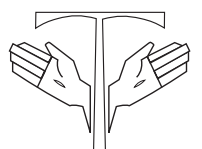


Letter from the Minister and the General Definitory to the whole Order for the Solemnity of St. Francis 2023



OFM



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

We are close to celebrating the feast of our father and brother Francis, which on this occasion coincides with the beginning of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will have as its theme "For a synodal church: communion, participation, mission" (First session). The theme, method and process proposed by Pope Francis for the Synod refer to topics such as: fidelity to the Spirit, walking together, listening, dialogue, discernment.

Discernment, through listening and dialogue, is not foreign to our spiritual tradition and our origins, as St. Bonaventure testifies who describes Francis as the one who «had learned from the Supreme Master the great things», but who, not for this reason, «had the humility to ask the little things of those smaller than him. He used to seek – adds the Seraphic Doctor – with singular zeal the way and the way to serve God more perfectly, as He pleases best. 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 way in which he could most virtuously reach the summit of perfection»¹.

On this occasion we would like to deepen the theme of listening, so important in our life and mission. Our charism, in fact, was born from the Gospel heard by Francis at the Porziuncola, listening to the Gospel that immediately became also listening to the Church, represented in the priest who explained to the young Francis the meaning of those words. In the course of almost fifteen years, the original *forma vitae*, which began with this happy encounter with the Gospel, has been adapted through listening to the brethren and the signs of the times, carried out above all in the Chapters.

In this way, through a fraternal discernment carried out by Francis and his brothers, the Franciscan charism gradually acquired its textual configuration that received definitive approval eight hundred years ago in the *Regula Bullata*. A very topical dimension of listening, which we would like to deepen in a particular way, is mutual openness within our fraternities, acceptance of the gift of our brothers and sisters, of their words, of their needs, of their riches and fragilities, which make our fraternal relations a journey of communion in fidelity to the Gospel.

It is true that during our visits to the various Entities and in the various meetings we have had as Minister and Definitory, as well as through the reports sent by the Ministers Provincial and the Visitors General, we have been able to verify that the Lord continues to do so much good through the witness and work of our brothers with joy and authenticity. Likewise, we realize that there are certain factors that make it more difficult to listen to each other based on trust in our fraternal communities.

¹ *Legenda Maior* 12,2

One of the factors could be the fact that the many changes and challenges of recent years (digitalization, the Covid pandemic, global warming, etc.) have required a continuous and so fast adaptation that many of us at this time simply feel tired and exhausted, with little energy to invest in fraternal life.

In other situations we live in such a polarized context that opening a deeper dialogue between us seems a threat to community life. In some contexts it is the tense relationship between generations that represents a real challenge for mutual listening in fraternity.

A very present factor is the fact that now most of us live simultaneously in the real and virtual world with the risk of having to process too much information at the same time. It is no wonder that there is little room left in the real world for listening to the brother and sister that each one has next to him or her. We are very focused on ourselves and our way of overcoming current challenges.

In the document *Life as Dialogue in the wake of St. Francis*, a reflection on quality listening as the main way to dialogue was proposed a few years ago. First of all, it was emphasized that our existence starts from a call to listen:

«Our existence is born of a call. The word of the other always precedes us; above all, the Word that has always pronounced our name precedes us: the name of each one in his poverty and in his irreplaceable dignity. We are friars because we have been called and 'given', but also because we have accepted to be a word and a 'gift' for others². Fraternity is a dialogue that does not begin with ourselves and that we must not interrupt; it is expressed in: speaking, listening, trusting, accepting difference, respecting the other, discerning the Spirit and spirits, clarifying and reconciling conflicts. The great dialogue that governs the life of God transforms creation into a great fraternity»³.


This deep listening, capable of overcoming the differences and polarizations of our time, is at the basis of our vocation as the General Constitutions of our Order also remind us: «We should study to listen to others with sincere charity and respect, and with people, amongst whom they live, in a very special way towards the poor, who are our teachers, they should learn willingly, and be willing to dialogue with all»⁴.

2 cf. Testament 14

3 OFM Servizio per il Dialogo 1, *Life as Dialogue in the wake of St. Francis*, Secretariat of Evangelization and Secretariat of Formation and Studies, Rome 2002, p. 154

4 CCGG 93 §1





In order not to lose contact with ourselves and with others in a time that tends to make us close in on ourselves, mutual listening is therefore an indispensable condition for making possible an authentic process of conversion and renewal in fraternity. It is necessary to ask for grace to convert the heart and to generate relational dynamics through which the voice of the whole fraternity can resound in its originality and particular beauty. It will be the experience of this beauty to generate constructive reflections and shared decisions.

Knowing that there are no easy recipes to learn or relearn listening to each other, we would like to offer you some final reflections that can guide you to some practical decisions:

- Listening with sincere charity and respect presupposes, first of all, the willingness to be attentive to how we listen to the other: «Only by paying attention to whom we listen, what we listen to and how we listen are we able to grow in the art of communicating, whose centre is not a theory or a technique, but rather “the capacity of the heart that makes proximity possible”»⁵.

- The ability to learn mutual listening is closely linked to the willingness to provide in the calendar of the fraternity regular moments of sharing, in which a quality mutual listening can emerge that allows us to participate truly in the life of each other. For this reason, it would be appropriate to reflect and regularly share in fraternity the way in which we manage our time and, concretely, our calendar. This applies to the planning of local chapters and community meetings, which should take precedence over other commitment.

- Often our communication in fraternity fails to clarify in time any misunderstandings, misunderstandings and conflicts between the friars. Let us not forget or avoid the efforts that come from the multicultural dimension and from the ethnic and “regional” differences of many of our fraternities, which touch precisely on communication and listening. Hence our question: during our local Chapters and other sharing meetings are we available to address the “real” themes of our life in community or do we limit ourselves to an exchange of information that is important, but not sufficient to deepen the relationships between us?

- Paul VI defined dialogue as «an art of spiritual communication»⁶. For this reason it would be good to accompany mutual listening and dialogue in fraternity through a perspective of faith and shared spirituality. In our mutual listening, is there enough room for the help that faith and our Franciscan charism can offer? Can we do this while also listening to our cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences?

- The synodal journey that the Church is making invites us to broaden listening and dialogue to overcome the boundaries of our own fraternity or of the Franciscan family, and to open ourselves to listening to the world with its cultures and realities, today so increasingly complex. In short, to learn to listen to those "outside" (the laity who surround us, the collaborators in the mission, the young, the non-believers and the so called "indifferent", immigrants, workers and the elderly, the voices and questions that creation poses to us, ...). What are the moments planned in fraternity to open ourselves to this 360° listening? What concrete steps can we begin to take to learn better to know, interpret and live the reality around us, without isolating ourselves from it?

We would like to conclude with an image taken from the Mirror of Perfection that shows the importance of seeing ourselves with the eyes of God as a community based on diversity and mutual listening where the Friar Minor cannot be a friar alone. St. Francis says «that he would be a good Friar Minor who would bring together within himself the life and attitudes» of many other friars⁷: only through their faith and their love for poverty, their simplicity and their kindness, their common sense and their prayer, their patience and their charity... one can become a true Friar Minor, following Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis; definitely never alone.

With best wishes for a joyful feast of St. Francis on this centenary of the Regula Bullata and of the Christmas of Greccio, we greet you with fraternally, and we remain in communion with you on such a beautiful day for our whole Family.

6 Paolo VI, Ecclesiam Suam, n. 38
7 cf. Mirror of Perfection, nr. 85




Fraternally

Rome, General Curia, 17 September 2023
Feast of the Impression of the Stigmata of St. Francis



Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm
Ministro Generale

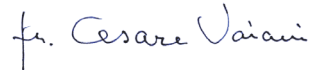


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