

Report of the Minister General to the Presidents of the Conferences General Curia, 15<sup>th</sup> May  
2023

***No one is saved alone: revision and renewal of the Conferences, of the structure of the Curia and of the Order.***

**Reality and prospects** I have been entrusted with the task of drawing up some guidelines for the revision and renewal of the structures of the Order, from the Conferences at the Curia, I would furthermore also like to include our current Entities. The 2021 General Chapter gave us this mandate without explaining the reasons or offering any coordinates. Those of us who were present know that in the proposals that came to the General Secretariat of the Chapter from the Conferences and various language groups there was an awareness that our structures would become obsolete, sons of the post-conciliar renewal of the Constitutions when we were at least 25,000 friars. As the report on the history of the Conferences will show us, at that time the Order was able to rethink itself in structures that we can define as communion, capable of generating intermediate levels between the Minister and the General Definitory, and the Entities. In a certain sense, important steps have been taken to overcome the historical form of autonomy of the Provinces and combine animation with the necessary governing body/ (Leadership team).

The reality of the Conferences has undergone revision over the years, even if we must verify that they have often not functioned as the General Statutes prescribe. The General Definitory itself often did not consult them about what was planned, such as the restructuring of Entities. Perhaps it is the sign of a new structure in some elements, but which has continued to work with thought patterns stemming from the previous one. We need to review these processes and harmonise them.

The General Curia, on the other hand, was completely rethought in 1968, assuming a more rational administrative structure and creating Offices that did not exist before or were very different. Created along the lines of the structure of the Roman Curia of that time, our Curia saw the General Secretariat affirm itself in the function of overall coordination and then the birth and consolidation of Secretariats and Offices autonomous in their work and fundamentally oriented to the service of the Office proper to the Minister General *pro tempore*, as well as the General Definitory. Over the years, other Offices have been added, but the structure has remained the same.

The structure of the past was hierarchical in the pyramidal sense and above all of a predominantly legal nature. After Vatican II, the sense of communion and participation has grown, but perhaps we have not succeeded in generating an adequate organization for this purpose. At the beginning, for example, the Conferences were designed in a completely separate way with respect to the General Definitory, a position that was then balanced. In fact, the autonomy of the Provinces has remained and the only exceptions for very serious causes allow external intervention.

I would say that in the previous as in the current structure a paternalistic mentality has survived, centered on the "Minister" or other similar figures, where he was called to take care of

his brothers and these developed a kind of "affective" spirit in their approach to them. The relationships were mostly dependent. While this structure was evident above all at the centre, and this applied at all levels, the peripheral structures were able to save some of their separate arrangements even with a formal adhesion to the Province/Custody or to the Order as the ultimate reference.

I know I am being very concise and have skipped several steps; however, I would like to offer a general frame of reference, which can be deepened.

To-day the reality in which we are immersed worldwide and also within the Church, in Religious Life and in the Order asks us to reinvent our organization. At most we manage to do some small things every now and then and here and there, but I strongly feel that we are asked to dare to do *a lot* more.

In order to proceed we need to know what kind of Order we are thinking about from here to the next 20- 25 years. We can do this by studying the trend of growth and decrease, the change in the relationships between geographical and cultural areas, the epochal change taking place that touches every corner of the planet, albeit at different speeds. All this within what is proper within a community of religious life, that is to say the charismatic dimension, from which every verification, rethinking, overcoming and reinvention must start. In this sense we are an organization certainly more aimed at the integral care of the person.

### **Some criteria**

**The charismatic dimension.** The question of how to review our structures must be asked and matured in the light of our charism, before all other urgencies. So for us Friars Minor according to the principle of evangelical life lived as brothers, in search of the face of the Lord, in mission, especially amongst the "little ones" and the poor. In our Rule (RNB), St. Francis, after presenting the evangelical foundation of our way of life (1:1), he passes to the ecclesial one (1:2): the first "structure" which is therefore that larger community which is the Church, wherein we live out our vocation.

Obedience to Francis is the other element of "structure", which binds each friar to the Church through Francis and his successors (1:3).

Any structure must guarantee these relationships, so that they do not leave anyone isolated: this **is** (should be) the reality of our *fraternitas*-fraternities, where the evangelical and personal quality of relationships shapes the structure.

We can also read here a trace of that reality: "network" before pyramidal. Certainly at the time of Francis it was strongly hierarchical. Yet, the leaven of the *fraternitas*/fraternities was strong and mute from within the structures, in a society that at that time passed from a feudal and closed setting to a more urban and open one. Here the contribution to the culture of the time was

very important. The friars immediately sought organisational models that would express the novelty of fraternities/*fraternitas*.

Chapter 3 of the Rule speaks of the acceptance of new brothers and here too the network is composed of the minister and the other friars; those who are received are the protagonists of their choice and for this reason they are questioned. We find this dynamic that I would rather call circular, throughout the text of the Rule.

Hence the criterion that we derive for our journey of the revision of the structures is that no one is saved alone. We are interdependent on each other and on the Church and the world, also convening different voices and deciding for a very different and non-clerical relationship with the laity and with women. The friars give themselves the minimum of structure necessary to guarantee the life of the fraternity in what is essential. It is precisely here that the charismatic dimension takes on all its importance.

**Slimming down.** Too many structures within the Church, are often superfluous and sometimes of little use, and I believe that this may also apply to us. I suggest that we need less, new, and lighter ones. A work of a “*spending review*” (that is: an examination of the implementation efficiency and effectiveness of existing leadership policies) that must also touch us as religious and that cannot respond only to an economic or corporate logic, but must serve to rediscover the essentiality of the Gospel.

In different ways but in all areas of the Order we are asked to have the audacity to considerably lighten our structures, material and not only just that, but also to respond to the call to live the Gospel in a fraternity that wants to be true, more essential, agile and liberated for witness and proclamation. The risk of having excessive structures compared to our reality is always present. This also affects the new Entities, which inherit an organizational model that is often difficult to sustain in their contexts. I know that this might not be such an easy matter to deal with and will require study and consultation.

This process is also made urgent by the ongoing restructuring of various entities, including mergers and new realities that arise: what criteria should be given for these processes?

**Rethinking the system.** A famous saying of Einstein states that: *problems cannot be solved at the same level of thought that generated them*. Perhaps we need to access a new stage of consciousness of our reality and a new way of seeing the world, of reinventing our organization. To many of us it seems to be a *chimera* (an illusion), yet it has already happened, even in our time. Our model as a Church sees highly formalized roles within a hierarchical pyramid. Command and control come from above. Stability is a supreme value. The future tends to be a repetition of the past. Then the variables of this scheme are different, but basically, here we are again! If we want to start processes of change, we need to identify together where we want to go and study the steps towards a new paradigm that redesigns the structure of the Order, looking for effective ways to motivate ourselves.

Some elements that may encourage this are already in place in different areas, whilst elsewhere they must develop, taking into account different cultures and sensitivities. I am thinking in particular of how to foster relationships of interdependence rather than dependence based on the relationship between adults, where we learn to take care of each other's community, our human ecosystem and beyond. We require great forces to act in terms of a real transformation and impact of our structures: we owe it to the younger friars, in very few large areas of the Order, to whom we are handing over the baton, and thus to the brothers of the emerging areas in Africa and Asia.

I dare to ask if we still think that the model of Entity that we have received from our past corresponds to today's reality and to that of the coming years? For many of them it is increasingly difficult to proceed with real autonomy in the various areas. Not a few Entities, when they decrease in number and strength, tend to close in on themselves in order to survive and this does not help the necessary processes of renewal. In particular, in these situations the question of brothers and sisters capable of government and animation services becomes increasingly sensitive; in some cases the Entity cannot guarantee a replacement of brothers capable and free to take over the Governing Body (*Leadership Team*) to face even more difficult situations. We now need to create a culture and practice of governance that makes the transitions from one Entity to another less extraordinary in order to support the Governing Body (*Leadership Team*) and animation team to accompany real and impactful processes of transformation.

This is why it is important for us to follow what is happening in the USA and in other areas where different entities have come together: are new processes or organizational models born or is the past reproduced? I believe we encounter both models amongst us. We need to foster more agile models, networked, for large territories, more capable of supporting our presence in international and intercultural terms. In reference to this, I am thinking about the present situation in Europe.

Regarding the Province of Ireland and the Custody of England we are working on a new international presence in London, like a "laboratory" for this kind of new presence. Here we need to interconnect different levels such as the Entities and the Minister and the General Definitory in different ways to what we are used to. The Custody of the Holy Land is an example of this model.

**Conclusion** We would like to start this meeting of the Presidents in the name of the principle of subsidiarity. In the Curia we have taken six steps to revise our structure, favouring the interdependence and structural collaboration of the Secretariats and Offices, with regular meetings, the creation of a group of Secretaries and the Animator of JPIC together with the coordination of the Vicar General, the planning of meetings to animate our brothers in the various Conferences.

The revision of *COMPI* (The Conference of the Ministers Provincial of Italy) and *CONFRES* (The conference of the Ministers Provincial of Spain) is underway to create a new Conference with two sub-Conferences; for others it asks the question of their future. However, it

is advisable to initiate and accompany together a broader review of these realities so as not to reproduce obsolete models.

Every change occurs when it is able to reach a higher vantage point from which to see the world with a broader perspective. For this we need to detach ourselves from something in which we are immersed, leave aside control and fears of change. Here too our life of permanent conversion and transformation is at stake in attentive listening to what pleases the Lord in reading the signs of the times.

I hope that in this meeting we will be able to lay the foundations for such an urgent and vital journey for our Family at this time. Thank you for listening and enjoy this journey!

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