

# CHAPTER OF MATS

## CHAPTER OF MATS 2025 –Reflection by Br Derrick Yap, OFM (Singapore)

### FIRST CORE

*Renewing our vision:* to what characteristics of the charism should we open ourselves today?

My dear sisters and brothers,

what do you see in this image?

What draws your attention the most?

Or what lingers in your heart as you contemplate this image?

Could what lingers in your heart be an indication of what is important for you?

I believe that it is important for us to keep listening to what our hearts say especially in these days of discernment at this Chapter of Mats.



Coming back to this image, what captured your attention? Is it brothers being together, praying together? Is it the cave, the time of retreat into the cave of our hearts? Is it the cross or the folded hands in prayer? Or is it the lack of other brothers present, or the lack of being with the people in need?

We have heard the reports from the various Conferences and have also read the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which is so beautifully put together by the team. And now we are going to take what we have heard and read, and now discern what the Lord is calling the Order of Friars Minor to be, and to do.

The First Core is about **Renewing our Vision**. What is vision? It is what we see, what we should see, and how to see. I like the way St Bonaventure puts it, to see with the *oculis contemplationis* – the contemplative eye. If we can see as God sees, then we can love as God loves. So what do we see as the giftings, in other words, the charism from the Holy Spirit for the world, embodied through our lives.

In this First Core we are invited to clarify our **charism**, to discern which aspects we should be open to today? So we need to acknowledge and understand what our charism is, and then to see which aspects we are called to more deeply embody in our particular cultures and situations at this moment of salvation history, *our* history, our *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, our soul's journey into God.





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As Franciscans, we never journey alone, we never walk alone. And our vision is our fraternal vision, and our Father Francis shows us how. Allow me to reflect on this beautiful short letter that our Father Francis wrote to Brother Leo.

This version is taken from the Kajetan Esser edition.

*Brother Leo, health and peace from Brother Francis!*

*I am speaking, my son, in this way – as a mother would – because I am putting everything we said on the road in this brief message and advice. If, afterwards, you need to come to me for counsel, I advise you thus: In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience.*

*And if you need and want to come to me for the sake of your soul and for some consolation, Leo, come.*

Like our earlier image, we can see from this letter two brothers being together. And that's the primary gift of our Order – fraternity! Francis always refers to himself as 'frater' and used this term more than any other (306 times), except the 'Lord' (410 times). The number of times a term is used demonstrates how much this word resonates in the heart of Francis. Hence we, who follow in the footsteps of Francis, are truly called to be 'contemplative fraternities' (Lord + frater).

We hear in our reports that "our spirituality of our charism is rooted above all in a life of prayer and contemplation" and this "contemplative dimension must be given top priority", "with concrete and practical applications". Personal and communal prayer, faith sharing and Scripture sharing is essential at all levels. It is quite emotionally stirring to hear this battle cry for prayer, this means that we friars have not given up the aspiration to make our connection with God the fore and centre of our Franciscan lives.

But the very fact that many conferences make this point shows that in practice, this contemplative dimension is a huge struggle and challenge in many of our communities and may we dare say, also in our individual lives. How can we dream anew to have the Lord always in our hearts and in our conversation, like St Francis? I quote from the letter: "it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow his footprint and poverty" and "do it with the blessing of the Lord God". Do we regularly include God in our discernment and conversations?

Can I also honestly ask about our Christian dimension of our formation? We take a lot of interest on human and Franciscan formation, which is laudable; but if we Franciscans are **Christocentric**, like St Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus, then how are we doing Christian formation in both our initial and ongoing formation programmes? We hear in our reports to "revitalise our charismatic identity", about "listening to the Spirit", about "spiritual meaning of our Rule". Is our spirit really in tune with the Spirit of the Lord?





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“*Sicut mater*” is one of the most moving phrases used by Francis in his writings: “as a mother”. Question: is Francis a man or a woman? We know the obvious answer, but why would he specify here “as a mother”? We can surmise that it could be his personal experience of care and accompaniment by his mother, the mother who sets him free when he was chained by his father’s ambition. We Franciscans are blessed with an example of Francis who shows us that personal accompaniment and mutual care are the hallmarks of our fraternal life, and we are called to set our brothers free (not set our brothers *off*). And we respond with generous availability: “If you want to come to me, come”. Many conference reports affirm this need for mutual trusting care and intentional personal accompaniment.

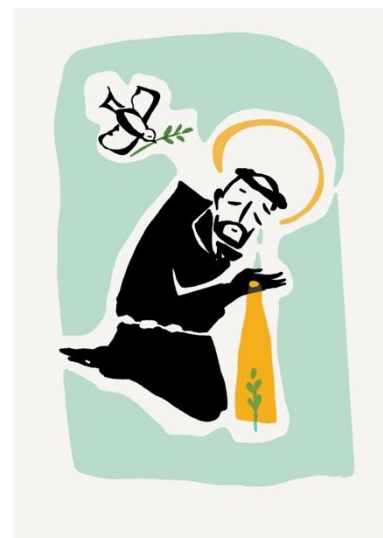
However, the reality in many of our fraternities is that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And hence the many calls to review and revitalise our ongoing formation programme, so that each friar can journey towards greater affective maturity, freeing himself from the chains that bind his True Self, courageously combating individualism by being *frater*, combating clericalism by being *minor*. At this Chapter, can we generously share about the successes and challenges of our provincial ongoing formation programme, recalling that “ongoing formation is the *humus* of initial formation” (RFF108).

It is only by grounding ourselves deeper into our Franciscan identity can we be authentic beacons of faith and hope. We hear from the reports about joyful witnessing to our way of life, and this joy can never be faked. Like Francis who so spiritedly sang the Canticle of his heart despite his internal and external pain, can we also allow the Lord to transform “our wounds into new life”? We know in our hearts that only the Risen Lord can do this radical transformation, which then brings us peace, the peace that the world cannot give.

Recall that our new Pope Leo XIV opened his first address by wishing everyone the peace of the Risen Lord. Is this profound pax the hallmark of our individual and fraternal lives? Are we other-centred and growth-centred even as we shed tears from our personal pain?

Let’s look at this image. This is the pictorial voice of Ashley, a young adult from our Franciscan parish in Singapore. She designed this for the journal cover of our Franciscan Young Adults Retreat.

Finally, let’s look at this line from the letter: “everything we said on the road”. “On the road” has the ring of *syn-hodos*, or “on the same road”. We are in the midst of the Synodal Process of the Church, and right now, we celebrate this Chapter in a profound synodal way with our Franciscan Sisters and Secular Franciscans. The entire Franciscan family is accompanying each other on the road, giving voice to each heart that is present. What sublime beauty we are currently experiencing.





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So circling back to theme of our First Core: *Renewing our vision to clarify our charism*. How are we now called to further welcome others to journey with us, especially the young and those from other cultures and faith traditions?

The Franciscan call is to be incarnational, to be with the people, especially the poor and those at the margins, with the fragile and those whose lives are fragmented. The technological and digital society we live in is brutally and rapidly changing, causing some souls to be desperately isolated and severely disconnected. This phenomenon is disturbing especially when there are phenomenal advances in communicative devices. Is this the “new poor” we are called to engage with, bridging Artificial Intelligence with Authentic Affectivity? How will that look like?

Staying on the same line: “everything we said on the road”, I will end this reflection by highlighting the word “everything”. In another translation, “everything” is read as “all the words” (“tutte le parole” in Italian). All/everything... it sounds like Francis heard every single word from Brother Leo’s seemingly incessant anxious questioning. We sometimes fail to listen empathically when we are frustrated or we are dealing with our own sufferings, but Francis here is “*sicut mater*”, like a mother, lovingly accompanying in an attentive and sacrificial way.

Learning from this short letter of Francis to Brother Leo, may we all in these days of being together at this Chapter, also lovingly open our hearts to one another and listen deeply to the question behind the questions, and encounter each person behind their story, so that ultimately, we hear God’s Canticle of Love resounding in every heart. Here’s wishing all of you a good session at the World Café.

