previous one - is **evaluating the sharing of a Province/Custody project, started from criteria derived from the charism**, contained in the Rule, in the Constitutions and the reinterpretation that the Order makes of it in this time. This project is not so much a nice idea of ours, as the awareness that the only adequate plan for our reality and our own community is God’s. It is manifested concretely through the circumstances of our lives, and it is the only one that can be achieved. It manifests itself concretely through the circumstances and signs of the times. In its constitutive link with the Church, the strength of the particular charism consists of knowing how to read and grasp these “signs” as a favourable moment for building up the whole ecclesial reality in today’s world.

Adherence to an Order/Province project becomes significant for a fraternity - and for individuals - to the extent that it becomes a concrete sign of the renunciation of planning one’s own life to adhere with complete freedom to what is authoritatively indicated. In this way, through a project, we manifest (= visibility) our belonging to a concrete fraternity, which, in turn, expresses our belonging to the Church in which each brother lives the reality of following in the style and flavour of the charism of the Friars Minor.

It is in the light of the charism that we can assess both the problems ‘outside’ (problems of proclamation, of mission, of organisation of services, of pastoral planning, of social services) and the situations ‘inside’ (problems of regulation of fraternal life, of formative planning, of management of resources, etc.).

The charism offers a **paradigm that places us in a communitarian discernment: thinking and acting from the broader point of view of the Church-People of God and not immediately from ‘my/our’ point of view.** This is the logic of the charism in ecclesial communion, and in close correlation, in the Order and the Province.

From this point of view, the scope of the Canonical Visitation is not confined to the narrow perspective of the Entity but opens the fraternity to a perspective of “ecclesial communion [which] promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension”⁷.

⁷ VC n. 46.

4. Guidelines

I propose that the Visitation be prepared in the various fraternities, thus making them key participants in “walking together” towards the evaluation of life in mission in view of the Chapter. This involves drawing up a template for reading the experience of the fraternities and the areas of animation and governance. This template can be used for the Report to the Chapter and its work.

After General Chapter 2021, I propose that the template be similar to this one, borrowed from the Final Document and organised with the structure of the Constitutions:

I. Invitation to Gratitude: Fraternal Life

Francis of Assisi invites us to live in an attitude of gratitude “Let us refer all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, from Whom all good comes, for everything”. (RnB 17:17).

- Accept the gift of faith that makes us recognise the goods that God still works in our lives and the world today.
- Recognise the gift of the brothers amidst the joys and difficulties of fraternal life.
- Briefly recount our fraternal life during and after the pandemic.

II. Invitation to “Renew our Vision”: our Identity in Mission

The Chapter invites us to recognise that “our name as friars minor contains the core of our identity” (n. 11). Furthermore, it reminds us that “the core of our Franciscan identity to be lesser brothers requires a radical commitment to take up the Spirit’s invitation to identify with the poor, marginalised, abandoned, despised and forgotten of our societies” (n. 12).

- Let us review how today we are brothers and minors in our life of proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel in the various missions and services entrusted to our fraternities.

III. Invitation to Conversion and Penance: Caring

Developing a sensitivity towards the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults:

This is a commitment that challenges us, but which is necessary because “it arises from the heart of our identity as Franciscans and is also an invitation to greater conversion and penance” (n. 19).

- As Friars Minor, what steps do we feel need to be taken in this field and the broader area of our ongoing formation in affectivity and the free choice of consecrated chastity?

Invitation to a transparent and fraternal economy among us:

- Let us re-examine our styles and practices of administration of goods in our houses and activities, in the light of what the General Chapter called “fraternal economy”.
- What is the level of transparency of the finances of our entities, our structures, our houses and our personal expenses?

IV. Invitation to Mission and Evangelisation to Rethink our Presences and Activities:

The Chapter indicated three principal areas to focus our efforts: young people, integral ecology and the digital world.

- What can we contribute in each of these three areas of evangelisation?
- Where do we feel that we are called to change and grow?

V. Invitation to Embrace our Future, with some Challenges present in the Order and the Entity:

- In the face of numerical changes, are we convinced that our future depends not only on numbers but also on the quality and authenticity of our life according to the Gospel?
- What are the most urgent challenges for our Province/Custody today?

Conclusion

The point of offering a template similar to the one I have proposed to you is to help each local fraternity to make a reading of its own situation in the broader context of the Province and the territory, not to offload problems onto the Visitor or ask for a solution from above, but to prepare a wider and wiser reading given the necessary decisions and choices to be made at the local and provincial level. The Visitation will not then be just a personal conversation between each one with the Visitor, often a place for outbursts, for some reckoning, for overheated speeches, but rather a journey together as a fraternity that learns to read its own situation in the light of the Rule, of the mission entrusted to it and of the time in the territory in which it lives, to relaunch its life in the mission.

All the responses to this template by the different fraternities can become material for the preparation of the Chapter. Each fraternity will thus have contributed, together with the Secretariats and the various areas of work. This is evidence of a synodal journey that fosters communion, cohesion around the charism's values, and participation in the decisions to be taken. I know that this method is already widely used and can be refined by paying attention to the recent General Chapter.

In a certain sense, the Provincial Chapter in our tradition is a reality that expresses "synodality": the International Theological Commission has reminded us that it is "an essential dimension of the Church, which through it reveals and configures herself as the pilgrim People of God and as the assembly convoked by the risen Lord."⁸ In n. 70, this same document underlines how this constitutive dimension is articulated on three levels: that of the **style** in which the Church ordinarily lives and works, and for us, **the style is that of fraternity**; that of the **structures** in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed institutionally, and for us, **the structures are for communion and the participation** of all; that of the synodal **processes and events** in which the Church is convoked, for us the **personal and community meetings** of the Canonical Visit, the steps of preparation for the Chapter and the Provincial/Custodial Chapter itself.

Dear Brother Visitors

In giving you, these notes I know that I am giving you the mandate that the Rule entrusts to the Minister, that of visiting, admonishing, consoling and supporting the friars in their life in mission.

This mandate will take up a considerable part of your life, and I ask you to take up this service in your inner life, in the place where your personal identity as men who live the following of Jesus Christ as the heart of their very existence is continually being shaped.

I ask you in particular to recognise the good that will come to you from listening to your brothers, which can often open up unexpected glimpses of life and unexpected depths.

I ask you again to welcome the brothers' limitations and miseries with great mercy, many of which you will have to keep for the rest of your life in absolute secrecy.

I beg you not to be discouraged by certain hardness, resistance and imperviousness. Look beyond them!

I ask you to have the inner freedom and clarity to correct and let things emerge that cannot be overlooked and kept silent. And thus, the strength to take certain decisions, even serious ones.

All this must be brought up in personal prayer and continually recalled to God's heart so that he, himself in his spirit, can take care of each one and sustain his journey.

⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2018, n. 42.

Serving as Visitor immersed in a relationship with the Lord means being prepared to listen deeply to the Spirit in the brothers' lives and the people you meet in diverse ways in our Houses and activities. The Spirit can suggest and prompt new things and steps from this deep listening, which our rationality and capacity for planning alone could not find.

The service of the Visitation will thus be, first and foremost for you, for us, an exercise of faith, hope and charity. In short, it is not a service that we render outside ourselves, but from what we are and what the Lord calls us to become. That is why rendering the service of Visitor is first and foremost a gift for us and, to the extent that we welcome it, for the brothers we meet.

May the Lord accompany you and bless you, make your steps light, open your hearts, and make your understanding and sensitivity fruitful to sow good, tirelessly and against all expectations.

I am confident that even in these complex and often dark times, the Lord still wants to open up for us, as an Order, a beautiful road ahead, considering our often very poor situation. God is not tired of us and pushes us forward, moves us and motivates us, and precedes us on the paths of the world. Let us allow God to do his work and let us not be the first to put up resistance and obstacles.

May the Spirit of the Lord give us momentum, the presence and intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary comfort and clarity of vision and choices, and the presence of St Francis love for the charism that through him has been given to the Church, to the world and us.

Happy journey!

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