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**Notebooks of the office Pro Monialibus**

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# Communion and Communication



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## **cTc comunione e comunicazione**

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Bollettino di collegamento fra i monasteri francescani in comunione  
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## Presentation

With *Communion and Communication* No 61, we begin the journey of deepening the Words of exhortation addressed by Francis to Clare and the sisters *Audite, poverelle*, whose 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of composition we will commemorate in 2025. As we wrote at the close of cTc 60, "we have decided to devote ample space to the *Audite poverelle* in the next issues reserving the first to an introduction to the reading and to testimonies relating to the discovery of the text by the sisters of the Monastery of St. Fidenzio Novaglie, custodians of the manuscript, who experienced 'live' the stages of its 'discovery'. Their words put us in touch with the different emotions that accompanied that moment.

Ample space is devoted to the commentary on the *Words of the Exhortation* by Br. Carlo Paolazzi, ofm, published by Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana in the small volume entitled *Francis for Clare* (Milan, 1993). The text, of particular interest, has been divided into two parts, the second part will be published in the next issue.

Paolazzi's commentary is followed by a short introduction of Paolazzi prepared for us by Br. Marco Guida, ofm, who introduced us to the text and helps us to familiarise ourselves with the Author. We thank him from the bottom of our hearts!

Our thanks also go to Br. Paolo Canali, ofm and to the EBF who allowed us to publish Br. Carlo Paolazzi's text.

Below, you will find the last part of the reflection offered by Sr. Marie de Jésus of the Monastery of Libreville, Gabon, rereading the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* in a feminine way.

Finally, we recall the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the magazine *Forma sororum*, currently published by the Monastery of



Città della Pieve (Perugia, Italy): the essential events that determined its birth and development are quickly retraced.

Before all this, Br. Fábio Gomes, ofm, General Delegate Pro Monialibus, accompanies us to grasp the movement of the Spirit that speaks to us through the *Words of exhortation* of Francis of Assisi. Let us treasure his words, in this 'ordinary time' in which we are sent as living witnesses of the Risen One.

Please do not close this issue before also reading the last page, in which we invite you to send us notification of the Federal Assemblies held in the past six months, so that we can forward them to *Acta Ordinis*. Thank you for your collaboration!

And remember that the next cTc 62 will collect testimonies and/or brief reflections on the first verses of the *Words of Exhortation*: "Audite, poverelle dal Signore vocate, ke de multe parte e provincie sete adunate". It is therefore a question of vocation, and in particular of finding ourselves living together coming from very different places, which poses important evangelical challenges... Thank you in advance to all the sisters who would like to send us their reflections by the end of August 2023 to share in the next cTc 62!

Happy reading!

*The Sisters of the Editorial Staff*

P.S. We were just finishing writing this Presentation when we received the news of the death of Br. Dario Pili, ofm (2 June 2023), General Delegate Pro Monialibus from 1985 to 1991.

It was he who inaugurated the series of the *Communion and Communication* issues, in which he wished to see the



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active participation of the sisters and to foster knowledge, relations, exchange, and interaction among all throughout the world. Our gratitude to this passionate, creative brother, solidly rooted in the Franciscan charism, a man of the Gospel, can never be enough.



Br. Dario Pili, ofm, General Delegate Pro Monialibus from 1985 to 1991

# Office Pro Monialibus

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## Letter of the General Delegate

Dear sisters and brothers,

May the Lord give you His peace!

As announced in cTc 60, from this issue until 2025, the fundamental themes of our magazine will be inspired by the strophes of those words that Francis composed with a melody “for the greater consolation of the Poor Ladies of the Monastery of San Damiano. He did this especially because he knew how much his illness troubled them (AC 85.1; FA:ED vol. 2, p. 188).”

Therefore, I propose a reflection inspired by the first two words with which the text is generally known and called, beginning with the first:

Listen!

It is a very important verb for the Judeo-Christian tradition, for which the Word of God proclaimed has central importance. Just think, for example, of the Book of Proverbs in which the author, like a wise father, invites his children to listen to his teaching of life’s wisdom (cf. Pv 1:8; 4:1, 10). Among other things, it is precisely with the verb listen, always conjugated in the imperative, that that beautiful prayer known precisely as the Shemà Israel, which is recited twice a day according to Jewish tradition, begins: “Listen, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one (Dt 6:4).” And how can we forget the great Patriarch Benedict, who begins his Rule precisely with this verb: “Listen, my son, to the teachings of the master and docilely open your heart (Prologue, 1).”

Thus, like a wise teacher and a loving father, Francis invites his daughters and sisters of San Damiano first of all to



cultivate the attitude of listening, which is indispensable for welcoming that wisdom which he has reached and which, at the end of his days, he desires share with them.

### Listen!

We can already guess, therefore, that the *Listen!* of which Francis speaks is not reduced simply to hearing the sound of words, but concerns an attitude of openness and welcome capable of perceiving, beyond words, the depth of what is being said. It is an attitude that, according to the Apostle, represents the indispensable condition for the very beginning of the Christian faith, since “faith is born from listening (Rom 10:17)” and, consequently, for its preservation and maturation.

This is why Pope Francis, from the beginning of the Synod on Synodality, an ecclesial moment for which the Holy Spirit is the protagonist par excellence<sup>1</sup>, has insisted upon the importance of the attitude of listening by all of us, as he did, for example, in the homily of the opening Mass of the Synod with these words: *Participating in a Synod means placing ourselves on the same path as the Word made flesh. It means following in his footsteps, listening to his word along with the words of others. It means discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, to suggest fresh paths and new ways of speaking. It is a slow and perhaps tiring exercise, this learning to listen to one another – bishops, priests, religious and laity, all the baptized – and to avoid artificial and shallow and pre-packaged responses. The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every Church, people and nation. And to listen to the world, to the challenges and changes that it sets before us. Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. So often our certainties can make us closed. Let us listen to one another.*<sup>2</sup>

Thus, I believe that this attitude of listening is also fundamental for the Order of St. Clare which, since the beginning of the process of revising the General Constitutions, has





been experiencing a profound synodal experience. Indeed, along this journey we are all permanently invited to listen to each other with generosity and patience, so that we can listen ever better, together, to what the Lord is saying to the Order today.

But the title of Francis' poem does not end with the verb listen. Next to it, the *Poverello* places the first recipients of his invitation, that is Clare and her Sisters of San Damiano, whom he calls precisely:

*Poverelle!*

I believe that Clare liked this title very much, because it is precisely as “Poor Little Mother” that she defines herself in one of the letters she wrote to her great disciple, Agnes of Prague (cf. 4LAg 33), thus identifying herself with Mary, “the poor [little] Mother” who “placed as an infant in a narrow crib” the poor Christ (cf. LCla IX, 7; CA:ED, p. 293).

Therefore, this endearment, *Poverelle* (“Poor Little Ladies”), is more than an affectionate way of Francis addressing Clare and all the Sisters. It contains in itself what, for him, who also called himself *Poverello*, consisted of the essence of the identity of the “Poor Lord of San Damiano,” i.e., “to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity (FLCl, 1-2; CA:ED, p. 109), “by following the poverty and humility of His beloved Son and His glorious virgin Mother, [in] holy poverty (TestCl, 46; CA:ED, p. 63).”

Indeed, *Poverelle* is an expression capable of admirably summarizing a lifestyle, a way of standing before God and in the Church.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in my opinion, it is an expression that can be understood well if placed in close relationship with the verb listen, as Francis did, thus establishing a virtuous circle between listening and being poor, between poverty and listening:

Listen, *Poverelle!*

Indeed, we can say that the Sisters of San Damiano are



truly Poverelle, because they constantly incline the hearing of their own hearts to obey the voice of the Son of God (cf. LOrd, 5-6; FA:ED, vol 1, p. 116). And on the other hand, the more they are Poverelle, not appropriating anything, not even themselves, the more capable they become of listening to and discerning the voice of God's will in every circumstance.

The same is certainly also true for us today, because if, on the one hand, we listen to the Lord more deeply, the more truly we become poor, because we are purified from every form of selfishness and self-referentiality; on the other, the more evangelically poor we become, the more deeply we will be able to perceive and welcome the presence of the Kingdom of God in us and among us.

Listen, Poverelle!

May the synodal process in which the whole Church is involved and, in it, the Order of St. Clare help everyone, with a heart of the poor, truly to listen to one another and, together, to the voice of the Spirit, so that, docile to His voice, we can increasingly understand and embody in our history today the essential of our Franciscan and Clarian identity, which will always be that of Poverelle and Poverelli, i.e., of women and men for whom the Lord God is "all our riches to sufficiency (PrsG, 4; FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 109)."

A fraternal embrace!

*Br. Fábio Cesar Gomes, ofm  
General Delegate Pro Monialibus*

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis* for the Opening of the Synod, 9.X. 2021: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>

<sup>2</sup>*Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis*, 10.X.2021: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html>.

<sup>3</sup>*Fonti Clariane*, edited by Giovanni Boccali (Ed. Porziuncola, 2013) 1014; not the official translation.

# Audite Poverelle

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## The Rediscovery Of The Lauda

### Audite Poverelle

*[Listen Little Poor Ones]*

On September 11, 1976, Sr. Chiara Augusta Lainati explicitly asked in writing to our Mother Abbess, Sr. M. Antonietta Savoia, to be allowed to consult the codices mentioned in the text of the 1941 GGCC of the Order of St. Clare (cf. General Rules and Constitutions of the Nuns of the Order of St. Clare, Rome, General Curia of the Friars Minor, pp. XXII and XXIII). She also asked the great favour of being able to hand them over to Fr. Giovanni Boccali so that he could study them. The priest was introduced as a “friar minor, an excellent and well-known scholar of Sacred Scripture”. At that time [he was] ‘master of novices covering all of Italy. [He was] in San Damiano and in contact with the friars in Vicenza for publications on Franciscan spirituality”.

Sr. Chiara Augusta asked for them “on loan and for a short time, assuring that they would be kept well, in safe hands”. She herself claimed to “have a religious respect” for such texts, because she knew what value manuscripts have: her “profession, before entering the Monastery, was in fact to read codices” (letter to Mother September 11, 1976).

On the following October 5, Fr. Boccali arrived at our Monastery to give substance to our Sister’s request. After the presentation and some clarifications, Mother M. Antonietta handed over two codices, one from 1300 in parchment and one from 1500 on paper. They, together with other precious documents and parchments, were carefully kept in the Monastery archives. Fr. Boccali took careful custody of the ma-



nuscripts and ensured firmly to return them in person in short time. In fact, the codices remained in Assisi, in the hands of the father, for more than a year!

Remembering that singular and unexpected event, let us quote what Fr. Boccali himself wrote in the first official article, commenting on the *Lauda Audite, Poverelle*, which appeared in the No. 2 [issue] of *Forma Sororum* in 1977: “This article is the result of various circumstances. In the spring of 1976 M. Chiara Letizia Marvaldi (of the Monastery of Saint Clare of Assisi), President of the Poor Clares of the Federation of Umbria, pointed out to me certain words of exhortation of St. Francis to poor women, words quoted by Fr. Leonardo M. Bello from certain codices in Verona, in the introduction to the booklet *Regole e Costituzioni Generali dell’Ordine di santa Chiara* [Rules and General Constitutions of St. Clare], Rome 1941, p. XXIII. To tell the truth I did not recognize them, nor did I pay much attention to them, even though I was preparing the writings of Saint Francis and Saint Clare for printing. Similarly, when I read the Assisi or Perugian Legend compilation (n. 85-45), I did not notice their similarity to the words of the ancient Legend. It was not until August 1976 that the Mistress and novices of the Protomonastery of St. Clare of Assisi pointed out the similarity to me. The following October 5, I wanted to go to Novaglie near Verona, to the Monastery of the Poor Clares Mater Ecclesiae, to see the codices indicated by the GGCC of 1941. Indeed, by the gracious permission of Sr. M. Antonietta Savoia, Abbess of that Monastery, I was able to take them with me, so that I could study them with greater ease. My interest then grew, because in the meantime I was working on the volume *Fonti francescane* [Franciscan Sources] edited by Fr. Feliciano Olgiati of Milan, of which I was in charge of the General Indexes”.

The interest, which aroused after the publication of Fr. Boccali’s commentary and the inclusion in the volume of the *Fonti Francescane* [Franciscan Sources] (even if only in the



introduction to the *Fonti Clariane* [Clarian Sources]), immediately got us involved; in fact, there were other requests by scholars to see and study the codices. However, alerted by competent people, we no longer 'lent out' the codices. In the following years, someone consulted them on site and there were other publications commenting on the Lauda. There were also those who set the text to music, including Fr. Terenzio Zardini, ofm of the convent of San Bernardino in Verona. However, the scores proposed to us were not accepted. We currently use the text (non-original words) and music by G. Tromba (cf. *Note di Luce, canti a Chiara D'Assisi*, Albano Laziale, Rm [Notes of Light, Songs to Clare of Assisi]).

Then, in the 1980s, a sister of ours, who is very good at painting, completed two miniatures contained in the codex: the first, Saint Francis standing giving the book of the Rule to Saint Clare on her knees, and the other, Saint Francis standing with his right hand raised, and the words of the Lauda placed next to him. These two paintings, measuring 100 x 67 cm, can be seen in our Chapter-Chapel room. We have been able to reproduce in print the same miniatures with the text of the Lauda for cards and holy cards for various community occasions. We also keep a register in which we collect the signatures of "illustrious" visitors who, for special meetings or occasions, have the opportunity to see the codex. To date, the signature of a Pontiff is missing, but there is time for that to happen...

### **Reverberations of re-discovery**

The request for consultation that was made to us back in 1976 both surprised and delighted us, but at the same time it did not arouse such interest as to focus our attention at a community level. This was perhaps due to historical reasons linked to the events of the two Veronese Monasteries: Santa Maria delle Vergini in Campo Marzio, erected in 1226, and



Santa Chiara in San Giovanni in Valle, erected in 1424. Both disappeared with the Napoleonic suppression and, despite attempts, the sisters were unable to reopen their much-loved cloisters. The last abbess of S. Maria delle Vergini, Sr. Rosa Margherita Pizzini, together with 19 sisters, had to leave the Monastery in 1810. Instead of returning to her family, where she would have been lovingly received, she withdrew to a dwelling not far from the Monastery to support her sisters and to try to save the furnishings from being stolen by French soldiers. It is due to her thoughtfulness and prudence that we owe the rescue of the most precious things. Before the dispersion, as some biographers note, she secured part of the furnishings and precious things of the Monastery, handing them over to priests she trusted and to her family, while awaiting new events. Rosa Pizzini was born in Ala di Trento on March 21, 1742. She ended her earthly life on December 1, 1820 and was buried in the cemetery next to the convent of San Bernardino in Verona.

The second Monastery, named after St. Clare, is linked to the Reformation and St. Bernardine of Siena, which also flourished until the suppression. Four of the expelled sisters managed to occupy a small part of the Monastery, living together until the end of their days. The last one died in 1857.

But “like the water of the streams that disappears among the cliffs to reappear in the valley and begin life anew”, so it was for our Monasteries. Indeed, on October 19, 1845, Sr. M. Cherubina Cavalieri with 47 sisters, after various difficult situations, succeeded not only in reopening the ancient Monastery of Santa Maria delle Vergini, but also in professing the Rule of St. Clare of Urban IV before Bishop Aurelio Mutti. This large group of young women, we can say, had risen from nothing.

Mrs. Anna Brunetti, already in the early decades of the 19th century, had gathered young girls inclined to prayer and religious life into her house for the purpose of education. When Anna passed away, her young sister-in-law Tere-



sa Cavalieri, later to become Sr. M. Cherubina, took over the educational task. On the day of the solemn reopening, she received from the Bishop the black veil that had belonged to Mother Abbess Rosa Margherita Pizzini. This fact is very surprising because Pizzini had died in 1820 and the purchase of the Monastery began in 1835: even then it “was reduced to a state of desolate abandonment”. While the chronicles attribute the salvaging of part of the sacred furnishings and fittings to Mother Pizzini, there is no mention of the books or even the codices and parchments, despite the fact that a librarian who worked for the monastic library is named. Our archive also has no information on this.

It therefore appears to be a real miracle! Surely the codices containing the *Lauda* were given to someone who took care of them and made sure to deliver them to whom they belonged, at the appropriate time. The chronicles do not inform us of the persons directly involved, except for a certain Signor 'consigliere' Giuseppe Buffoni [Mr. 'Councilor'] (cf. S.M. Arrighi in “Cenno storico di Santa Maria delle Vergini” [“Historical overview of St. Mary of the Virgins”] 1851, p. 70).

Between 1899 and 1900, the community of St. Mary of the Virgins moved to the Monastery of St. Clare, where in 1860, at the wish [request] of the bishop, 12 sisters had moved and started perpetual adoration. Diocesan priests and other religious took care of the spiritual and religious formation of the sisters. While choosing Franciscan spirituality and professing the Rule of St. Clare, the presence of the Observant Friars Minor is only occasionally or temporarily recorded. The commitment to perpetual Eucharistic adoration has singularly marked the face of the Community, leaving the charismatic aspect of the Order in the shadows.

However, in the Chapter of May 5, 1942, during the Abbessate of Mother M. Giuseppina Chiantore, following the letter sent by the Minister General, Fr. Leonardo M. Bello, the Community was unanimous in favour of the passage to



the first Rule of St. Clare. That same year, on September 16, the Minister General visited the Sisters, rejoicing with them because of the step taken. The rescript [decree] from the Congregation for Religious would, however, be delivered by the Bishop on August 30, 1944.

However, we had to wait until the post-Council years - following the relocation of the Sisters from the city to Novaglie, on San Fidenzio Hill - to have a regular presence of Franciscans in liturgical, charismatic, theological and spiritual formation.

As for the Lauda, it too had to wait quite a while before we paid attention to it. In the years 2006-2007, we found ourselves working intensively to develop a community life project and for that event, we took *Audite, poverelle* as our guide, particularly the opening words, pillars of spiritual life: *Audite* - listening / *Poverelle* - kenosis. A work that led us to quench our thirst at the source of the spring for every form of Christian discipleship.

With the elective Chapter of 2021, the new Mother, beginning to implement the Chapter programme, placed before our eyes - even visibly - the mirror of the Lauda, so that by reflecting in it, the face of our mother St. Clare might emerge more clearly, according to the exhortation of [our] Fr. St. Francis.

At this very time, a young brother, Br. Christian Vallarsa, ofm, gave us his written exercise for the bachelor's degree entitled: "The Spiritual Accompaniment of St. Francis in the Letter to Brother Leo and in the *Audite, poverelle*" at St. Zeno Theological Institute.

St. Francis, more than eight centuries after his death, is more alive and fruitful than ever, continuing to nourish the lives of his brothers and sisters with his 'saporific' words, steeped in the Gospel and sap that will never fail, because they draw on divine life.

*The Poor Clare Sisters  
S.M. Mater Ecclesiae Monastery of Novaglie (Italy)*





## Remembering...

It was fortuitous that on the morning of October 5, 1976 I was present at Fr. Giovanni Boccali's meeting with our M. Abbess Sr. M. Antonietta Savoia. Fr. Boccali had come from Assisi to collect two precious codices that were in our possession, thanks to the recommendation made by the novices of the Protomonastery, who were attracted by the citation made by the Minister General at the time, Fr. Leonardo M. Bello, in the 1941 edition of our GGCC.

After almost 50 years, I feel fortunate to have witnessed this event. We were in the celebratory year (750 years) of the death of our father St. Francis, with [its] many initiatives. A sister from our community was President of the Veneto-Emilia-Romagna Federation. I often collaborated with her in writing and having sent articles or letters for the anniversary.

The publication of the Franciscan Sources in a single volume was quite eagerly awaited. I remember that I often had to search for quotations that I wanted on St. Francis through various texts and it was not so easy. I didn't always find them... When I had in my hands the large volume of the Sources (actually, in the first edition there were two), I felt like I was dreaming! A volume all to myself, to be read, consulted and loved in order to get to know Father St. Francis and Mother St. Clare better.

St. Francis, a saint who left me somewhat perplexed when, as a child, I would see his figure in school textbooks talking to wolves or birds. Generally, three days after school started (strictly fixed for the first of October), we stayed at home for his feast day - October 4 - and invariably there was a poem to learn by heart about him.



How my gaze and attention was to change, only a few years later, when I began to really get to know him and he slowly revealed himself to me truly as a father, a father who reveals the meaning of life, supporting me on the sometimes rough and misty path. A father who shakes you up and helps you overcome obstacles, restoring your faith in yourself and in others, even when you would have every reason not to believe in it.

A paternity, his, acquired after his delivery to that Father in heaven who had revealed his secrets to him, just as an antiphon of his Liturgy makes us meditate: “God has made me forget all my father's house and made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (I antiphon Office of Readings).

And what joy it was to see the text of our *Lauda Audite, poverelle* included in the introduction to the Clarian Sources! Although still being studied, it was believed to be an authentic writing of St. Francis because the rhythmic verses corresponded exactly to the content described in the *Mirror of Perfection* at n. 90 and in the *Perugian Legend* at n. 45. It was and is a great joy because it is unique in the world (such as it is until today). Joy and a great gift for the Sisters of the entire Order and for the entire Franciscan family.

Among so many Monasteries and Sisters we were the lucky custodians, without any merit.

Even today, it is surprising that the codices were saved from the waters of suppression, emerging from the Napoleonic storm that devastated and occupied our two ancient Monasteries. In fact, both became part barracks and military hospital, another part used as a nitro factory and grain store.

As far as the influence on the life of the Community is concerned, it was not immediate and obvious, as it appears from the other article.

This does not detract from the fact that *Audite* is a pearl that shines for itself and has influenced the life and choices of the sisters. Personally, I have always been struck by so-



me of the typical adjectives used by St. Francis, which recall the *Canticle of Creatures* and other writings of his. The adjectives Francis uses are unmistakable: towards God he always uses absolute superlatives that never seem to suffice (most high, most holy, almighty). In relation to himself he uses terms just as absolute, but of baseness (vilest vermin and most worthless servant of thine), but also of tenderness and compassion with diminutive adjectives or pet names, for example 'little Francis' or 'grant to me your little sheep'. Addressing the Sisters, while calling them 'my ladies' and 'poor ladies', almost at the end of his life, he uses the pet name adjective 'poor little ones'.

In moments of harshness, of hardness - one's own or that of others - that one may experience, Francis is a model and example of gentleness, of acceptance, of tenderness, attitudes that help us to catch our breath, to break the chains that bind us.

The spiritual testament that Francis wrote for us sums up a life programme in a few verses (poetry, song and music are also a plus!). But not even a long life is enough to exhaust its depth.

After so many years, I still let myself be carried, as if on a mighty wing by that *Audite, Poverelle* that allows me and us to live and die in the truth of the Gospel, in abandonment to Providence and accepting, now infirmity and now fatigue, the daily bread of human existence, but with the certainty of the crown that awaits us.

And so be it through the merits of Mary, the 'poor' Mother of God, of St. Francis, of St. Clare and of all the Saints and Saints of God!

*Sr. Maria Flavia Cavazzana, osc  
S.M. Mater Ecclesiae Monastery of Novaglie (Verona, Italy)*



## The Exhortation «Audite Poverelle, dal Signore vocate»

Fr. Carlo Paolazzi, ofm

Whoever enters the small church of San Damiano, nestled among the olive trees on the south-eastern slopes of the city of Assisi, suddenly feels taken back in time, removed from the crowds and magnificent art of other places in Assisi, and within the blackened walls that reach upward, hears again the mysterious echo of an ancient and ever new voice, the one that spoke to Francis' heart in the crucial days of his conversion, the one that comforted Clare and the first sisters throughout the entire span of their contemplative journey within the mysteries of the Kingdom.

The threads that connect San Damiano to the religious experience of Francis of Assisi and the evangelical movement born with him are many, and in unravelling them one always runs into a few surprises. In retracing the accounts of the biographies, we in fact discover that by a singular twofold movement of grace, San Damiano was the first refuge for the newly converted Francis, the last and final definitive place for Clare and her “poor ladies.” The *Legend of the Three Companions* tell us that Francis, after his encounter with the lepers, and the voice from the Crucifix, confided in the poor priest of San Damiano and wanted to make him accept a large sum of money, “striving to give credibility to his own story and begging the priest to let him stay with him. At last, the latter gave in to the second request, but, for fear of the young man's relatives, he did not accept the money.”<sup>1</sup> The persecution he suffered at the hands of Pietro Bernardone, culminating in the trial before Bishop Guido,



temporarily drove Francis away, but he returned to his first refuge with the intention of restoring the crumbling little church: and from there, "returning to the city, he began to cross the squares and streets, praising the Lord with an inebriated soul. After he finished his praises, he worked to obtain the stones needed for the restoration of the church. He would say, "Whoever gives me one stone, will have one reward; whoever gives me two stones, two rewards; whoever gives me three, as many rewards!"<sup>2</sup>

It is at this point that from the double interwoven thread of Francis' conversion and his uninterrupted praise to the Lord, the surprising story of the "poor ladies" of San Damiano branches out. Clare recounts in her *Testament* that after her conversion and departure from the world, she and her first companions "by the will of the Lord and of our most blessed father Francis, we came to live next to the church of San Damiano".

Here, in a short time the Lord, by his mercy and grace, multiplied us greatly, so that what he himself had foretold by the mouth of his saint might be fulfilled".<sup>3</sup> Francis' prediction, as proof of the importance attributed to it by Clare, is the first fact referred to in her *Testament*: "In fact, almost immediately after his conversion, when he had neither brothers nor companions, while he was building the church of San Damiano, where he was visited in fullness by divine consolation, was moved to abandon the world completely – through great joy and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit he made a prophecy about us which was later fulfilled by the Lord. Climbing the wall of the said church, he shouted in French to some poor people standing nearby: "Come and help me in the work of the monastery of San Damiano, for later on, there will be ladies living here, whose fame and holiness of life will give glory to our heavenly Father throughout his holy Church."»<sup>4</sup>

The mention of a mysterious prophetic foretelling is also found in the *Second Life* of Celano, where with re-



gards to San Damiano, it is noted that «as the Holy Spirit had once foretold, there was to arise an Order of holy virgins destined to be transferred in due time, as a chosen group of living stones, to restore the heavenly house»,<sup>5</sup> and the confirmation of the information suggests, that in Francis' thoughts the story connected with Clare's stay at the monastery of S. Paolo delle Abbadesse and at S. Angelo in Panzo was perhaps more complex to explain than the reasons given in the previous essay.<sup>6</sup> After the brief interval on Francis's prophecy, it is time to resume the quotation from Clare's *Testament* at the point where it had remained suspended: «In fact, we had dwelt on it in before in another place, albeit for a short time. Afterwards he wrote for us a form of life, especially that we should always persevere in holy poverty. Nor was he content during his life to exhort us by many sermons and examples to the love of most holy poverty and its observance, but he transmitted it to us in various writings [*plura scripta*] so that after his death we should in no way depart from it, just as the Son of God who, while he lived in the world, never wished to depart from the same holy poverty.»<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the respective stays at the little countryside church of Assisi, the reconstruction of the material building, by Francis and the construction - first announced and then built - of the universal Church by Clare and the «poor ladies», the two historian initiators of the movement of evangelical penitents of Assisi are thus also linked to San Damiano through the mediation of «various writings,» of which until a few years ago we only knew the two short exhortations entitled *Form of Life* and *Last Will*, already mentioned in the course of reflection on the “feminine” in the writings of Francis. But the research put in place for the anniversary of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Francis (1976) has definitely revived from secular oblivion a third writing by Francis to the damianite, the exhortation in the vernacular *Audite, poverelle dal Signore vocate*, to



whose latest rediscovery - not devoid of interesting and even curious aspects – has equally contributed to the care of some friars minor and the attentive and loving eye of the daughters of Saint Clare<sup>8</sup>. Before turning to the text, it will not be entirely unnecessary to briefly trace its history.

Some ancient biographical sources (the often quoted *Perugian Legend* and the *Mirror of Perfection*) tell us that about two years before his death, or more precisely in the period between the winter and spring of 1225, Francis spent almost two months at San Damiano, bedridden by the aggravation of his illnesses and tormented above all by an excruciating pain in his eyes, which prevented him from enduring the natural light of the sun during the day, and the glow of the fire during the night: therefore, inside the little house where he was staying together with the friars responsible for the care of the church and the «poor ladies»<sup>9</sup>, a little cell of mats had been set up for him, in which mice kept him company day and night, when he prayed and when he ate. And in that very place, when light reappeared after a night of atrocious sufferings, but consoled by the divine promise that they would be transformed into the priceless treasure of salvation, Francis filled with joy and gratitude composed the *Canticle of Brother Sun*.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of our discourse it may be particularly enlightening to draw from the *Perugian Legend* the description of the joyful spiritual and psychological moment experienced by Francis in those days of grace, with a multiplication of initiatives that are astonishing in a man so tried by physical suffering: "In fact, his spirit then was in such sweetness and consolation, that he wanted to send for brother Pacifico, who in the century was nicknamed "king of verses" and was a most refined master of song, and assign him some good and spiritual friars, so that they might go throughout the world to preach and praise God.



He said it was his intention, therefore, that first one of them, skilled in preaching, should preach to the people, and after the sermon they should sing the *Praises of the Lord* together as his jesters. When the praises were finished, he wanted the preacher to say to the people, “We are the Lord’s jesters, and the reward we desire from you is this: that you live in true penance.” And he added, “For what else are the servants of God, if not in a certain way his jesters, who are to move the hearts of people and lift them up to spiritual gladness?”<sup>11</sup>

The account of the ancient biography, and before that, the same behaviour of Francis, seem to be inspired by the magnanimous thoughts which opens the *Second Letter of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians*: «Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father and God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our tribulation, so that we may also comfort those who are in any kind of affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are comforted by God» (1:2-3). The first opportunity to share with others the fullness of peace and interior consolation experienced in the radiant morning of the *Canticle* came to Francis some time later, when a violent quarrel broke out between two of his friends, the *podestà* of Assisi and Bishop Guido: and the saint, filled with pity for them, especially since neither ecclesiastic or secular cared to restore peace and concord between them, added to his praises the verse «Praised be you my Lord, for those who forgive for Your love», and sent two friars to sing the verse before the two disputants, who were moved and publicly repented and were reconciled, and «without recalling the mutual insults, returned to sincere concord after such a grave scandal».<sup>12</sup>

But the evangelical man who dreamed of using his *Canticle* as a universal invitation to live «in true penance» and had the joy of experiencing its beneficial effect on the city authorities, could not forget Clare and the other «daughters and handmaids of the Most High King» who





watched and prayed beside him in the small earthly court of San Damiano. In fact, continues the ancient text we have chosen as a guide, «always in those days and in the same place, after Francis had composed the *Praises of the Lord* for his creatures, he also dictated some *words with a melody*, for the greater consolation of the poor ladies of the monastery of San Damiano, especially since he knew them to be greatly distressed by his infirmity. And since, because of his illness, he could not visit and console them personally, he wanted his companions to bring and let the enclosed sisters hear that song.»<sup>13</sup> It is time to give the floor to Francis:

Audite, poverelle dal Signore vocate,  
ke de multe parte et provincie sete adunate:  
vivate sempre en veritate  
ke en obedientia moriate.

Non guardate a la vita de fore,  
ka quella dello spirito è migliore.  
lo ve prego per grand'amore  
k'aiate discrezione de le lemosene ke ve dà el Signore.

Quelle ke sunt gravate de infirmitate  
e l'altre ke per loro suo' adfatigate,  
tutte quante lo sostengate en pace,

ka multo venderite cara questa fatiga,  
ka cascuna serà regina,  
en cielo coronata cum la Vergene Maria.<sup>14</sup>

It immediately appears to the eye and ear that this is a kind of psalm consisting of verses of unequal length, distributed in four rhymed strophes (the first two, with perfect rhymes) or (the last two): with assonance in short, to put it in technical terms, of a “rhymed prose” (*rhythmic*)



in the vernacular, quite similar in form to the prayer *Most High, Glorious God* uttered by Francis before the Crucifix and the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, with which there are also obvious coincidences in content. Aligning the information from the ancient biographies with the data emerging from the recently discovered vernacular text, and comparing the latter with Francis' already known writings, scholars who have carefully examined the rhymed prose *Audite, poverelle* on the basis of the Novaglie codices near Verona that have preserved it for us («Hec verba fecit beatus Franciscus in vulgari»): These words composed by Blessed Francis in the vernacular, attest to the oldest codex), agree in attributing it to Francis of Assisi.<sup>15</sup> The only notable exception is the linguist Ignazio Baldelli, whose paper with the axiomatic title *Sull'apocrifo francescano "Audite, poverelle dal Signore vocate"*<sup>16</sup> appears, however, to be supported by very weak arguments individually and as a whole, and in any case has been emptied by an opposing intervention by Aldo Menichetti, who deals with the problem of authenticity with a rigorous and systematic investigation, resolving it in a completely probing and convincing manner in favour of Francis<sup>17</sup>.

The fact is also relevant for the history of culture, not only because it enriches the number of vernacular compositions that make Francis of Assisi the first authentic poet-novelist of Italian literature, but also because it confirms that the three poetic texts in the vernacular left to us by the "jester of the Lord" - the *Prayer to the Crucifix*, the *Canticle*, and the *Audite, poverelle* - were all born in the shadow of San Damiano, there where the wind of the Spirit that was innovating the Church fruitfully met, ennobling them, with the sweet intonations of the maternal and citizen language that Clare and Francis had learned from the days of early childhood. One understands, reflectively, the passionate desire to "communicate" that characterizes these texts, particularly the



last ones, written in the spoken language so that the tidings of salvation they contain may reach everyone, educated and uneducated, literate and illiterate.

In fact, according to the ancient biography, the stakes placed in the song for the “poor ladies” of San Damiano are very high: «In it Francis proposed to manifest to the sisters, then and forever, his ideal».<sup>18</sup> In line with this indication, some modern readers have had no hesitation in calling Francis’ words of exhortation a «spiritual testament»<sup>19</sup>, but others such as Fr. Giovanni Boccali, who first held and meritoriously studied this text, sees in it rather «as an exhortation and not a testament of Francis,» adding that «it is not an organic discourse, but perhaps a synthetic repetition of teachings given earlier».<sup>20</sup>

Yet on a careful reading, the words of Francis give a glimpse of the great thoughts that also animate the spiritual testament for his brothers: the story of vocation (vv. 1-4), obedience to the Spirit and joyful poverty (vv. 5-8), and mutual love (vv. 9-14).<sup>21</sup>

And twice the thought of the final passage, death “in obedience” which will result in the heavenly “crowning,” surfaces, confirming that Francis is now insistently trying to penetrate with his interior eye the mystery of grace that awaits beyond the confines of life, and he wants to make those especially dearest to him participate in these supreme explorations. Even the lamented lack of organicity seems to gradually dissolve in the eyes of the reader, both because of the emergence of those «recurrent associative chains»<sup>22</sup> that characterise Francis’s thinking and saying, and above all because of the constitution within the *Audite, poverelle* - as the commentary will try to show - of that same relationship between homogeneous thematic unity and single strophe (punctuated by rhymes or assonances) that constitute the characteristic of the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, with immediate positive reflections on the interpretation and on the very formation of the text.



Listen, little poor ones called by the Lord,  
who have come together from many parts and provinces  
Live always in truth,  
that you may die in obedience. (vv. 1-4). (Original text below)

Audite, poverelle dal Signore vocate,  
ke de multe parte et provincie sete adunate:  
vivate sempre en veritate  
ke en obedientia moriate (vv. 1-4).

In that initial «Listen» (audite) some might hear the echo of a jester's move, the invitation for attention that the jester in the opening of his song always addressed to his listeners... Here, however, it is a solemn appeal traced back to that of the prophets («*Audite* verbum Domini...!», «Listen to the word of the Lord»), which Francis dares to take up exclusively to invite us to listen to the words and works of the Lord: «Come, listen (*audite*), all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me». <sup>23</sup> Again Francis' word rises high, for he does not invoke listening for himself, but attention to the mystery of the grace that is being fulfilled in Clare and her sisters, from the Lord's first call until its fulfilment in the sign of mutual obedience. In fact, the perfect rhymes of the first four verses delineate within the first “strophe” the two-handed story that is taking place in the person and life of the «poor ladies» of San Damiano: the calling (vocate, v. 1), the response (adunate, v. 2), the way of life (vivate, v. 3), and the happy ending (moriante, v. 4). Each of these moments deserve careful analysis and attention.

Listen, little poor ones called by the Lord... (v. 1).

Whenever Francis thinks of the Gospel call, his heart swells with gratitude for the wonders wrought by the Lord: «The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way...», begins his *Testament*, which in the first



part tells the journey of conversion to the Gospel as resulting from an uninterrupted shower of grace («The Lord himself led me among them...»; «And the Lord gave me such faith in churches...»; «Then the Lord gave me and gives me still, such great faith in the priests...»; «the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the holy Gospel») that is met with a full, unflagging adherence of will and life («what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body»; «I would still want to have recourse to them...»); («And these and all others I desire to fear, love and honour...»; «I want... and pray...»). For the humble Francis, the good of human love and will is only the free, joyful reflection of the love of Him, «the highest good, eternal, from whom all good comes and without whom there is no good». <sup>24</sup> Also, in the *Form of Life* sent to Clare and her first companions, Francis emphasises their personal “choice” to live according to the Gospel, but only after extolling the initiative of God, the first protagonist of every event of salvation: «Since *by divine inspiration* you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the Most High King, the Heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel...».

The insistence on emphasising the divine initiative reappears consistently in the vernacular exhortation to the «poor ladies»: it is God who has called them, or to borrow the term used by Francis, “vocate”. The word “vocate” (called) is a Latin term of great biblical and theological poignancy, which Francis probably draws from «Paul, called to be an apostle» (*vocatus apostolus*, 1Cor 1:1; Rom. 1:1) and places it in close connection with «poverelle» («little poor ones») for the purpose of expressing this strong thought: “Listen, you poor ones called by the Lord,” or more explicitly, “you who have been called by the Lord to live in poverty.” Francis knew very well that Clare and the other Damianites were not poor before the Gospel call, and precisely for this reason from the very first words he intends to recall that the heart of his



vocation and their vocation is «to follow the life and poverty of our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and His Most Holy Mother, and to persevere in it to the end».<sup>25</sup> Of course, Francis does not forget that the “good news” is proclaimed to the poor (cfr. Lk 7:22), who are called blessed because «theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven» (Mt 5:3), and it is precisely the poor through the host's generosity that are called (*voca pauperes*, Lk 14:13 and 21) to the banquet deserted by the other guests. Having thus established through internal reminders the sequence of values to be embraced by those whom Christ has called to follow him, Francis in the following exhortation may omit new direct and explicit mentions of poverty, and indeed exhort the «poor ladies» to temper its harshness by using with “discretion” the gifts of the great heavenly Almsgiver.

Moreover, a nuance of affection and intent appears already in that diminutive little poor ones, which returns not surprisingly in the vocabulary of Francis during his last days, when in his *Testament* he protests his respect for the “poor priests [*pauperculus*]” living in their parishes and calls for “poor dwellings [*paupercola*]” for his friars, or when on the eve of his death he invites Lady Jacoba to Assisi signing himself «brother Francis, poor man [*pauperculus*] of Jesus Christ»: an extreme confirmation that his word always vibrates with religious and loving veneration before every reality where the mystery of the poverty of Christ and his mother Mary shines out. There is therefore, probably a precise echo of his language on the page where Thomas of Celano recalls that Francis «could not think again without weeping how much scarcity the *poor* Virgin had found herself in on that day [= Christmas]. Once, while he was sitting at lunch, a friar reminded him of the poverty of the blessed Virgin and the destitution of Christ her Son. Immediately he rose from the table, burst into sobs of sorrow, and with his face wet with tears ate the rest of the bread on the bare ground. This is why he called poverty a royal virtue, because it shone with so much splendour in the King and Queen».<sup>26</sup>



And with the language, Francis' own soul seems to double and melt into the feminine concreteness by which Clare manages to convey the mysteries of Christ into the more modest and ordinary everyday life: «And for love of the most holy and most beloved Child, wrapped in poor clothes [*pauperculis panniculis*] and lying in the crib, and of his most holy Mother, I earnestly admonish, pray and exhort my sisters to always wear vile garments».<sup>27</sup>

Within this order of thoughts, which indissolubly connects the kingship of Christ and his becoming poor and a servant out of love, there was undoubtedly also the nurtured definition «poor ladies» (*pauperes domine*) that Francis would have preferred for Clare and her companions, to indicate the simultaneous convergence in their person and in their life of the two great mystery of poverty "servant" and the "royal" lordship of the Word made man in the womb of Mary. It is a reflection that Francis had already expressed in other words in the *Rule* for his friars and that Clare in turn took up to the letter, merely transposing to the feminine the exhortation that the sisters, «serving the Lord in poverty and humility,» and entrusting themselves to almsgiving «should not be ashamed, because the Lord made himself poor for us in this world. This is the summit of the highest poverty, which has formed you, my dearest sisters, heirs and queens of the kingdom of heaven, made you poor in substance, but rich in virtue. Let this be your portion, which leads you into the land of the living».<sup>28</sup> Francis used to describe himself as «ignorant and illiterate»<sup>29</sup>, but this did not prevent him from being very much in need of making the order of words adhere to the order of truth and things, so that the return of the same terms - especially those central to his religious vision - in reference to diverse people is always indicative of a secret commonality of predestination and grace. It is not surprising, then, that at the conclusion of his exhortation he opens up the ultimate horizons of hope to the «poor ladies» of San Damiano, reminding them: «and each one will be crowned queen in heaven with the Virgin Mary» From the



call to the prize, however, there is still a long way to go, and Francis marks the second step:

who have come together from many parts and provinces... (v. 2).

The adventurous events of Clare's nocturnal escape from her father's house and her consecration to God at the hands of Francis must have spread quickly in Assisi and throughout the neighbouring towns, but just as quickly, the news of her virtues also spread, as her biography observes, «Within a short time, the fame of the holiness of the virgin Clare had spread throughout the neighbouring districts and from all sides women ran after the fragrance of her perfume»<sup>30</sup>. The exhortation stresses that the women came «together from many parts and provinces», and this is valuable information to base the authenticity of the text on external information as well: from the acts of the *Process of canonization of St. Clare* it was in fact possible to ascertain that at the date of the composition of the *Audite, poverelle* (1225) there were in San Damiano, sisters who came not only from Assisi and the countryside, but also from Perugia, Spello, Spoleto, Rome, and probably Pisa and Ferrara<sup>31</sup>.

But ascertaining the facts again, does not exhaust the resonances of the text. It is a well-known custom of Francis to extend to his audience in time and space: in the exhortation that concludes the *first Rule* written for his friars, Francis addresses «all nations and all men who are and who will be»<sup>32</sup>, and similarly commends his *Letter to the whole Order* to the minister general «and to the other custodians and guardians of the friars, who are and who will be»<sup>33</sup>, then dictating in the so-called *Short Testament* of Siena a blessing for: «all my brothers who are now in the Order and those who will enter it until the end of the world»<sup>34</sup>. Beyond the documented evidence, it is therefore legitimate «to ask whether Francis' admonition should not be taken as a message projected into a prophetic dimension»<sup>35</sup>, by virtue of





which the «poor ladies» to whom he addresses himself will be, yes, primarily those «gathered» in San Damiano, but also those gathered then and in the future at the court of the Most High King, as, moreover, the author of the *Perugian Legend* already interpreted, explaining that in these words Francis «proposed to briefly manifest to the sisters, then and forever, his will.»<sup>36</sup> This is not a presumptuous attitude, but a reflection of the universality immanent in the «fragrant words of the Lord [*odorifera verba Domini*]»<sup>37</sup> of which Francis' word intends to echo in order to relaunch its sound to every place, every time, every person.

Thus the participle *adunate* (come together), a rare term that only occurs once in Francis' writings, certainly signifies that God has gathered and holds together his daughters and handmaids «in the same monastery, with the same vocation, for the same life»,<sup>38</sup> but within the expressions used by Francis, the remembrance of Ezekiel's prophetic word, which foretells the end of the dispersion and the spiritual renewal of the people of Israel, strongly urges: «Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the midst of the peoples and assemble you from the nations [*adunabo de terris*] to which you have been scattered. I will give them one heart [*cor unum*] and a new spirit [*spiritum novum*]» I will put within them; I will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh, that they may follow my decrees and keep my laws and put them into practice».<sup>39</sup> Centuries pass, but God continues to gather his people, to call and «gather in unity» his daughters from lands and cities, to make them into «one heart» that beats in unison, in truth and love. «*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*», «The love of Christ has united us», joyfully proclaims the liturgical antiphon *Ubi charitas*, whose words manifest a harmony that runs along the pen of the ancient paraphrase of Francis' exhortation: «he begged them, that as the Lord had gathered them together in unity from many parts [*in unum congregavit*] in charity...»<sup>40</sup>. The echo of the prophetic text and liturgical consonance ensures that *adunate* does not mean purely physical gathering,



but expresses in advance and succinctly that ideal of communion full of spirit and life that Francis illustrates in the following verses:

Live always in truth  
that you may die in obedience (vv. 3-4).

According to the ancient biographical source, the ideal or “will” that Francis proposed to express to the «poor ladies» could be summarised thus: «that they be unanimous in charity [*deberent karitate esse unanimes*] and in fraternal coexistence.»<sup>41</sup> The difference between the phrase «*vivate... en veritate – live in truth*» and the phrase «unanimous *in charity*», coupled with other differences between the text and paraphrase, has led some modern readers to think that the exhortation was accompanied by oral messages or a brief letter that contained other thoughts<sup>42</sup>, or even, that the rhymed prose in the vernacular is not Francis’ text, but a late (fourteenth-century) reconstruction, elaborated on from the biographical source, which in turn presupposes a much larger and more complex lost original<sup>43</sup>.

In fact, to limit ourselves to the point at hand, the discordance between *charity* and *truth* is only apparent, more in form than in content. There is no doubt that the biblical-theological source from which Francis’ word emerges is John («*ambulantes in veritate - walk in the truth*», 2Jn 3; «*tu in veritate ambulas - you walk in the truth,*” 3Jn 3), as has already been pointed out,<sup>44</sup> and perhaps at the moment when he sends to the «poor ladies» of San Damiano an exhortation that has all the flavour of a spiritual testament, Francis is thinking of the great testament of Jesus, the priestly prayer in which the Lord asked the Father to «*sanctify in truth*» the disciples, that is, to help them to be «*perfect in the unity*» of faith and mutual love. The ample quotations from that text found in the *Regula non bullata* and in the *Letter to the Faithful*, as well as the radiating power reflected from it in many pages and attitudes of the *Poverello* of Assisi, show that Chapter 17 of John’s Gospel is



probably the Gospel page most loved, meditated upon and relived by Francis.<sup>45</sup> The reason lies in the fact that in the priestly prayer of Jesus the divine plan of salvation is fully manifested: God, the Father of life, truth and love, who in Christ Jesus reveals himself and gives himself to humanity; and the community of disciples who must welcome and allow the life of God, which is a communion of truth and love to shine through them for their own salvation and that of the whole world. At the heart of Jesus' invocation, as repeated by Francis in the first *Rule* for the Friars Minor, are the illuminating words for the passage under consideration: «*Sanctify them in the truth*. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I sanctify myself so that they too *may be sanctified in truth*. I pray not only for these, but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me. May they *be perfected in unity* [*consummati in unum*] so that the world may know that it was you who sent me, and that you have loved them, as you have loved me.»<sup>46</sup>

It will be good to pay attention to some poignant expressions of Jesus: who prays that the “truth” he has communicated to the disciples will shine through their lives («*Sanctify them in the truth*») and protect the disciples from evil by uniting them with the One who is “the Holy One of God” par excellence («*may they be sanctified in the truth*»), so that the Father who is perfect unity of life, truth and love with the Son and the Holy Spirit, may also make perfect the communion of truth and love that animates the person and the life of his children («*may they be perfected in unity*»). The various expressions used by Jesus in his prayer thus express different aspects of one great mystery, the communion of the triune God with his Church, which inexhaustibly draws from him truth, holiness, perfect communion in love: complementary faces of ecclesial reality that find their unity in God. In an attempt to condense Jesus' prayer into a single line exhortation, Francis chose «*vivate en veritate*» (*live always in truth*), a concise expression to be understood in



the vein of the Pauline exhortation to «live according to the truth in charity» (*veritatem facientes in charitate*, Eph 4:15), or of the previously mentioned Johannine exhortation to “walk in the truth,” explained elsewhere with a concreteness so close to Francis’ heart: «Little children, let us not *love* with words or speech but with deeds and *in truth*» (1Jn 3:18).

The ancient source had thus grasped perfectly the meaning when, in the phrase «live always *in truth*», had read the exhortation that the “poor ladies” «be unanimous in charity». Thus the inseparable link is reassembled whereby in Francis’ writings obedience is always paired with charity, as a verse of the *Salutation to the Virtues* proclaims: «Holy charity, may the Lord save you with your sister, holy obedience». In fact, the verse of the *Exhortation* already commented on is completed thus:

Live always in truth,  
that you may die in obedience (vv. 3-4).

The supreme model of obedience, of course, is always the Lord Jesus, who appeared in our midst «as one who serves» (Lk 22:27) and for our sake «became obedient unto death, death on a cross» (Phil 2:8), or as Francis paraphrases, «gave his life so as not to fail in obedience to the most holy Father» (LOrd 46). In this sense, the term «obedience» is thus charged with very rich and multiple meanings, as Francis’ other writings amply confirm: it is obedience to the Father, to the Spirit of the Lord, to the Gospel and the professed *Rule*, but also to the demands of fraternal life<sup>47</sup>, and as such it implies the totality of relationships within the fraternity and the “norm of life” that governs them, identifying with Franciscan life in its totality<sup>48</sup>. On a page in the first Rule for his friars, Francis expresses fully the opening of obedience, following the example of Jesus, to the twofold command of brotherly and obedient love to-



ward the Father, when he writes: «Let no brother do evil or say evil to another; rather out of charity of spirit let them willingly serve and obey one another. This is the true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ». And after a stern warning to those who forsake the commandments of the Lord and wander outside obedience, he resumes, «If, however, they have persevered in the commandments of the Lord, which they have promised to observe by following the holy Gospel and their form of life, let them know that they are in true obedience, and may they be blessed by the Lord.»<sup>49</sup>

It is important at this point not to overlook the theme of perseverance, the golden thread that connects the grace of every “vocation” with its landing at the ultimate and definitive shore, when the faithful soul will finally be able to sing, «You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord, almighty God, merciful Saviour.»<sup>50</sup> Francis needed only an adverb, «*always* live in truth», to remind the «poor ladies» gathered at San Damiano that the gift of their life of poverty, charity and obedience in the Spirit must be welcomed and lived in the dimension of daily life and perseverance, so that sister bodily death would find the «daughters and handmaids of the most high and supreme King, the heavenly Father» industrious and vigilant in doing the most holy will of their Lord. But later, shortly before his death, in his *Last Will* Francis would return with a force equal to exquisite courtesy to the subject so dear to his heart: «And I beg and advise you, my ladies, that you live always in this most holy life and poverty.»<sup>51</sup> These were neither prayers nor advice thrown to the wind, judging by the heartfelt insistence with which Clare would reiterate the exhortation at the conclusion of her *Testament*: «And because the way and path is straight and the gate through which one passes and enters into life is narrow (cfr. Mt 7:14), there are few who walk on it and enter through it”. And if there are some who walk that way for a time, there are very few who persevere in it. How blessed are those to whom it has been given to walk that



way and persevere to the end».<sup>52</sup> The light of the Gospel beatitude («Blessed are those servants whom the master finds watching when he returns», Lk 12:37), also illumines the last words of Francis in the *Canticle*: «Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm». (vv. 30-31). For believers, the expectation of the light of the sunset turns into the dawn that heralds the new day.

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<sup>1</sup> 3Comp VI,16.

<sup>2</sup> 3Comp 21.

<sup>3</sup> TestsC 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> TestsC 9-14.

<sup>5</sup> 2Cel 204.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Paolazzi, *Francesco per Chiara*, Milano 1993, notes 22-25 and the relative text.

<sup>7</sup> TestsC 32-36.

<sup>8</sup> Previous chance and rediscovery can be reconstructed on the basis of information provided by the discoverers themselves, who also became the first editors and scholars of the text: cfr. Ch. A. Lainati, *Introduzione a Scritti e fonti biografiche di Chiara d'Assisi*, in *Fonti Francescane*, 1977, pp. 2238-2240 (with the text of the exhortation); G. Boccali, *Parole di esortazione di s. Francesco alle "poverelle" di San Damiano*, "Forma sororum" XIV (1977) 54-70 (text pg. 59); Id., *Canto di esortazione di san Francesco per le "poverelle" di San Damiano*, "Collectanea franciscana" 48 (1978) 5-29.

<sup>9</sup> This is the convincing solution suggested, in full agreeing with the old documents (cfr. RsC XII,5-10; *Processo di canonizzazione di santa Chiara* (= Proc) II,15; VI,16, where they speak with the friars who lived outside ») from O. Schmucki, "Audite, poverelle". *El redescubierto canto de exhortación de san Francisco para las Damas Pobres de San Damián*, "Selecciones de franciscanismo" 13 (1984) 134-135, with indications of the illness that afflicted St. Francis.

<sup>10</sup> Origin and interpretation of the famous praise in the vernacular cf. Paolazzi, *Il Cantico di frate Sole*.

<sup>11</sup> LegPer 43.

<sup>12</sup> LegPer 44.

<sup>13</sup> LegPer 45. If one wants to stick to the account of the ancient sources, as well as the quoted documents, it is therefore evident that Francis' lodging was different and distant from that of the 'poor ladies', despite the



moving poetic expressions of some illustrious biographer (cfr. P. Sabatier, *Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi*).

<sup>14</sup> This is the critical text established by F. Brambilla Ageno, *Proposte al testo della "prosa" volgare di san Francesco*, "Studi e problemi di critica testuale" 20 (1980) 5-8.

<sup>15</sup> One thinks in particular of Chiara Augusta Lainati, Giovanni Boccali and Ottaviano Schmucki for the documentary and content aspects, and of Franca Brambilla Ageno and Aldo Menichetti for the text, language and style (all texts quoted here and used extensively).

<sup>16</sup> In "Ricerche storiche" 13 (1983) 559-575. Note among other things: it is highly unlikely that the obscure "live always *in truth*" derives from the very clear *deberent karitate esse unanimes* ("they should be unanimous in charity", LegPer 45) by a forger, as Baldelli would have it; the absence of the term *sorores*, as well as constituting an element contrary to authenticity (*Sull'apocrifo*, 569-570), fully meets Francis' intentions and lexicon, as shown in the previous essay; the combination *vocate-adunate*, versus only *congregavit* of the biography is by no means a "synonymic diphthology" typical of the vernacular translators (*Sull'apocrifo*, 570-571), but expresses two essential moments in Francis' "vocational" synthesis.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A. Menichetti, *Riflessioni complementari circa l'attribuzione a san Francesco dell'«Esortazione alle poverelle»*, "Ricerche storiche" 13 (1983) 577-593 ("You hit the mark," Gianfranco Contini had written to him on the occasion).

<sup>18</sup> LegPer 45.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Schmucki, *El redescubierto canto de exhortación*, 136-138.

<sup>20</sup> Boccali, *Canto di esortazione*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> the story of vocation and love of poverty, cf. 2Test 1-24; mutual love and to lady poverty in 1Test 1-4. Not explicitly appearing in the words of exhortation to the "poor ladies" is the invitation of fidelity to the Church and to the clerics, which, on the other hand, returns in both testaments for the Friars Minor, evidently more exposed to temptations of deviance (cf. 1Test 4; 2Test 30-34).

<sup>22</sup> Menichetti, *Osservazioni complementari*, 586. See also in this regard Paolazzi, *Lettura degli "Scritti"*, 25, 62-67.

<sup>23</sup> Uff III Ter 4; the invitation also returns in literal form in the *Letter to the Whole Order* (= LOrd) 5 and 21.

<sup>24</sup> Paraphrase of the "Our Father" (= Pater) 2.

<sup>25</sup> Uv 1.

<sup>26</sup> 2Cel 200.

<sup>27</sup> RsC II,25.

<sup>28</sup> RsC VIII,2-5 (the parallel text is Rb VI,2-5). In the continuation, Clare adds to Francis' text the explicit mention of the Mother of the Lord: "Adhering totally to it [= poverty], never, beloved sisters, wish to have anything else under heaven, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and *his most holy Mother*" (VIII,6).



<sup>29</sup> LOrd 39 (*ignorans sum et idiota*).

<sup>30</sup> LsC 10.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Boccali, *Parole di esortazione*, 62-63; Id., *Canto di esortazione*, 23. Reductive and biased appears to be the reading of these data in Baldelli, *Sull'apocrifo francescano*, 566-569.

<sup>32</sup> Rnb XXIII,7.

<sup>33</sup> LOrd VI,47.

<sup>34</sup> 1Test 1.

<sup>35</sup> Menichetti, *Riflessioni complementari*, 585.

<sup>36</sup> LegPer 45. As previously noted, there is a methodical revision of the translation in the Latin text.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 2Lf 2.

<sup>38</sup> Boccali, *Canto di esortazione*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Ez 11:17.19-20. The call to renewal in the "Spirit" and the life of "obedience" that follows emerges in the following verses of the Franciscan exhortation.

<sup>40</sup> LegPer 45.

<sup>41</sup> LegPer 45.

<sup>42</sup> Schmucki, "*Audite, poverelle*", 136-137.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Baldelli, *Sull'apocrifo francescano*, 560-563 (and cfr. above, n. 16).

<sup>45</sup> Cfr. O. Battaglia, *San Francesco e il Vangelo di Giovanni*, in *Parola di Dio e Francesco d'Assisi*, Cittadella Ed., Assisi 1982, 165; O. van Asseldonk, *Maria, sposa dello Spirito Santo, secondo S. Francesco d'Assisi*, "Laurentianum" 23 (1982) 416. For the most significant quotations, see Rnb XXII,41-54; 2Lf X,56-60.

<sup>46</sup> Rnb XXII,49-53; and cfr. Jn 17,17-23 (with some cuts). That the italicized expressions are felt by Francis to be theologically equivalent is shown in the *Letter to the Faithful*, where the path is decisively shortened: "And for their sake I sanctify myself, that they may be sanctified in unity as we are" (X,59).

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. Paolazzi, *Lettura degli "Scritti"*, 235-239.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. Schmucki, "*Audite, poverelle*", 139.

<sup>49</sup> Rnb V,13-17.

<sup>50</sup> *Praises of the Most High* (= LodAl) 7.

<sup>51</sup> The literal coincidence *vivate sempre-semper vivate* [live always in truth] is highlighted by Menichetti, *Riflessioni complementari*, 585.

<sup>52</sup> TestsC 71-73.

(continued in the next issue)





## Br. Carlo Paolazzi: a short introduction

In view of the centenary which we are getting ready to celebrate, the Poor Clares of Cortona, together with Br. Fábio C. Gomes, have kindly asked me to write a short article for cTc about the writing of Brother Francis' *Audite poverelle*, [Listen, little poor ones]. I have accepted this invitation with pleasure although aware that my words and reflections would never be able to express the beauty and richness of that text.

I have read and reread *Audite poverelle* many times and I know how much benefit I have received from that reading. I also remember that many years ago I read a study by the friar minor, Carlo Paolazzi, devoted to that same writing of Brother Francis to the sisters of San Damiano. So I have once again picked up Brother Carlo's book *Francesco per Chiara*, [Francis for Clare] (Presenza di San Francesco, 40, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milan 1994). On pages 77-130 there is Br. Carlo's reading of the Exhortation *Listen little poor ones, called by the Lord*. Br. Carlo's style captured me once again. It is profound, rigorous, passionate and - more than anyone else - capable of drawing the writings of Francis into dialogue with Francis' other writings. Indeed, this is because the best way to understand a text of the Saint of Assisi is to read and reread him in the context of his other writings.

This is how I came to suggest to the editors of cTc that they republish this great work of Br. Carlo Paolazzi. In this way it would reach a greater number of readers. Br. Paolo Canali - the Director of the Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana - has accepted our proposal with enthusiasm, and for this we thank him with all our hearts.



To give a few words about Br. Carlo Paolazzi: he was born in Palù di Giovo in the Province of Trento on 8 March 1938. He made his first vows on 19 September 1955, solemn vows on 28 August 1960 and was ordained to the priesthood on 14 July 1963. An excellent philologist and scholar, he was a professor of Dante and Italian literature at the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia before becoming one of the Quaracchi Editorial College, then at Grottaferrata. He undertook the demanding task of publishing the new critical edition of the Writings of brother Francis of Assisi (*Francisci Assisiensis Scripta*, critical edition by C. Paolazzi [*Spicilegium Bonaventurianum*, 36], *Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae*, Grottaferrata [Rome] 2009). From 2000 to 2010, he taught the course on *Filologia e Intertestualità* at the Scuola Superiore of Mediaeval and Franciscan Studies at the Pontifical University Antonianum.

Br. Carlo Paolazzi is also the author of a number of books on the Writings of brother Francis, both strictly scientific in character or more informative. In them he succeeds in bringing together textual exegesis with a profound spiritual insight. Following on from the collaboration of the first edition of the *Fonti Francescane* (*Movimento Francescano*, Assisi 1977), Br. Carlo Paolazzi's research focussed primarily on the Writings of Francis of Assisi, exploring them in relation to the saint's religious experience as well as to the biblical and liturgical sources as well as to the hagiographic sources. His attention was constantly on an exegesis of the text and the theological-spiritual message. All his work on the Writings of Francis moved in this direction, in the Introductions, translations and Notes as can be seen in *Fonti Francescane*. Nuova edizione, EFR - Editrici Francescane, Padua 2004, pp. 27-217; and in *Fonti Francescane*. Terza edizione rivista e aggiornata, EFR - Editrici Francescane, Padua 2011, pp. 29-217.

His last works have touched on editorial and textual problems, of interpretation and authenticity and especially on the relationship between Francis and his scribes, on some



crucial issues in the text of the autographs, the authenticity of the writings to the Poor Ladies and the passages in the Rule about books and studies.

To list a few:

- Il Cantico di frate Sole, Marietti, Genoa 1992;
- Francesco e Chiara. Invito alla lettura, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1999;
- Le laudi volgari, in Francesco d'Assisi, Scritti. Testo latino e traduzione italiana, EFR - Editrici Francescane, Padua 2002, pp. 215-242;
- Lettura degli "Scritti" di Francesco d'Assisi, II ed., Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, Milan 2002;
- Per l'autenticità degli scritti di Francesco alle «pauperes domine», in Atti del Convegno Internazionale "Clara claris praeclara" (Assisi, 20-22 novembre 2003), Edizioni Porziuncola, S. Maria degli Angeli - Assisi 2004, pp. 307-337;
- La "Preghiera davanti al Crocifisso": Francesco alla ricerca di Dio, in Miscellanea Franciscana Salentina, 22 (2006), pp. 5-19;
- Studi sugli Scritti di frate Francesco, Frati Editori di Quaracchi, Grottaferrata (Rome) 2006;
- Francesco d'Assisi e il creato: dalla contemplazione all'obbedienza, in Studi Francescani, 104 (2007), pp. 189-204.
- La Forma vitae presentata da Francesco a papa Innocenzo III, in Francesco a Roma dal signor Papa. Atti del Convegno storico di Greccio (Greccio, 9-10 may 2008), Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, Milan 2008, pp. 123-139;
- Il Testamento di Chiara d'Assisi: messaggio e autenticità, Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, Milan 2013;
- In cammino trinitario, con san Francesco d'Assisi, Edizioni Biblioteca Franciscana, Milan 2016.

Br. Carlo was a man of clarity, like the mountains of his native Trentino. He was a significant figure in the cultural



tradition of our Order and above all, he was a true Franciscan. He returned to his Father's house on 25 March 2022 at Trento in Italy. He was 84 years old.

*Br. Marco Guida, ofm - Rome, Italy*

# We received

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## **Fratelli tutti... Sorelle tutte!** **(All brothers... All sisters!)**

(continued from [no. 60](#))

### **The wounds of fraternity in the light of Francis**

In this world, then as now torn by bloody wars, Francis knew how to find true peace in God and “freed himself from any desire for superiority over others.” (cf. FT No. 4). The desire to be above others, preferred, admired, has, I believe, its positive principle in our infinite desire to love and to be loved, because we feel that we are not made to be put aside, humiliated, but loved infinitely and freely, looked upon with kindness. But some experiences, most often during childhood, have negatively impacted this assurance of being loved; if we were told for example: ‘you are the last one, or you are younger than me, so your opinion doesn’t matter’ or ‘you are the worst in the class, you don’t know anything, you are useless!’ etc... unconsciously we then try to prove that we are valuable too, because God says deep inside each person: ‘You are valuable, you are important, I love you!’. However, humiliations, injustices, insults, damage this certainty of being loved and desired by God. But our way of seeking love and the gaze of others often resembles a competition.

St. Francis, faced with the sufferings that he personally endured in his soul and body, did not close in on himself, but made his poverty an open path to discover with his heart the suffering of others to the point of putting himself at their service, and this for the poorest and most despised of all, whom he had always shunned before: the lepers.

*Service in great part means ‘caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our*



people.’ In offering such service, individuals learn to “set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, ‘suffers’ that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people.” The needy generally “practise the special solidarity that exists among those who are poor and suffering, and which our civilization seems to have forgotten or would prefer in fact to forget. (FT 115b-116a)

### **Beyond human brotherhood**

When Jesus tells us: ‘Love your enemies’, I can hear: ‘love those brothers who are your enemies’, that is, love your brothers and sisters even when you have quarrelled, when you have different points of view, even when they behave in ways that seem to show that they want to harm you. If we look at the root of the word enemy, we see that it comes from the Latin inimicus, built from the privative prefix in - and amicus (‘friend’, from the root amare, ‘to love’, that is, either someone who doesn’t love me or someone I don’t like. I can understand then: ‘the person who does not love me or whom I feel does not love me is, all the same, a beloved brother or sister’.

Our Mother St. Clare also takes up the experience of human fraternity to sublimate it into a supernatural love: Rule 8,9: “And if a mother cherishes and nourishes her daughter according to the flesh, how much more should each one not cherish and nourish her sister according to the spirit!”. Mother Mary of Jesus, foundress of the Poor Clares of Cameroon and Gabon, said to her daughters: “Be mothers to one another, indulgent to the limit of what is possible, remembering that Jesus was severe only to the Pharisees” (cf. ‘It is only urgent to love, and to love is to die’). Human fraternity is based on the bonds of blood, on the same culture, the



same education, a similar experience. But in the brotherhood to which Jesus invites us, we are gathered 'from every tribe, race, language, people and nation' (cf. Rev 7:9) so even unintentionally, we can hurt each other, make each other suffer; the love to which we are invited is greater and more perfect. Loving someone who is like me, who has the same opinions as me, the same ways of seeing things, is generally easier. I do good, they thank me, it's gratifying. But with a person who is very different from me, I can do good and, because of the way I do it, they understand it differently, they interpret my gesture or my word as a negative act. The present experience of our Order in the revision of our General Constitutions, which requires the participation of each one for the good of all and the future of the Order, may be an opportunity for rapprochement and mutual respect, rather than distrust and assumptions about each other's intentions...

### **Forgiveness through the example of children**

In reading about how Jesus asks us to be like children, many qualities of children are often cited, such as trust in their parents. I also notice that children have an amazing capacity to forgive. They fight and scream, and a few minutes later hold each other's necks in friendship. Why are adults so different in this respect? Instead, *the Gospel tells us to forgive "seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22) and offers the example of the unmerciful servant who was himself forgiven, yet unable to forgive others in turn (cf. Mt 18:23-35). (FT 238)*

As St. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us, forgiveness towards others has its deepest source in the peace of heart that comes from God Himself:

«He, Christ, is our peace, he has made one people out of two. Since we thus understand that Christ is our peace, we will show what the true definition of a Christian is if, through this peace which is in us, we show Christ in our lives. In his



person, he has killed hatred, as the Apostle says. So let us not revive it in ourselves, but show by our lives that it is dead. Since it was marvellously killed by God for our salvation, let us not resurrect it and risk the loss of our souls; by giving way to anger and the memory of insults, let us not, by doing this wrong, accomplish the resurrection of hate which was marvellously put to death.

But since we have Christ, who is peace, let us in turn kill hatred in ourselves, so that we may achieve in our lives what our faith shows us has been achieved in him: he has broken down the wall that separated the two peoples, he has created in himself one new man, and he has established peace. In the same way, let us be at peace within ourselves, so that we may build the new man, unified and at peace, out of this double reality.» (From St. Gregory of Nyssa's *Treatise on Christian perfection*)

Certain situations of refusal to forgive one another between sisters or between communities seem incomprehensible to those who are the painful witnesses, a counter-witness that sometimes extends far beyond the walls of our monasteries and can have disastrous repercussions in the hearts of many, such as slowing down the coming to fruition of religious vocations or even driving away from the Church people who are still fragile.

### **Words that give life and not death**

God created us with his all-powerful and all-loving Word. His Word is truth, therefore it is also effective. He creates and then blesses what He has created, He looks with goodness and kindness on what He has created: "God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light. God saw that the light was good" (Gen 1,3-4) and the same with man: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them. God saw all that he had made. And indeed, it was very





good”. (Gen 1:27-28a.31)

Nowadays, many human words pass through communication channels such as the internet, the telephone, through all social networks. Unfortunately, very often, we transmit messages received that criticise people we do not even know, messages whose veracity we are materially unable to verify. Let us listen again to our Holy Father Pope Francis who warns us:

*Nor should we forget that “there are huge economic interests operating in the digital world, capable of exercising forms of control as subtle as they are invasive, creating mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process. The way many platforms work often ends up favouring encounter between persons who think alike, shielding them from debate. These closed circuits facilitate the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting prejudice, and hate.” We should also recognise that destructive forms of fanaticism are at times found among religious believers, including Christians; they too “can be caught up in networks of verbal violence through the internet and the various fora of digital communication. Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned”. How can this contribute to the fraternity that our common Father asks of us? (FT 45b-46)*

*He continues: True wisdom demands an encounter with reality. Today, however, everything can be created, disguised and altered. A direct encounter even with the fringes of reality can thus prove intolerable. A mechanism of selection then comes into play, whereby I can immediately separate likes from dislikes, what I consider attractive from what I deem distasteful. In the same way, we can choose the people with whom we wish to share our world. Persons or situations we find unpleasant or disagreeable are simply deleted in today’s virtual networks; a virtual circle is then created,*



*isolating us from the real world in which we are living. (FT 47)*

What about us? What is the quality of our words? Do they give life or death? Do we, listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit Advocate, see in each person a child of God created in his image and likeness, called to goodness? Or do we prefer to side with 'the accuser of our brothers who accused them before our God day and night' (cf. Rev 12:10)? Yes, the voice of temptation always seeks to divide us, to separate us.

St. Peter reminds us that "love covers a multitude of sins" (1Pet 4:8), quoting the Book of Proverbs, which I would like to take up here in its context: "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. Hatred provokes strife, but love conceals all wrongdoing." (Pr 10:11-12) When we don't love someone, we rather point out their mistakes, their sins, their faults, but when we love, we know, like God who created us with love, that the depths of that person are good like 'the dove hidden in the cleft of the rock' (cf. Ct 2:14). The one who does not love (in the sense not of hatred, but of the absence of love) sees only a stone, but the one who loves sees the diamond hidden in that stone. In other words: my words reflect my heart, as Jesus reminded us (Lk 6:45): "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil; for what the mouth speaks is what overflows from the heart." When I speak, when I convey a message, I think I am speaking about another person, or a group of people, but first and foremost, I am speaking about myself. If I live in hatred, in distrust, I will find it easy to criticize not only the acts, even the best ones, interpreting them as bad, but also the people created in the image of God and loved by Him. When I criticize one or more people, near or far, I bear witness to myself that I do not consider that person as my brother or sister, but only as the 'other' whom I distrust and keep at a distance from me. "Do not judge and you will not



be judged, do not condemn and you will not be condemned.” (Mt 7:1) Now to criticize a work is above all to criticize its author. To despise a child is to make his parents suffer. When we speak ill of our brothers and sisters, it is above all God whom we criticize and make suffer.

Doesn't the great misunderstanding between the Church and the world come from the fact that God, in his Word, teaches us to discern in our acts what is good or not so good for us, for our soul and for that of our brothers and sisters, while the world judges not the acts but the persons 'guilty' or 'not guilty', even innocent. The good and the bad. If someone who does not know or understand the Gospel is told: "what you are doing is not good" (implying: you are good, but you injure yourself by acting in this way), he understands too often: "you are doing something bad, therefore you are bad" and he rebels. This is why there is so much misunderstanding when the Church warns against certain behaviours that are harmful to people. For this reason, we must always begin by witnessing to the love and tenderness of God for all his children before recalling the Rules and prohibitions that were decreed by a Father full of love for our good, and not by a merciless Judge who would wait for us to fall before throwing us into the eternal fire. This does not mean that we should not warn against evil, but always do it with love and kindness towards people.

Are we, children of God, sons and daughters of St. Francis and St. Clare, really the peacemakers that God expects us to be? Or are we fanning the flames of real wars? Our Pope Francis warns us that: *Manifestations of hatred and destruction in the virtual world are not - as some would have us believe - a laudable form of mutual aid, but true associations against an enemy.* (FT 43) At present, many people, victims of unfair accusations on social networks, unfortunately end up committing suicide because their existence is depicted as despicable by others. They can no longer understand the hatred against them and give up.



The silence to which our Mother St. Clare invited us in her Rule is a silence of love, which helps nurture in us beautiful words, words of love and blessing, words that sow life and not death. For God, in creating us in his image, has given immense weight to our words, and this can be seen in the positive or negative influence of the words spoken to a child by his or her parents: words of encouragement that help them to improve, or insults that lock them into their errors and convince them that they are worthless.

### **Being a family in order to progress together**

*Here is a beautiful secret to dream and make our life a beautiful adventure. No one can face life in isolation. [...] We need a community that supports us, that helps us and in which we help each other to look forward. How important it is to dream together! [...] Alone, we risk having mirages through which we see what is not there; dreams are built together! (FT 8)*

This reflection of our Pope Francis is so important: very often we prefer to dream alone, because no one interferes with our dream: it begins and ends as I want it to. But this dream, even if I try hard to put it into practice, may well remain a dream; whereas the dreams that we agree to share can be lived and realised together, even if the concrete result is often different from what I would have dreamed of doing alone, enriched by the opinions and ideas of others. Disappropriating “my dream” is what Our Father St. Francis and Our Mother St. Clare had to do so that God’s dream for them and for their brothers and sisters could be realized and last until today. They shared their dream in Church and community and, knowing what was essential and ‘non-negotiable’ in this God-inspired dream, lived it in communion with others.

In the chapter *Dreams that fall apart*, our Pope reminds us how many constructions aimed at unity among people, such as the European Union, seem to fail because aggressi-



ve conflicts reappear and particular interests, especially economic ones, seem stronger than mutual help and solidarity. For this reason, he tells us that: *Each generation must make the struggles and achievements of past generations its own and take them to even greater heights. This is the way. Goodness, like love, justice and solidarity cannot be obtained once and for all; they must be conquered every day.* (FT 11) When we see the efforts that our elder sisters have made so that different communities of different sensibilities, of different formation and cultures, come together and work together in Federations for the good of all, we should not consider these steps as acquired once and for all or as ancient history, because this is only the beginning.

We need to make our own the texts we have received that undergird our unity as a Federation and to understand how the Church is inviting us to come closer to one another for the good, to encourage us to move towards the better. When I think, for example, of our Federation SOLOFO KAMUTI of the Poor Clares of French-speaking Africa, of our magazine or of the common formation meetings, which were launched as an incredible challenge beyond the distances of thousands of kilometers that separate, for example, Madagascar and the Ivory Coast, I say to myself: this heritage is bequeathed to each one of us today, a symbol of the links between our monasteries in Africa and even in Europe. We must not think that “the things of the Federation or of the Order” concern only the abbesses who sit at the meetings, but know that each one of us has a part to play. As I pray for each of my sisters in community, I also feel called to pray for each of the monasteries in our Federation, for our whole Order. Does the closing of some monasteries, even far away, the heartbreak of my sisters, often elderly, who must look for a place to go, touch me in the most intimate part of myself? Or do I remain outside of what they are experiencing, or do I judge only by saying to myself “they have done this or that which has not attracted or has repel-



led vocations”? Or do I do everything to keep my distance from those who now live in retirement homes? The juridical autonomy of our monasteries is very positive for the life of each community, for a rapid and adapted decision making with a better knowledge of each person, but it should not make us indifferent to each other, each community or each Federation seeking only to ‘survive’, or to be above the other.

We see with *Cor Orans* that, even concretely, the future of a monastery of a Federation concerns all the sisters because in case of difficulty, each community can be called to send sisters to give a hand, or in case of closure or necessity, we can be called to welcome one or more sisters coming from elsewhere to our community.

Several sisters have left their continent of origin to respond to the call of very distant monasteries that asked for sisters to help them, thus manifesting fraternity beyond distances in a spirit of faith and self-giving that leads us to admiration and thanksgiving for the generosity of these sisters and their community as well as for the humility and simplicity of the sisters who ask for help.

## **Conclusion**

What a great gift is sisterhood! Thank you, Lord, for the gift of each one of our brothers and sisters!

I thank you for having listened, with fraternal love and benevolence, to these reflections and meditations that have been inspired by the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* of our Pope Francis. Together, as a family, we can face the problems, the obstacles of our lives, of our communities, of our Federations. For if we are frank with ourselves and open to the Holy Spirit, we will recognize that sin is in our hearts and that we all need God's great mercy and the help of our brothers and sisters to get out of it and go further, together and in fraternity.



I would like to end with the words of our Mother St. Clare who, beyond human distances and borders, spoke with so much love to her sister St. Agnes of Prague, I would like to say her “own sister”, not a sister by blood, but a sister and daughter by soul in the path traced by God for our religious family: “Farewell, most dear Sister and Lady, because of the Lord, your Spouse; commend me and my sisters to the Lord in your fervent prayers, for we rejoice in the good things the Lord works in you through His grace. Remember us warmly to your sisters as well.” (2LAg 24-25).

*Sr. Marie de Jésus Lorent, osc  
Monastery of Our Lady of the Angels, Libreville, Gabon*

[Here is the link](#) to read the first part of the article.



## 60 Years of *Forma Sororum*

It was the year 1962: the new-born federation of Italian Poor Clares laid the first stones of inter-federal collaboration with the national Convention of Presidents. Among a number of initiatives, the one which was unanimously approved was the publication of a review especially for Poor Clares. The first number, however, had to wait for the following year when M. Chiara Cristina Vercellotti, President of the Umbrian Federation, decided to respond to the waiting communities with a much fuller and more elaborate version of the circular which she had already been in the habit of sending to the Italian monasteries. This carried the date of 12 August 1963, the Solemnity of our mother Saint Clare, and the title *Forma Sororum*. The enthusiasm with which it was received enabled the circular, composed of 12 simple sheets, to be transformed into a proper printed booklet. January-February 1964 saw the publication of *Forma Sororum*, a Review for the Poor Clares of Italy, Number 1, Year 1.

Working with M. Cristina right from the start was the novice, Sr. Chiara Augusta Lainati of the Protomonastero in Assisi, who took over from the President at the end of her mandate, early in 1970. With her, *Forma Sororum* would move from being a place of information, debate and exchange between the Italian monasteries and the world, to being a valid instrument for formation without thereby losing the other aspects. Friars and nuns worked hard together to make their skills available and to fill the pages of each issue. In time, interest in the review grew among the laity who more and more became both readers and collaborators.

In 1979 the editing and administration of *Forma Sororum* followed behind Sr. Chiara Augusta when she transferred to the Monastery of S. Maria di Monteluca in S. Erminio in Perugia and, at the end of the 80s, to Città della Pieve. All





through those years, Sr. Chiara Augusta would involve the young sisters who entered the monastery in the production of the review, according to their possibilities and gifts.

At the beginning of the 90s, the baton gradually passed to Sr. Maria Manuela Cavrini of Città della Pieve who is still responsible for the review, helped by Sr. Chiara Ester Mattio and other sisters who busy themselves preparing the articles for publication, with the correction of drafts, with subscriptions (the review travels to five continents) or with keeping the website up to date ([www.clarissecdp.it](http://www.clarissecdp.it)), etc.

Latterly the perspective has widened as is indicated by the subtitle *The gaze of Clare of Assisi today*, with the wish of keeping in step with the times, giving back to God and the Church the gifts we have received. These are gifts of Christian spirituality and especially of Franciscan spirituality which come together in the widest possible collaboration to be an instrument of faith which forms the culture of people's daily life.

This year we shall celebrate 60 years of publication with an article in each number dedicated to a decade. We congratulate ourselves that there is still so much to tell in the issues ahead, just as we are grateful for those who follow us and support us.

*The Editorial Team of Forma Sororum*

# News from the Office Pro Monialibus

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## Poor Clare Federation of Mary Immaculate (USA)

The Sisters, gathered for their Federal Elective Assembly at the Los Altos Hills Monastery from 19-26 April 2023.

Election results:

Mother Mary Angela, pcc, of Roswell Monastery, President; Mother Mary Giovanna, of Belleville Monastery (Illinois) and Mother Miriam of Kokomo Monastery (Indiana), Councillors.

We invite the Federations celebrating their Elective Assemblies to send us the names of the elected Sisters and their Monasteries, so that we can publish them in our magazine and in *Acta Ordinis*. **Thank you!**

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**Communion and Communication**

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