



MINISTER GENERALIS
ORDINIS FRATRUM MINORUM CONVENTUALIUM

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“Oh, that today you would hear his voice,
harden not your hearts...”
(Heb 3:7-8; cf. Ps 95:7-8)

**Toward Communal Holiness,
Namely, Opposing the “Anti-Francis”**

A Message of the Minister General for Lent 2021

Dear brothers:
Peace be with you!

1. May we listen to the Spirit and harden not our hearts!

When I invoked the Holy Spirit to help me animate this Lent, now just around the corner, two simple verses came to my heart. Actually, it was one verse expressed in two similar forms. The first variation was from Psalm 95:7-8: “Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Do not harden your hearts...” The second was from the Letter to the Hebrews, in which the author quotes the same Psalm: “Oh, that today you would hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (3:7-8). The psalm is so familiar to us...we say it several times a week. Therefore, if I may, I would like to take this opportunity to offer a reflection that I hope will help us.

Before the verse from the Letter to the Hebrews, “Oh, that today you would hear...,” the author writes, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says.” It refers to the breath of the Spirit that inspired the author of the psalm. However, the Holy Spirit also acts among us and makes proposals to us that we often do not listen to sufficiently. Our hearts can be hardened not because of ill will or thoughtlessness, but because of the many other realities; all of them important, of course, which we usually use to justify ourselves: commitments, worries, urgencies, problems, work, etc. St. Francis of Assisi already wrote of this danger in the *Earlier Rule*: “Therefore, all my brothers, let us be very much on our guard that, under the guise of some reward or assistance, we do not lose or take our mind away from God” (*Earlier Rule*, XXII 25; *FF* 60).

So let us listen carefully to what the Lord tells us and what the Spirit inspires us to do. Let us not harden our hearts. Let us be attentive to the danger of distractions!

2. A vocation to communal holiness

I simply want to remind you, once again, that this year, and certainly every year, we as Friars Minor Conventual have been called, under the inspiration of the

Holy Spirit, to internalize **our vocation to communal holiness**. In fact, in our Six-Year Plan of the Order, the stage scheduled for 2021 contains the appeal “to become a fraternity” (Six-Year Plan of the Order, Part 2). The introduction to Part 2, states: “Discipleship leads us to *conformitas*, following the footsteps that St. Francis left us, not by ourselves, but within a *fraternitas* which invites us toward a communal holiness.”

Fraternity “like a living body, must be nurtured in order to grow.” Therefore, we reaffirm “the importance of initial and ongoing formation, of the testimony of credible communities, of studying and deepening our Franciscan charism.”

In order to achieve these purposes, the introduction mentions the use of some simple and easy-to-use tools, such as: “a daily schedule that gives priority to what makes community, (prayer, meals and recreation), a weekly and monthly schedule that makes time for eating together and sharing life (House Chapters, retreats, *lectio divina* and fraternal outings).

More specific and profound instruments are also mentioned, such as being “capable of evangelical discernment”; knowing how the fraternity “is regarded” within our social, political, and historical context in order to offer more appropriate responses; or trying “new ways of incarnating the charism with creative fidelity” in keeping with the famous Motion No. 9 of the 2019 General Chapter: “New Wineskins for New Wine” (cf. Mt 9:14-17).

All this is about more than just maintaining the “fragile balance” of the fraternity. It is also about our happiness in witnessing the specific nature of our conventual style, namely, *fraternitas*: not only in the sense of forming a community, but “to live, think, act in a fraternal and evangelical way at every stage of our lives.”

3. The importance of ongoing formation

Brothers, times have changed and have changed very quickly. Like the rest of the world, the Order is in the midst of the pandemic and finds itself facing various lockdowns that have halted our meeting agendas. However, these situations again remind us of what we have stated for years: **the importance of ongoing formation**, especially in our friaries; formation that involves everything: the heart, the mind, the spirit, evangelical discernment, decisions made in the Spirit, the ways a solid fraternity conforms itself, common commitment, etc.

I therefore ask the whole Order not to “harden its heart” when listening to what our vocation and the Church ask of us: that we not distort our charism, that we not lose heart in enriching what we have chosen, that we take care of all fraternal areas, beginning with the House Chapter, our fraternal and formative meetings at the area level, that we welcome all other meaningful opportunities to carry out community formation. In fact, House Chapters, *lectio divina*, community retreats, etc., when done well, are a source of fraternal closeness, forgiveness, mercy, growth and formation. They are a source of interpreting reality, of serious and evangelical planning, of welcoming theological gifts, and of conversion.



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4. Conversion – opposing the “Anti-Francis”

Lent is almost synonymous with conversion, just as “conventuality” is synonymous with healthy fraternity. The Ministers General of the First Order, speaking about the *Earlier Rule*, now celebrating its 800th anniversary, stated that the *Rule* “makes every appeal to **live the following of Jesus as brothers**. There is a sort of dogma, a distillation that appears between the lines which could be read like this: nothing is as ‘anti-Franciscan’ (or even anti-Christian) as a lifestyle that takes root outside of our devotion to the bonds of fraternity...” (*To Live and Follow: A Letter of the Franciscan Ministers General*, October 4, 2020, subheading: *Opposing the “Anti-Francis”. Only as brothers!*).

I wish you a good and creative Lent, carried out with a spirit of responsibility to make fraternal life grow according to our charism. Our charism of fraternity is a gift from the Most High: “the Lord gave me some brothers” (cf. St. Francis, *Testament*, 14; *FF* 116). All of us: Ministers Provincial, Custodes, Delegates, Guardians, formators, and every friar, are called to listen to the Spirit who urges us to be what we say we are: Franciscans and Conventuals.

May our Lenten journey be guided, everywhere in the Order, by a special fraternal process toward communal holiness.



f. Carlos A. Trovarelli
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Minister general