



Address by the Minister General at the meeting of the new Provincial Ministers and Custos

Rome, 11th May 2026

THE CHARISM ENLIGHTENS THE SERVICE OF AUTHORITY IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Dear brother Ministers and Custodes,

"May the Lord give you peace!"

Welcome to this meeting, where we will reflect together on how the charism illuminates the service of authority in a time of profound change. I do not intend to present you with a didactic programme, but rather to share with you a reflection born of the experience of recent years and of meeting so many of you around the world, so that you may feel encouraged and supported in the ministry entrusted to you.

The central theme is simple: the charism is not an idea to be kept in a display case, but a living force that guides our service, teaches us to listen and enables us to foster a free and responsible freedom in our brothers. Ultimately, in the language of St Francis, it is *the Spirit of the Lord and his holy work* living within us. All this takes place amidst a changing era, which is not merely an external setting, but a living environment in which our vocation and mission grow and are expressed today to the extent that we allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit.

I. THE CHARISM: A LIVING GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

The first focus of our reflection is the charism. Let us re-read no. 4 of *Lumen gentium* and Pope Francis when he forcefully reminded us that *"the charism is the gift given 'for the common good' (1 Cor 12:7), to be useful to everyone. It is not, in other words, destined principally and ordinarily for the sanctification of the person, but for the 'service' of the community"* (Audience, 20 November 2024). These words help us to free the charism from any form of privatisation and to rediscover its communal and missionary nature.

I would also recall, as *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* (June 2016) tells us, that there is no opposition between charism and authority. Rather, there is *co-essentiality* between hierarchical and



charismatic gifts: *'it is possible to recognize a convergence in the recent Magisterium on the coessentiality between the hierarchical and charismatic gifts'* (no. 10).

In this context, the Franciscan charism is not an archaeological artefact. It is a living reality that the Holy Spirit stirred up in Francis and which continues to work amongst us and within the Church. But this life needs to be recognised, nurtured and left free to express itself in ever-new forms. As Brother Giacomo Bini said, it is time to move from the orthodoxy to the orthopraxy of the charism: it is not enough to know it intellectually; we must live it through recognisable and practical choices.

The charism as a living paradigm

A charism functions as a paradigm not on the basis of a rigid definition, but through its ability to guide concrete life. It works when it helps us to see the re new light, when it offers us criteria for daily choices, when it shapes our relationships with one another and with the world. If the charism remains merely an elegant discourse but does not touch our daily lives, our communities, our choices, then we have a serious problem.

As I visit the Entities around the world – I have now been to ninety of them – it is becoming increasingly clear to me that the renewed choice of our identity as brothers and minors, centred on our relationship with God and on a life of fraternal communion for the mission amongst and with the poor, is what the Spirit is strongly asking of us, before so many other ministries, projects and activities with which we are so preoccupied.

Charisma and personal conscience

The rediscovery of the charism following the Second Vatican Council brought with it a precious fruit: attention to the personal conscience of the religious. In the normative texts of the previous tradition, the dimension of conscience was practically absent. Attention to the person and to fraternal relationships is one of the great fruits of the conciliar turning point. This means that the charism is not a garment imposed from the outside, but a gift that challenges the freedom of each individual and calls for a personal and responsible response.

And it is precisely here that our service of authority comes into play: not imposing from above but accompanying each brother to discover and live out the charism in his own concrete life, with his own struggles and resources.

II. THE SERVICE OF AUTHORITY: LISTENING FOR RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM

The second core theme is the service of authority. Today I would like to focus on an aspect that seems central to me: authority as the promotion of a free and responsible freedom.



Not administrators, but animators of the charism

One of the greatest risks of our service is reducing ourselves to mere administrators. Of course, there is a necessary and proper administration. But if administration becomes the centre, we lose sight of the heart of our ministry. The superior, as has been noted, is not merely a manager, but a guardian of the flame: his primary task is to keep alive the passion for the original charism, preventing the community from retreating into mere survival or nostalgia.

St John Chrysostom, commenting on Jesus' commission to Peter, reminds us of the origin of authority: *'Do you love me more than these? Give yourself to them. Not directly to me, but to me through others ... Show that fervent love which you have always demonstrated and of which you boasted. The life you were willing to give for me, give it to my sheep'* (St John Chrysostom, *Homily 88 on John*). Guiding others requires knowing them, a knowledge born of love. Those for whom we are responsible must be approached personally, understood one by one, helped, cared for, and joyfully brought back if they have strayed far.

Listening as the primary responsibility

Listening becomes the primary responsibility of those who exercise authority. Not a superficial listening, but a profound one, capable of discerning the voice of the Spirit speaking through our brothers. This requires creating genuine spaces for dialogue and discussion, in which every voice can express itself freely: the regional and plenary meetings of the Entity, the open Definitory, and listening also to the laity and religious sisters.

Sometimes we think we are conveying attentiveness and empathy, yet in reality, we are communicating distance and forms of authoritarianism, or shirking our responsibilities in various ways, whether subtle or more overt. We are called upon to pay constant attention to ourselves, because the relational model we carry within us influences and shapes our relationships more than we realise.

I then ask myself, along with you: *who is listening to me, who am in a position of authority, and to whom am I obeying at this time?* Only if we are listened to and accompanied can we open up a similar space – one that is human and charismatic – for others. Let us not neglect personal accompaniment, we Ministers; please, it is a priority.

Obedience as responsible freedom

Here we come to a crucial point. Obedience in the current context cannot be passive submission, but active listening – *ob-audire* – a shared search for God's will. Members and leaders are together subject to the Word and the charism. Obedience is the shared path to achieving the good of the mission.

But let us be honest: if free obedience falters, leadership becomes manipulation and discernment an empty formality. In an age that exalts absolute individual autonomy,



rebuilding the meaning of obedience as a free choice is perhaps the greatest challenge we face. Without an inner disposition towards obedience – understood as a shared search for truth – communal discernment turns into political negotiation between particular interests.

The meeting point between those who lead and those who obey is the charism itself. Both are subject to the mission. The necessary transition is from submission to listening, from execution to dialogue. Authority must invest time in explaining the spiritual and charismatic motivations behind a choice. Freedom grows in shared truth, not in the secrecy of the decision.

DYNAMICS OF LISTENING AND FEEDBACK: *Who is listening to me?*

In personal silence (3 minutes), each person writes down on a sheet of paper the answer to two questions:

- *At this moment, who is truly listening to me in my service?*
- *Whom am I obeying – not formally, but in the actual direction of my choices?*

Then share in pairs (5 minutes), not to resolve issues but to listen to one another. Do not comment, simply receive. No feedback in the plenary: the sharing remains between the two of you. This protects the truth of what emerges and allows you to experience in practice the kind of listening you are talking about.

Tolerating uncertainties, accompanying processes

The service of authority compels us to work ceaselessly on ourselves. We can learn not to panic, to wait, to be patient, and not to want to control everything. We can learn to recognise that we are also insecure and afraid, because we do not know where a path is leading us.

Relationships with our brothers and sisters remain asymmetrical; we must learn to live between closeness and distance, and this takes effort. As ministers, we will not enjoy the closeness and affection of everyone. Authority isolates us somewhat. We often bear the weight of our brothers' and sisters' immature expectations and feelings, and sometimes even our own. We must tolerate conflict and learn to engage with it proactively. We must learn to tolerate the long timeframes involved in change, without imposing our own timetables on others. We must allow things to mature from within and gradually, recognising the steps that reality now demands.



III. THE CHANGE OF ERA: THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT OF OUR VOCATION

The third core theme is the changing times. And here I mean that this is not merely a backdrop, an external scenario surrounding us. The changing times are the living environment in which our vocation and mission grow and are expressed today. We are part of it; it permeates us and transforms us. We cannot place ourselves outside or above it.

Recognising the change that has already taken place.

All too often, we speak of change as if it were still underway, something that is yet to come. In reality, the change has already taken place to a large extent. The world in which we were formed, in which our structures were born, is largely no more. We cannot dream of the numbers and the widespread presence of the past. The past is past.

This does not mean resigning ourselves. It means having the courage to look at reality as it is, and to recognise the seeds of the Spirit right there. Like the prophet Elijah, sent far from the seat of power, we are called to discover that life is given to us by simple and poor creatures: the ravens and the widow. The Lord teaches us not through words, but through experiences.

Night and discernment

It seems to me that the Spirit speaks to us in the night of the history we are living, within and without us. It is a fragile time in which humanity itself is at risk. How many projects have failed to take us where we hoped! How many ideas have not worked! It is not possible to find formulas that guarantee us a solution once and for all.

But could it be that it is precisely in this night that the Spirit shows us a way? As Brother Giacomo Bini used to tell us: *'We are invited to discern with intelligence the seeds of new life, often hidden, that emerge within the context of our cultures, so that they may develop under the breath of the Spirit.'* These words remain extraordinarily relevant.

The newness of the proclamation and the sincerity of faith

Overcoming a functional and worldly mindset is urgent. The newness of the proclamation is not proportional to our own initiative but draws on the sincerity and ty of our faith. Neither the sectarian path of the 'pure' nor assimilation to the wisdom of the world meets the challenge. Rather, we are called to conversion, both as individuals and as institutions, as the Church.

To what kind of life can we invite today's young people and young adults? To the weary repetition of communal acts and coexisting individualisms? Or to a whirlwind of activism lacking clear direction? To a fraternal life not centred on our relationship with God and on genuine relationships amongst ourselves? 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?



Three concrete steps

The first step: to pause. To have the courage to let go of something, to scale back not only our houses and ministries, but also our activities and missions, in order to create the space needed to turn inwards, to give ourselves time for listening and reflection, to repair that home which is our life and our fraternity.

The second step: listening. A discerning listening to our reality, both local and wider. More often than not, we carry on with what already exists, which is usually excessive. All too often, we lack a vision of the future: who do we want to be ten or twenty years from now?

The third step: launching workshops. Places where it is possible to truly live according to the traits of Franciscan identity and mission that we identify. We mostly want to keep everything together: tradition, the existing situation, and the drive towards the future. This is not possible. We need the courage to experiment with truly renewed fraternities, in the spirit of the document *"Ite et nuntiate"*.

DYNAMICS OF LISTENING AND SHARING: *A step the Spirit is asking of me.*

Here we move from listening to sharing. In language groups of 4–5 people (10 minutes), each person shares briefly:

- *Of the three steps – pausing, listening, launching workshops – which do I feel is most urgent for my Entity today? And which one frightens me the most?*

CONCLUSION: MINISTERS OF HOPE, ARCHITECTS OF THE FUTURE

Dear brothers, we are called to take up the service of authority within the life of each one of us and in this particular moment in history. The charism illuminates this service, giving it direction and warmth. The changing times are not an enemy to be feared, but the soil in which the Spirit sows today.

Just as Francis was able to see, beyond the ruins of San Damiano, a renewed Church, so we are called to see, in the fragility of our times, the signs of a new future that God is preparing. The service of authority, lived in this perspective, becomes not a burden but a grace: the grace of accompanying our brothers and sisters on a journey of renewal, sustained by the certainty that it is the Lord himself who leads us.

Let us recall Paul's words to the elders of Ephesus: *'I entrust you to the Lord and to the word of his grace'*. True authority points beyond itself, for it does not make itself and its own success the decisive criterion.



I ask the Lord for all of us to grow on this journey: capable of true listening, promoters of responsible freedom, rooted in the charism, open to the future that God is preparing for us.

For our final discussion, I ask: *In light of what we have shared, what would you like to explore further over the coming days together?*



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