



TOWARDS

the extraordinary General Chapter
"The Vocation of the Order today"

Rome 2005

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A text from yesterday for today

Letter of the Minister General

Dear Bother Ministers, Custodes and Friars:
May the Lord give you peace!

As I had the occasion to write to you a short time ago in the letter “*The Grace of our Origins*”, we will have the grace of celebrating the eighth centenary of the Foundation of our Order. To prepare ourselves for this great event of grace, we will hold an Extraordinary General Chapter in Assisi in 2006, with which we will begin the process of discernment and renewal of the Order, which is one of the objectives we seek through this celebration.

The Commission for the preparation of the Extraordinary General Chapter, composed of Br. Francesco Bravi, Vicar General, Br. Ambrogio Van Si, Definitor General, and Brs. Thaddée Matura, Hermann Schaluek, Giacomo Bini and José Maria Arregi, appointed by the General Definitory, has already made a concrete proposal for all the Fraternities of the Order. This proposal consists of reading and studying the Declaration of the General Chapter of Madrid (1973): “*The Vocation of the Order Today*”, which we send to you as a proposal for work. In this way we will gradually involve and prepare ourselves for the celebration of the General Chapter.

Given that, by any reckoning, the work and involvement of all the Entities and Friars of the Order is important, I ask the Ministers and Custodes to distribute immediately a copy of this document to each Friar of their Entity:

- Let them encourage the Friars to read and study the text personally, or to take advantage of some Fraternity act, in order to reflect on it,
- let them also encourage the Friars to respond in community to the questions presented as a complementary aid and, finally,
- let them send the responses of the Fraternities to the Provincial Curia, which, in turn, should send a summary of the responses of their Entity, on no more than three pages, to the Secretariat of the General Chapter in the General Curia of Rome *by the month of September 2005*.

The Commission for the preparation of the General Chapter, as well as the Definitory, considers that the text proposed for study by the Friars, although it is old, preserves the vigour and currency which present times require. I personally think that the reading and study of, and the meditation on this Declaration of the 1973 General Chapter, “*The Vocation of the Order Today*”, could serve as a great help in the renewal we hope to achieve through this General Chapter and through the celebration of the eighth centenary of the approval of the Order.

I once again thank the Ministers and Custodes for their service of involvement and animation of the Friars and I also thank all the Friars of the Order for their commitment to trying “*to give greater quality*” to their vocation to Fraternity and Minority.

Rome, 1st January 2005.

Br. José Rodríguez Carballo, OFM
Minister General

Presentation of the Declaration “The Vocation of the Order Today”

Called on to update our form of life continually we propose once again to the Friars the Declaration of the 1973 General Chapter, “The Vocation of the Order Today”.

The Order of the Friars Minor, accepting the invitation of the II Vatican Council, which hoped for the constant return of all religious to “the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (*Perfectae Caritatis* 2), began this process of renewal. A long and committed process of reflection was undertaken, supported by numerous historical, theological and spiritual investigations of its origins, as well as through concrete experiences of renewal, which also led to legislative decisions. It was thus that, two years after the Council, during the Chapter of 1967, the General Constitutions were laboured over for a long time in order to adapt them to the perspectives opened up by the Council. Six years later, in 1973, the General Chapter of Madrid wished to present a vision of the Franciscan identity in the bosom of the contemporary world in the form of a Declaration drawn up in modern, simple and accessible language. There resulted, in line with the council documents, an enthusiastic synthesis of discoveries, proposals, questions and experiences which came from the past and were situated in the present. The acceptance given by the Order to this Declaration was very positive: it became an inspiration for many Friars and a basic document for the formation of the young.

The fundamental topics which it deals with were taken up again by different Chapters, by the Documents of the Ministers General and by the Commissions which

followed in the course of years. Written with the fervour of the Council, the Declaration has a tone of hope, it invites all to a serious examination of conscience and remains an encouraging and optimistic document.

To prepare for the 8th Centenary (1209 – 2009) of the approval of the Rule of the Friars Minor, it seemed that revisiting this text could stimulate reflection of all the Friars on the re-foundation – the re-updating – of the gospel project which the Rule proposes and which the Declaration, at the invitation of the Council, adapted to the present times. On reading it personally and in fraternity once again some 30 years later, it should not be a nostalgic act of memory, but a real confrontation with the present times.

- What have we done about the perspectives opened up by this text?
- What is, from all that was proposed, still regarded as current for each one of us?
- How can we respond today to the provocations of the Declaration? How can we pass from theory to practice? With what new and original decisions, gestures and steps?
- Are there any points or insistences in the text which are out of date today?
- Are we not, on the other hand, confronted by new situations and challenges about which the Declaration is silent?
- At a time of great changes and crises in our Entities, what hope do we have and what hope can we propose to the Christian people?

Rome 11th December 2004

The Friars of the “*Forma Vitae*” Commission.

The Vocation of the Order Today

*A Statement of the
1973 Madrid General Chapter*

Presentation

1. Men of our times and consecrated to God, we Friars Minor also feel we are questioned from all sides about the meaning of our life, about our options and about the specific nature of the vocation of our Order today.

First of all, it is Christ who calls us to live the Gospel today.

Secondly, the Church, through the person of Paul VI, who sent a Letter to our General Chapter, asks us this question: “What is your role in the Church, what is your specific vocation in the present-day world?”

For its part, the world, anguished and agitated by various tensions, but filled with sympathy for St. Francis, asks us who we are and what we have to offer to it.

But we ourselves, gathered in Chapter to revise our General Constitutions, are seeking – as did our predecessors throughout the history of the Order – our identity and the particular nature of our vocation today.

2. We wish to give a sincere reply to all these questions in this statement which we have drawn up. The statement is not intended to be an exposé of all the elements of the Franciscan life, or a spiritual document, and even less a theological treatise. Rather does it propose to take up the essentials of what has been said about the Franciscan vocation, to express them in a brief and incisive manner and, in this way, to be an affirmation of those values which seem to us to be of particular significance for the vocation of the Order today. Our statement equally tries to take into account some new questions

which have arisen in recent years and to spell out, in the light of these new questions, certain options already taken. It is an urgent call for the embodiment in the day-to-day life of the Friars, through their effective application, of the topics which have been widely agreed upon within the Order.

This statement cannot remain a dead letter. Each Province, in the light of it and of the report of the Minister General, should endeavour to study the important points of this document in order to implement one and the other of the points underlined in it.

Introduction

3. As Friars Minor, we first declare our confidence in the charism given in the past to Francis of Assisi and recognised by the Church, a charism that is still real and alive today as is witnessed to by many voices inside and outside of Christianity. Submissive to this charism of Francis, who succeeded in grasping some of the deepest aspirations of his times, we are led to look at the present-day world and to listen to the interpellations which come to us from contemporary trends, including their challenges. We owe our existence as a fraternity to the historical experience of Francis and of his Order and we intend to remain faithful to him. Welcoming in faith the Gospel of Christ, Francis was aware that he and his brothers were sent to the world to proclaim, by life-style and word, conversion to the Gospel, the coming of the Kingdom of God and the revelation of his love among men. Awareness of that mission gave him the spiritual dynamism, mobility and the audacity to leave all, and placed him in the midst of men, Christian or not, to share with them, in the concrete situation of their lives, the newness and the joy of the Gospel. The call addressed to this man in the past is our concern and still calls us today; it is up to us to accept it and to live it, thus replying to the expectations and needs of the people of our times.

4. We recognise the gap there is between Francis and ourselves, we who claim to be his followers, between what we propose as a project and the actual profile of our Order. The crisis of the world and of the Church to which we are contributors, the present situation of the Order (numerous departures, aging of the group, lack of confidence in our vocation, all of which were indicated by the Minister General in his report “As I see the Order”) and,

over and above all, our desire to remain faithful to the Gospel, forces us to begin again, that is, to a more profound conversion of heart. This requires of us a renewal of faith, imagination, courage, acceptance of risk and prompt decisions. In spite of our weakness, we wish to become involved in this process and to indicate those points which appear to impose on us with greatest force.

THE GOSPEL AND THE FAITH

5. At the centre of Franciscan life, as the writings of Francis and other texts testify, is found the experience of faith in God in the personal encounter with Jesus Christ. From whatever side we approach it (prayer, fraternity, poverty, presence among men) the evangelical way of life constantly refers us back to faith. The continuous recommendations of the Rule on the search for God, its absolute and unique primacy in the life of the Friars; on the adoration and love due Him; on the following of Christ and life according to the Gospel; an openness to the sovereign and free breathing of the Spirit; on constant prayer that is a priority; the evangelical motives proposed for the various aspects of the conduct of the Friars (contemplation, fasting, prayer, clothing, poverty, work, begging, food), demonstrate sufficiently that at the root of such a life there is a unique experience of faith in a God who is Love.

6. This experience took place in a cultural and religious context very different from our own; it does not, for this reason, however, remain any less exemplary for our situation. We are living in a time when many things, once thought secure and simple, and many illusions about our faith are collapsing and we are forced to move beyond marginal issues to the very heart of our Christian option: our faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ. This faith is not a purely theological reflection or understanding, or mere repetition of formulas, or just an ideological system or set of wilful convictions, but a discovery, a gradual and living acceptance of the reality of God and of man in the light of Jesus Christ. A free gift of the

Spirit of Jesus “without whom we can do nothing” (*Jn* 15,5), this faith, freely accepted, is the sole solid foundation on which we can build a life of prayer, celibacy, fraternity, poverty and service.

7. We know that it is not easy to live such a requirement, difficult to state in precise formulas, never wholly fulfilled, always to be begun again and which spurs us to new beginnings. There is nothing, however, to be gained by contenting ourselves with mere words, by having an answer to everything; rather must we humbly and honestly take up, from within the context of the faith of the People of God, the difficult search and the uncertainties common to so many people.

8. Such an approach in faith will give depth to our spiritual search, carried out in common or individually; it alone will support our prayer. Everything that can be said about intense prayer, about solitude, about the need for deep spiritual dialogue, is based on this primordial affirmation of faith. Therefore, without fear of the critical questions the world and life itself ask us, we must constantly test and verify our faith, thus reinforcing the very foundation of our life project. If we bring ourselves to live like this, we will be able to bear witness, by our very searching, that God is alive, that Jesus is Lord, that the Spirit is the power which animates us; and our fraternities will be capable of become places of awakening to faith, prayer and evangelical reference for ourselves and for those who are seeking a meaning to their lives.

LIFE IN THE CHURCH

9. This deepening of the faith, to which both our vocation and the present situation call us, can only be undertaken and pursued without failure in communion with the Church. A sense of Church and service to it form an integral part of our vocation. In the 12th and 13th centuries many evangelical movements had to face the problems and, frequently, the scandals of the Church. Many took up positions against the Church because it seemed, to them, to be unfaithful to the Gospel they wished to live. Francis, who was pained by the failings of the medieval Church, wished wholeheartedly to place himself and remain in full communion with it. He acted in this manner, not for opportunistic reasons, but out of deep love and out of a sincere obedience to the will of Christ, who had entrusted His Church to Peter and his successors. This Church, structured by ministries, was, for Francis, the privileged place where the authentic Word of God rang out and where Jesus is revealed in His sacraments. Although aware of the weaknesses to be found in the Church, he never ceased to love it and to consider the clerics as his lords and masters, knowing that he himself was a sinner.

10. Today, those things which are being questioned touch on, most times, the structures of the Church. They appear to many as an obstacle to faith and to the Gospel. Criticism and rebellion against the “institution” are strong and vehement and many, even among ourselves, abandon it, even if only in their hearts.

11. While acknowledging that the face of the Church - as we Christians paint it - appears disfigured at times, we

still wish to love it wholeheartedly and to remain in communion with it. We know that it is within it that we can receive and develop our charism, because it has been sent to maintain faith in God and the living presence of Jesus and of His Spirit in the world and to labour for the coming of the Kingdom of God (*Lk 17,20-21*). Certainly, our life-style, to the extent that it is lived, is a powerful rebuttal of mediocrity and of the weaknesses of people and structures. But, at the same time, after the example of Francis, we wish to be men of peace and reconciliation within the Church, by loving all of our Christian brothers, giving an example of obedience and respect to the bishops and especially “to the Lord Pope”.

BROTHERS AMONG MEN

12. The Lord has called us to live according to the Gospel, not alone, but within a community of brothers. It is within and because of this community that our vocation is brought to maturity, because it is the privileged place of our encounter with God. It is our wish not only to live side by side, striving towards the same goal and helping one another to reach it, but to turn towards one another in mutual love, as the Lord has given us the example and the command. We must look upon each other as brothers, show mutual respect, make known our needs with simplicity, render each other the humblest services, avoid disputes, grumbling, anger, negative judgement – in summary, love one another in deed and not in word alone, all with the tenderness of a mother for her children.

13. Such a fraternal life, given meaning and nourished by the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and charity, implies spiritual and material sharing, the search for God and for Jesus in common prayer and in fraternal exchange and questioning, the confrontation of our respective involvements and a life habitually lived together. The choice of such a life-style, made after due reflection, submitted to the proof of time and publicly expressed before God and the Church, binds us permanently to the community of our brothers. It also includes the choice of celibacy for the Kingdom (cf. *Mt 19,12*), which, based on the promise and the call of Jesus, favours the realisation of this life-style.

14. Our fraternity is a gathering of men who, under the impulse of the Spirit, have come from different social

and cultural backgrounds and who strive to create among themselves true bonds of friendship, respect and mutual acceptance. It is not merely a working team, even an apostolic one. Within the fraternity all are brothers, men of equal status although different, men who are free and corresponsable. Even though it excludes ponderous and detailed structures, it still includes the necessary service for unity and cohesion exercised by the “Ministers and servants” of the fraternity, whom all the Friars must obey. Thus, seeking together what pleases the Lord, they accept each other mutually, limit their freedom by that of others, submit themselves to the demands of a common life and to the necessary structures of the fraternity and live the true obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ.

15. The fraternal community is not a reality that is closed in on itself; it goes out, through its very dynamism, to all men, who are a manifestation of Christ for us. We must love and receive both friend and enemy with kindness, whether they come to us or we go to them. We can even seek, along with those who desire it, new forms of relationship to the Franciscan Family.

While recognising the fact that our world is divided into social classes and ideological categories, we refuse to judge and to condemn men by virtue of these classifications. Aware of our obligation to be witnesses to the Gospel everywhere, we should not, in our contacts with men, indulge in disputes or practise proselytising, even of a religious nature; we wish simply to be peacemakers, without any pretensions, courteous, joyful, submissive to everyone, practising non-resistance if necessary (*Mt* 5,39), remaining convinced that we are the servants of a Word that is far greater than us. We must bear witness, through our lucid and gentle love, to the irreplaceable value of each person.

16. Situated in a world where economic, social and political structures influence men and, in subtle forms of manipulation, prevent real freedom, we cannot remain indifferent before such a state of affairs or be in collusion with any situation where man cannot live as man because he is either underdeveloped or exploited. Therefore, in the name of justice and charity, precisely in order to be faithful to our vocation as “heralds of peace”, we are called to battle against these evils and to work for the liberation of the oppressed and the oppressors, proclaiming conversion and faith in the Gospels to them (*Mk* 1,15).

17. If we know how to live true fraternity among ourselves, “not in words alone but in deeds”, if, instead of turning in upon ourselves, we remain open to all men with whom we come in contact, we will respond to the expectations of a world which, menaced by depersonalisation and anonymity, aspires fervently to community. Then, with other men, whether Christian or not, we will play a role of leaven in the formation of a humanity which will not only be a sprinkling of solidarity and depersonalised individuals, but a fraternal community in Christ.

SERVANTS OF ALL

18. The name of “Friars (Brothers) Minor”, which we bear, expresses both the requirement of fraternity and that of humble service (“minority”). Already within our group we are invited to obey one another and, when a position gives us a certain authority, to exclude all domination and desire for power, and to render the humblest of services.

19. Friendly with all and subject to all creatures because of God, we must present ourselves both as a community and as individuals, as little ones, servants, of whom no one is afraid because we seek only to serve, not to dominate or to impose ourselves, especially for spiritual purposes. Such an attitude requires a childlike spirit, littleness, simplicity and resolute optimism in the face of men and events. We must accept insecurity on the level of institutions and ideas, uncertainty about the future, recognising that we are weak and vulnerable, “worthless servants” (*Lk 17,10*), and that God alone is powerful. In this manner we will contribute our share to the splendour of the face of the Christian community, which is also the face of its Lord, who “came to serve and not to be served” (*Mt 20,28*).

DISCIPLES OF THE POOR CHRIST

20. Our rule and life consists of following the footprints of Jesus Christ in all things. Since He made Himself poor for us, we are called to serve the Lord in poverty and humility, as strangers and pilgrims in the world. Poverty, lived in its twofold dimension, social and spiritual, is presented to us as a special and ongoing task.

21. The poverty of Francis had essentially gospel roots and presupposed an initial interior attitude of complete abandonment for the Kingdom of God and of total dependence on God, the only source of all good and all richness. But it showed itself in a very particular way, making the preaching of the Gospel credible for the men of his time. While the medieval monastic world worked landed properties, which assured its subsistence, Francis wanted no property for himself or for his Friars. He and his companions, in imitation of Christ and the Apostles – totally free to preach the Gospel – began to live in itinerancy. Their subsistence was provided for by working for others and, eventually, as a last resort, by begging. Even if the evolution of the movement led to some adaptations (acceptance of ‘places’, of houses and of churches for the use of the Friars), the refusal of Francis to become part of certain structures of society remained firm; the same is true for his refusal of money and for the requirement of a life of poverty.

22. Today we must discover how we, in a different socio-economic situation, can maintain the essentials of our choice of poverty. In the past, the Order, constantly drawn by the radical poverty of Francis, had always reacted, with greater or lesser force, to the natural ten-

dency to become installed. We are all invited to seek how to express the same requirement today. Lack of landed property, modest dwellings, subsistence assured by work and precarious employment are, nowadays, the normal condition of a great many people, but greater still is the vast number who live in inhuman conditions. It is convenient then to seek, the local situation being taken into account, how to live like the little ones of today. While participating in the present situation, but without accepting any structures which keep so many of our fellow human beings in misery, we strive to be, along with them, the leaven of a new society called to total participation in the salvation of Christ (cf. *Rm* 11,12).

23. If we learn to live in this way, we will be able to play, vis-à-vis the society of production and consumption, a role of challengers. Not having properties and living through working in a simple, modest and dignified way, by refusing to bow to publicity, which only has the consumer world in mind, we will give the true meaning of material goods, bring ourselves close to the poor, the marginalised, and also to all those who, not finding any meaning in a society of abundance, seek a life that is freer and less encumbered.

24. Our gospel poverty also implies sharing. What we have we share, not only among ourselves, but we also try to give towards helping others who are in need, whether material or spiritual. Freed from all fear by the poverty we have chosen, joyfully living the hope that is based on the Promise, we will be capable of giving witness to the men and women of our time that the world has a meaning which surpasses it and draws it towards a future which we call Jesus Christ.

25. In line with the “Canticle of Creatures”, we will extend our fraternal concern to nature herself, threat-

ened today by the avaricious and irresponsible conduct of an industrialised and consumer society. We want to humanise the earth we gratuitously received from the God Love through a mastery which will make it totally fraternal at the service of all. We will thus meet up with a preoccupation of our times while giving the very reason for our attitude: creation has its origin in Love who gives it its meaning, which is the emergence of a fraternal humanity gathered in Christ, through whom and for whom the world was created.

THE WORK OF THE FRIARS

26. Work is a necessity bound up with our profession of poverty. Francis and the first Friars devoted themselves to very different works (the care of lepers, working in the midst of others, preaching). With relation to the overall situation of the medieval religious world, Francis introduced a new concept and practice: working in the midst of others. This work was not principally clerical, in the present meaning of the word, because the small original group of Friars consisted of very different types of men of whom only some were priests. The Friars exercised, whenever possible, their own trade or profession, or they learned one. Their work was an occasion for contact with people and a means of proclaiming the Gospel. This novelty did not survive the evolution of the Order and its gradual insertion into the framework of the clerical and monastic life. Since then, the Order has been involved especially in ministerial work (priestly ministries, preaching, studies), social assistance (care of the sick, help of the poor and the promotion of the abandoned classes) and domestic work within the houses by lay brothers.

27. In recent times, participation in the general evolution of religious life, influenced also by certain experiences of other communities, led us to rediscover an aspect of work as it was understood by Francis. Work and occupations began to diversify in our Fraternities. If ministry, the service of our own works and domestic tasks within our Houses legitimately occupy the majority of our Friars, it is more and more frequent to see Friars exercise different salaried trades and professions within

enterprises and institutions which do not belong to the Order or to the Church. Such an orientation also appears to us to conform to our vocation; it inserts us into society in a special way, it makes us work for its construction and brings us closer to those who live by their work. While placing us squarely on the road to the future, it brings us back to one of the intuitions of our origins.

28. We believe, therefore, that the Friars may work at any job or profession which is compatible with the Christian and Franciscan way of life. While affirming the need to labour in our own works and at the service of institutions organised by the Church, we acknowledge the importance of working in the midst of others as a form of service and witness which especially brings us close to our fellow human beings.

29. Such a commitment carries with it certain limitations: human limitations, because we must guard against being slaves of work or of gain and safeguard our freedom as men vis-à-vis a world of dehumanising structures. Limitations proper to our style of life: which, for us, has as its absolute priority the search for God (interiority, solitude, prayer), fraternal life, availability to others, poverty and the rejection of power. Any work which would habitually hinder us in leading this life, which is our essential task, cannot be accepted.

30. So, recognising in work the culmination of creation, the full blossoming of men and women and their participation in the destiny of mankind, and carrying it out with competence and fidelity, we must realise all the while that it only makes sense when in reference to the Father, who works unceasingly in the world (*Jn 5,17*) to make it a land of the living.

MESSENERS OF PEACE IN OUR WORLD

31. The essential mission of our fraternity, its vocation in the Church and in the world, consists of the real-life realisation of our project of life. We believe that by striving to live our experience of faith in the midst of the human community, by creating a fraternity of love and of service open to all, by living in poverty and work, by participating in the hopes of the poor, we can give an outline picture of the new humanity gathered around Jesus, resurrected through the power of the Spirit. Our contribution to the building up of the Church and humanity is, first of all, of this order: it is by our way of life that we bear witness above all.

32. It goes without saying that the word which proclaims and explains what God has done in Jesus Christ, and which He continues to do in us and in the world, is an inseparable part of our mission, perceived by Francis as the gospel mission and confirmed as such by a mandate of the Church. We must all have the courage to “render an account of the hope that is in us” (1Pt 3,15). Those who have received the priestly ministry should proclaim the Word after the manner proper to that ministry; but all the Friars must bear witness, in word as well, to the Lord Jesus.

We should be particularly attentive to confused Christians, to the men and women on the path towards the faith and to groups of Christians who, in different ways, wish to build communities of life.

33. Our desire to create a fraternal community in the very heart of the city where the most diverse of men

share life, goods and work; a fraternity which renounces all power in order to serve, which chooses a life-style that brings it close to the poor and makes it sensitive to the lot of all who are oppressed, creates, whether we wish it or not, both social and political repercussions. We must take care not to confuse this desire with any particular political current or to let it be used by one or other tendency; rather, we must strive to push the demands of the Beatitudes to the limit. In this way we will be able to show the possibility – though in a relative way, because no human accomplishment can be identified with the Kingdom of God – of having a community where a man is free, recognised as a brother and respected for his worth.

34. On this basis and taking into account our vocation as men of peace, it will be possible for us really to take part in the present-day problems and social and political struggles. This requires serious and correct information so that we can avoid sentimental enthusiasms, summary unjust judgements, irresponsible declarations and it will allow an objective analysis of situations. In addition, if we try to live in justice and in mutual sharing, if we take part, according to our possibilities and gifts, in the fate and work of the poor and abandoned of our times, we will then have the right and the duty to join our voices to that of the oppressed. But we should do so out of love for the person we discover in every man, regardless of the social group to which he may belong. Thus, as peacemakers, we will hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God in which walls between men, or dominion over others, will no longer exist: “no longer slave or freeman... but sons of God” (*Gal 3,26-28*).

35. What has been said for society also applies, in part, to our mission within the Church. If we truly live according to the Gospel in faith, mutual love, poverty and the

practice of authority as a service, we could be a leaven of unease and of gospel questioning in its bosom. This is a formidable demand, because evil and failure are always within us; to content ourselves with a purely verbal protest would be sheer hypocrisy.

THE MEANING OF THE STRUCTURES OF OUR FRATERNITY

36. The description of our project makes it obvious that we are not an organisation structured in view of one or several specific tasks to be accomplished. We are a community of brothers, who, within the communion of the Church, in union with all who are animated by the spirit of Francis, simply wish to live a gospel kind of life, convinced that such a life is a particular contribution to the overall witnessing of Christians.

37. All what is necessary as a structure and which makes us an 'Order' (*Ordo Fratrum Minorum*) has as its basis the assurance of fraternal communion among us and with the Church so that our witnessing may be unceasingly and evermore evangelical. This is the fundamental meaning of authority in our fraternity, whether on the local or provincial levels or on that of the entire Order. The Friars who are responsible should guarantee good relations and unity among the Friars, alerting them to their Christian responsibility, affirming them in their gospel and Franciscan vocation and bringing them out of their isolation as individuals to open them up to greater communion. This is, above all, the role of the Minister General of the fraternity who, through frequent exchanges and personal contacts, maintains the unity of the Friars spread throughout the world and is their representative before the centre of ecclesial unity.

38. With the fundamental bonds guaranteed and assured – and there is still much to do in this area –, the greatest part of autonomy and freedom, still insufficient-

ly used, should be left to the fraternities, Provinces and cultural or regional groupings. The laws which are necessary should aim at guaranteeing and protecting subsidiarity against negligence or irresponsibility. More account must be taken of dialogue and personal contact between the Friars and their Ministers than of the multiplicity and precision of laws.

39. Within the groupings (fraternities, Provinces and Order), great importance should be given to the participation of everyone in responsibilities. However, if pluralism is a good thing, care must be taken so that it does not lead to the isolation of any grouping and that contacts and exchanges are provided on the level of those in positions of responsibility and also between the Friars of the different groupings.

40. In drawing up laws, the Order should go its own way, should avoid anarchy and disintegration, should maintain lightness and flexibility so that, periodically at each General Chapter, possible revisions and new starts may be carried out.

In this way we will be able to live according to the word of Francis: aware of having done very little up to now and of being always ready to begin again in the gospel conversion to which we have been called.

[*Acta Capituli Generalis Ordinarii Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, Madrid 1973, Curia Generalis Ordinis, Roma 1973, pp. 491-502]

FOR REFLECTION

A

Personal reading and study. Impressions and interests
aroused during fraternal sharing.

B

Questions.

1.

“The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this, to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Rb 1,1)

To find again the true faith in everyday life requires, at the same time, a passion in seeking the face of God and radical detachment from all things.

What concrete *obstacles* should be removed and what personal and fraternal *means* (structures) should be proposed for the updating of our vocation and mission?

2.

“What is our role in the Church, what is our specific vocation in the present-day world?” (Paul VI)

Francis and the early Fraternity gave a response to these interrogatives by bringing the Church close to the world of their time.

How do we relate to our Church and how can we make ourselves more present among the people in order to improve dialogue between the Church and the world?

3.

“If a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must one love and care for his brother according to the Spirit?” (Rb 6,8).

Fear, lack of faith and individualism often go together, paralysing our progress and erecting walls of closure and divisions...

How can we continue to deepen our personal relationships in view of a more *authentic, contemplative* and *missionary* Fraternity?

4.

“Let the Friars not have anything of their own... (Rb 6,1). “I work with my hands... I firmly wish that all the Friars should work... Let them learn... in order to give example and to keep laziness at bay...” (2Test 20-21).

How can we live, today, these prescriptions of the Rule and Testament through the respective updating of our *GGCC* (Art.72-82)?

What kind of *sobriety* and *solidarity* can we practise personally and in Fraternity?

5.

"Blessed are the peacemakers... Those people are truly peacemakers who... preserve peace of spirit and body" (Adm 15).

Reconciled with themselves and with the Friars, sharing in our flesh the same lacerations of our world (cfr. *LgP* 20), how can we bring peace to our world in a practical way and what are the difficulties we could meet?

6.

"Persevere in discipline and holy obedience and, with a good and firm purpose, fulfil what you have promised..." (LOrd 10).

What means, what fraternal-religious ambience, what significant structures (personal, relational, of "habitat") do we hold are important to make the most of in order to retrain our vocation and mission? And what do we hold to be an impediment to a more rapid personal and fraternal gospel progress?

*“At the centre
of Franciscan life...
is found the experience of
faith in God
in the personal encounter
with Jesus Christ”*