

“TO HAVE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD AND ITS HOLY ACTIVITY”

(2R 10)

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,
May the Lord give you peace.

On the occasion of the feast of the Transitus of our father and brother Francis, we greet you with great joy and hope and ask that the triune and one God may fill you with His blessings.

In last year's letter it was said that our service of animation and administration wished to be carried out through “... *reciprocity in acceptance, in availability, in exchange of information, in trust and in openness of heart*”. Moved by those same sentiments again this year, we wish to share with you some reflections on the priorities taken up by the General Chapter of 2003 in its Final Document; priorities which invite us to return to the essentials of our Franciscan vocation. On this occasion we offer you the fruit of our fraternal meetings on the first priority: “*the spirit of prayer and devotion*”.

These reflections are inserted into the context of the celebrative itinerary of the Eighth Centenary of the Foundation of the Order, which we will begin in 2006 and will accompany us until 2009. It is a time of grace which the Lord grants us in order to begin a process of *discernment* of our life and mission; to take up again our personal and fraternity *life projects* and also to *celebrate with joy* the grace of our origins. In this way we wish to respond in a creative and suitable manner to the challenges which come from the Church and world of today and in awareness of our rich and centuries-long spiritual and cultural heritage, which numerous Friars have left to us down through history.

The General Chapter of 1997 presented the contemplative dimension as “*the fundamental element in the life and mission of the Friars*” (*MemProph* 11). The most recent Chapter did the same by affirming that “*our life of faith must include the whole person: mind, heart, feet, relationships, the manner in which we look at, meet, embrace and love our neighbour*” (*LgP* 27b). We also stressed the same thought in the aid *Followers of Christ for a fraternal world* (*FCFW*, p. 7).

Open to the Spirit

“*The spirit of prayer and devotion*”, as the fundamental priority of our charism, is not only an *attitude* towards God, others and nature, or even a well organised *praxis*. It is the way of being and living of each Friar Minor in all his dimensions and in the different circumstances of life: in prayer, work, study, fraternal relationships, pastoral services, sickness, etc. This is why, for Francis, the most important thing is “*to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*” at every moment of life.

Francis allowed himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit in all his intuitions and initiatives; he was only able to say, go and do anything when “*moved by the Spirit*” and “*full of the grace of the Spirit*” (Cfr. *1Cel* 11, 26; *LMj* 2, 1; *3Comp* 10, 36). He himself confessed that it was God Himself who took the initiative in his life: “*The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance*” (*Test* 1). It was, in fact, the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity that made him “... *non tam orans, quam oratio factus*” (*2Cel* 95).

This is also true for those who come to the fraternity: Francis did not committed himself alone to living “in the Spirit”, but he wanted his Friars, “*who through divine inspiration*” (*1R* 2, 1) wished to choose this form of life, to have the same experience of faith. He proclaimed that the Holy Spirit was the “*Minister General of the Order*” (cfr. *2Cel* 145, 193) and exhorted his followers to desire “*the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*” (*2R* 10) above all else. The Friars, therefore, can carry out any fraternal, ecclesial or social service whatsoever, without, however, “*extinguishing the spirit of holy prayer and devotion*” (*2R* 5; *Letter to Brother Anthony*).

Francis, in order to explain what “*having the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*” meant, compared the wisdom of the Spirit with the wisdom of the flesh and of the world (cfr. *SalV* 9,10; *Adm* 27, 1). For him, the flesh indicated mortality, the weakness of mankind, the sentiments which oppose God. That is why he was able to affirm: “*we, miserable and wretched, rotten and foul, ungrateful and evil ones*” (*1R* 23, 8). In contrast, the spirit is what comes from God and leads to God. “*A servant of God, - Francis said - can be known to have the Spirit of the Lord in this way: if, when the Lord performs some good thing through him, his flesh does not therefore exalt itself... Instead he regards himself the more worthless and esteems himself less than others*” (*Adm* 12).

But, in order to possess the Spirit of the Lord, “*we must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh, but, instead, we must be simple, humble and pure*” (*2LtF* 45). And he adds: “*blessed are the clean in heart, for they will see God* (*Mt* 5,8). *The truly clean of heart are those who look down upon earthly things, seek those of heaven and, with a clean heart and spirit, never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God, living and true*” (*Adm* 16).

During these eight hundred years of Franciscan history it has been seen how the Spirit of the Lord has spurred many Friars and Sisters to always seek new ways of living the spirituality in every culture, in all times, without ever closing in on self. The Friars and Sisters who allowed themselves to be guided and sanctified by the Spirit of the Lord in the most diverse of circumstances and who have been able to discover innumerable forms and methods of prayer are many; they

are the Friars and Sisters who the Church has recognised officially as blessed and saints in all areas of human and ecclesial life: on the missions, in culture, in the arts, in the hidden services of fraternity, in sanctuaries, in parishes, in social works and in pastoral ministries. The people who have never renounced “*the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*” are very many and often they had to pay, with the price of their blood, for their faithfulness to their confession that God is “the supreme and only Good” of life.

All of them have constructed a rich and century-long spiritual heritage, worthy of being known and, especially, lived.

Challenges and commitments

We, in the different Entities of our Order, realise that there are still slowness and difficulties both in perceiving the importance and centrality of our life of consecrated persons, and in discerning the concrete options or possible means for putting them into practice in everyday life. Because of this, God runs the risk of occupying a small space in our life and prayer becomes a mechanical recitation of prayers through living with strong tensions between the life of prayer and pastoral urgencies. Too often other dangers spring from these situations: the desire to dominate and control others, to possess and accumulate goods; the anxiety to enjoy egotistical pleasures, to have prestige and privilege without taking the dignity of others into account; or even simply of having a deceitful affective life and also a deceitful spirituality.

We must recognise, however, that there are also efforts to carry forward the contemplative dimension of our charism. Many Friars are engaged in creating suitable spaces (oratories, hermitages) and in recovering the value of interiority and silence; in seeking new methods of prayer which are more suitable to everyday life; to celebrating, in the best way possible, the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist with the fraternity and people; in re-discovering the value of the prayerful reading of the Word of God.

From these lights and shadows are born some challenges and commitments for each one of us and, in particular, for those who carry out the ministry of animation of the different Entities (the Ministers with their Definitors or Councillors, Guardians, Formators, etc.). It is necessary and urgent, therefore, in theory and in practice, to place ourselves in a dynamic process which will lead us from *desperation* of mind and heart to *unification and centralisation* of our life in Christ in order to construct in us a harmonic unity, in which each day we ‘bring back’ to God what we are and do, what we want and project; from *activism* to *moratorium*, in order to find the link that exists between interior life, sacramental life, life in Fraternity and evangelisation; from *efficiency* to the *absolute gratuitousness* of God in order to offer Him our time of adoration and of activity, our successes and frustrations; from *routine and tiredness* to the *joy* of being Friars Minor in order to *taste the beauty* of our vocation, of fraternal prayer, of a dignified, beautiful liturgy, which really expresses the encounter with a presence, a vital relationship; from *formalism* to a *personal relationship* with God in order to recover the sense of availability and mobility to announce the Gospel (cfr. *RMG* 63. 69-70). All this is only possible if we really consider “*the life of prayer and the “spirit of prayer and devotion” as the priority that orientates and animates our life, the first expression of the following of Christ*” (*FCFW*, p. 10-11) on which the other priorities depend: fraternal life with all its values, the life of poverty, solidarity and minority, evangelisation and mission and a serious and renewed ongoing and initial formation.

Proposals

Aware of our *total and radical* consecration to God in baptism and of our religious profession as a “*free and generous response, without conditions, to the gratuitous call of God*”, in the different personal, ecclesial and social dimensions (cfr. *RMG* 66-68); and as a daily renewed *alliance* in the observation of the vows, understood as a “*path of freedom, of clinging to the Lord and of availability to others*”, we present you with three proposals already contained in other aids, so that we can assess how we are living, in practice, “*the spirit of prayer and devotion*”:

- The centrality of the Word of God in our life and mission; a Word read with simplicity and purity, meditated on during the day, restored in prayers of praise, thanksgiving and blessing, supplication and invocation to the Lord, and put into practice at all times (cfr. *The Prayerful reading of the Word of God in the Franciscan life*).
- The reading and interpretation of the signs of the times in the light of the Word of God, which will permit us to discover the presence of God in the personal, fraternal and social life of all peoples and cultures (cfr. *LgP*, 13-17).
- The life of the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist, which are privileged means for the encounter with God the supreme good, all good, almighty and merciful, incarnated in Jesus Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Accepting, then, the indications of the Commission for the contemplative life, we hold it important to re-propose the aid *The Spirit of prayer and devotion* (1996) for 2004-2005. The different pages of the publication can be used either in fraternity for Chapters, for a Review of life, for monthly recollection or spiritual exercises, or by the individual Friars for a personal itinerary of study or personal prayer. The same Commission, during these years and in harmony with the celebrative journey of the eighth centenary of the foundation of the Order, will help us with agile aids for deep study of

other topics: in 2006 the reflection and prayer will be on the image of the Christ of San Damiano; in 2007 the attitude of listening in our life; in 2008 the prayerful reading of the Constitutions and in 2009 the prayerful reading of the formula for profession and of the Rule.


Conclusion

Dear Brothers and Sisters, this first and fundamental priority spurs us once again to live a *personal and fraternity relationship* with the triune and one God, a God who makes Himself present in a special manner through listening to His word, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the life of fraternity and minority, in ecclesial communion and in its pastors, in the relationships of solidarity and justice with the poorest and most needy of every culture and in the commitment to defend every form of life. It is a presence which challenges us to read and interpret the “signs of the times” in order to find new and courageous responses (cfr. *LgP*, 19-34). It is a Presence which gives us the strength and wisdom to resolve every crisis of identity, truth or belonging which could arise from the life of faith, from loneliness, from fraternal or pastoral life, from the very limitations of human existence (age, sickness, the meaning of death). It is a Presence which keeps alive the fire of His love in our life in order to announce, with full freedom, generosity and passion, the Gospel of life, solidarity, justice and peace.

Let us look to the example of Francis, of whom we wish to remember, of him who, transformed in soul and body by the Holy Spirit in La Verna, became for every Friar Minor “*an example of perfect contemplation as he had previously been of action, like another Jacob and Israel*” (St. Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, VII, 3). Through the grace of God and the intercession of our Father we can “*go up to God and descend to our neighbour*” (*LMj* XIII,1), always and everywhere maintaining a perfect balance between contemplation and activity.

May the *Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*, which has called us gratuitously to the Franciscan vocation, give us the strength necessary to respond to Him with every joy, intelligence and audacity.

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