

**EIGHTH CENTENARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE ORDER
1209/2009**

“The Lord gave me brothers...”

*“And those who came to receive life gave
whatever they had to the poor and were
content with what they had....
And we desired nothing more.”
(Test. 16-17; FF 117)*

May the Lord grant you Peace!

1. My dear brothers, with a prayer for peace I begin this Letter which marks the third stage of the journey toward the eighth Centenary of the Founding of the Order 1209/2009. Already in the earlier Letters, we called to mind several times the grace of this Jubilee, which allows us to revisit the origins of our Order, and helps us to rediscover in ourselves “the inspiring spark which first gave rise to the following” which “is only a response of love to the love of God.”¹

In the programmatic document, “*Following Christ with Francis Today*”² this third stage is presented as a deepening of the reflection on the topic which characterizes the spiritual experience of Francis of Assisi: “*the evangelical fraternity as the locus and sign of newness of life in Christ*” and precisely, “*the beginnings of life in fraternity and apostolic mission founded on the Gospel.*”³

In these expressions we can detect two emerging themes from which we can begin our reflection and to which we can refer for the journey of the fraternity of the Order in this year, 2007-2008:

1. the evangelical fraternity

2. the apostolic mission

Before fully entering into my reflections, I would like to call your attention to the two adjectives which qualify respectively the fraternity and the mission: *evangelical and apostolic*. These words capture the ultimate meaning of the following of Christ which is born from the receptive reading of the Gospel, and which generates, as it were, a communion among brothers who would become “apostles”, i.e. *those sent* to announce the same Word. A fraternity is authentically *evangelical*, that is, called by Christ to live

¹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CIVCSVA), Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ*, Rome, May 19, 2002, No. 22.

² Cf. Order of Friars Minor Conventual, *Following Christ with Francis Today*, A Program for celebrating as a Fraternity the Eighth Centenary of the Origins of the Franciscan Charism (2005-2009), Rome 2005.

³ Ibidem, p.16.

according to the Gospel, as long as it is at the same time *apostolic*, i.e. capable of mission.

Evangelical Fraternity: the sign and place of the newness of life in Christ

For you it is not to be so...

3. The *fraternitas* developed around Francis beginning with the experience of his personal encounter with Christ and of his conversion of life, “*from the moment, however, when he began to speak publicly with a persuasive force, the situation began to change and some began to follow his example.*”⁴ Here one can find the meaning of Franciscan fraternity: a relationship which does not reside in an abstract ideal, but in reciprocal relationships of each one connected with the another. It is enough to recall the story from the biographical sources concerning the arrival of the first brothers. With the presence of brothers, some form of organization to inspire them became necessary, and from the Testament we can draw the conclusion that *to live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel* comes after the *gift of brothers*, since we see Francis consulting the Gospel along with his first companions. For the fraternity he does not base himself on the life of the apostles or even of the first community in Jerusalem, but directly on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on how He lived and behaved in this world. Thus, the first Franciscan fraternity was inspired by the life of Christ and this evangelical model. “*Poverty, minority, humble manual labor, the mission of witness and the proclamation of the Gospel are the essential coordinates of the communion and the meaningfulness of the Franciscan fraternity.*”⁵

The Gospel passage, which I want to propose for our reflection, is one which is particularly dear to St. Francis and is part of that Word which the Seraphic Father “*had impressed deeply in his memory*”⁶ and which emerges here and there in his Writings as an authentic experience of fraternity:

Luke 22, 24-27

“There arose a discussion as to who should be considered the greatest: He (Jesus) said: “The kings of the nations govern them and those who have power over them are called benefactors. For you, however, it should not be so, but who is the greatest among you ought to become as the least and the one who governs as the one who serves. In fact, who is the greatest, who sits at table or who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? And yet, I stand in your midst as one who serves.”

In the structure of this text we can point out three aspects which trace the division of the evangelical fraternity of the apostles gathered around Jesus, but which offer us as well an occasion to reflect, since our fraternities are likewise not free from the same dynamics:

a) the discussion: v.24

⁴ R. Manselli, *San Francesco d'Assisi-Editio Maior*, Cinisello Balsamo (MI),2002, p.151.

⁵ Cf. Order of Friars Minor Conventual, *Following Christ with Francis Today*, A Program for Celebrating the Eighth Centenary of the Origins of the Franciscan Charism (2005-2009), Rome, 2005, 11.

⁶ Celano, *Vita Prima*, XXX, 84: FF 467.

- b) the healed relationship, vv. 25-26
- c) the model for the relationship: v. 27

a) *the discussion: conflict among the brothers.*

We are in the context of the Last Supper, in which Jesus has just broken the bread of His Body and given the chalice of His blood (Luke 22, 14-20) and has announced the betrayal of Judas (22, 21-23); the evangelist describes these actions of Christ to create a dramatic effect; the disciples seem not to notice the drama, they *are discussing who of them can be considered the greatest*. This scene is a repetition of the same scene in Luke 9, 46-48 when Jesus announces his passion: already then the disciples responded to this dramatic situation with the same discussion: *who of them can be considered the greatest* (9, 46). The Greek term to indicate discussion (literally: argument) is the same in the two contexts: *philoneikia* which signifies love for victory by which is expressed the desire to win, to overcome the other-- the origin of every war and fight. One affirms himself at the cost of the other. All human divisions take their origin from here.

To the word argument is added the motive for the discussion: *who of them can be considered the greatest*. The word "considered" may be understood in Greek to mean *appear, be esteemed*, that is to project an image before others. It is interesting to note, both here and above, the marks of division which affect the fraternity arise from the desire to prevail over the other.

b) *the healed relationship: "for you, it is not to be so"*.

After the discussion there follow the words of Jesus who reads and interprets what is happening among His disciples with a simple and effective metaphor: *the kings of nations govern them, and those who have power have themselves called benefactors*. *Kings and benefactors* are two social categories who play commanding roles and who establish relationships of subservience, thus creating distance and difference. Fraternity in the Bible is always a place of difficult relationships, because it is there where otherness and difference appear: e.g. from king to slave, one is either brother or the two institutions are inconsistent with the value of equality and the confidential nature of fraternal relationships. Returning to our text, the *discussion/argument* among the disciples is the clear manifestation of this power-game which takes place likewise in our fraternities: competition, rivalry, jealousy, egotism, self-promotion.

The intervention of Jesus brings the disciples back to the reality of the fraternal relationship: *"for you, it is not to be so"* in so far as the fraternity is a gift which comes from accepting the Gospel and deciding to follow Jesus. If we pay attention to the literal sense of this text, we can discover a nuance in the affirmation of Jesus which opens up a better way of understanding it: *"for you not only is it not to be so, but instead who is the greatest among you should become the least and one who governs as one who serves."* We are speaking of a situation, which begins "it is not to be so", it is about to become the "other". Become what you truly are, he who is *great (becomes) small*; and he who *governs (becomes) a servant*. Let us pause a moment to consider these four terms which define the relationships in fraternity: the first two refer to the roles of authority in government in the community and the other two to being placed "under" in the community. In the face of the politics of domination which *kings and benefactors* exercise, Jesus proposes the strategy of service, in which what counts is not the role, nor the power, not one's personal value, but the recognition of others and the renouncing of

one's rights. It is not difficult to perceive the "revolutionary" import of such an unconditional disposition to serve, which by the grace of God, characterizes the group of disciples. The source of such an approach needs to be sought in Jesus in the act with which He hands himself over, as was mentioned a little earlier, in the Eucharist.

c) the model of relationship: the servant.

The words which follow the metaphor indicate, in parallel with John's Gospel after the washing of the feet (John 13, 12-17), that the model of disciple within the fraternity is the *servant*, which is expressed by the Greek term *deacon*. With this image we are led to the center of the mystery of Christ, who is at the same time servant of the Father and servant of the brothers. The evangelist Luke sends us back, therefore, to the great icon of the *new commandment* expressed by Christ in the act of washing the feet of the disciples. This is the key to Christian existence and to evangelical fraternity. Contrary to the "world" (*nations*), which deforms the relationship among brothers by seeking success and dominance, the disciple of Christ is a man prone entirely to the gift of self in the humble service of the brothers and considers himself and behaves in every circumstance as a servant of others. And in synthesis, this is what Francis wanted to express when he gave to his fraternity the name of *friars minor*.⁷

"*I am in the midst of you as one who serves*": here is the evangelical image with which to read the fraternal relations in the community: Christ-Servant, He who "*humbles himself...making himself obedient*."⁸ There are two dimensions inseparably connected to fraternity: *poverty and obedience*-- the two coordinates of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God, who "*emptied himself, assuming the condition of servant*."

The servant of God and of his brothers: the Admonitions

3. With the evangelical image of *servant*, I would like to propose the reading of a second text which can help us to understand better its characteristics, a text drawn from the *Admonitions* of St. Francis.⁹ In the *Admonitions* Francis illustrates with different nuances and with much realism the characteristics of the friar minor and of the Franciscan fraternity. We cannot certainly read here all the 28 admonitions which appear in the Franciscan Sources, but it is good to keep in mind that their literary genre is of a form of *reportage of sayings or words* and consist, therefore, of short and simple words of wisdom, collected and transcribed by the same persons to whom they were addressed and offered for the admonition and formation of the friars.¹⁰ Among the *Admonitions*, some of them are introduced by a Biblical citation; others revolve around some Scriptural concepts. Such a method resembles that of the *Apophegmata Patrum*. If the sayings of the Fathers can be defined as the "practical guide to the experience of God in the desert," the *Admonitions* are instead the "practical guide to the experience of God in the fraternity."¹¹ For Francis, in fact, fraternity is the place of the "encounter with God"; accordingly, the

⁷ Cf. Rnb V, 9-13; FF 19-20

⁸ Cf. Phil. 2, 6-11.

⁹ Cf. FF 141-178.

¹⁰ Cf. Grado G. Merlo, *Ammonizioni*, in *Francesco d'Assisi, Scritti*, Padova, 2002, pp.441-445.

¹¹ F.P. Messa-L. Profili, *Il Cantico della fraternità*, Assisi, 2003, pp.17-18

Admonitions are the *magna charta* for the life of fraternity, which is constituted radically on a life lived in greatest poverty with a constant reference to Christ.¹² Within this “fundamental law” Francis draws, with many individual portraits, the ideal image of the Christian man, of the *servus Dei*, of the *frater minor*.¹³

The unifying thread which joins and gives the background to the entire corpus of the *Admonitions* is the *kenosis*, the “emptying” of Christ, his being Servant, his redemptive poverty, and consequently, “*his being a new creature*.” (Gal. 6, 15). Only in this dimension can we establish the foundations for an authentic evangelical fraternity.

Admonition V

Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the *image* of His beloved Son according to the body and to His *likeness* (Cf. Gen. 1, 26) according to the Spirit.

And all creatures under heaven serve, know and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you. And even the demons did not crucify Him, but you, together with them, have crucified Him and are still crucifying Him by delighting in vices and sins. In what, then, can you boast? Even if you were so skillful and wise that you possessed all knowledge and knew how to interpret every kind of language, and to scrutinize heavenly matters (Cf. 1 Cor. 13, 1-4) with skill: you could not boast in these things. For, even though someone may have received from the Lord a special knowledge of the highest wisdom, one demon knew about heavenly matters and now knows more about those of earth than all human beings. In the same way, even if you were more handsome and richer than everyone else, and even if you worked miracles so that you put demons to flight: all these things are contrary to you; nothing belongs to you; you can boast in none of these things. But we can *boast in our weaknesses* (Cf. 2 Cor. 12, 5) and in carrying each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This text does not speak openly about fraternity, but it addresses each one of us and his experience of life and faith: from here, however, he invites each brother, through a series of reflections, to look at himself in the light of Christ and to live the *new commandment* with the wisdom that comes from the cross of Christ.

Here also, as in the Gospel passage from Luke, we can discover three aspects which emerge from an attentive reading of what Francis proposes to us:

- a) *the vision of the human being; vv.1-4*
- b) *the root of sin; vv.5-7*
- c) *the glory of the human being; v. 8*

a) the vision of the human being

The text begins with the invitation to look at oneself in the light of God: “consider”. We are the work of God and this fact gives meaning to our life. Keeping his eye on our

¹² C. Paolazzi, *Lettura degli Scritti di Francesco d’Assisi*, Milano, 1987, p. 113.

¹³ Cf. K. Esser, *Gli Scritti di S. Francesco d’Assisi*, Padova, 1982, pp. 83-149.

humanity, Francis sets out to re-read the first pages of the Bible: God “*created us in the image of his beloved Son according to the body*” and adds “*and in his likeness, according to the spirit.*” It is a new vision of the human person, which Francis proposes in these lines, a dimension which leads us back to look at ourselves always, in our daily life, with his positive glance. My own body reproduces the body of Christ, my Spirit is made in *His likeness*: God has conferred this “*sublime condition*” which enlightens my life and all my relations with my brothers. This dignity remains even when, the *Admonition* continues, I fall into sin; and to make clear the grandeur of humanity, the Saint uses an effective image to point back to the harmony of the creature which “*serves and obeys its Creator*”. All of creation knows what to do and fulfills its service with obedience and submission to the Creator “*better than you.*” The only creature endowed with intelligence and wisdom is the human person who is also the only one not capable of hearing the voice of the Lord, but rather one to “*crucify him by delighting in vices and sins.*” The text puts the burden of responsibility on each of us. There are three elements which define the refusal of the human being to look at himself and live in the light of God: vices, sins, and delights. Often in the Writings of St. Francis, we find the two words together, vices and sins, but they are really two distinct terms, because “vices” indicates bad tendencies, the egotistical passions, and drives which live there and over which we do not have complete control, while “sins” refer to the concrete acts, willed and committed, which have marred the image of God which we are and at the same time have ruined the relationship between God and the brothers. The verb “delight” is used to indicate taking pleasure in immediate satisfaction of one’s drives while seeking a liberation and self-actualization. Therefore, in the terms which Francis uses, this expression means to turn back on oneself, deluding ourselves into thinking that we are self-sufficient, and capable of self-realization outside of communion with God and one’s brothers. And Francis, at this point, leaves us with a question: “About what can we truly glory?”

b) *the root of sin*

What really makes us enter into the dynamic of the pursuit of self, and consequently of sin? Here Francis reveals himself as a profound knower of the human spirit: without the love of God in the human person, “*without charity*” (cf. 1 Cor. 13, 1ff), there is nothing in the human being. Even the most sublime gifts one has do not help. He goes on to list the various manifestations of knowing: *intelligence*, which in this context means “intellectual refinement” (Latin: *esse subtilis*); *wisdom*, as life-experience; *knowledge* as varied sorts of learning. Francis adds to these also some spiritual gifts: *the interpretation of tongues* and the *capacity to scrutinize accurately (subtiliter) heavenly things*, that is, by theological penetration and the understanding of mysteries. “*In all this,*” says the text, “*you cannot glory about yourself*”, neither of your *beauty*, or *riches*, or all the extraordinary skills which enable us to do “*marvelous things, such as drive out devils.*” He adds, in fact, with some very strong words: “*All these things are an obstacle to you and they are not your concern*”. With acute insight Francis touches the root of sin: not to take oneself as a work of God but rather appropriate to oneself all the gifts received from the Lord.

c) *the glory of the human being*

In this way we reach the answer to the question left open earlier on: “*we can glory in our infirmities.*” The one reality proper to the human person is to be a limited creature—fragile, mortal, dependent on his Creator. To glory in this is to recognize one own poverty and thus to be grateful for what God gives us and be open to the *gift of brothers*, a concrete manifestation of the presence of the Lord. The motive, thus, for glory is to be sought in evangelical following of Christ crucified: “*to carry each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Evangelical fraternity

4. If we put together now what emerges in the Gospel with what appears in the fifth *Admonition*, we have a description of evangelical fraternity beginning with the dynamic of each friar until we arrive at that which is common and characterizes our living together *ad intra*, and also our being the proclamation of the Gospel in mission.

a) In the Gospel text we considered the context of discussion (argument) among the disciples at the Eucharistic table with Jesus. The object of their *conflict* is to establish *who is the greatest*. It is a real and serious argument which does not take in consideration what else is going on at the moment: the Eucharistic gift of Jesus. We can read the motivation for this imposition of one thing upon the other as a way to recognize the distorted vision one has of God, of one self, of others. The text of Francis’ *Admonition* becomes enlightening: what is *the vision of the human person* which underlies our fraternal relationships? What are the concrete signs with which we look at our brother as a *gift* because he is *the image of Christ*? It is not a rhetorical question that allows us time for an answer but one which brings home to us the meaning of our living in common. We will never succeed in welcoming the other if we do not look at him in the light of God. Otherwise every word, every look, every gesture is already misunderstood even before it is expressed. And perhaps in our fraternities we struggle to dialogue and encounter one another because we do not have a *pure* view of the other. Francis seems to say that motive for this struggle to communicate is to be found in seeking to *be better* than everyone, in attributing to oneself the gifts received and in combating injustices if our *gifts* are not recognized and appreciated. In the words of *Admonition V*, we can say that we make our vices emerge and are guided by them. Thus, we do not succeed in dialoguing with our brothers, and even less do we succeed in having a positive vision of the human person, of the brother before us. The going back on oneself and the search for one’s independence and autonomy are the fruit of this will to dominate.

b) the *Admonition* suggests a journey of discernment which can bring us to recognize the root of sin: It involves entering into oneself and discovering that we are fragile creatures, inclined to evil, if we do not leave room *for the love of God to be poured into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit who is given to us* (Rom. 5,5). It is this love which allows us to recognize our limits and the joy of the gift of a brother, as a gift greater than my capacities: “*intelligent and wise... all knowledge... to interpret all languages and deeply scrutinize heavenly things... more beautiful and richer than all else, even if you were to do marvelous things, such as cast out demons...*” It is a list which gathers together all our

motivations, even the most camouflaged ones of spirituality, a list which expresses very well our hidden desires to be recognized by the fraternity, “*kings and benefactors*” of all.

d) “*I am in the midst of you as one who serves*”: these words of Jesus offer us the view of a concrete path for conversion for the person and for the fraternity. Francis suggests the manner of this “*service*” of Jesus: carrying “*each day the holy cross*”. My “*cross*” is not an injustice imposed by others. Defining it in other words, we can say that “*cross*” means : the following, Gospel, Eucharist, gift of self, submission, listening to the brother, sharing, poverty, mission. Service then is a conforming to Christ poor and crucified, the servant at the feet of each person. The evangelical fraternity has the mandate before the world for this type of witness: it is to be an icon of Christ, poor and obedient.

The reading of the Gospel text and the comparison with the fifth *Admonition* have led us to discover the essential lines of evangelical fraternity through the reversal of the values which we cannot say belong only to the “*world*”, because, through a healthy personal discernment, we must admit that they dwell in us and present themselves always alive and negatively intruding into different life situations. But, it is well to remember that, for Francis, the fraternity is not the fruit of an ascetic personal effort of combat against these “*evil intentions*” which emerge from our inner depths.¹⁴ For the Seraphic Father, fraternity becomes possible on account of the Fatherhood of God, of which the Son, Jesus Christ, is the revealer. At the beginning of his experience, this is his fundamental insight which allows him to read everything in a new way: the gratuity of the love of God. This changes him completely and everything acquires a new meaning, a new motivation. Francis is the fraternal man because he intuits that everything has a common origin, the love of the Father, *Almighty, Omnipotent and good Lord*.¹⁵ Evangelical fraternity is, therefore, the gift of love of the Father in Jesus Christ, lived thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit “*and his holy operation*”.¹⁶ Certainly, this does not mean that we are freed from all effort. The Gospel text and the Franciscan writing give us some clear indications which cannot be undervalued with regard to our personal and fraternal journey.

For this reason I would like to recall some qualities of an evangelical fraternity, because they can be the *place-sign of the newness of life in Christ*:

- To be a brother does not depend on a decision, as happens in the case of friends, nor on a choice, but on a welcoming: it requires the recognition and welcoming of the other as brother. This means that the experience of fraternity does not enter among the items that I can produce through my own will, with the effort of my hands or with the imagination of our intelligence. It always has the aspect of gift which precedes me and therefore also the dynamic of a calling which summons and touches me intimately. We recall: “*The Lord gave me brothers*”; this is a characteristic of our order—a fraternity which is given.
- In addition part and parcel of fraternity is the notion of reciprocity, whose vision in the Bible (which is anything but an idealized notion of fraternity since its vision is

¹⁴ Cf. Mark 7, 20-23

¹⁵ Cant. FF 263

¹⁶ Cf. Rb X,8; FF104

clearly disenchanted) always appears weak, easily broken, since it is realm in which otherness and difference are manifest. Fraternity is often seen as the place ready to explode into conflict or at least into some difficulty. Whatever it is, the welcoming of a brother always passes through the recognition of his diversity.

- Another characteristic of fraternity is the area of belonging: there is an “inside” and an “outside”: the inside of the fraternity always creates a sense of intimacy, a sense of mutual belonging, a depth in relationships all of which are indispensable for the maturation of the person, and where charity does not remain an abstract or disincarnate reality, but becomes concrete and personalized—the place where love becomes word, glance, welcoming, gratuity.¹⁷
- A final typical trait of the experience of fraternity: through it the other confers on me a new identity. At the moment in which I call the other “brother”, I confer a new name also on myself, precisely that of brother. To recognize that one has a brother means to arrive at a new awareness of oneself.

Welcoming, reciprocity, belonging, identity: these four terms are woven together into our evangelical fraternity. They exclude any expression of power or “greatness” and require, on the contrary, the evangelical attitude of the lesser and of the servant/deacon, of obedience and of poverty. It is the question of the climate in which to live our relations, to authenticate our proposals and desires, to undertake our duties, to grow in a healthy manner. If in the experience of the love of God and neighbor every good act flows together, then in the concreteness of the daily fraternal life, the gate which leads more directly to that experience is none other than reciprocal obedience, even as the Fathers suggest: “I do not see in all the Scriptures that God has any other wish for the human person except that he humble himself before his neighbor, that he renounce his own will, that he beseech His help unceasingly and keep his eyes free from the sleep of forgetfulness.”¹⁸ Not that this is easy, but it turns out to be profoundly true. When, in the Our Father, we pray that the will of God be done, we ask first of all to have the experience of the love of the generosity of the Father in our regard, to experience the love of salvation that God has for all men, which expresses itself in the grace of a given fraternity. Without this it is impossible to live with joy. One cannot practice any of the commandments with joy and enjoy the kingdom of God. Every brother shares the responsibility for the life and climate of the fraternity. The basis is trust which we ought to have the one toward the other. We are free and responsible.

To want to be “great” means following the Lord Jesus, needing to serve. To serve means carrying out the “will of good pleasure” of the Father toward others—something which is realized fully in Jesus. To fulfill the “will of good pleasure” means to make shine brightly that love of God for human beings in which their dignity and liberty are rooted. We are speaking of that greatness which knows how to liberate the dignity of the human person, revealing them to be not only the object of love but subjects of love. To serve means to gain this redemption: free the dignity of the human person and make the presence of the Lord appear in all its splendor. And if serving does not lead to that goal,

¹⁷ It is enough to read a few pages which describe the fraternity at its origins: e.g. 1 Cel 39-40; FF 387-391.

¹⁸ Isaiah of Scete

then this means that the service is still a too human one, perhaps a sentimental generosity or the desire for self-affirmation.

Too often we are inclined to consider these reflections as something abstract, not rooted in the reality of life and because of such thinking, we feel justified not to give serious attention to our Gospel commitment. The celebration of the centenary becomes then really the occasion for grace to refresh our commitment to an authentic life which will transform deeply every aspect, interior and exterior, of our person. We have no right to an evangelical fraternity, but we have the duty to ask for the grace to do all that depends on us so that it can become the *place-sign of the newness of Christ*.

Apostolic Mission Founded on the Gospel

5. In the General Chapter we celebrated this year, we affirmed clearly that the expression **“Formation for Mission”** can synthesize and express—in this time of grace that the goodness of the Lord is giving us to live—the possible priority for the Order in these next six years (until 2013).¹⁹ I would like to call the attention of everyone back to this priority which will accompany the journey of the third stage toward the celebration of the centenary.

The reflection on fraternity which has characterized the first part of this letter has laid the foundation for the formation for mission, without which our missionary witnesses would be in vain. *We know that our mission has its roots in the Trinity: it flows from the single mission of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, sent by the Father. Rooted in the signs of the times, the Franciscan approach to mission in whatever culture and life-situation becomes established today, in addition to proclamation, by the witness of a genuine fraternal life, of minority, of service in the local church and in the Order.*²⁰

The frequent risk into which we fall when we speak of mission is to try to define it in relationship to what we do or to a specific activity, as if everything is reduced to a “quantity” of accomplishments or “conversions” achieved. For Francis, this is not the case: he does not describe the activities of the friars or the services they perform, but their way of life. We read, in fact, in the Final Rule: *“I advise, admonish, and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that when they go about in the world, they do not argue, and they avoid any disputes, nor judge others: but let them be meek, peaceful and modest, meek and humble, speaking honestly with everyone, as is proper.”*²¹

This exhortation is completed by the one found in the Earlier Rule: *“The friars who go among the infidels can behave spiritually among them in two ways. One way is that they not argue or dispute, but are subject to every human creature for love of God and they should profess to be Christians. The other way is, when they see that it pleases the Lord, they may announce the Word of God because they believe in God, the Almighty Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, creator of all things and in the Son, Redeemer and Savior and are baptized and if they become Christians since if one is not born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*²²

¹⁹ Cf. General Chapter 2007, “*To form for mission*”—*Elements of a six-year project of the Order*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ RB III, 10-11; FF85.

²² RNB XVI, 5-7, FF43.

Here are contained the traits of the friar minor in mission: a fraternal and universal man, disposed to benevolence, who does not impose himself, is ready to serve, is a peace-maker. The picture is complete with the indication of the modality whereby the friar minor goes about in the world, “behaving spiritually,” he says, “in two ways.” The first is the life-style modeled on the beatitudes, the second way is the public proclamation of the Gospel which comes about, when they see that it pleases the Lord. In the words of Francis, it involves the affirmation that the life itself of the missionary is the living Word of the kingdom. It is not the case of proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near, but that through the presence of the friars, it is already in our midst and it is the evangelical fraternity which becomes the concrete and efficacious sign in which the testimony is confirmed. What then is “mission” for Francis and for his friars minor? It is to open the human heart to the gift of God, to the Spirit of the Lord; it is the refusal of all power; it is the proclamation of the incarnation of God to become companion to every man plagued by suffering.²³ The mission of the friars consists, therefore, in the proclamation of the mystery of God, of his omnipotent love, and what the discovery of this reality can do in the life of those who welcome it: the hearing and safeguarding of the Word, conformity to the Gospel and constant fidelity, proclamation made essentially with life, accompanied and explained by the word. The heart of the mission lies here. All the rest—traditions, structures, diverse initiatives-- are at the service of this message.

The missionary intuition of Francis, founded on respect and the dignity of human persons, of cultures, of traditions encourages us to dare all the more in new initiatives in accord with the needs of our time. We ought to keep in mind what the friars who gathered for the International Mission Congress in India in January, 2006 told us in reading the history of our time: “The world in which many of us live is marked by the phenomenon of secularism,, indifference, and above all globalization. All of these often produce a profound crisis in human, religious, social and cultural values. Furthermore, they create a deterioration in the economic situation, which increases poverty, injustice, exclusion of too many from the use of goods and the migrations toward the West and its mega-cities. These phenomena accelerate the processes of internationalization and multiculturalism, which are not always accompanied by a new intercultural dialogue. We are dealing with situations that call out to the Church and to religious life, and thus to our Order, and ask us for a change in our “being in mission.”²⁴

From all this it follows that concretely we need to make certain choices and establish some priorities so that this “formation for mission” can become a personal dimension of each friar and of each friary of the Order. I think it opportune to recall some aspects which are fundamental to arrive at a better formation for mission:

- a greater harmony between the life of prayer and the life of the apostolate, not forgetting that the source of our mission is the daily and prolonged encounter with the Lord God;

²³ Cf. Roman Missal, Common Preface VIII.

²⁴ Letter to all the friars of the Order, “*We cannot hold back in silence about what we have seen and heard.*” International Mission Congress, OFM Conv. Kerala(India), January 1, 2006.

- living the experience of mission as a fraternity and taking care with a renewed spirit of the formation of the “(religious) brother”, so that there be a better understanding of his identity and place within the fraternal life;
- being educated in the responsible, healthy and poor use of the means of communication (internet and other means in general);
- being prepared for a greater missionary sensitivity, a mission which accentuates the Franciscan dimension of life, giving priority to places and expressions more tied to our spirituality, tradition and culture²⁵;
- **Liturgy.** Liturgical prayer of the Hours, the celebration of the Eucharist, “lectio divina”, personal prayer, contemplation: these form part of a fundamental aspect of our evangelical life—the relationship with the Father, *Almighty, Omnipotent and good Lord*. To live authentically and with passion this aspect of our Franciscan life is mission. In this regard it is good that each fraternity strive to have a common and participated liturgy. It should set aside times and places so that it becomes a prophetic proclamation of a life which is authentically evangelical through this sign of a community gathered together in the name of Christ.
- **Justice, Peace, the Safeguard of Creation, Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue.** To affirm these values with our life is an expression of a discernment which is born, as in the case of Francis, from an evangelical reading of creation, of the world, of history. “*Franciscan justice is experiential, lived first of all and then preached. The Spirit fosters in the world the building of a just society to which everyone has a right to belong as sons of the same Father.*”²⁶
- **Interculturality.** To live the Franciscan charism means, the economy of history and of the Church, to affirm a specific culture which makes the Gospel its fundamental option. Right now, our Order presents a multiculturalism which requires a newness of life in each brother and in our fraternal relationships. Accordingly, it is of vital importance to arrive at a deeper awareness of history and of the Conventual Franciscan spirituality, since it is essential for the fraternity’s creative fidelity to the one spirit which animates the Order. Certainly, this process will take time before it bears fruit, but in any case it will be able eventually to take place if we allow ourselves to be involved without delegating the responsibility to others for what daily life asks us to assume personally in the events of each day.

Fraternity in Mission

Servants and brothers of all.

6. The servant is the model that Jesus left us for living his new commandment: *love one another as I have loved you* (cf. John 13,34). It is this example for which we are called to ask the grace so that our fraternities can be authentically evangelical and capable of apostolic mission animation. We can bring this about only if we are increasingly men of prayer and “*family members of God*” (Eph. 2, 19). Intimacy with Christ pushes each friar and the fraternity to mission, to be servants, that is, friars minor.

The true “servant” is truly Jesus. In His total trust in the Father, He serves everyone to gain for everyone that same confidence. The force of His love derives from the force of that intimacy. The same thing is true for us, his disciples, his servants, “*simply servants*”

²⁵ Cf. General Chapter 2007, “*To form for mission*”—*Elements for a six-year project of the Order*.

²⁶ Ibidem. Pp. 198-199.

and nothing more. Our title to glory and honor is found right here: not to wish to be or to have anything else than what the love of the Lord wants for us.

What is asked of us is to learn the divine art of serving. Serving humanity is our specific vocation. St. Paul says the same thing when he writes: “We are your servants in the name of Jesus” (2Cor 4,5) and together we are “fellow workers of your joy” (2 Cor 1, 24).

Fraternity and service are the two coordinates in which are contained our life as friars minor, “who go among the infidels... and are subject to every human creature for love of God.”

Consequently, fraternity is:

- ***to serve in solidarity***

To be united in God’s desire with regard to all people and at the same time to be united with humanity so that His love shines as a liberator.

- ***to serve as the capacity to maintain the beauty of hearts***

When we are offended, how do we keep ourselves in charity, if we do not recognize a heart as precious as ours to maintain likewise in its beauty? Instinctively, we are drawn to accent our wounded right with the duty of the other to heal us. To offer pardon, as a sign of renewed benevolence, means to maintain the beauty of the creatures. Acting in this way, I keep my own beauty and I save that of the brother. We are keeper of our brothers, the guardians of their beauty before God.

- ***to serve as an opportunity to liberate the dignity of humankind***

The “joy of the kingdom” is involving and radical. It reaches the roots of the heart and nourishes its life. Brothers have the right to our joy. We ask for the grace not to hold on to our goods as if they constituted our joy, that if we were to lose them, our joy would likewise disappear. We ask for the grace not to vindicate our rights, as if we would be crushed, were they not recognized. We ask for the grace not to complain about life but rather to live it in the love of the Lord who gave His life for us.

- ***to serve as the victory over illusions***

There is a struggle which, when assumed ends up by oppressing; there is a struggle instead which multiplies our joy with its “lightness”, which renews our energies and gives impulse to our life. It is the struggle of the beatitudes, which mortify our illusions and our dreams to show off, but which renews the energy of the heart and increases our life (cf. Is. 40,27-31).

- ***to serve as a sharing of hope***

If we truly share and participate in the suffering of hearts, others can really feel that they are welcomed and loved. They will be able to lead their life in a totally different perspective, with totally new vigor. The essential thing is to arrive at living in such a way that others, by the grace of God, feel the welcome and love. Thus, the world will seem more livable, the presence of God more visible and the mutual consolation more

determining in the type of existence for each and every one has. All this becomes a shared truth, when the heart is open to the wisdom that comes from the other.

AN OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION

7. As a conclusion to this Letter, I would like to propose three forms of action in order to put into practice what we have meditated on together, lest it remain alien to our everyday experience, the real place to verify our ideals and our life-choice in a concrete way.

1. ***Some questions*** are necessary to help us understand the motivations which animate our fraternal relations, our service, our missionary spirit. What are the signs which tell that we truly love one another? What are the signs that we are disposed to make ourselves servants? What are the signs that our fraternity is really evangelical and apostolic? What are the signs that a desire for mission truly animates each of us and our fraternity? What are the signs that we are meaningful for the people and for the Christian communities in which we live?

2. ***Some initiatives***. In the area of formation each individual friar should be helped to have “ a missionary sensitivity both for the local ministry and for a commitment ad gentes – plantatio Ordinis”. Besides, care should be taken that formation be “better cared for and more solid in terms of witness and a significant and effective mission within the variety of the local churches.”²⁷ It is appropriate to keep in mind the priority commitment of the “*life of union with God, giving special attention to Lectio Divina, as a formative Franciscan value*” and to “*arrive at a renewed commitment to the service of mission, according to the example of St. Francis.*”²⁸ In the programmatic document for the Franciscan centenary it is suggested that a “*Chapter of Mats*” be celebrated in every circumscription or in each Conference “*in order to verify and re-launch the fraternity.*”²⁹

3. ***A sign*** which can express, in this third stage of the project for celebrating the Centenary, the desire of rediscover our origins in order to bring about, in our day, *what the Lord revealed* in Francis of Assisi and what He asks of us, personally and as an Order, in order to be effective witnesses, servants of all, brothers in Christ. For this purpose, at the end of the “*Chapter of Mats*” the text of the *Admonitions* will be given to each friar.

I close with the word which Francis himself wrote to the entire Order³⁰:

*“In the name of the most high Trinity and holy Unity: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
To all the brothers to whom I owe reverence and great love...”*

²⁷ Cf. General Chapter 2007, “*Forming for Mission*”-Elements for a six-year project for the Order.

²⁸ Ibidem,

²⁹ cf. Order of Friars Minor Conventual. *Following Christ with Francis Today*.-A Program for Celebrating as a Fraternity the Eighth Centenary of the Origins of the Franciscan Charism (2005-2009), Rome 2005.

³⁰ *Letter to the Entire Order*, 1-3,6-11. FF 214-216.

*to all the ministers and custodes,
to the priests of the same fraternity, humble in Christ,
and to all the simple and obedient friars, the first and the last.
Listen, sons of the Lord and my brothers,
and pay attention to my words.
Bend the ear of your heart
And obey the voice of the Son of God.
Observe his precepts wholeheartedly
And fulfill perfectly his counsels.
Praise him since he is good,
and exalt him in your works,
since for this reason he sent you into the whole world,
so that you can bear witness to His voice
in word and deed
and make known to all
that there is no other omnipotent except Him.
Persevere in discipline and holy obedience
and fulfill with a good and firm purpose what you have promised.”*