



Letter to the Formators in the Novitiate

Rome, 3 July 2026

Prot. 115507 (FS 102/26)

To all Formators of Novices

Dear Brother,

May the Lord give you peace!

With this letter we address you and all the Formators of Novices. Last year we sent a series of letters to the Formators of our Order: first to the Provincial Ministers and Custodes, as those primarily responsible for formation in their Entities; then to the Provincial Secretaries for Formation and Studies, the Moderators of Ongoing Formation, and the Animators of Vocational Pastoral Care. This year our gaze and our thoughts are directed in a particular way to you who are engaged in Initial Formation. Last March we sent the Letter to the Formators in the Postulancy, and in the coming weeks we shall also send a letter to the Formators in the Post-Novitiate. These letters, always prepared in agreement with the Minister General and his Definitory, are intended to offer encouragement and to highlight important aspects of the formation process.

Now, in a fraternal spirit, we address you, called to carry out one of the most delicate and precious services in the life of the Order: accompanying the brothers who are taking their first steps on the path of Franciscan life.

Biblical Icon

Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end. They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand', he said, 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. 'In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him. 'Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly'.



*'I give you a new commandment: love one another; you must love one another just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples'.*¹

These words of the Lord Jesus, spoken in the context of the Last Supper, constitute a true icon of Christian life and, in a particular way, of fraternal life in religious life. Jesus does not leave his disciples a structure or a system of complex rules: he entrusts to them a way of life founded on mutual love.

This love is not a vague sentiment, but a concrete form of life. It is the very love of Christ, who gives himself to the end, who bends down to wash the feet of his brothers, who welcomes, forgives and serves. Fraternal love thus becomes the visible sign of Christ's presence in the world. This is the true meaning of "following in the footsteps" of our Lord Jesus Christ.²

For us, Friars Minor, this commandment takes on a particular depth. Fraternity is not merely an organisational form of our life, but the place in which the Gospel becomes visible and credible. It is in fraternity that we learn to live the Gospel *sine glossa*, in simplicity and truth.

Novices enter the Order attracted by an evangelical ideal embodied in the life of the brothers. For this reason, the first and most effective instrument of formation is not a programme or a method, but the concrete witness of a fraternity that truly lives the Gospel.

The formator and the formation fraternity, therefore, do not educate only through words or teaching, but above all through the evangelical quality of their life and of the fraternal life into which the novices are inserted.

A Franciscan Reflection

Thomas of Celano, in his *First Life of Saint Francis*, offers us a valuable testimony to the way in which Saint Francis formed the first brothers, the new disciples who entered the fraternity.³

The biographer emphasises that Francis formed his brothers "not simply by words, but above all by his deeds and by the truth".⁴ He was aware that authentic formation springs from concrete witness. The brothers learned by observing the way Francis prayed, worked, met people and lived together with the brothers.

At the heart of the life of the first friars was a fervent fraternal love, for they "poured out all the affection of their hearts into the fraternity" and "strove with all their strength to give even themselves in order to meet the needs of their brothers".⁵ Francis wanted his brothers to recognise one another as gifts from God. Fraternal love was not an abstract ideal but a lived reality, expressed in everyday life through mutual forgiveness, mutual support, and the sharing of hardships and joys.

¹ John 13,1-5.12-17.34-35.

² 1Peter 2,21; cf. Rnb 22,2; 1 Cel 84.

³ Cf. 1 Cel 39-41.

⁴ 1 Cel 41.

⁵ 1 Cel 39.



Fraternal life thus became the primary place of formation. The brothers learned to live together, to welcome differences, and to support one another on their spiritual journey. For this reason, we can say that the Master of Novices is not the only formator: the fraternity itself is formative. Every brother contributes, through the witness of his life, to the growth of the novices. Likewise, the novices themselves can become a stimulus for the growth of the fraternity.

Francis also formed his brothers in evangelical poverty. This did not simply mean renouncing material possessions, but living with hearts free and trusting in God's providence. Poverty became a way of life that enabled the friars to remain close to the poor and to share in their condition. Free from attachment to anything, the brothers were “always joyful, restrained by no fear and distracted by no anxiety, awaiting the future without worry”.⁶

Alongside poverty, Francis placed great emphasis on manual work. Working with one's own hands meant sharing the life of ordinary people, living with dignity, and contributing to the support of the fraternity. Manual labour was also an exercise in humility and responsibility, for the brothers served everyone “with humility and devotion”.⁷

A central element of Franciscan formation is minority. Francis desired that his friars should truly be *lesser brothers*: little among the little, seeking neither privilege nor power. Minority is an attitude of heart that leads one to serve others with simplicity and joy.⁸

The life of the brothers was deeply rooted in prayer, and they “hardly ever ceased praying and praising the Lord”.⁹ Francis desired that the brothers might “raise their spirits to heaven”.¹⁰ Contemplation was not separated from daily life but permeated every activity.

From fraternal life and prayer sprang the mission, which was always carried out fraternally, because the brothers “rejoiced whenever they could gather together, and even more when they remained together”, and thus were able “to carry out, without argument and with every obstacle removed, whatever was entrusted to them”.¹¹

Finally, the brothers “sought peace and gentleness with everyone in all things”.¹² This is the distinctive style of Franciscan mission. Their way of encountering others was to be marked by kindness and benevolence, becoming a visible sign of the peace of the Gospel.

⁶ 1 Cel 39.

⁷ 1 Cel 39.

⁸ Cf. 1 Cel 40.

⁹ 1 Cel 40.

¹⁰ 2 Cel 94.

¹¹ 1 Cel 39.

¹² 1 Cel 41.



The Novitiate as a Deepening of Franciscan Identity

In the light of these pages, we can better understand the meaning of the Novitiate.

The Novitiate is a privileged time during which the novice is called to deepen his Franciscan identity.¹³ It is not simply a matter of acquiring information about the history of the Order or about the norms governing religious life. Rather, it is the time in which the brother learns to recognise the evangelical form of Franciscan life and to make it an integral part of his own identity.

This also entails a gradual discernment of mission. Franciscan mission is not merely a collection of apostolic activities; it is the concrete expression of our charism. To evangelise, to serve the poor, and to promote peace and universal fraternity are different ways of living the same evangelical vocation received from Saint Francis and of living it within fraternity.

Novices, especially in today's world, need a deep and solid identity. We live in an age marked by great mobility, cultural diversity and, frequently, by profound human fragility. For this reason, it is essential that the Novitiate helps the brothers to become deeply rooted in the Gospel and in the Franciscan charism. To achieve this, it is essential that formators devote time to carefully prepared personal conversations, accompanying each novice as he grows in every aspect of Franciscan life and in his own vocational development.

Evangelisation and Closeness to the Poor

An essential aspect of our identity is our evangelising mission. From the very beginning, the Friars Minor have been sent to proclaim the Gospel more by their lives than by their words. The Novitiate should help the brothers to understand that their vocation is not only contemplative or fraternal, but also missionary. For this reason, we wish to recall that "the Ministers can, in accordance with the Statutes, decide that several periods of apostolic activity are to be spent outside the community of the novitiate in order to complete formation of the novices, provided that the novitiate does not exceed two years".¹⁴ This may consist of "one or more periods of apostolic exercise outside the Novitiate House, without prejudice, however, to the specific formation of the Novitiate".¹⁵

Since our legislation provides for this possibility, and because we are convinced of the value of such experiences, we encourage you to prepare a programme which, insofar as local circumstances permit, may be submitted to the Provincial Minister or the Custos, in accordance with the General Statutes.¹⁶ This refers to situations in which the entire Novitiate fraternity—novices together with their formators—moves for a period of time to another house of the Order designated by the Provincial Minister, either for apostolic ministry or in order to experience solidarity with those who are marginalised.¹⁷

¹³ Cf. *RFF* 190.

¹⁴ *GGCC* 154 §2.

¹⁵ *GGSS* 100 §1.

¹⁶ Cf. *GGSS* 100 §2.

¹⁷ Cf. *CIC*, can. 647 §3.



To evangelise means, first and foremost, to bear witness to the Gospel through one's life. A fraternity that lives in simplicity, joy and peace is already, in itself, a proclamation of the Gospel. Yet evangelisation is also expressed in concrete encounters with people, especially the poor and those on the margins of society.

Francis discovered the heart of the Gospel in his encounter with the lepers.¹⁸ That encounter marked a genuine conversion in his life.

Today we too are called to recognise the lepers of our own time: people with disabilities, the sick, those with intellectual disabilities, the poor, the excluded and those living on the margins of society. Encountering them is not merely an act of charity; it is a true theological place in which the friar encounters Christ himself. It is a fundamental experience in the formation of novices.

For this reason, the Novitiate should offer the brothers concrete opportunities for service and solidarity, enabling them to experience personally the joy of living the Gospel among the poor and those who are marginalised.

The Beginning of Life in the Order

The Novitiate marks the true beginning of life in the Order. It is a particularly important period during which the brother is called to discern and deepen his vocational commitment.

The *Ratio Formationis Franciscanae* reminds us that the Novitiate is a time of discernment and of strengthening the vocational choice already made. The novice is invited to test his vocation by measuring it against the concrete life of the Order and the demands of the Gospel.¹⁹

The Novitiate House

The Novitiate House should be a living fraternity and, according to our legislation, should be erected as a guardianate. This enables novices to experience genuine fraternal life, rather than belonging merely to a formation group.

For this reason, the legislation of the Order provides that there should be at least three novices before a novitiate year may begin. This requirement is not merely organisational; it expresses the conviction that formation takes place above all through fraternal relationships. Novices learn a great deal from one another by sharing the journey and supporting each other. In this way they learn to live, work and evangelise as brothers.

In some parts of the Order, where the number of novices is smaller, interprovincial and international Novitiates have proved very fruitful. These experiences also provide an opportunity to live the universal dimension of Franciscan fraternity. The Order is increasingly moving in this direction, enabling novices to become acquainted not only with their own Entity but also with others.

¹⁸ Cf. *Testament* 2:1-3.

¹⁹ Cf. *RFF* 190.



In this regard, we believe it is important to foster opportunities for novices from different Novitiates, including those in different countries, to meet one another. Where travel is not possible because of distance or limited resources, digital means of communication can be used.

Fraternity as the Place of Formation

Within the Novitiate, collaboration between the Master of Novices, the Guardian and the whole fraternity is essential. Although the Master has a specific responsibility for the formation process, he is not the only educator. Every brother in the fraternity contributes to formation through the witness of his own life.

The novice should experience that the whole fraternity is concerned for his journey. We encourage you to identify practical ways of involving the entire fraternity in the formation process. At times this is neither simple nor easy, requiring considerable creativity and patience, yet it is essential for authentic formation.

Integration into the Life of the Order

During the Novitiate, the brother gradually becomes integrated into the life of the Provincial fraternity and of the Order as a whole. This integration takes place both at the theoretical and the practical level.

At the theoretical level, novices study the principal themes set out in the *Ratio Studiorum*, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the various dimensions of our life and mission.²⁰

At the practical level, it is important that they be given opportunities for concrete experiences, including those outside the Novitiate House, as mentioned above. In planning these experiences, it is advisable to involve those responsible for Mission and Evangelisation, as well as the JPIC offices.

Prayer and Contemplation

A fundamental element of the Novitiate is the deepening of the experience of prayer and contemplation. The novice is invited to learn how to remain in the Lord's presence, cultivating a personal relationship with Christ.²¹

Particular importance should be given to the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture according to the Franciscan tradition. By listening attentively to the Word of God, following the example of Saint Francis, the brother learns to discern the Lord's will in his own life.

²⁰ Cf. *RS* 147.

²¹ Cf. *RFF* 197.



It is also important that novices come to know and love the Psalms, so that they may enter more deeply into the prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours. Naturally, the other dimensions of Franciscan spiritual life must not be neglected.²²

Manual Labour

Alongside prayer, manual labour continues to hold an important place in Franciscan formation. It helps the brothers to live simply, to share responsibility for the life of the fraternity, and to remain close to ordinary people. Manual labour, undertaken together within the fraternity by the formators, the other solemnly professed brothers of the fraternity and the novices, forms them in responsibility, humility and a spirit of mutual sharing.

Conclusion

Dear Brother, the service you provide is of immense value for the life of the Order. Through your ministry of accompaniment, novices learn to know and love the evangelical form of life handed down to us by Saint Francis. We encourage you to carry out this ministry with patience, wisdom and a truly fraternal spirit, always remembering that the first and most effective instrument of formation is the witness of one's own life.

May Saint Francis and Saint Clare intercede for us, so that the brothers who today begin their journey in the Order may grow into authentic disciples of the Lord and true Friars Minor, capable of living the Gospel in fraternity and in mission.

Fraternally,



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Secretary General for Formation and Studies

²² Cf. GGSS 7-19.