

PENTECOST LETTER OF THE MINISTER GENERAL
TO ALL THE FRIARS OF THE ORDER

HAVING THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IN THE TIME OF CRISIS

My blessed brothers,
May the Lord give you peace!

The occasion of the Franciscan Centenary of the Rule and Christmas in Greccio reminds us of those Pentecost Chapters where the friars gathered around Brother Francis. It was here that the Rule gradually took its present form. Francis often spoke of the Holy Spirit as the true Minister General of the Order. Although the Rule had already been approved in 1223, he always accompanied it with the thought of inserting a phrase into it that explicitly declared this.¹ Let us listen to what the Spirit is saying to our family today.

“Having the Spirit of the Lord” at the Heart of the Rule

For Brother Francis, the Rule sums up the way of life according to the Gospel. The core is “having the Spirit of the Lord”², a central theme in the experience of Francis, the engine from which everything comes to life.

“The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity”³. This evangelical inspiration of the Rule is moved by the action of the Spirit, evident throughout the text, in language that is both exhortative and juridical. From the call to be in the world as meek, peace-makers,⁴ to the prohibition of receiving money to live

1 Cf. 2Cel 193.

2 *Regula bullata* (=Rb) 10,8.

3 Rb 1,1.

4 Cf. Rb 3,11.



a real evangelical insecurity⁵ as pilgrims and strangers in this world,⁶ to reciprocal mercy when the brothers sin,⁷ up to the sending on mission “by divine inspiration”.⁸

We know that Francis went through a long journey to deliver to his brothers a text that would expound the gospel life and give stability to the *Fraternitas*. How many attempts have there been in our troubled history to reduce the Rule to a series of precepts or a vague inspiration! It remains both letter and life, words written with simplicity and purity, to be sought to understand and to observe with holy operation.⁹

Paradoxically, I believe that today we have the opportunity to revive the sense of our form of life contained in the Rule precisely in contact with the more general situation of crisis that we are experiencing, which seems to shatter every reference point. The crisis is social, ecclesial, personal and also of the Order. It is such a change that leaves nothing as it was found and obliges us to reaffirm with our lives what gives us foundation and what we can never take for granted or acquire once and for all. In a society where it is difficult to go into the depths, “the crisis serves, in a certain way, as a battering ram to break through the doors of these fortresses in which we are enclosed”.¹⁰

The Prophet Elijah Goes Through a Crisis

I refer to the story of Elijah, which tells of a profound crisis: the fiery prophet, afraid of human power, flees into the desert to save his life. He now feels alone and asks God to let him die.

Perhaps we, too, know this flight instinct in the face of the complexity of our times and our various personal, fraternal and mission crises.

Elijah, precisely in the crisis, is led by the hand towards the mountain, the place of the encounter with God.

God transforms his crisis from a flight into a new path of faith, like a second call:

He was told, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord. Behold, the Lord passed by. There was a mighty, rushing wind to split the mountains and break the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire, there was the murmur of a gentle wind. As

5 Cf. *Rb* 4,1

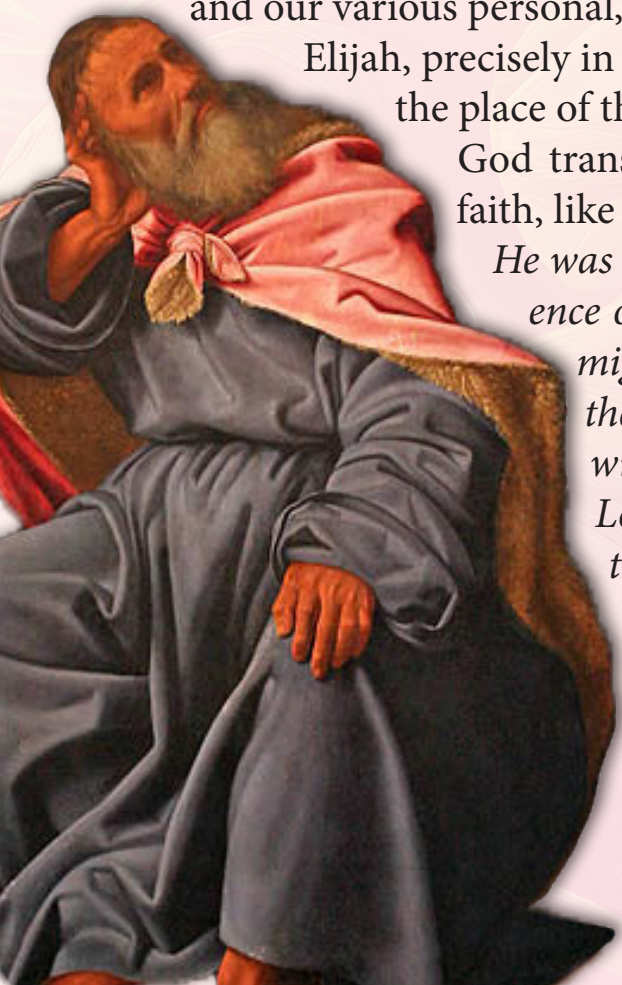
6 Cf. *Rb* 6,2.

7 Cf. *Rb* 7.

8 Cf. *Rb* XII,1-2.

9 Cf. *Testament*, 39.

10 Ch. Singer, *Du bon usage des crises*, Paris 1996, 41-42.



he heard it, Elijah covered his face with his cloak, went out, and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, he heard a voice saying to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered: "I am full of zeal for the Lord God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, [...]. I am left alone, and they try to take my life". The Lord said to him, "Come on, retrace your steps to the desert of Damascus".¹¹

The root of Elijah's crisis is his image of God, a projection of power represented by the earthquake, hurricane and fire, which on Sinai had already been the signs of the divine presence for Moses. Elijah seems to symbolically shut himself up in the cave as if descending into the abyss of his bewilderment. Indeed, he had not foreseen what would happen on the mountain. Here, the dismayed prophet is pushed out of that cave, out of that world, even the religious one familiar to him, to experience an unusual encounter. At last, he can know the face of God in silence and not in force. He thus also discovers a new face of himself and his mission.

Crisis and Meaning of Our Vocation

In Elijah, we see both the bold and fearful prophet, believer and doubter, solitary and compassionate. He questions himself and the Lord. He flees and then retraces his steps. Perhaps we are surprised. Yet, many among us also experience the time of crisis in different ways as we ask the question about the meaning of our way of life today. Let us not be frightened. We can go through this crisis in different ways in the different ages of life, with each of us reworking the meaning of existence and the Rule of Life we have all professed. In such a journey, the crisis is vital for growth. It is not an unpleasant accident but a necessary moment of passage in the person's becoming. It is part of that progressive journey of humanisation that is the only truly verifiable fruit of the Spirit's action in us.

The crisis has many faces: in youth, the sense of frustration at the distance between ideal and reality. In adulthood, the labour to become free and more unified people. Maturity and old age, a favourable time to integrate the good received with the inevitable bitterness and defeats experienced.

Others, in crises experienced at different ages of life, simply leave. The reasons are different. We seem to have become accustomed to the fact that brothers may leave even a few months after solemn profession. Some leave, and others stay. Where am I?

The Second Call with Brother Francis

Just as we remember the Rule, covenant of alliance and marrow of the Gospel, we can take it up again as a compass to guide us in a time of crisis and yet a blessed time! We cannot avoid taking it on with its contradictions, which are also present among us. We cannot take refuge in protected enclosures that isolate us from the crisis that the human person is experiencing today. No formulas protect us from difficulties or give us the solution for everything.

“Having the Spirit of the Lord” is the compass that the Rule offers us in the crisis that affects us all today: does not listening to its inspiration mean for us to stop, evaluate ourselves in depth and answer the call to a new encounter with the living God, which in the story of Elijah we have retraced?

Finally, surrendering to Him is the space for a second call. Here the Lord calls us again to “be with Him and go and preach”,¹² even through a journey of dispossession that we had not counted on. A journey which breaks our patterns and puts us back on the road, taking nothing away from our life but instead giving us a more human dimension. Leaving behind what we have appropriated, something or someone, is a painful pruning: it is possible if there is a personal encounter of love, which allows life to flow back into us and around us. Without mysticism, there is no rule that holds.

Instead, settling for lives often lived in low gear hurts us, robs us of joy and paralyses the growth of a healthy spiritual experience. This does not diminish but makes what is genuinely human flourish in us in the steps of Christ, poor and crucified. Whoever follows him, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man,¹³ capable of relationship and of giving his life out of love.

The compass that the Rule gives us is then a living faith that does not only touch orthodoxy (ideas and doctrine), nor just orthopraxis (behaviour, morals), but reaches out to orthopathy, to the heart for an encounter with the Lord of life that transforms our humanity.¹⁴

St Francis experienced this second call in the years that led him to Fonte Colombo for the final drafting of the Rule. Even in the painful crisis with his changing fraternity, Brother Francis continued to seek his Lord in many caves, including that of Greccio. Here the Poverello wanted to “enact the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as is possible with his own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay”.¹⁵ After the labours of writing the Rule, Francis seems to indulge in a contemplative pause. He wants to let himself be touched by God in his very human sensitivity, to the point of allowing himself to be indelibly wounded at La Verna. Here he shares the pain of the Lord Jesus, a necessary step to “love his own to the end”,¹⁶ allowing himself to be transformed into the Beloved, the summit of his journey.

Revisiting our Rule helps us orient ourselves in this blessed time of crisis, in touch with what is essential in our lives and letting go of the superfluous.

12 Cf. Mk 3:14.

13 Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 41.

14 Cf. Lk 24:32.

15 *ICel* 84.

16 Jn 13:1.

Conclusion

Let the Pentecost of this year, the eight hundredth anniversary of the Rule and the Christmas of Greccio, be a vibrant epiclesis throughout the Order so that we may awaken from our torpor, rediscover the warmth and beauty of our relationship with God, with our brothers, with the little ones and the poor, and with creatures. Let us not tire of renewing the great yes of faith and vocation, which is the assent to our humanity by following Jesus. Our Fraternity is present in very different continents, cultures and sensitivities. Let each of us try to ask ourselves this year: what does it mean for us, where do we live today, to renew the covenant of evangelical life? For this, we pray together:

Come Holy Spirit, upon this little people of brothers and minors, enkindle in us again, with the flame of your love, the vigour of faith, hope and charity, with all the holy virtues.

Enkindle in us the enchantment of covenant and friendship with the Lord and all his creatures. You who are the dove of peace, give us the taste to live the Gospel today as poor, subject to all creatures, disarmed from the pretence of power, made free to love.

Holy Mary, Virgin made Church, accompany us on this journey, you who have made the Lord of majesty our brother.¹⁷

Saint Francis, remember us, your brothers, often afflicted by the loss of memory of the beauty of our vocation, and help us to renew it, for the good of the world that you love so much. Amen.

I wish you all a bright Pentecost, my brothers, with the gentle vitality of the Holy Spirit, Minister General of the Order, and my fraternal embrace as Minister and servant.

Rome, from the General Curia of the Order, 13 May 2023



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