



## Ministers, friars called to serve life between ideal and reality: new wine in new wineskins

Speech by the Minister General at the meeting of the new Ministers

10th May, 2024

Let us listen to the word of God from the 1 book of Kings (17,1-24)

I would like to start by listening to the call of Elijah, who suddenly enters the scene without being presented, neither as a prophet nor as a man of God, but as the Tishbite. The word does not appear, the word of the Lord was addressed to him, which appears only in v. 2. The question of whether Elijah acts as a servant of the Lord, obeying God's orders, or on his own initiative: is an aspect that will return.

When the Lord speaks to him (17.2), he actually commands him to leave, to move away from the place of conflict with those in power and to undertake a journey in two stages. First of all, Elijah will have to hide near the Cherith stream and accept being fed by ravens: The prophet experiences being fed by God through other creatures.

Secondly, the Lord sends Elijah to Zarephath of Sidon, where Baal was worshiped, which he fights. Here he asks the prophet to learn that life is given to him by simple and poor people, like the widow he meets in that city.

Elijah had started from a very harsh confrontation with Ahab, while God now accompanies him with an interesting educational action. Instead of giving him speeches, he gives him experiences, through which he shows that he is not a super Baal who gives life (rain) and death (famine), but rather that he places himself at the service of life alone, through simple and poor (the ravens and the widow), even outside the borders of Israel, in Sidon, in a pagan land.

When the woman in v. 18 asks him what it has to do with him, the prophet lies down on the body of his dead son, coming into contact with impurity and the reality of pain. He seems to have learned his lesson! Thus he becomes a witness to the God of Israel, whose omnipotence is aimed exclusively at life, without ambiguity. Here he then becomes a credible witness and the woman recognizes him: *"Now I truly know that you are a man of God!"* (v. 24).

### CALL

Elijah is called by the Lord, who commands him to leave. We were elected Ministers by the friars, therefore called by the Lord through them to serve them, for a specific time and not forever. The call is an antidote to identifying ourselves with the role, as to overestimating ourselves in exercising it. We are not the saviours of the Province, the Custody, the Foundation and the Order, rather, we are called to accompany a stretch of the journey.

We certainly also find within ourselves our initiative, the tendency to do everything we can, to follow our ideas and projects. The word of God heard asks us to verify ourselves:

The call to this service opens new perspectives for everyone: how do I feel?

Elijah is removed from the place of power and sent into the harshest reality, supported by poor means.

I have already had the impact with the reality of the friars and the Entity: does this meeting/clash encourage me, demotivate and tire me, does it help me to rethink myself and start again?

In Elijah's call, his vision of God and of himself as his servant is also at stake. He seems to want to replace God or have a ready-made idea of how God thinks and acts.

Between administrator and friar minor, servant of the brothers: an image to express what vision of God and of my service I seem to have today.

### **FOR A FULL LIFE**

Elijah believes he has remained alone to serve the Lord and forgets that there are 50 other prophets (see 1Kings 18.13), together with other solitary and anonymous ones (1Kings 20.13-43). He wants to do justice to God alone, even with extermination, a typical method of pagan cults. He is called to review his image of God and of himself.

In some situations, the new Minister/Custos finds himself faced with brothers with many expectations and desires. Often in the Entities there is the expectation of a change, of a turning point and the minister is encouraged, but he also feels the weight of a demanding expectation on himself. Maybe we may have wondered whether we would be able to answer. We may have felt under observation and the fear of not making it can hold us in a tight grip.

At the same time, everyone is faced with serious and often old problems. Unaddressed, postponed or hidden situations come to light. The impact with reality can be very harsh and undermines the idea one had of one's service, of oneself and also of the vision of faith and vocation that motivates us. I think of when we are faced with various cases of abuse, which form a network and a widespread mentality. Or to situations of conflict and psychological distress among the friars. In quite a few Entities the retreat into the "private" of quite a few friars of different ages makes the service of the Minister and Guardians difficult. Reactivating motivation and passion for our life on mission often seems like a "mission impossible". The administration of assets and properties becomes difficult and risks absorbing a lot of time and energy, especially so as not to leave a legacy that is too heavy to manage for the immediate future. We often present ourselves as burdened, lifeless men, without a vision for the present and the future, resigned or comfortable managing what exists. It is difficult to recognize the spark of life and vocation that animated us and which can still relaunch us. I am sorry for this not so pleasant list, but I know you all understand well what I mean.

When faced with this reality we may want to tackle everything at the same time or struggle to find a scale of priorities. Also taking into account unforeseen events, we may proceed a little haphazardly, with a great waste of energy. We can proceed with our own personal vision and type of action, favouring a primarily disciplinary way to resolve situations. Or we can choose the longer one of dialogue, of personal and community persuasion in some situations. It takes more time and the results

are not guaranteed, also leaving room for disappointment if we rely too much on our personal charisma or recognition from the friars. But the service of authority changes their perception of us and what previously allowed us to open up ways of dialogue and discussion does not always work.

## **BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY**

Elijah wants to defend the uniqueness of the God of the covenant in the face of the rising foreign gods. He will have to recognise that things are more complex and in contact with reality let himself be educated by God.

It seems to me that here there is **a gap between ideal and reality** that can be one of the major reasons for crisis in our service. In fact, some people can experience *burn out* after too much activity and perhaps excessive waiting, or even find themselves looking for compensations to bear the burden and find strength, or else pull the oars in the boat and wait for the chapter.

The central question then is what comes first in serving the lives of the brethren, in the light of God's desire and reality. The God of the covenant is not the one who ensures fertility and good results, like Baal, by annulling our freedom. He calls us by provoking and sustaining our free, loving and responsible response, including the risk of rejection or indifference.

Herein lies a central criterion for us: in our service we can provoke and accompany this freedom, show the way forward, remember and guard the boundaries necessary to live the Gospel we have promised in freedom. The margin between the evangelical ideal and concrete reality is often very thin and we suffer because it is not easy to find a space for action and change here. How we do this then depends very much on the vision we have of the God of the covenant, of ourselves, and of our form of life. Working on these three dimensions even in the time of the office entrusted to us is crucial.

We will thus be able to avoid proceeding in fits and starts, being too much of a protagonist, wanting to 'moralise' the province, isolating ourselves or closing ourselves in the small circle of those 'with us', carrying out mainly practical action, but not supported by a broader vision. Administrators rather than animators. At the same time, it is necessary to find the balance between these two dimensions, not giving up proposing the form of life, the evangelical core of it, honesty in living it.

Knowledge of ourselves, of the image of God we have and thus of our service, disposes us to gradually change our thinking and outlook and heart in the service entrusted to us.

## **WHAT THE SPIRIT IS TELLING US TODAY**

Elijah is convinced that he knows in advance what God wants from the people. He does not feel part of this, he is sure of his mission and seems to carry it out on his own initiative. The Lord educates him in the desert and at Sidon, as we have seen, but this seems not to be enough, because at Carmel he returns to act as a solitary and violent hero, just like the ministers of Baal.

We too do not always proceed in a linear manner, the important thing is to recognise this and work on it. Before our vision and mode of action, let us ask ourselves through good spiritual discernment what the Lord dreams of, desires for our fraternity. I ask myself with you:

How can we recognise together **what the Spirit is saying to our international fraternity today**, where is it driving it? PCO Nairobi 2018 reminded us that we are *a contemplative fraternity in mission*; GC 2021 asked us to listen to *what the Spirit is saying to us today through the lives of so many, especially the smallest and poorest*. It has decisively shown us *the need for renewal of our Franciscan identity and fraternal life* (DF n. 9).

Visiting friars and entities around the world - I have now been to at least 56 of them - it is becoming increasingly clear to me that it is precisely **the renewed choice of our identity as brothers and minors, centred in our relationship with God and in the life of fraternal communion for the**

**mission among and with the poor, that** the Spirit is powerfully asking of us, before so many other ministries, projects and common and individual activities by which we are so caught up. How?

### **THREE STEPS**

The first step is to pause and have the courage to leave something, to downsize not only our homes and services, but also our activities and missions, to have the space to return to ourselves, to give ourselves time to listen and verification, to repair that house which is our life and brotherhood. It applies to all Entities, even the youngest ones. This requires faith and prayer, listening to reality, the courage to verify. The Definitory is an important place to do this, involving the guardians, the managers of the sectors, to the point of touching that place which is the Conference, to ask ourselves who and how to be today in a specific part of the world. The dialogue between the Conferences and the General Definitory is another vital space for looking together at our present with a view to the future.

The second step is to listen wisely our reality, local, provincial and broader, from the country we belong to, to the Conference and to the entire Order in today's world. Most of the time it seems to me that we continue to carry forward what is already there, which is usually excessive and is the same as when we were more than double. At most we close a few houses and ministries, but we don't review the whole. Too often we lack a vision of the future: what do we want to be in 10-20 years from now? Reality crushes us and the ideal becomes increasingly unattainable if this step is missing. There is a high risk of remaining closed in our circle and seeing everything starting from ourselves: can we open ourselves to a new listening to the cry of people and the reality of today?

The third step is the audacity to start workshops where we can truly live according to the traits of Franciscan identity and mission that we identify. We mostly want to keep everything together, tradition, existing and pushing towards the future. It is not possible. In this way, maintaining the status quo always wins, at most with a few tweaks, which do not change the substance.

For 60 years we have deepened our charism, through knowledge of the writings of Saint Francis, of the Sources and of our tradition, as has never happened in the long history of our family. There is still a lot missing to let this richness transform daily life, the choices of our institutions, the guidelines for real change. Brother Giacomo Bini always told us that it was time to move from orthodoxy to the orthopraxy of the charism. After more than twenty years these words are more relevant than ever. It is not enough to know the charism intellectually.

### **NEW WINE IN NEW FRATERNITIES**

This is why I try to listen to what the Lord is telling us, thanks to meeting many realities in the world and with brothers, sisters and many lay people. It seems to me that the Spirit speaks to us in the night of the history we live in, both outside and inside us. It is such a fragile time where humanity itself is at risk. Could it be that precisely in this night and in the disorientation that it enables the Spirit to show us a path? How many projects didn't take us where we hoped! How many ideas didn't work! Moreover, in this time it is not possible to find formulas that guarantee us once and for all. If we want to recognize the path that the Spirit opens to us today, we need to listen to the Word of God, stay on

the path, question reality, let ourselves be surprised by the Spirit who guides us on this very night, to express with our lives the permanent newness of our charism.

On this journey I believe that the Spirit shows us the way to open places, fraternities, new ways of organizing ourselves, in which it is possible to live the priorities that the Rule and the Constitutions already authoritatively indicate to us, beyond the usual patterns. All this without submitting to the amount of activity and maintenance of what exists, however glorious and good it is. This then often becomes an excuse for those friars who don't want to change and we cannot hide that there are many, too many I would say. For this reason we see the tendency to defend spaces that we have created for ourselves, often autonomously (services, home, money and more), attracting others into ways of living that are unsuitable, if not clearly contrary, to our way of life. Thus the new life of the Spirit does not flow within us. Thus no renewal is possible, while the friars need breath and life and the Order needs a true reform, like the Church.

I continually ask myself if this stalemate does not contain one of the reasons, along with many others, for our vocational sterility, which should worry us much more.

After all, to what kind of life can we invite today's youth and young adults to? To the tired repetition of common acts and individualisms that coexist? Or a whirlwind of activism and projects often lacking a clear direction? To a fraternal life not centered in the relationship with God and in true relationships between us? How can we say "Come and see!" if we do not live in constant conversion, with freshness, passion and joy for our vocation and for reality?

Concretely this means not only allowing, but encouraging and accompanying the birth of truly renewed fraternities, in the spirit and according to the indications of the *Ite et nuntiate* Document of 2017. In the General Definitory we are seeing that this could also mean, especially where the current Provinces are more weak, think of new Entities, in which - in a network of new fraternities - the friars who want it can respond to the call to live according to our form of life without the delays, compromises and maintenance of those already existing which is usually what is asked of them.

We certainly need to guarantee care for the elderly and infirm friars and some essential presences, without preventing ourselves from opening a new path too soon. If we remain in the midst of an unfinished and postponed renewal, I fear that many of our efforts - mergers of Entities, restructuring and downsizing, other isolated attempts - will be in vain and will create further dangerous disillusionments.

## **IN THE FRATERNITY OF THE ORDER**

On this journey none of us can remain alone. It is important to activate all collaborations and places of dialogue and exchange in each entity and in that particular space which is the Conferences of Provincial Ministers. Right here Ministers and Custodes discover that they are not alone and that their Entity is not an island and must not become one when temptation emerges. Thanks to Conferences and meetings of the Order like this one, we discover ourselves, through a concrete experience, in relationship within the only family of which we are part, that of the international fraternity of the Order. The Provinces remain the local space where we concretely experience fraternity, which however still remains universal. So let's not close ourselves off, but let us nurture a belonging that opens up horizons and fresh hope for us.

The reports in the Conference support in this journey and in the very urgent rethinking of how to be Friars Minor today in the different territories and with a view to the coming years. They are the spaces in which to rethink the physiognomy and distribution of our provincial realities, in organic connection with the Minister and the General Definitory.

I am increasingly convinced that we also need to review the current structure of our Entities, initiating a review of our legislation. In fact, we need a lighter structure for this time and for a future that already is and will necessarily be different. This is not only true for Entities who experience great weakness, but also for those who are younger and even growing. We cannot limit ourselves to reproducing the model of a completely autonomous Province that every now and then offers something to the Order. Collaboration and exchange are increasingly urgent to guarantee the mission, even in new territories and the support and even the restart in different areas of the Order where our presence is now running out. We cannot dream of the numbers and widespread presence of the past. The past is the past. Today the Spirit asks us something else. Certainly not to resign ourselves to dying off in many areas, to barely maintaining ourselves in others or to growing without a clear charismatic orientation in emerging areas. Rather, he asks us to find new paths and tools for our life and our growth, charismatic above all.

All this is urgent and the next General Chapter 2027 will be called to reflect on it seriously, giving concrete guidelines.

Here are the reasons why the Conferences are a necessary network, which is not marginal compared to the service of each of you to the Province. For this reason, I ask you not to withdraw from the life of the Conference and to make your contribution. The review of the Conferences that the 2021 General Chapter asked for helps us to rethink and relaunch these realities and we are all called to do so.

Thank you for your attention and let us continue to grow as ministers, brothers in a relationship.

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