



## PRESENTATION OF THE MINISTER GENERAL

### THE FRIARS MINOR TODAY IN EUROPE, WITH OPEN EYES TO THE FUTURE

#### Premise

Greetings to all of you, temporary professed brothers and formators, present at this meeting that the General Definitory has chosen to take a look at with you at the present and future of our presence in Europe. I warmly thank the General Secretariat for Formation and Studies for having overseen the preparation and now the celebration of this international meeting.

We have gathered in this small portion of land – the Porziuncola - of the European continent, bringing with our very presence the signs of its richness and diversity of expressions. From the very first steps of its history, our Order has crossed Europe, recognizing itself as called to sow the seed of the Gospel with life and word. From Europe, the Friars Minor crossed lands, cultures and languages of all kinds.

For centuries the movement of the Friars Minor started in Europe, where its large presence has innervated the roads of this continent, a mosaic of languages and cultures, and has made it possible to push into new lands with an enormous missionary movement. Certainly, in contact with new realities, the Friars Minor welcomed the spiritual vitality of their charism in unprecedented ways and synthesis. These trials and tribulations still persists today, in a time of globalization and of impressive encounter, clash and transfer of cultures, which make every border blurred.

This situation constitutes a renewed appeal for us Friars Minor today on this continent. I like to think that "this is the age of the spiritual seekers", <sup>1</sup>in which we are called to give voice to the integral Franciscan vision of the person and the world, in contact with cultures.

#### 1. "This is the age of the spirit seekers"

Our way of treading through our continent today is to recognize, as believers, that an age characterized by the domination of science and technology contains many signs of new spiritual research, to be able to intercept in order to walk together with the people of our time and to propose the Gospel.

Francis of Assisi was a seeker of spirit in his time. We can say that he opened a new way, because his search was open to the inspiration and movement of the Spirit.

St. Bonaventure writes in the *Legenda Maior*:

*He had no blush to ask the lesser ones for the little things, he, the true minor, who had learned the great things from the supreme Master. He used to seek with*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles TAYLOR, "Can Only Secularization Save Us? Faith and Reason in the Age of Disenchantment", Milan, 10 January 2023. In <https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/charles-taylor-l-eta-secolare-un-opportunita>.

*singular zeal the way and the way to serve God more perfectly, as he pleased. This was his supreme philosophy, this was his supreme desire as long as he lived: to ask the wise and the simple, the perfect and the imperfect, the young and the old, what was the most virtuous way in which he could reach the summit of perfection*<sup>2</sup>.

I strongly desire that this meeting responds precisely to this desire of Francis, who was always searching and was ready to learn from everyone. At the heart of his life was the desire to *flee from the spirit of the flesh and of the world, seeking the Spirit of the Lord above all things*. He was therefore not satisfied with appearances or with what immediately seems to give life, to go deeper, to search with passion. The heart of his search was the face of God, as Bonaventure reminds us again:

*Prayer was his consolation, when he gave himself to contemplation, and as if he were now a citizen of heaven and a fellow citizen of the angels, with ardent desire **he sought** the Beloved, from whom only the wall of the body separated him*<sup>3</sup>.

His way of believing was precisely the search, the desire, moved by love. Celano tells us:

*We also want to expose and highlight, with attention and precision, what the most holy Father Francis wanted for himself and his own – his generous, lovable, perfect ideal – in every exercise of heavenly science, and in the **loving search for the highest perfection***<sup>4</sup>.

On this journey he was driven by the search for God. He sought out his brothers and sisters, even the most distant and sinful (see *Letter to a Minister*), and the distant *par excellence*, the "infidels". For this reason, he crossed the border that separated "Christian" Europe from the Muslim world, opening an "unarmed" path into the camp of the "enemies", of the "infidels", seen in a new way thanks to the meeting with the Sultan.

Many of us can meet many people in Europe today who are looking for answers to give full meaning to their lives. Not everyone finds them. Not everyone reaches the same goal, which can be close to the Christian faith. However, it is a journey, a path, an attempt to change and transform oneself and this path unites us, makes us travel companions of many people today on our continent. A process that translates for us first of all into recognizing that, as friars and *minors*, we are called to a renewed authentically spiritual search. Let us research together how faith remains the first choice for us to make.

We can be contemporaries of the time that Europe is living in if we start again with patience and trust from the charismatic center of our evangelical choice, as friars of all on the journey, available for shared paths, and *minor*, ready to seek with others how the Spirit is accompanying what moves in depth in the often contradictory passages of this time.

The spirit of fraternity and minority allows us to build bridges and discover new ways and languages with other people. The borders open here and our evangelization, often restricted to "ecclesial" boundaries, begins to travel the paths of Europe that the Friars Minor have trodden since 1217.

Post-secularization can therefore be an opportunity to rediscover the faith.

## **2. Called to give voice to the integral Franciscan vision of the person and the world.**

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<sup>2</sup> LM XII, 2.

<sup>3</sup> LM X, 1

<sup>4</sup> 2Cel, Prologo 2

The path is arduous. In fact, it asks us for a new spiritual and cultural effort in the deepest sense of the term. The Franciscan Centenary can be an opportunity to rethink and deepen, among others, Franciscan humanism, which has its foundation and its centrality in the style of the human and Christian experience of Francis of Assisi, which contributed to creating a new form of being and living, which has greatly influenced Western <sup>5</sup>culture. The starting point for this novelty was for Francis listening to the word of God, which "interrupted" his human perspectives, those already known and experienced. Thus, the "*Poverello*"-the poor man of Assisi was able to open himself to that newness that comes to us from the word of God.

If from the Renaissance onwards a strong anthropocentric movement has developed in Europe, with Francis of Assisi we can go through this complex time by choosing the *fraternal person in relationship*. In a context that sees concentrations of loneliness and fear of the other, this Franciscan vision is a precious offering. Francis of Assisi, in his experience of Christ, injected more humanity into the veins of the *medieval societas* of his time.

We need a boost in action and thought, to animate our life and our proposal of evangelization. We cannot do it alone.

Study and cultural research are important to elaborate today the elements of a Franciscan humanism that is proposed and a provocation to our way of living in this time and to the people who live today on our continent.

### **3. Modulating Franciscan humanism in contact with the novelties that emerge.**

The French politician Jean Monnet, one of the inspirers and realizers of the European dream, argued back in 1954 that the progress of European integration takes place through difficult passages: "*Europe will be forged by its crises and will be the sum of the solutions found to solve these crises*".

If we look at the current "crises", that is, at the signs of the times that challenge us, we certainly find in the first place the meaning of peace and development for European countries in the twenty-first century. We are no longer in the aftermath of the Second World War or even in the years of the economic boom. Restoring meaning to the construction of Europe means questioning the meaning to be given to peace at a time when risks come from many quarters: the war in Ukraine is one of these, with the serious risk of its expansion on the continent and beyond. Then I think of the phenomenon of migration, of general impoverishment, of the question of young people, of the digital world, of the question of the possible future, of science and technology, of the awareness aroused by *Laudato Si'* of having to take new paths in the face of the close link between the ecological crisis and the social crisis.

To truly arrive at a new understanding, a serious comparison between the profoundly different experiences of the countries that make-up Europe is necessary. This is also true for us and the dialogue between the different Provinces; it is truly urgent to overcome gaps, to learn to know each other in order to overcome deep-rooted prejudices and esteem each other, to be more interconnected.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Max SCHELER, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Bonn 1931) 130.

The reality of the European Provinces to which you belong can only be based on the conviction that we can have a future on this continent only if we learn to walk together. You represent this possibility that is already a reality. We wanted you together in these days in Assisi to start a path and not just for one event among others. We can learn to think about it without clinging to old boundaries and find together a new geography of our presence and mission on this continent, to ensure a network of agile presences, centered on the priorities of the charism, missionary in life and witness.

The world is changing, and this is nothing new. Approaching change with a long-term vision, on the contrary, is. Those who will have to face it are you, the new generations who find themselves facing an eternal present, devoid of charge and imagination for the future. Today you represent the few young people who join us and to whom we cannot bequeath the vestiges of a world that no longer exists. With you and for you we must think of new ways of living Franciscan life in Europe today and tomorrow. Don't be afraid! It is possible, because the Spirit seems to us to be this path also through our personal and structural weaknesses today. Through them, which are blessed, we can imagine new paths and allow ourselves to be converted to embrace today the beauty and simplicity of the evangelical life of St. Francis.

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to read in a double track way some elements of Europe today and our situation within it. It is important to open the horizon beyond our borders and the courage to think about the new.

I propose some traces of reflection and future perspective:

- What evangelical and charismatic nuclei do you consider necessary to promote clear and visible choices for a renewed quality of our life? How can we help ourselves - from your point of view - to do so in Europe by rethinking borders and methods of organization, activating synergies and international fraternities?
- How can we promote together the proposal of a Franciscan humanism for Europe? How can it be developed also thanks to studies and comparison with the voices of our time on the continent, especially with young people?
- How do you dream of the Franciscan presence in Europe tomorrow? What feelings does it provoke in you to see the physical and organizational structures to be managed, a pastoral care that is predominantly one of conservation, a model of religious life distant from young people, our struggle to change?

These are only some indications that may be used and others that may be overcome by common work.

I thank you for your patient listening and I hope that these days shared amongst us will also help us to mature forms and places of ever greater encounter and co-responsible communion between the realities of the Friars Minor in Europe.

Enjoy the quest, with the help of the Lord.