

UFME ASSEMBLY

Medjugorje (Bosnia and Herzegovina), 28 February 2023

FRIARS MINOR TODAY IN A EUROPE THAT IS BOTH "UNITED" AND DIVIDED: HOW DO WE STAND?

Foreword

Greetings to all of you, Brother Ministers, present with the General Definitory at this UFME meeting.

We have come to this piece of land on the European continent, bringing the signs of its richness and diversity of expression with our very presence. From the first steps of its history, our Order travelled across Europe. It saw itself as being called to sow the seed of the Gospel in different lands, beyond all borders, by its life and word. From Europe, the Friars Minor then crossed all kinds of lands, cultures and languages, feeling at home everywhere because everywhere the Spirit of God makes all things new and accompanies the groaning of creatures.

For centuries, the Friar Minor movement started from Europe, where its massive presence infiltrated the streets of this continent, a mosaic of languages and cultures, and allowed it to push into new lands with an enormous missionary movement.

In contact with new realities, the Friars Minor embraced their charism's spiritual vitality in unprecedented ways and forms. This labour is still going on today, in a time of globalisation and striking encounters, clashes and transfers of cultures, which blur every border.

This situation represents a renewed appeal for us Friars Minor on this continent today, learning to read its different signs with wisdom amid hopes and struggles. It is evident to most - from European institutions to national institutions and civil society - that Europe, "united" and divided at the same time, is going through a complex and uncertain transition of crisis.

The term does not mean a simple problem that can be addressed and resolved by resorting to ordinary solutions. On the contrary, the use of the word "crisis" indicates a profound difficulty that touches the root of the reality involved (be it a person or an institution), calling its identity, behaviour and choices into question and whose solution necessarily requires recourse to extraordinary energies, resources and solutions. A crisis also always concerns a pivotal aspect. If one "goes into crisis", then the status quo is no longer sufficient to meet fundamental needs. In this sense, the crisis reveals what is essential for the person or institution affected and shaken, something that is "sick" and needs to be "healed" and that needs to be revitalised.

We, too, are in this transition. How? I believe we can get through the crisis that affects everyone in Europe, including our own situation, starting from the charism entrusted to us. And here, I offer three points to try to highlight our call in Europe today. **"This is the age of the seekers of the spirit",¹ in which we are called to give voice again to the integral**

¹ Charles Taylor, "Solo la secolarizzazione ci potrà salvare? Fede e ragione nell'epoca del disincanto", Milan 10 January 2023. In <https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/charles-taylor-l-eta-secolare-un-opportunita>.

Franciscan vision of the person and the world, moulding it in contact with the emerging newness.

1. "This is the age of the seekers of the spirit".

Our way of being in our continent today is to recognise, as believers, that an age characterised by the dominance of science and technology can positively represent a "challenge for religion". An opportunity to "transform ourselves", to "search our world for new languages", and forms of "brotherhood" between people.

In the Acts of the Apostles, this is the call that Peter recognises in the house of Cornelius: "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*" (Acts 10:34b-35). Likewise, Paul recognises it through contact with the Gentiles: "*What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*" (Acts 17:23).

Did not Francis of Assisi, for his part, cross the frontier that separated "Christian" Europe from the Muslim world, opening an "unarmed" way into the field of the "enemy", the "infidels", now seen in a new way thanks to his encounter with the Sultan?

Many of us meet people in Europe today looking for answers to give full meaning to their lives. Not all of them find them. Not everyone reaches the same goal, which may be close to the Christian faith. However, it is a journey, a path, an attempt to change and transform oneself, and this path unites us and makes us fellow travellers of many people today in our continent. A process that, for us, translates first and foremost into recognising that, as brothers and minors, we are called to a renewed authentically spiritual quest. It seems to me that this priority is not always so evident to us. Perhaps we are concerned with something else, thinking that today's focus of evangelisation is an answer to be given, new strategies to be sought, and steps to be taken towards today's cultures or alternatives to them.

Therefore, I propose that we all reflect together on how faith remains our first choice. Did not St Francis tell us that at the heart of our evangelical option is "*to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation*" (LR X, 8)? Recognising the dynamic and continuous presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in us and around us in an ongoing discernment: this is a way to walk as "seekers of the Spirit" in a change of epoch that requires us to review our paradigms of thought and action without further delay.

So we can be contemporaries of what Europe is going through if we restart with patience and trust from the charismatic centre of our evangelical choice. We are brothers of all in the journey, open to shared paths, and minors ready to seek with others how the Spirit is accompanying what is moving profoundly in the often-contradictory passages of today. But, if we do not reform our vocation from within, we will be beating the air, whether we choose to build bridges or oppose the present time.

From this living centre, we can take the next step, which is to carefully seek new approaches to today's cultures and worlds, which often have the same direction in common, albeit in very different ways: the search for a spirituality for this time. We cannot limit ourselves to doing this among ourselves and within the confines of our ever-shrinking

Christian communities. Instead, we can cultivate a joint action of people of different faiths who come from different cultural backgrounds but are united by their spiritual experience.

Here the spirit of fraternity and minority allows us to build bridges, seek the good together, and discover new ways and languages with other people. Frontiers open up here, and our evangelisation, often restricted to "ecclesial" boundaries, begins to take the paths of Europe that the friars minor have been treading since 1217. There are many such experiences underway; others are timidly beginning; elsewhere, it is still difficult to imagine: let us try to share the paths underway and those possible.

Secularisation, which has entered an entirely new phase, can be an opportunity to rediscover faith. At the same time, we recognise that in the contemporary world, including Europe, there have been many attempts to restore religious traditions, in many cases linked to political and nationalist resentments. These attempts either disregard the Gospel and dream of restoring a "Christian civilisation" that will never return or prostrate themselves to the Caesars of the day. That is why it is urgent to remain vigilant, learn to discern with the Gospel in hand, and prevent destructive cultures that can lead to conflict, as we can already see.

2. Called to give voice again to the integral Franciscan vision of the person and the world.

The path is arduous. And it asks us for a new spiritual and cultural effort, in the most profound sense of the term. The Franciscan Centenary that began on 7 January is an opportunity to rethink and deepen, among others, a Franciscan humanism. This has its foundation and centrality in the style of the human and Christian experience of Francis of Assisi, who helped to create a new form of being and living, greatly influencing western culture.² For Francis, the starting point for this newness was listening to God's word, which "interrupted" his human perspectives, those he already knew and experienced. Thus the Poverello could open himself to the newness that comes to us from the word of God.

Thanks to this primacy, *"In the Franciscan school, one always starts from God, as the foundational, configuring and exemplary reality. It follows that man's vision is based on the assumptions of faith, according to which the human being has been created in the image of the Triune God. Indeed, man, by virtue of the triune image he bears, belongs to two different worlds, the individual and the social, precisely in the likeness of the divine being, who is a **community of persons**. Man is both for himself and for others, just as the divine persons are for themselves, but at the same time are for each other".³*

From this listening, Francis was able to give rise to a form of integral vision of reality that is the fruit of listening to the primacy of God. That is why he can find the *qualitative difference* in a way of living and interpreting the relations of man with man, and of man with nature and culture.

If a strong anthropocentric movement developed in Europe from the Renaissance onwards with the consequences we know with Francis of Assisi, we can cross this complex

² Cf. Max SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Bonn 1931) 130.

³ Br José Antonio MERINO, Speech at "In cammino verso Firenze 2015" - In Christ Jesus, the new humanism. Rome 24-26 April 2015.

time by choosing the *fraternal person*. This means being open to the other in their relationship with God, the person and creation, respecting and promoting them.

Against a background of increasing loneliness and fear of the other, this Franciscan vision is a valuable offering. Francis of Assisi, in his experience of Christ, injected more humanity into the veins of the medieval *societas* of his time. I believe it is possible to rediscover and still present the Franciscan vision of the person as a relational individual that is leaven in a dramatic crossroads of the history and culture of our continent.

We need a shot in the arm in action and thought to animate our life and our evangelising initiative. We cannot do this alone. We need to be open to others to listen and work together for this integral vision.

The Pontifical Antonianum University is trying to go down this road. Can we think about having centres of reflection and exchange among ourselves and others to develop the elements of a Franciscan humanism that is both proposal and provocation to how we experience this time and to the people who live in our continent today?

3. Moulding Franciscan humanism in contact with the emerging newness.

The French politician Jean Monnet, one of the inspirers and architects of the European dream, argued back in 1954 that the advancement of European integration takes place through difficult steps. He said, "Europe will be shaped by its crises and will be the sum of the solutions found to resolve those crises".

If we look at the current "crises", i.e. the signs of the times that challenge us, we certainly find first and foremost the meaning of peace and development for European countries in the 21st century. We are no longer in the aftermath of the Second World War or the economic boom years. Giving meaning back to European integration means questioning the meaning of peace at a time when risks come from many sides: the war in Ukraine is one of them, with the serious risk of it spreading across the continent and beyond. Then I think of the phenomenon of migration, general impoverishment, young people, the digital world, a possible future, science and technology, to name but a few.

In the same way, for development, we must reflect on how to understand and interpret it in the light of the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate, and the awareness raised by *Laudato Si'*. We must break new ground in the face of the close link between the ecological and social crises.

To truly achieve a new understanding requires a shared process in which there is a serious exchange between the profoundly different experiences of the countries that make up Europe. This presupposes overcoming a mindset in which we continue to think of the differences between East and West, South and North in terms of "good guys/bad guys". If this does not happen, there is no room for a real solution to the current crises because there is a lack of mutual recognition of the dignity of each component of Europe, with all its unique characteristics.

This is also true for us. Therefore, the dialogue between the different Conferences that make up UFME is urgent to overcome divisions, get to know each other, overcome deep-rooted prejudices, appreciate each other, and be more interconnected.

The reality of the European Conferences represented here can only be based on the conviction that we only have a future on this continent if we learn to walk together. While for political sovereigntism, the way forward is not one of solidarity, but of division, in a spirit of mutual competition, we are called to the prophecy of communion, with the effort of charismatic creativity and action that is required to bring into play joint collaboration and bold visions of the future.

Faced with such significant challenges, there is now an impatience manifested in Europe by many European citizens, who perceive the unitary institutions as distant, sometimes useless and costly, if not downright hostile and an enemy. A fact that cannot be underestimated because it signals a worrying disconnect from civil society.

Even among us, there is a certain weariness and disillusionment with groupings such as the Conferences and their Union. On the one hand, this is understandable if we think of the decrease in numbers that leads several provinces to concentrate on themselves or among those closest to them. But, on the other hand, there is an urgent need to rethink these bodies and streamline them, including the Provinces. We must imagine a different organisation for the future that lies ahead of us, and that will not wait.

If simply uniting the Provinces in Europe or clinging to old borders is no longer enough, we must find together a new geography of our presence and mission on this continent. We must ensure a network of agile and meaningful presences because they are centred on the priorities of the charism and missionary in their living and witnessing.

The world is changing, and this is nothing new. Facing change in a reasoned manner, with a long-term vision, on the contrary, is. Those who will have to face it are not the generations that lived through the roaring '60s and '70s; for us, the Council and the hopes that followed amid lights and clouds. Instead, the new generations will have to face the consequences of choices fashioned for an eternal present and lacking imagination for the future.

It is the generations of the youngest, of those young people not even yet born, who will find themselves in a world that is increasingly urbanised, increasingly hotter, and increasingly poorer in those raw materials necessary for subsistence. Young people who need to rely on new political, social and economic structures and innovative institutional systems without which these challenges appear insurmountable.

The same applies to the few young people who join us and cannot be bequeathed the vestiges of a world that no longer exists. Therefore, we must think of a new way of living Franciscan life today with them and for them.

Conclusion

I have tried to read some elements of Europe today and our place in it on a double track. It is just a proposal I am giving you so that it can animate reflection and discussion among us.

It is vital to open our perspective beyond our borders and to dare to think the new.

I offer some hints for future reflection and perspective:

- How can we refocus on the evangelical and charismatic core, with clear and visible choices for a finally renewed quality of our life? How can we help each other

to do this in Europe among different entities, rethinking boundaries and modes of organisation and activating synergies and international fraternities?

- How can we promote together steps to offer a Franciscan humanism for Europe? What are the places where with lay people and others, we can develop lines of thought and action starting from our tradition in exchange and dialogue with today?

- How can we stay together within the principal changes of this time: for example, thinking of a common observatory to follow what is happening on the continent and gather, besides the data, the elements that provoke us and the possible choices?

- How can we hand over the inheritance of a very great burden to the few young friars in 15 years' time: the physical and organisational structures to manage, a pastoral care predominantly of conservation, a model of religious life that young people simply do not understand today? What steps can be taken to welcome a new breath more decisively? The Spirit always gives it to us if we still connect the life of following Christ, which is always current, with today, which is complex and full of opportunities, even in crisis.

- How can we take steps to integrate and share life and mission between the different areas of Europe, from the Mediterranean to the centre, to the east, open to friars from other continents, called to live and serve with us and not to "plug holes"?

These are only pointers to be used and to be improved by our work together.

Thank you for your patient listening. I hope these days shared among us will also help us develop forms and places of ever greater interaction between Provinces, Conferences and the General Definitory in view of the steps ahead of us.

I wish you the best of luck with the Lord's help.

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Prot. 112048