

LETTER OF THE MINISTER GENERAL
AND GENERAL DEFINITORY
TO THE WHOLE ORDER
FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF SAINT FRANCIS

«...All my
brothers those
who preach,
pray, or work,
cleric or lay»

Saint Francis, Rnb XVII

**Dear Brothers and Sisters,
May the Lord give you peace!**

The words of St Francis that we have chosen as the title of this letter offer a precise overview of the identity of the Order as Francis wished it to be: a community composed of men who, in their daily lives, carry out different activities, but who deep down cultivate their belonging to the great family of the Church of Jesus. Even in the diversity of their ministries, they are united by the common vocation of being friars. They choose to live the relationship with



the other always as a call from God who “because of the good words and deeds or, for that matter, because of any good that God sometimes says or does or works in and through them” (Rnb XVII, 6). They thus reject the rationale of appropriating or enslaving the other to one’s own needs or desires.

This year, on the feast of St Francis, we wish to comment with you on Pope Francis’ Rescript of 18 May 2022, by which lay friars are admitted to the service of government¹. We share the joy of this step that the Church has taken, thanks to the long study journey and request of our Family and other Institutes. This message is addressed to the Friars Minor, the Contemplative Sisters, and the Family as a reminder of our common charism.

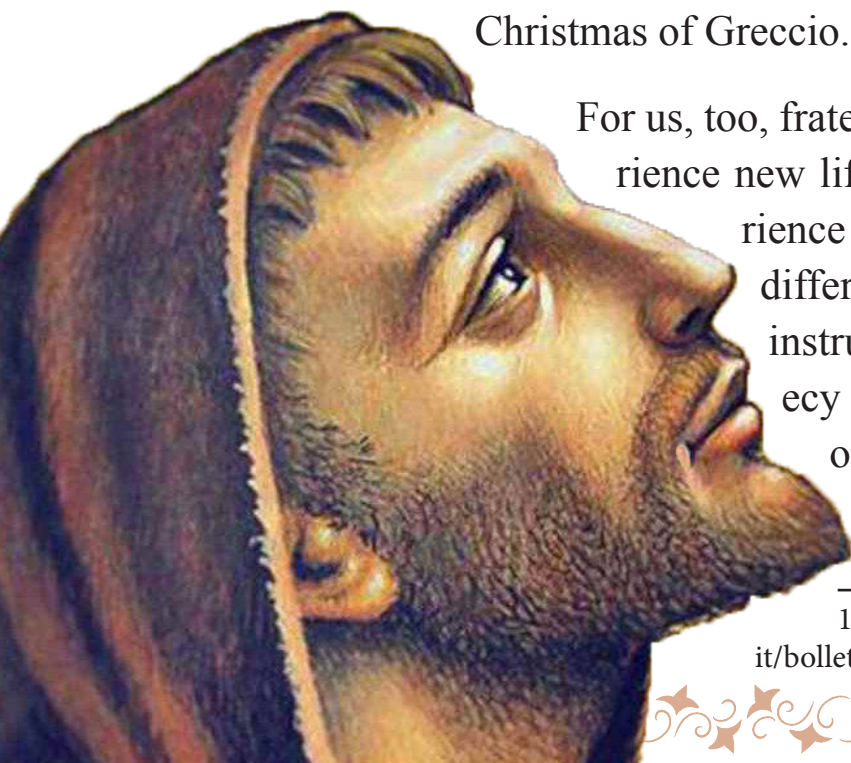
The Gospel lived in fraternity

Francis’ vocation and mission led him to make the call to fraternity resonate in the society and Church of his time as the truest fruit of Jesus’ Passover. Everything in him stems from the surprising discovery that no one is forgotten by the merciful love of the Father, who welcomes all of us as beloved children: the healthy and the lepers, thieves and brigands, popes and sultans, knights, and ragamuffins...

The life and words of Jesus showed Francis the goal to strive for, and fraternity was the path that allowed him to follow Jesus. Truly the life and Rule of the Friars Minor is to live and faithfully guard “the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience, without anything of one’s own and in chastity”. The centenary of the approval of the Rule, which we will commemorate in 2023, is meant to help us return to this heart of our identity, together with the joy of the Incarnation, which we will also celebrate in 2023 with the eighth centenary of the Christmas of Greccio.

For us, too, fraternity is the space where we can experience new life according to the Gospel and experience the harmony that can only arise from different notes and a diversity of musical instruments. In this way, we are a prophecy of humanity faithful to the Creator’s original design.

¹ Cf. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/05/18/0371/00782.html>



The numerical decrease of lay friars

But the harmony of diversity is a reality to be welcomed as a gift, as the fruit of the life and Passover of Jesus. It must be guarded and cultivated with care. In the present historical time, it seems to us that taking care of the gift of fraternity also means sharing our concern for the decrease in the number of lay friars in the Order, which is a higher percentage compared to the clerical friars².

If the general decrease in the Order obliges us to reflect wisely, as the 2021 General Chapter has asked us to do, that of the lay friars is a sign that should worry us. Our fraternity seems to be struggling to preserve that diversity of ministries that has characterised it since its origins. Francis understood his fraternity as different, almost alternative to monastic or canonical life. Today, we struggle to grasp the originality of this form of life. Are we in danger of turning into communities of ordained ministers who refer to a Rule, considered above all as a tool to organise living together with dignity, rather than as a continuous provocation to always devise new forms of fraternal life according to the Gospel? The situation is, of course, different in the various areas where the Order is present, but we are convinced that this is a question that goes to the heart of our vocation and therefore questions all friars.

In particular, all this constitutes an appeal to our formation process. What unites us is the fact that we are all brothers, not primarily priests. Therefore, it is good for us to rediscover again and again and to show from ongoing formation to initial formation that the first vocation of each of us is to be a Friar Minor. On this path, we will also be able to appreciate again what a great gift the reality of the lay friars is and present it with more conviction in our vocational outreach.

Some reflections

In this diminishing situation, a positive sign has come to us from Pope Francis. In his Rescript, he recognises that the participation of all the friars in the life, mission and governance of the fraternity is determined by sharing the same charism. It is not just a question of “rights” and power but of charism and identity. Starting from the gift of this pontifical Rescript, it seems appropriate to consider some further reflections.

1) **Consecrated life in the first Christian millennium was fundamentally lay in nature.** Since the first centuries of the Christian era, consecrated life has been born out of the desire to live the Gospel more radically. It has led to a choice that guides the entire existence of the men and women who feel called to it, men

2 Cf. Our Vocation, Leaving or Remaining Faithful, OFM General Curia, Rome 2019, n. 3 .1-2, p. 11-14.



and women who are and remain lay people. It is not, of course, a matter of looking back with nostalgia to a now distant past; we must also take into account the fact that in the Latin Church, religious communities of a clerical type were born, and that this tendency also marked the older Orders. History is complex. However, it does not exempt us from asking ourselves now whether the all-encompassing desire to “live according to the perfection of the holy gospel” as friars is still so alive as to guide our personal and fraternal choices for the future. Whether it is decisive concerning a clerical identity, which always risks absorbing the vocation of Friars Minor.

Besides, let us think about it: Saint Francis was not a priest, and it is precisely in him that we find a fundamental root of our identity. Concerning the vertically layered systems of society and certain institutions within the Church and religious life of his time, Saint Francis thought of the “Friars Minor” as men called to become fulfilled in the same family through a code of fraternal communion rooted and founded in charity and minority. This ideal meant a permanent challenge to the greatest familiarity between brothers, to equality, theologically and juridically, in the sign of Christian love, respect, service and mutual obedience³.

This is why we feel very close to the breath of Pope Francis’ Rescript, which is a great inspiration for us to revive the original intuition of our vocation today. In light of all this, we confess our fear that in the world, several candidates for our life are attracted to the clerical state rather than Friar Minor’s life. Or that they do not know how to distinguish them sufficiently. Moreover, our formation system does not inspire and support this awareness much, nor does the profile and activity of most of our fraternities and presences, which are very much marked by priestly ministry. This could also explain the fact that more than half of the friars who leave our fraternity enter the diocesan clergy⁴, declaring in no uncertain terms that they feel more like priests than Friars Minor. A change of gear is urgently needed.

2) The lay vocation within our fraternity is precious above all because it is a living memory of the priestly dimension inherent in our baptismal consecration, which is at the root of religious consecration. Every believer, by their baptism, is called to participate in the one and only perfect sacrifice of Christ, not only through the sacramental celebration but above all through the gift of one’s own life for the good of one’s brothers and sisters: this is the true worship according to the Spirit ⁵that every baptised person, cleric or lay, must present to God. The

3 Cf. The identity of the Franciscan Order in its founding moment. Document of the Inter-Franciscan Commission “for the study of the Franciscan Order as a ‘mixed institute’”, May 1999. Enchiridion OFM II, nn. 3281-3282.

4 Our Vocation, Leaving or Remaining Faithful, OFM General Curia, Rome 2019, n. 3 .4, p. 14.

5 Cf. Rm 12:1.



relationship with God, in this way, does not become one occupation among others that fill my day but the basic orientation that brings order and unifies the rest of the activities I am called to perform, whether clerical or lay. “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ”⁶.

3) Finally, reflection on the presence of the lay brothers in our Order can also become an invitation to become aware of the **responsibility that, as disciples of Francis, we have towards the entire ecclesial community**. At this challenging time in history, also marked in the Church by turbulence, restlessness, resistance and demands, the call that unites cleric and lay people within our fraternity without opposition could also become a stimulus to dream of a Church in which the words of Christ are truly fulfilled: “But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves”⁷. These are the words that inspired Francis to name his fraternity: Friars Minor, that is, people who feel the desire to serve because they have experienced that the Lord first put himself at their service. It seems to us that this is an urgent call that our time is addressing to us who bear that name: should we not be witnesses today to a community in which no one reasons, like “the kings of the nations... and those who have power over them”⁸? The Church urgently needs the selfless witness of men and women who show with their lives that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters, not as competitors or adversaries. Only this witness can root out every form of clericalism (whether from clerics or lay), every social pressure, claim to dominance or superiority over brothers and sisters, and every short-sighted vision that considers the diversity of vocations as a threat to the well-ordered life of the Church organisation.

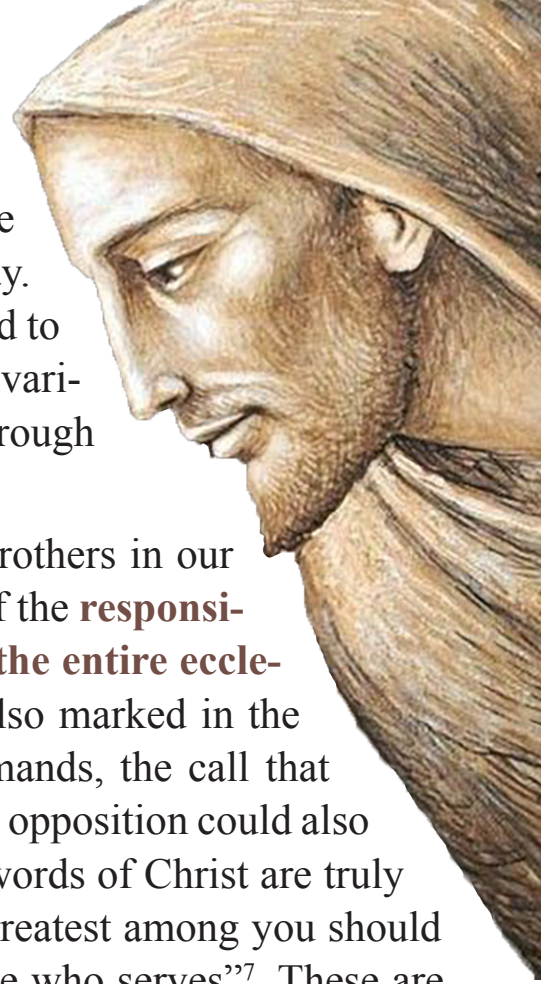
Congresses of the Lay Friars

As the General Definitory, we are confident that the congresses of the lay friars at Conference level and the international one of 2025, requested by the General Chapter 2021, will be precious places and occasions for this reflection. We hope to evaluate and relaunch our integral vocation that we dream of. We, therefore, invite you to prepare and experience these meetings with conviction.

6 1 Pt 4:10.

7 Lk 22:26.

8 Cf. Lk 22:25.



From here, we can welcome the opportunity that Pope Francis offers us to call other brothers to the government of the Order. It is a challenge to rethink ourselves, change deep-rooted mentalities, and open ourselves to the future that the Spirit is already stirring among us.

Dearest brothers and sisters, may the celebration of the feast of our father and brother, Saint Francis, help us return to the heart of our vocation and unite our lives around the blazing core of the Lord's call.

May he help us not to let the fire of our charism be extinguished under the weight of disappointments and weariness; may he rekindle the flame of life and faith, the greatest gifts we have received.

In this spirit, we greet each and every one of our brothers and sisters who are pilgrims and strangers throughout the world, wishing with the blessing of Saint Francis to live the Gospel with joy, walking in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus in this difficult and blessed time, remaining on the road with the men and women of goodwill of today.

Fraternal greetings,

Rome, General Curia, 17 September 2022
Feast of the Stigmata of Saint Francis





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