

The Order Today

Reflections and Prospects

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Rome 2000



Introduction

My dear Brothers,

May the Lord give you peace!

The much-heralded third millennium has begun. We have crossed its threshold eagerly and without fear, because “we know the One in whom we have put our trust” and we are the bearers of something wonderful and precious. We carry the treasure of our gospel vocation which has fascinated countless men and women during the past eight hundred years and transfigured their lives. For these, and for the many generations he has brought to Christ, Francis was the outstanding “man of the second millennium”. His zest and his seemingly effortless ability to make the gospel live for those he met still amaze us.

Now, with the advent of the third millennium, it's over to us. People today are just as open to the message of the gospel as they were in Francis' day - if anything, their thirst for its spirituality is even greater. Can we afford to let them down?

For the past three years I've been visiting the brothers all round the world. I've met and spoken with many of you. I'm happy to say that Francis' ideal still lives among us, and we do our best to live it in ways that are relevant to our different cultures. We really want to make a fresh beginning for the new millennium by testing our lives against the template of the gospel and bringing them into better alignment with it. I'm

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writing this letter to encourage such good intentions, in the hope that they will not evaporate but rather lead to a genuine renewal of our life. I want to be personally close to each one of you, brother to brother, with this word of encouragement and hope.

*I'd like first of all to share with you the marvels God continues to work among us and through us. Then I want to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to all those brothers, and there are many of you, who witness so faithfully and generously to our **forma vitae**. Finally I would like to encourage any brother who finds himself confused and doubtful about what the future holds in store for him to press ahead without fear: "For one who lives in the love of God there is no room for fear; indeed perfect love drives out fear" (1 Jn 4:18). The Lord is still with us, and with the Lord all things are possible!*

This letter, then, will put before you my impressions and reflections on the Order today, gleaned from what I have heard and seen during these three years of my service as Minister, so that the 'memoria' of what we have been able to achieve in the past may become an active encouragement in the present and a guiding vision towards a future illuminated by hope.

Rome, Pentecost 2000

Expectations and Hopes

"As followers of St. Francis, the brothers are held to live the gospel vision completely in the spirit of prayer and devotion and in brotherly sharing. They are to give witness to a life of penance and lowliness and, with love for all, they are to bring the gospel message to the whole world, proclaiming reconciliation, peace and justice by their works"

(Gg.Cc. 1.2)

We live in a historical moment of crucial importance, caught up in a profound process of change. All round us we can see the shoots of new life springing up. People are everywhere longing for a positive restructuring of society. Men and women are questioning things hitherto taken for granted, in a restless search for new meaning and consistency in their lives. We friars are urged and challenged to give an account of the hope that is in us (cf. 1Pet 3:15) and to flesh out that hope in symbols and patterns of living capable of speaking to our contemporaries and responding to their justified expectations.

Saint Francis and his message have an amazing contemporary relevance and are welcomed eagerly in all cultures. Francis is more alive than ever. He can still speak to everyone. But what about us? Have we the ability to embody his gospel project for today, to communicate it with conviction and joy by means of a visible presence made attractive by its harmonizing of soul and body, life and words, personal and relational behavior? This in a nutshell is the basic challenge today's world sets before us as we embark on the third millennium.

We are asked to supply an answer to the ever-increasing inequalities between the few who are rich (and who continue to get richer) and the masses of the poor who lack basic necessities. Is an answer visible in the way we

live as brothers to everyone? Is our solidarity with the poorest and most abandoned (above and beyond anything we *do* for them) a convincing witness to genuine freedom, overcoming of ethnic exclusion and nationalism, and a refusal to get sucked into the consumerism which surrounds us?

People look to us to stand out as men of justice, reconciliation and peace in a world which is ruled by cut-throat competition and upstart flaunting of wealth. As usual, we're not stuck for words; on good days we can even rise to sporadic acts of generosity. But what we desperately lack are *concrete, alternative forms of a lifestyle of Fraternity*. As St Paul puts it, we are suffering "the pangs of childbirth".

There can no doubt that we are experiencing today a special "*kairos*", a graced moment calling us to new beginnings, a surge of new energy from the creative resources of our charism. The Franciscan message of universal brotherhood, inviting us to respect everyone, to reconcile differences and to seek to reach out in communion, has a powerful impact where it is heard. As a word of hope that offers an alternative value-system inspired by the gospel it speaks loudest in exactly those places where the destructive power of individualism is most rampant.

Freedom and detachment from possessions, evidenced in a simple lifestyle without concern for profit and without extras, freely sharing what one is and what one has, has the power to rattle those for whom the world is one big market and challenge them to solidarity and **restitution**, a value which is typically biblical and Franciscan. We know that the earth is the Lord's, and we ourselves are God's

possession (Ex 19:5): our duty is to share what is given for everyone, without greed or arrogance, and restore it to God by thanksgiving.

When we see where we have come since Vatican II we must acknowledge that today our identity as **Friars Minor**, based on the experience and spiritual message of Saint Francis, has become clearer. It has been outlined and affirmed by our legislation and by recent documents of the Order (General Constitutions, Chapter decisions, letters of the General Ministers, etc.). Seen against the background of the troubled history of our family this clarity and depth, at least at the level of theory, is a very important acquisition. We have identified with exactness the "*orthodoxy*" of our charism. Should we not now concentrate our greatest efforts on "*orthopraxis*", on beginning to live a style of life which will provide for today's world a prophetic expression of what we believe, hope and profess?

Notwithstanding our fall in numbers, the Franciscan religious family still makes up about a quarter of all the religious in the world (200,000 members, of whom 20,000 are contemplatives and 35,000 belong to the First Order). This constitutes an extraordinary spiritual force for the life of the world, a force which must find expression today by entering into the aspirations and daily life of humanity in the third millennium.

Many brothers and Provinces have already embarked on this path of prophetic transformation. They have found innovative ways of living the basic values of our Franciscan life. Even the things that we worry about, such as the difficulty of maintaining big enterprises and the decrease in numbers of the friars, can

be seen as an invitation to rethink our commitments and conduct a dynamic revision of our structures so that they answer better to the requirements of today. I would like to list some prophetic initiatives already under way:

- ❑ *There is an increasing collaboration developing between the “central government” and the Provinces, and also between neighboring Provinces and Custodies.*
- ❑ *Within Provinces and Conferences there is a growth in diversified fraternities which are constituted on the basis of our values: some are more radical, others more contemplative, others still are “inserted” fraternities more involved in a dialogue of solidarity with the world. This diversity is being accepted very positively, without suspicion or prejudice. This is a very important development which will lead to the establishment of prophetic fraternities which can trail-blaze new paths. It is an expression of the “creative fidelity” which the Church asks of us and which is in complete harmony with our charism.*
- ❑ *In some Provinces there is a serious commitment to ongoing formation, which is the guarantee of our future, involving individual friars, whole fraternities, special groups such as the Definitory, the Guardians, the formators, and those who work in the same ministry.*
- ❑ *Initial formation has also been reorganized in some Provinces, in response to the need to provide adequate time and space for more personalized accompaniment and for Franciscan formation consisting of both theory and practical experience incorporating specific human, Christian and Franciscan values. Hand in hand with this goes a high quality of dis-*

cernment which is free from the temptation of boosting numbers and fears about survival.

- ❑ *International and intercultural fraternities are growing. For example, all the missionary projects of the Order and almost all the entities of Africa and the Middle East are international and intercultural in character.*
- ❑ *More and more brothers are asking to try out a way of life that is simultaneously itinerant, contemplative and evangelizing, while solidly based on strong inner stability.*
- ❑ *There is a steadily increasing level of collaboration among the entire Franciscan Family.*
- ❑ *Finally, I must say that almost all of the friars lovingly cherish their vocation and faithfully live out their religious commitment. Many brothers, even those of advanced years, are eager to travel new paths.*



**Some widespread
difficulties experienced
in the Provinces
and Custodies**

*“For one who lives in the love of God
there is no room for fear; indeed per-
fect love drives out fear”*

(1 Jn 4:18)

1. Decrease in number and higher average age

“The new phenomenon of scarcity of numbers must be faced with the serenity of one who knows that what is required of each one is not so much success but faithful commitment. To be avoided at all cost is what would amount to the real failure of consecrated life - not its numerical decline but rather the weakening of our spiritual dedication to the Lord and to our vocation and ministry”

(John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 63)

The reality of institutional impoverishment - shrinking numbers, reduced energy, fewer stable and secure structures - impinges more and more on the life and activity of the universal brotherhood and on local fraternities. If on the one hand this can lead to spiritual discipline and become a positive occasion for recovering what is really essential in our consecrated life, it can also result in a complex about aging and self-justification for our inertia.

As I look at our Order I think the real problem here is not the lack of vocations but rather our inability to recover an ordered and harmonious set of values which we will live with joy and conviction, in such a way that the perennial fruitfulness of our charism will again be vindicated. What is really at stake is not so much whether the structures of the Order will continue or whether we will end up with more or less friars, but whether there will still be a *quality of Franciscan life, lived to the full, today and right up to the last day of our life*. Even after he reaches 60 a friar still has a lot to give

and much to say to the world of today! Sinking into a paralysis of resignation will only prevent the older friar from expressing fully what is most beautiful in his life, what he is. How can we motivate such brothers, as long as our mission is conceived almost exclusively in terms of efficiency? How can we continue our ongoing formation in times of crisis, when the temptation is to give up? These are the profound questions that demand an answer of us.

We must, however, acknowledge that very many of the older friars live this time of their lives with vivacity, joy, creativity and generosity. At the same time we must offer help to some others who, for various reasons - frustrating changes, past hurts, misunderstandings - are tempted to chime in with Elijah's "*I've had enough, Lord: take away my life*" (1Kgs 19:4), and to hand their life back before the time, when instead it would be the appropriate moment to forge new relationships with God, with others and with the world.

Old age is not the end; it does not exhaust our spiritual life, and is in fact a rich reserve of experience, wisdom, and the ability to discern what is important and essential for our world. It is necessary, therefore, to create opportunities and to encourage the release of the vitality which is going to waste and yet is so desperately needed for the youth of today; to seek to impart fresh motivation to the "daily round" of each one, even if it appears to be banal and insignificant. Every individual is endowed with an unexpected and almost limitless creativity: we have been created, after all, in the image of God! We must put it to use in every stage of our lives. Once the role of the elderly friars has been clarified, motivated and oriented, it can make an extremely valuable contribution in

some decisive ministries which will give a new impetus to our Provinces, such as:

- ❑ *the ministry of listening and of dialogue.* In our frenetic world, where people are isolated and distracted and nobody seems willing to listen, the presence of one who is welcoming, attentive, able to listen and to give sound advice, is like an oasis in the desert.
- ❑ *the ministry of accompanying* the young, and the not-so-young. Who better than a senior brother can portray the beauty of a vocational journey, helping us to "read" and to understand its stages, its difficulties and its risks?
- ❑ *the ministry of a fraternal-maternal presence* which is dependable and faithful. Such a presence of a friar who has achieved peace in his life can reanimate our fraternal life. "Just looking into his eyes you find peace", has been said of a wise man. The old brothers can be the authentic witnesses of that contemplative simplicity in which all becomes sign and word.

2. Fewer vocations and lack of perseverance

“In his concern for poverty, Francis was afraid of a large multitude of brothers, because even if not in fact, large numbers appear to be sign of wealth. Therefore he used to say: ‘I long for the day to come, I tell you, on which the world, seeing the friars minor but rarely, may reverence them for the smallness of their number!’”

(2 Cel 70)

That day has come! Many Provinces are struggling with a precipitous drop in vocations, while in others the tapering off is much slower. However, something every entity has had to cope with is the lack of perseverance especially among the younger generation during the early years of temporary or solemn profession. This phenomenon can be found in all religious institutes, as well as among vocations to the priesthood and the married state. There are, doubtless, many reasons for this, among which are some linked to new situations, mentalities and social and religious behavior patterns which can be seen in all cultures of the world: the “hurricane of globalization” spares nobody. And on top of that every culture has to grapple with its own specific problems.

It is obvious, though, that in tackling the problem of vocations there is only one valid starting point: how we, as friars, actually live our own vocation in our day-to-day setting. The most recent documents of the Church and of the Order direct us to carry out an urgent and thorough re-examination of the extent to which our charism and spirituality are really

the engine of our lives, and in the light of our findings to reshape our entire formation process from top to bottom - in some Provinces formation structures haven't been touched for fifty years, apart from some superficial tinkering.

Fixation with numbers and fretting over survival affect almost every Province, with the result that we are mesmerized by the *status quo* and incapable of implementing an objective and spiritually serene restructuring of Provinces and of the Order. And yet the logic of “quantity” seems not to square with the creativity of God (cf. Jgs 7:1), while for Francis too numbers can become self-sufficient riches (Adm 5).

It is necessary to develop good programs for the care of vocations, but absolutely top priority must go to our witness of gospel living, faithful to the project which is clearly outlined in the Rule, the General Constitutions and our other documents.

It is certain that it is the Lord who calls whom he wills, as he wills and when he wills. Our part is to ask, pray, welcome and accompany on the gospel path those who are called, by the witness of our life and by our words.

We have done enough investigation into our performance in this area in recent years, with its various mistakes and failures; we have even predicted statistically what we can expect in the future! Maybe the time has arrived to come to grips with the present, without fear, conscious that responsibility for the present moment of the Order's history is ours alone.

3. Lack of enthusiasm and creativity

“Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life? ... I have observed all these things since my youth... Jesus, looking at him, loved him... You lack only one thing: go, sell all you have and give it to the poor... come, follow me”

(Mk 10:17-22)

Like the rich young man we, young and less young alike, ask what we must **do** for ourselves and for others. We look for our fulfillment and identity in “doing”, even if it is a “contemplative doing”, in doing more and better, without reflecting very much on the reason for the activism which has been our occupation for years. The Lord loves our busyness too, but asks first of all for our conversion: to “*un-do*” ourselves so as to “*re-do*” (cf. Lk 10:41) in such a fashion that our doing will not completely swamp the other values which are a priority for us, such as listening to the Lord’s word, nourishing an authentic relationship with God, and living a life of communion and relationship in fraternity. The indispensable first step in this, however, is to leave everything, to follow him and be with him. Then and only then will all the highways of evangelization, traveled two by two (i.e. in fraternity), be open before us. We must find our identity in “that which the friars must desire above all things: to have the Spirit of the Lord at work within us” (RegB 10,8), and integrate our “doing” within this identity, so as to overcome more easily the common temptation of seeing our pastoral work as primarily an affirmation

of our identity and self as the beginning and end of our undertakings.

We cannot afford to forget that every form of evangelization is the result of a free call from God, who sends us to work in **God’s own** vineyard for some hours. The outcome of our evangelization, therefore, must never be the fragmentation of our brotherhood as each one of us gloats privately over the success “I” have achieved, but rather our united handing back to the Lord both ourselves and the good that the Lord says and works in us and with us (cf. Mk 6:30-31; RegNB 17:3-5). We are *co-workers with the Spirit*, who remains always the chief actor in our story. In this way it is a beautiful thing to discover our identity in a “doing” which is rooted in dependence - on God and on the brotherhood - so as to become more and more completely *agape*, a free and unfettered gift, a “project” of God for the Kingdom. Then our pastoral work will be an expression of communion with God and with our brothers, and be rooted in the true source of its fruitfulness, creativity and missionary quality, like that of the disciples sent out in Christ’s name: thanks to the overwhelming trust God has in us we too will work miracles (Lk 10:17ff.)! But when we lose the harmony between the basic values of our *forma vitae* and make efficiency the be all and end all of our work, even to the extent of excluding any conscious reference to God, we are storing up for ourselves sooner or later a shattering vocational disorientation and disillusionment - both because we have no inner unity and because the very efficiency we once counted on wanes through diminishing strength and dwindling numbers. Having reached that point, we are tempted to seek out our own path of “survival”, perhaps outside, perhaps

inside the Order, or else settle for a life that is no more than a monotonous, numbing routine, within structures which maybe once worked but are now simply scaffolding propping up lifeless traditions.

There are, in fact, many situations where one finds friars working alone, in charitable work or pastoral projects. Sometimes this would appear to be the only solution. But is it really necessary to act alone in order to be creative? Nobody can deny the generosity, the impressive results and the success of such brothers. But how is it possible to live as brothers without, at the very least, creating frequent bonds of collaboration and communion with neighboring fraternities, whether or not they belong to the same Province or culture? If we fail, the fundamental values of our vocation can disappear: for we are called “to live the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in obedience (*dependence*), without anything of our own and in chastity” (RegB 1:1).

These attitudes of ours also run the risk of disconcerting and discouraging the younger men who come to join us. Either they fail to discern among us any sign that we are serious about our charism - or else they will join the queue of those in search of a comfortable “accommodation”.

If only we dared...



“Go, you who are the friars of the people, into the heart of the masses, to those teeming multitudes, wandering aimlessly and dejected like sheep without a shepherd, those very ones for whom Jesus felt compassion...

Go, you also, to the men and women of our time! Don't wait for them to come to you! You yourselves must seek them out! It is Love which drives us to do this...

The whole Church will be grateful to you.”

(John Paul II to the Franciscan Family,
Rome, November 15, 1982)

Who can imagine the marvels, the miracles, that God would achieve with us and through us if only we dared to entrust ourselves totally to God as Francis did? God has an unbelievable confidence in us in spite of our fragility, limitations, betrayals and denials... God is always ready to “place us on our feet again”, to reopen for us the door of welcome and to send us through the world, in spite of our age, our weariness, our disenchantment (cf. Elijah: 1Kgs 19). We desperately need to recover this trust so as to intuit and experience, as Francis did, the living and fatherly presence of God.

Francis began his new way of life with his eyes turned towards the “Father who is in heaven”. “Naked he follows the naked Christ”, through a new “baptism of desire”, that of belonging solely to the Lord and thus becoming *agape*, a gracious and free gift to the lowest (the lepers), within the arms of the Church, for the sake of the Kingdom of God and for the world: outside the walls of his town, outside Assisi (LegM 4:2).

1. To rediscover unity in our diversity

“Life in fraternal communion requires that brothers be of one mind in keeping the Rule and constitutions and that they have a similar lifestyle. It also requires that the brothers participate in the activities of the brotherhood, especially in common prayer, evangelization and household tasks of the friary. Likewise, whatever material goods they receive, from any source, should be handed over to the brotherhood for its use.”

(Gg.Cc. 42:2)

I would like first to express the gratitude and appreciation of all the friars towards the Order, the Ministers, and their respective Definitories and collaborators who have guided us during these past difficult post-conciliar years towards a progressive rediscovery of our identity. We can assuredly now say that our Order has a clearly mapped identity thanks to our General Constitutions, updated with such skill and wisdom, and to all the other documents which have served to clarify our way of life, our initial and ongoing formation, and evangelization as our “raison d’être” once it is rooted in contemplation. Nobody can claim today that our project of evangelical life is not clear: it’s just that it hasn’t become an existential project for us and a new manner of living. The inherent problem of these documents which have shown us the Franciscan path over recent years is not that they are too many, or too long, or too unclear: the problem is that they have been received (when they have been received...) as simply “documents” and not as important tools for restructuring and reanimating our daily living. Here’s a simple test: ask yourself, and an-

swer honestly: when was the last time I've read the General Constitutions?

The direct result of our indifference is that our daily living out of our vocation progressively disintegrates and collapses as we fall prey to the multiplicity of involvements and desires dangled before us by an over-consuming society. Instead we should deliberately replace the predominant culture of our globalized world - that of appearance, of the immediate, of externals, of efficiency - with one of inwardness, of silence, of obedient listening, of divine fruitfulness. We must overcome our fatal tendency to act only when we've examined every angle and excluded the unexpected, or to confine ourselves to "what's always been done", and begin instead to launch out in trust on the open seas of God's providence, in spite of all our former failures - indeed schooled by them.

The most compelling task before us is reconstructing our **interior unity**, on the solid foundation of a spiritual formation which can integrate who we are and what we do in a healthy and serene synthesis. The bedrock on which we build will be the Word of God which we welcome as an ever-new event and the Eucharist which strengthens us in following Christ.

It is important that we learn how to discover in every event of our life "a path which leads to God", since "everything that happens is adorable" (L. Bloy). In this way everything is drawn into our communion with the God of our life and personal history. This will never happen, however, unless we adopt a **discipline**:

- by investing time, places and persons in this effort;
- by rebuilding in our hearts "a dwelling-place for God" (cfr RegNB 22:27) which will become the center of our activity and of our affectivity.

We must ask the Lord every day for the grace and strength "to do what we **know** is your will, and always to will what pleases you" (EpOrd 50).

By neglecting our obligation to conduct regular assessments of our fidelity to the gospel project which binds us together we have run a serious risk: that each friar, fraternity and Province will concoct **their own** project - perhaps even on the exclusive basis of **their own** culture, with the result that their sense of belonging to a world-wide body can be obscured. This is serious. I'm not suggesting that we try to impose a stifling uniformity without considering our various cultures, still less promote a legalistic and monarchical centralization: I'm concerned solely with how we witness to our charism. It is impossible for us to claim that we are "brothers" if we don't relate to each other or, worse still, cling to mistrust and prejudice which block the constructive dialogue and brotherly service which are called for by our Rule and Constitutions. To open up and to engage with each other, to welcome one another and to dialogue, these are the basis of our fraternal life. They are the essential instruments required for clarifying, strengthening and practically applying our common gospel project. They will enable us to discover a new and exciting creative capacity, and in the process restore our confidence in ourselves and in others.

It is clear that there has been a “drifting apart” in relations between the center of the Order and the Provinces, between entities of the Order (Custodies - Provinces), and sometimes also between friaries of the same Province. Today it is imperative that we move towards unity and **the reconciliation of diversity**, so that diversity can become once again a constructive enrichment rather than an occasion of division:

- We must rediscover our identity as “lesser brothers”, regardless of ministry in the brotherhood, academic qualifications, salary scales, pretensions of clerical superiority, ethnic and cultural differences;
- We must actively foster unity in diversity by encouraging the emergence of new expressions of Franciscan life (contemplation, insertion among the poor, itinerancy...), by welcoming them and journeying with them as they develop. The same goes for the various new forms of evangelization. We can certainly do this without diluting the basic values of our charism or weakening the unity of the universal or local fraternity.

2. To renew our sense of the liberating power of the vows

“The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of their own, and in chastity”

(RegB 1:1)

“The supreme rule of religious life and its ultimate norm is the observance of the following of Christ according to the teaching of the Gospel. Is this not the concern which has given rise in the Church, over the centuries, to the requirement of a life which is chaste, poor and obedient?” (Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 12).

In our path of following Christ the **religious vows** retain today their capacity to express and focus what it means to entrust ourselves totally to God and to our brothers. Setting us free from the idolatry of power, possession and pleasure, the vows enhance the potential of our human nature to express itself in its totality and open to us the possibility of relationships which are purified of every shadow of domination or exploitation. The vows map out a path to authentic love (chastity), genuine solidarity (poverty), and total availability and responsibility (obedience). They are the expression and manifestation of our absolute adherence to God in a gospel project of life. They unify and thus simplify our daily existence.

The vows remain, as they have always been in every age and culture, signs both of contradiction and of hope. In contemporary life,

where the most weird and disparate desires are being continually stimulated and pandered to in a kind of round-the-clock supermarket of pleasure, the vows, which elicit a steady commitment to a *forma vitae*, do not rate very highly. Unless we're able to show by our way of living them that they resonate with the aspirations of those around us – to freedom, solidarity and true happiness – they will never be accepted.

The vow of obedience

“O Lady Holy Charity, may the Lord save you with your sister Holy Obedience... Holy Obedience puts to rout all self-centered and carnal desires and keeps the body subject in obedience to the spirit and in obedience to one's brother, and thus a person is subject and submissive to every human being in the world”

(SalVirt 3. 14-16)

“When they have completed the year of probation let them be received to obedience, promising to observe always this life and Rule” (RegB 2:11). Our project of life is here identified with obedience. “When [the friars] have persevered in the commandments of the Lord which they promised according to the holy Gospel and their way of life, let them know that they abide in true obedience, and let them be blessed by the Lord” (RegNB 5:17). Our *“forma vitae”* is the horizon and goal we look to and the pattern against which each one of us, friars and ministers alike, must evaluate ourselves. What restructured Francis' life in a radical way was love for the Father and a passionate desire to follow Christ to the extreme limit. These should revolutionize the life of every fri-

ar as well. If authority sets itself to serve and “wash the feet” of the brothers, giving unstintingly of itself as Christ did, then the obedient friar is really entrusting himself to God: “he must not consider the human person of his superior but the one for whose love he has made himself subject” (2Cel 151). The fact is that Francis sees obedience as a *genuinely theological virtue* which is referred directly to the God who is love: God alone is its object and love its motive. In the creature, “obedience” is another name for its love for its Creator and Father: they are one and the same reality. This is why Francis makes obedience the sister and twin of love (cf SalVirt 3). It is by obedience that we “entrust” ourselves unconditionally to the brotherhood, and in turn accept our brothers wholeheartedly and unreservedly. Even in the face of a “better spiritual good” each one is called to entrust himself to his superior for the sake of the brotherhood, “and this is the obedience that makes for charity, because it is pleasing to God and to one's neighbor” (Adm 3:6).

The Minister General of the Order is the Holy Spirit (cf. 2Cel 193): all, authorities and subjects, are bound to obey the Spirit and place themselves at the service of our gospel project of life. We move into the fullness of this Love when we serve each other and obey each other reciprocally (Cf. RegNB 5:14).

You may say, this is all well and good, but what sense does it make for people today whose quest is for independence and greater freedom? Authority is in crisis and is no longer fashionable - at home, in school, in politics, in the Order... Perhaps the only authority unquestioningly accepted by everybody today is economic clout! Naturally, obedience is also questioned. And yet there isn't a human being

on this earth who is free of structures of control - indeed nowadays the forms of slavery are so all-pervasive and so constricting that we don't know how to begin to break free of them. We friars have an uphill struggle ahead of us. We must address ourselves to the sensitive task of seeking a harmonious balance between individual and community. Francis engaged in this search, and he found an answer: that a person's conscience and established authority need not be rivals; they must complement each other and work side by side on the gospel project, motivated by love for the Lord and obeying the one Spirit. A man will be more independent and free the more securely he is rooted in specific fundamental values which he has chosen for himself. Obedience for him will not mean renunciation of being himself but rather placing himself at the service of a cause, as Christ did.

Asserting my own personal rights, or the "freedom" I so frequently devote only to my own interests while excluding others, can easily become a form of violence and injustice. "Subjective experience is legitimated only through being related to others". Sometimes we fence off certain areas of our behavior in a space marked "private - no entry" and tacitly trade with each other on the basis of "leave me alone and I won't bother you..." How does this kind of freedom square with our shared project of life? Is it not totally self-centered and self-serving?

In this delicate network of relationships **authority** has an important function. This function needs to be thought through and re-evangelized, as a service and gift received from God and a clearly spiritual mission (GgCc 45-46). Allowing oneself to be "possessed" by this

mission, as the prophets were, is a safeguard for the fraternity. Both authoritarianism and permissiveness frustrate and paralyze the fraternity and the individual and block their progress; they give rise to lack of mutual trust and can result in an escape into ideas and behavior patterns taken second-hand from the media. This signals the death of creativity.

When authority allows itself to be guided by the Spirit and really listens and collaborates with the brothers (the Definitors, Guardians, Formators, Fraternity) new horizons can open up before them. The brother in authority can now become a guide and encourager in forging ahead towards the goal. He can facilitate and generate in the fraternity new evangelical initiatives; his concern will be with inviting fresh ideas and stimulating new incentives among the brothers rather than simply keeping the buildings standing or propping up lifeless structures; he will have the ability to create trust and a sense of belonging, indispensable requisites for a fraternity that is innovative and creative.

It must be said, however, that not all Ministers and Guardians are free, motivated and enthusiastic in serving their brothers...

"Without anything of their own"

"Keep nothing, therefore, of yourselves for yourselves, so that he may totally receive you who gave himself totally for you"

(EpOrd 29)

The vow of poverty sets us free from the greed which tries to grasp as much as possible, of the best quality possible and as soon as pos-

sible, because we have already found “riches enough for us” (LaudDei 4). Poverty liberates us from every kind of possessiveness. As a result we don’t make a non-negotiable absolute of the house we’re living in, or the work we’re doing, or the remuneration we “deserve”, whether material or psychological. “If you do not renounce all you have”: the Lord doesn’t ask that we give up **something**, he bids us give up **everything** - so that he can become our all. “The brothers are to acquire nothing as their own, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all” (RegB 6:1). What’s required of us here is not a self-satisfied feat of asceticism but that we set out on a journey of justice, solidarity and love for others and with others, a journey towards personal and community freedom which will make our proclamation of the gospel more credible.

The Lord of the harvest and the vineyard has sent us out as pilgrims to announce the gospel, without claiming proprietorship over “our” work or “our” people or “our” results. This doesn’t mean that we needn’t work generously and competently - of course we must. The talents and qualities the Lord has given us must be allowed to bear fruit. But success can never be our only criterion of evaluation. We must always measure ourselves against the values of our evangelical and community project of life, so that it will become *the witness and sign that we belong to the Lord, and not to “our” work*, and that we are ready, as Abraham was, and as the apostles and Francis were, to “leave our country” and go towards unknown horizons.

Fraternal relations among us are not infrequently compromised through our lack of freedom in regard to money and material things.

Sometimes we can’t even distinguish between what is necessary, what is useful, and what is superfluous. It’s so fatally easy for us to fall prey to the consumer logic of the world and consequently sin by injustice and a lack of solidarity against those who are denied even the necessities of life - forgetting that we must “restore” everything to God, as Francis bids us (RegNB 17:17), and that we have a duty of dependence and accountability towards others for our use of money.

There are Provinces in our Order in which individual friars or individual fraternities are wealthy while the Province itself is poor. This is a sin not just against poverty but against justice too, and against fraternal communion and solidarity. Sometimes Provinces don’t concern themselves about the needs of the universal brotherhood: is this simply heedlessness, or evidence of mistrust, or indifference? It was heartening to see small offerings from the Poor Clares of Africa being sent through the General Curia to help the sisters of Assisi after the earthquake. There is no doubt that if offerings are channeled through Rome they will possibly be slower and the beneficiary may not know the donor – but they will surely be more in keeping with the gospel, since they will create less direct dependence. We know well how easily our gifts can prove ambiguous for both recipient and donor.

Some brothers (but not very many) refuse to hand in to the fraternity what they receive for their work (which has sometimes been coveted and secured precisely because of the remuneration involved!), or other gifts they acquire. They personally administer “their own goods”. This is against the Rule, and it has the potential to wreck fraternity. How many abuses

in the Order over money! How many brothers are destroyed through being sacrificed to the “prestigious” structures we doggedly maintain even though they’re moribund and far from the spirit of the gospel! May God forgive us.

Whereas the freedom that comes with poverty can rapidly transform us into men of communion, to whom solidarity and sharing are second nature. It enables us to relate in a spontaneous, joyful and prophetic way with the people of our day.

The vow of chastity

“Like a sentinel on a watchtower (cf. Is 21:8) Francis was vigilant, with rigid discipline and supreme care, in preserving his purity of body and spirit”

(LM 5:3)

The vow of chastity also has a prophetic function in a world ceaselessly in search of facile and ever-new pleasures. According to Francis the pure of heart are those “who never cease to adore and gaze on the Lord God, living and true, with a pure heart and mind” (Adm 16:2). The *Legend of the Three Companions*, referring to Francis’ conversion, tells us that from that moment on he stopped adoring himself (cf. L3S 8). Chastity is the progressive purification of a narcissistic and adolescent kind of love so we can grow towards relationships that are mature, gifted, pure and free from ego-centered agendas. Dealing with my sexuality means learning to deal with my relationships. The central reality in our lives is, once again, the discovery of a love in which I find all my delight and to which I hand over my entire life. And it is the overwhelming real-

ization that I am loved unreservedly that provides the essential ingredient of human happiness and makes me capable of generating new life and radiating love, peace and communion.

Listen again to Francis: “So that we may love you with all our heart by always thinking about you, with all our soul by always desiring you, with all our mind by directing all our intentions to you and seeking your honor in everything, and with all our strength by spending all our energy and ability of soul and body for the service of your love and not for anything else...” (ExpPat 5). What is physical becomes here a sacrament of the spirit, and the entire person, body and soul, is transformed into a tangible language capable of expressing a communion that is more fulfilling than that of bodies abandoned to a closed, limited and unsatisfied pleasure.

Of course I can’t reach these heights in a single day! I must, among other things, accept and begin to live in the kind of solitude “indwelt by God” which is typical of consecrated life. I must also come to terms with what I know full well, that there is no such thing as a completely satisfied affectivity or a naturally perfect sexuality - whether for celibates or for those who are married. Very often it is exactly in this area that our limitations are revealed to us. This does not prevent us, however, from continuing to follow Christ, for he does not call the perfect and the pure but sinners so that they may be converted - such as Levi and Zacchaeus and the woman of Samaria. Even though the full integration of our natural inclinations and urges will always be a struggle - this will be the case irrespective of whether one’s orientation is heterosexual or homosexual - it nevertheless remains totally unaccept-

able for us as friars to settle for any degree of 'leeway' in this area, while airily dismissing our infidelity as a "third way" or an "alternative way" of living our vowed chastity. Francis' answer to such subterfuge would be blunt: "Since we have left the world we have nothing else to do ... except to **please the Lord alone**" (RegNB 22:9).

For those who wished to take up the gospel life Francis had one and only one condition: **conversion**, which signifies re-directing one's life totally and exclusively towards the Lord. If on the one hand he insisted that there be pardon and mercy for every sinner, on the other Francis harshly drove away anyone who was persistent in justifying his sin and refused to repent, "because when we live according to the flesh, the devil wishes to draw us away from the love of our Lord Jesus Christ" (RegNB 22:5). We must all strive towards this radical self-giving, helping each other along the way. We are responsible for our brothers who fall short of what they promised to the Lord and we have the duty to correct them and accompany them with mercy along the path of conversion (RegB 10; Adm 22; EpMin 14-16). The experience of a contented fraternal life helps us enormously to be faithful to our religious consecration. In our profession we entrusted ourselves to one another as brothers, and so we are responsible for fraternally recalling each other to our project of life when we fail to live up to it. Sad to say, fraternal correction is all too often replaced in our friaries by snide criticism and malicious gossip. Some of our brothers might not have abandoned their vocation if sensitive brotherly help had been forthcoming in time.

3. To restore authenticity, credibility and visibility to our project of life

"As consecrated men, our specific task is to discern the God who is ever present, to hear and contemplate that presence, to witness to it by our lives and proclaim it by our words. The future will depend, in large measure, on our ability to bear witness to the God who is present in this complex world, conveying in our lives what we have experienced of God as we follow the poor Christ after the example of Francis of Assisi".

(Hermann Schalück,
To Fill the Whole Earth..., 111)

If even a few fraternities really believed that our gospel project of life is a message of reconciliation and liberation for today's world, and their activities derived directly from and were powered by this conviction, so many things would change in our Order and in our world! I am convinced that there exists almost everywhere a genuine passion and love for our vocation, but these must still catch fire and become **a living, energetic and effective presence** capable of going beyond the mental and environmental structures which still stifle us, beyond the anxiety for survival which pushes us blindly towards conservatism, beyond the failures and resentments still looming from the past, beyond consideration of age and number, and above all beyond the disjunction between being and doing.

Possibly our greatest challenge will be that of **visibility**, how we become an *inculturated presence*. We must set about creating a new way of being visible appropriate for today, for

the sake of a world that has lost its compass but is yearning for a sense of direction and some token of salvation. Can we offer a convincing sign of what energizes us, of what we believe in, of what we've given our lives for?

In order to forge this kind of spirituality, three things will be required:

- *That we be clear about our spiritual identity and charism and live them authentically.*
- *That we understand and adopt the appropriate instruments and signs to facilitate dialogue: people must find them legible, so that they really transmit the values of the charism we have received in function of the needs of each particular culture.*
- *That we be resolute and fearless, individually and as fraternities, in the enterprise of making our values speak today. We're simply following the path of the Incarnation and adopting its logic.*

As Franciscans we consider dialogue with the contemporary world, and especially with the young people of today, not as one choice among others but as a necessity. We have been called in order to be sent: sent to a world in the throes of great change as men of God who walk in brotherhood and minority. Our call is to open up alternative, more friendly spaces of dialogue in which to foster the bonding of solidarity, compassion and the eager acceptance of differences.

There is no call for us to demonize the world, the media, globalization or the youth culture of today. But we shouldn't make them a drug either, by feeding on everything, by aping

everything, by submerging ourselves body and soul in everything that is on offer. What is important is to cultivate a critical approach which is positive but not superficial, so that we can objectively discern the emerging signs of the presence of God. Jesus too sought out the crowds and identified with their story, distancing himself only from falsehood and ambiguity.

Let us give maximum freedom and encouragement to our brothers who, in all continents, are willing and eager to embark on a new gospel venture among the women and men of today! Let us accompany and support them by showing confidence in them and by offering fraternal correction when it is necessary. Let us prepare spaces for the Spirit in the hearts of all the friars so that new prophets and new prophetic fraternities can be raised up among us - where an authentically Franciscan relationship with people can flourish, where our spirituality will be embodied in the texture of daily life and where the deepest aspirations of the people among whom we live can find expression.

Conclusion

“The angel said to her: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus’... ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’... ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you... And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’...”

(Lk 1:30-38)

Dear brothers, at the start of this third millennium of salvation history which reminds us of the unchanging love God has for us, let us begin again, following the example of Mary, Mother of God and 'Virgin made Church', a new journey of faithfulness.

The first step the Lord asks of us – as of Mary – is to *overcome the fear* that besets us when we depend only on our own strength and abilities, and our horizons stretch no further than a concern for survival and personal efficiency. When we manage to shed our fears and take this first step, we'll discover that we have the courage to set out on unmapped paths. They may not be obvious or gratifying ones, but they are the ones Francis and Clare set out on, and our footsteps will be firm because, trusting in the Lord "with whom we have found favor", we will be assured that with and in the Lord everything is possible.

It is important for us to ponder again the story of our vocation, of how the Lord called us to intimacy how we welcomed God's Word with joyful acceptance. We must allow Jesus to break into our life, here and now, and stand "there among us", as he did among the disciples after the resurrection (cf. Jn 20:19). We must allow him to "come through the closed doors" of our certainties and our defences (both internal and external) and utterly change our lives by his presence.

"How can this be?" Everything is possible with God, provided we welcome and cherish

in a pure heart God's transforming Word; provided we allow ourselves to be guided more by the Lord's powerful presence within us than by our careful calculation of results; provided we are loyal to the Lord's projects rather than our own and do so in complete confidence.

"Let it be with me according to your word". This is the ultimate surrender the Lord asks of us, to be renewed every day by daily taking up the commitment made at our profession. Our life will thus reflect our total openness to God and to our sisters and brothers. True, this "yes" will be followed, as it was for Mary, more often by silence than by striking successes. But it will be the fruitful silence of God which is accompanied by the cross and authenticated by undramatic signs such as the advanced age and sterility of Elizabeth (cf. LM 8:2 !).

I think that increasing age and lack of vocations constitute the "signs" which are being offered to us at this juncture of history. Are they necessarily signs of resignation, of abandonment to a sterile lament for our past, of a struggle at any cost to survive? Remember: "Nothing is impossible with God"! The Spirit can transform these signs into a reality of life, of hope and of creative power, in a canticle of joy and praise to the God with whom everything is possible: *magnificat!* There has never been a time attended by so many harbingers of a new age to arouse and invigorate us! Our task is to allow them burst into an abundance of life *illuminated by our faith* - our trust, commitment and resoluteness in the Lord. With Mary we must "conceive" the Word (cf. 2EpFid 53) and experience the presence of the Spirit which lives in us and through us so that we can become true bearers of the Good News to the world.

The vocation which we have been given imposes a responsibility on us in respect to the women and men of our day who are searching everywhere for individuals seized by God and centers of authentic spirituality to help them make sense of their lives. We must not fail them. "Take care to be as good as people think you are, because many put their trust in you. Therefore I warn you: never be other than you are expected to be!" (2Cel 142), the simple countryman said to the stigmatized Francis.

Francis once again challenges us with his words: "I have done my part; may Christ teach you yours" (2 Cel 214).

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The Order Today

Reflections and Prospects



Introduction

I. Expectations and Hopes

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