



MINISTER GENERALIS
ORDINIS FRATRUM MINORUM CONVENTUALIUM

Prot. N. 685/19

Rome, October 4, 2019

Greeting to the Friars on the Solemnity of St. Francis of Assisi

Dear brothers, on this solemnity I wish to send my heartfelt best wishes to each of you and to everyone who walks with us on our journey of faith.

A Timely Recollection

A little more than three months ago, after concluding the 202nd Ordinary General Chapter, His Eminence, Angelo Cardinal Comastri, gave a homily¹ which resonated in our hearts. He reminded us of the fascination and deep emotion that our Seraphic Father St. Francis felt as he contemplated the humility of God. The words “You are humility” resounded inside the Papal Basilica of Saint Peter, as all the friars of the Order accepted the invitation to be true disciples of Jesus, to try to live the same humility of God; the humility that was manifested in the Incarnation, in the person of Mary and in the life of St. Francis.

As the Cardinal’s homily continued, he more deeply examined the experience of the Brother of Assisi who not only was awestruck before the Incarnation of the Lord, but also before the Cross, in which he saw the Love of God. Indeed, for Francis, the crucifixion revealed the quality of God’s omnipotence: the Almighty in Love.

Cardinal Comastri added to his reflection by giving us two contemporary examples.² One was a layman who was distant from the ecclesial world. He advised his friend Pope Paul VI to “prepare people in the Church who are good, merciful, humble, meek, serene and who are able to love everyone and dialogue with everyone...because there are far too many educated people. There are far too many intelligent people. What is needed are truly good people”. The other example was Cardinal Schuster, who left as a legacy to his seminarians the certainty that “people are no longer convinced by our preaching; but faced with holiness, they still believe, they still fall to their knees and pray.”

For his part, Pope Francis, speaking to the Capitular friars during the audience on the same day, shared what he considered to be the most important aspects of the Franciscan charism:

¹ Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, June 17, 2019

² Giuseppe Prezzolini

- the Gospel as a way of life (not as something merely to be preached!);
- listening to the Gospel as the source of all manifestations of Franciscan life;
- the mission as a living exegesis of the Word and the assimilation of the Word as a way of conforming our lives to Christ;
- the discipleship of Christ in fraternity;
- fraternity as a gift to be accepted with gratitude; as a setting of acceptance, where friars meet and share their lives, but also as a space and a daily pause to cultivate silence and contemplation; fraternity in which we are all equally brothers; a school of communion that is nourished by prayer and devotion;
- minority, lived according to the example of the Lord, namely, in the manner of a servant, a slave of all, without ambition, far from the temptation of power; minority which is a prophetic denunciation of the logic of the world;
- peace, understood as reconciliation and harmony with ourselves, with others, and with God; reconciliation that generates mercy, and mercy that regenerates life.

A Few Images

On one hand, I wanted to mention the two “ecclesial interventions” that took place at the conclusion of our last Ordinary General Chapter, so that we remember them, and, with God’s help, contemplate and live them. On the other hand, I have not brought up the reflection that was given at the beginning of the Chapter, namely, the presentation by His Eminence, Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle. Despite this, I shall try to imitate a little of the method that Cardinal Tagle used during his reflection, that is, to use some images (certainly more symbolic than analytical) in order to express some beliefs about our charism.

*First Image: “Under the Mantle of Holy Mother Church”
(or “The Gift of the Charism”)*

Recalling our papal audience last June 17, I am reminded of the scene in which the Bishop of Assisi covered a naked St. Francis with his cloak, to protect him, but at the same time, to confirm Francis in his purpose, which was nothing less than to call God his “Father” and to live the Gospel. The interpretation is clear: we leave everything to follow the Lord. We give everything back to the world; we take off the clothes of the “old man” in order to clothe ourselves in the sackcloth of the Gospel lived in fraternity. Thus, the Church confirms us in these holy purposes. Despite this, we easily change our sense of what nakedness means to us, and we consequently try to put on “clothes” that we think are perhaps more attractive. During this feast of St. Francis, I invite every friar and every fraternity to rejoice in the beauty of our charism, to feel their hearts overflow with grace, but also to discover, through healthy self-criticism, whether or not our “original nakedness” might have been replaced by other versions of nakedness; nakedness that

requires us to put on clothes that do not belong to us or do not represent what we have promised to live. Once again let us strip ourselves of everything that takes us away from the beauty of our charism. Let us not despise God's gift. Let us not be afraid to always return to our original charism.

Confirmed by the Church, clothed in the charism, formed in fraternity, protected by God the Father; let us once again proclaim our purpose: to live the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Second Image: "The Eyes and Their Mystery" (or "The Simplicity That Fascinates")

In the very first days of my ministry I had the opportunity to visit several friaries. In one of these, which shall remain nameless, there was something so simple—yet so special—that it moved me. An elderly friar there, who shall also remain nameless, was very proud to show me his friary. He told me about the history of the place, about his community and in particular, about his work. In fact, while so many things were happening elsewhere in the world and while so many paradigms were changing over the years, he worked in the friary's printing house and evangelized from there. It was a powerful experience; as though I could "see" his story reflected in his pale eyes and clear gaze. However, his eyes held a mystery: after putting in so much work and effort into that printing house, his eyesight was almost completely spent. This brother, who was actually once a missionary, lived his life in simplicity and fraternity and wore out his eyesight carrying out fruitful labor.

Our hard work, the kind of work that we friars do throughout the Order, is, thank God, very diverse. We do pastoral work of all kinds, social work, academic work, manual labor, service within ecclesiastical structures, other services, paid jobs, productive work for economic self-sustainability, etc. We make a living from our work and we evangelize with our work. We work in so many ways, but always as true lesser brothers: with simplicity, starting from the fraternity, to serve the fraternity, and through it, to serve the Church and the world.

Francis was deeply moved by God's humility. However that wasn't all! He launched his evangelical life by working as a simple mason, building churches with the work of his hands. I too am moved every time I discover—as with the elderly brother—that it is worth wearing ourselves out in order to generate life, to proclaim the *kerygma* of salvation to the world.

Third Image: "Guests" (or "Disappropriation as a Lifestyle")

We are pilgrims in the world; our obedience makes us available to change. Furthermore, some of us have been entrusted with the task of visiting the Order and different parts of the world. As the Minister General, I must visit a great many places and I am filled with joy as I encounter and become familiar with all the friars, cultures, nations, and customs. The world does not simply pass in front of me, but passes through my heart. Diversity is thrilling for me and it thrills me even more to know that, being diverse, we form, and are, a single big family. The world is our cloister and no matter where we are, we feel at home. One of the characteristics of our charism is disappropriation and even in this we are minor.

We are aware that we are guests: nothing belongs to us. We go about serving others for free, “just because”. We do not dominate the world, we inhabit it. We go about “asking permission” to “tread upon” the sacred ground of the friars and the People of God, of all peoples and cultures. Nothing and nobody belongs to us. We are free to love with the charity of God. However, we all run the risk of losing this characteristic of our charism. Appropriation plays against us, and manifests itself, not only as “having” but also as having power in some way. Sometimes in our Order, we sell the rich heritage of our evangelical freedom at the low price of power. Power warps fraternity. Power deforms our openness. Power distorts the face of our brother. Power disfigures the landscape of the world we inhabit. Dear brothers, let us always be guests, like the Brother of Assisi whom we celebrate. We do not own life, we inhabit it; we do not own the fraternity, we live with the friars; we are not masters of the tasks entrusted to us, rather we are responsible servants; we do not own the Liturgy, we simply dwell in its Mystery (not in its ornamentations!); we do not own the ecclesial community, we are part of it (and if we preside over it, we do it in charity, not as masters!); we do not own our ministry, we are simply ministers; we do not own the sacred, “we enter into it”; we don’t own history, we accept responsibility for it.

Fourth Image: “The Little Girl and the Earth” (or “Harmony with the World”)

Some time ago, while visiting a mission area, I was walking along a very rural road, in an equally rural town and I saw a barefoot little girl with dirty hands and feet, bringing a dirty piece of roof tile up to her lips. There was a total interaction between the earth and the little girl. I do not intend to analyze the social, cultural and health aspects of this image in order to moralize about it. I would simply like to present an image which, in similar ways, we see repeated all around the world. Is it an image of poverty? Is it an image of all the poor of the world? Is it an image of innocence? Is it an image of the simple life, of the simple human being, of the “common man”? Is it an image of nature? I believe that it is all of the above. However, I would like to focus in particular on the important word “poverty”, which brings us closer to another important word in our charism: “minority”. “The poor you will always have with you.” (Mt. 26:11). The poor, the common people, the life connected to the land, the daily life, these are part of our fraternities everywhere. This is a grace. St. Francis married Lady Poverty and chose to walk with her, connected to the land, to the end of his days. All over the world I have seen similar scenes: there is always a “little girl” connected to “the earth”, sometimes by choice, sometimes due to injustice in the world, sometimes for cultural reasons, and sometimes because of the mysterious designs of God. “The little girl and the earth” perhaps reminds us of Creation in its original state and calls to mind the mysteries present in history, peoples, nature and society. We are called to interpret those mysteries with the Word, and in fraternity, to be engaged with the world, with creation, with the poor, with young people and with life. As Pope Francis said, we are called to be a “living exegesis of the Word.” The Word illuminates and interprets our commitment to life. The Word and our minority make us friends with the earth and all its environments.

Fifth Image: “The Tables” (or “The Originality of the Son”)

Few things gather us together like a table. Whenever I visit a place, the “table” is always the reference point around which a fraternal relationship is created. I am often expected to preside over the table, but, in any case, the table always remains the “central mystery” around which the life of a fraternity gravitates. The table is a daily setting in which “eating” becomes an opportunity for strengthening our fraternal life. The table is not only a place for lunch or dinner, but also for House Chapters, for dialogue between friars, for planning and working, for groups and guests. However, only the Eucharistic Table contains all tables and settings, all peoples and all their expectations and hopes. The Eucharistic Table contains “Bread and History,” as Cardinal Tagle would say, and all fraternity begins there. It is the Table providing Bread and History that generates ultimate meaning for everyone and everything. The Eucharistic Table is content, strength and benchmark. How I regret that so many fraternities are deprived of Eucharistic concelebration in fraternity! At the Eucharistic Table we are all equidistant from the Love of the Crucified; we are equidistant from that feast, which nourishes us, and at the same time, builds us up. All tables have that “central mystery”, which adds a “plus” that no form of individualism can ever generate. This “plus” at the table may not be a matter of learning, but a matter of sapience (wisdom); the wisdom of humble people who may not know how to run fast, but who certainly can walk together.

The table offers a place for everyone, “especially the poor,” as Cardinal Tagle would say, because at a poor person’s table, dignity is not conferred by the quality of what is put on top of the table; it is conferred by the humility of those who gather around it in such a way that there is always room for one more. This is how the Son of God wants it. He wants us all to be included.

I dream of an Order that is always gathered around a table. I dream of large tables where everyone has something to say and something to learn. I dream of a table that is open to the poor. I dream of a table where we can all acknowledge the Bread broken together, while in fraternity—and while in fraternity, make history within History.

Dear brothers, let us help each other be constantly mindful of the charism to which we have been called. Let us not falter! As we celebrate this solemnity, may we celebrate the grace of being Friars Minor Conventual at this time, at this moment in history, in this world!

Happy Feast of the Seraphic Father St. Francis!

Friar Carlos A. TROVARELLI
Minister General