

The primacy of prayer: ideals and challenges

(Assisi, September 7, 2023, Br. Marek Miszczyński)

It is good to begin with the statement of Br. Octavian Schmucki, one of the most renowned and significant scholars of the Franciscan and Capuchin charism (along with Spaniard Lazaro Iriarte and Dutch Optatus Van Asseldonk). On the occasion of his 60 years of religious life, an interview with him was conducted in which he said, among other things:

During my long life as a Capuchin - September 6, 2007, is now 60 years since I entered the novitiate in Lucerne - I have witnessed great transformations in the Order. I have experienced them all the more since, by the will of the superiors general, I was a member of the Commission whose task it was to prepare the outline of the renewed Constitutions at the Special General Chapter of 1968. I must confess that this Chapter, during which I worked as secretary, made me suffer greatly. On the one hand, I observed how little the annotated outlines (for the most part by me) were consulted, either by individuals or by commissions, and, of the other, I followed with growing concern the prevalent orientation of the Legislative Assembly toward the social dimension. This second aspect meant that, during the long months of the Chapter, I began to study intensively the sources of the life of St. Francis with regard to prayer and the contemplative life. It is true that the subsequent Plenary Council of the Order held in Taizé on the subject of prayer partly reshaped the aforementioned direction, but its document does not belong to the constitutional text. It should be added, moreover, that certain prescriptions, though well founded, indeed ideal, of the Constitutions are often only printed on paper, and until they are translated into life, they remain only as written characters. At the long distance of the events now mentioned, I am more than ever inclined to urge a real renewal in the field of prayer, especially meditation. I believe that on the success of this element depends to a great extent our future as Capuchin Reform.

This is a dramatic observation, and not an isolated one. There are other voices noting the close link between the decline in prayer and the crisis of faith. The words of Pope St. Paul VI, often quoted by Minister General Paschal Rywalski, which are part of the document on religious life *Evangelica testificatio*, come to mind:

Do not forget the witness of history: fidelity to prayer or its abandonment is the paradigm of the vitality or decadence of religious life.

Indeed, if faith is not nourished, it fades away. And we know that it is nourished, practiced above all in prayer -- in the encounter with God, the author and perfecter of faith (Heb 12:2). If one becomes detached from this source, does not draw from it, or does so rarely, one becomes weakened, ill and finds it increasingly difficult to go to it and thus enters the vicious cycle of spiritual death or at least spiritual paralysis. For prayer requires faith and nourishes faith. If this circuit is missing, spiritual life dies: "without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). The whole spiritual journey takes place in the atmosphere of prayer. Here is the fundamental reason for prayer: "I pray because I know that alone I cannot do it; I pray because I know that I must be rooted in Jesus in order to walk with Jesus, to follow in his footsteps -- otherwise I fall into moralism.

For today the fundamental question about prayer is not so much how to pray as why to pray. And this question paradoxically is also valid in our case of Capuchin friars. Indeed, in theory we all agree on the primacy of prayer but practice often demonstrates a quite different reality. Let us try to specify this why of prayer, see what is behind this why, in order to be able to attempt at the most appropriate answers.

1. Why pray if everything should be prayer?

"The whole of life should be prayer"-it is said, often pointing to the example of St. Francis: "He was not so much a praying man as he himself all transformed into living prayer" (2Cel 95). True, so it should be. The problem arises, however, when those who say this contrast the practice of prayer with the life of prayer. One would then have to see whether this such truly is transformed, as St. Francis did, into living prayer.

We are dealing here with the classic distinction between the strong time and the continuous time of prayer.

Prayer can be conceived on the one hand as an act, as a concrete practice (meditation, Mass) - it is the strong time of prayer, or on the other hand as the style of life, as the contemplative dimension of the whole life, as the spirit of prayer - it is the continuous time of prayer.

Having made this distinction it must be said that this second meaning is the goal to which one walks in the spiritual life: for a Christian everything must become prayer, he himself must "become the living prayer," like St. Francis (continuous time of prayer). However, it must also be said that this is not possible without the concrete moments dedicated only to the encounter with God (strong time of prayer).

Strong time of prayer definitely influences continuous time of prayer.

As far as St. Francis is concerned, it is enough to mention some of his texts: Rule of Life in Hermitages and Chapter III or Chapter V of the Regola bollata. The Rule of Life in Hermitages reports Francis of Assisi's hermit experience, which is not confined only to the first period of his

conversion, when he "left public and frequented places, desiring solitude" (2Cel 9), but continued it even after he received the gift of the brothers, and until the end of his life. The Rule of life in hermitages Francis lived it first, alternating intense apostolic activity with times of solitude, being alone with God, in the hermitages or hermitages, which already existed within the Order at that time (e.g., Le Celle di Cortona, Montecasale) ... It is interesting to note how often the Poverello used to go to those places: on the occasion of the great fasts throughout the year, which usually lasted for forty days. In Chapter III of the Branded Rule he prescribes or advises three such periods: Lent-the Great Fast, the period from the Solemnity of All Saints until Christmas, and the fast called the Blessed One that begins after Epiphany. This means that one of the greatest evangelizers in the history of the Church spent long periods during the year in hermitages and then launched himself with all enthusiasm to the proclamation of the Gospel he meditated on. Also significant is the very fact that he wrote a particular Rule for brothers who wanted to live in hermitages and not for preachers, scholars or others.

This contemplative orientation of Franciscan life is also expressed in Chapter V of the Regola bollata, where it is written that no activity of any kind should extinguish "the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, to which spirit other spiritual things must serve." All work therefore, even manual, pastoral, and intellectual work is subject to the prayerful pursuit of God. Such contemplation then overflows into fruitful action.

There is no doubt that the contemplative dimension is one of the most essential features in the life of Francis of Assisi.

It was precisely the Capuchin Reform that took up and brought out the contemplative dimension of the early Franciscan Order. We need only recall the beautiful passage from the first Constitutions of 1536, later carried over from the following versions to the present, on mental prayer:

And because prayer is the spiritual teacher of the friars, so that the spirit of devotion may not be tepid in the friars, but, burning continually in the altar of the heart, may always be kindled more and more, just as the seraphic father wished, etiam che 'l vero spiritual friar minor always ori => no less it is ordered that for this two particular hours be deputed for the tepid ones .

To cure and develop the spirit of prayer, it was ordered that at the very least two hours a day be devoted to mental prayer, not speaking of liturgy. There was also the prescription to have - according to possibilities - in every place where the friars were staying "one or two small cells set apart from the common habitation of the friars and solitary so that, if any friar wished to keep an anchorite life (by his prelate judged suitable for this) he could quietly in solitude give himself wholly to God, according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (Const. 1536, no. 79). Also significant in the earliest Constitutions is the insistence on preachers to return to solitude after apostolic

activity and "there stay so much that filled with God the impetus moves them to spread divine graces to the world" (Const. 1536, no. 114). "And so doing," the Constitutions say later, "now Martha and now Mary, in mixed life, follow Christ who, after having prayed on the mountain, descended to the temple to preach.

We are thus the contemplative-active Order, and the order of adjectives is not accidental here. This primacy of the spirit and prayer life is clearly visible both in our legislation and in the practice of life throughout history. Until the Second Vatican Council, it was normal to practice two hours of mental prayer a day (Const. 1925, 59). The annual spiritual exercises lasted according to the possibilities and customs of the provinces one or two months. A brother would live them in solitude, living in a special convent-hermitage or in one of those solitary cells in the gardens of the convents. From there he would come only to the Eucharist and some parts of the Liturgy of the Hours. The rest of the time he devoted to personal prayer, spiritual reading and manual labor. This practice changed in the second part of the 1800', when the way of living the spiritual exercises we know today entered: a week of being together in listening to ascetical lectures.

One has to ask: Isn't it worth referencing these customs of our time, looking for guidelines for the fraternities we are talking about? Not to do archaeology; not to simply return to ancient forms; but to reflect on how to restore the contemplative dimension of our lives; what to do concretely to emphasize the primacy of the spirit and prayer life in our lives. For it does not seem that with the passage of time the fundamental structure of man has changed, the one concerning original sin and the need for divine grace: man the one of eight and five centuries ago and the one of today has the same need for divine grace because he is always fragile and unable to walk alone in the ways of the Lord. So if eight and five centuries ago, those who embraced the vocation of following more closely in the footsteps of the Lord devoted a good part of their time to prayer (and we have the testimonies of both the legislative and our saints) with what reason have we today diminished it...?

One thing is certain: if we want to be the truly contemplative-active Order, we must pray. One of the criteria for this is the presence or lack of prayer in the strong time sense.

2. Why pray if there is so much to do?

The wrong view of the relationship between prayer in the strong-time sense and prayer in the continuous sense raises another question, "why pray if there is so much to do"?

It is true that sometimes it is difficult to reconcile a lot of work that we are responsible for and prayer-the tension on this field will always be there. However, we are responsible if that strong time of prayer is put on the sidelines of the day and eventually disappears.

It is well known in our history the case of Bernardino Ochino. His apostasy in 1542, still serving as the vicar general of the young Reformation, was a scandal throughout the Church: it was commensurate with the extraordinary and universal esteem Bernardino enjoyed as a preacher and counselor. His flight and adherence to Calvinism so tragically involved the fortunes of the Reformation that it almost jeopardized its survival. Now chroniclers among several causes for such a decision note above all the lack of a spirit of prayer:

Paul of Foligno writes:

From these occupations (i.e., of preacher and counselor) entangled he never agreed with the choir, much less was he seen at prayer .

And then he further reports:

In this error he passed miserably to such blindness that he could not understand time to recite the divine office even privately; wherefore the pope by Motu proprio released him from this obligation .

A conversation between the two Bernardinos, one from Asti and the other precisely Ochino, is then significant. The predecessor (Bernardino d'Asti) is said to have said to the Vicar General at the time (Bernardino Ochino):

Father you are engulfed in these entanglements for seculars and studies and we never see you doing prayer. Warn well to your business, otherwise you will find yourself with hands full of flies and as a soldier of Christ without arms. Ochino answered him, "Non cessat orare, qui non cessat bene facere" .

Mattia Bellintani da Salò, reporting in his chronicle mal example of Ochino, seems to respond to him:

If it is true that he who does not cease to pray does not cease to do good, it is still true that he who ceases to pray also ceases to do good; for he who under the pretext of doing other goods leaves prayer, in the end leaves those goods still .

Bernardine Ochino was for the first generations of Capuchins an almost monumental warning about mental prayer that is, that an activism, even if exercised for pastoral purposes, inevitably condemns itself to spiritual sterility by the very fact that it stifles the spirit of prayer.

The PCO II Taizé Document says it very well in this regard, "He who has the spirit of prayer will also find time for prayer; he who does not find it, it means he does not have the spirit of prayer" (No. 11).

There is a story that seems to apply in an exemplary way to what we are talking about. One day, an old professor was called upon as an expert to speak on the most effective planning of one's

time to entrepreneurs. He then decided to try an experiment. Standing up, he pulled a large empty glass jar out from under the table. Together he also took a dozen stones the size of tennis balls, which he gently laid one by one in the jar until it was full. When no more stones could be added, he asked the listeners, "Does it look like the jar is full?" and they all replied, "Yes!" He bent down again and pulled out a box full of breccia from under the table, which he poured over the large stones, moving the jar so that the breccia could seep through the large stones to the bottom. "Is the box full this time?" he asked. Becoming more cautious, the listeners began to understand and replied, "Maybe not yet." The old professor bent down again and pulled out this time a bag of sand, which he poured into the jar. The sand filled the spaces between the stones and the breach. So he asked again, "Is the jar full now?" And everyone, without hesitation, answered, "No!" In fact, the old man took the pitcher that was on the table and poured water into the jar to the brim. At this point he asked, "What great truth does this experiment show us?" The boldest replied, "It shows that even when our schedule is completely full, with a little good will, we can always add a few more commitments, a few more things to do." "No," replied the professor. "What the experiment shows is that if you don't put the big stones in the jar first, you will never get them in later. What are the big stones, the priorities, in your life? The important thing is to put these big stones first in your agenda."

When the Apostles realize that because of too many commitments they neglect their contact with God, they make a very clear choice: "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God for the service of the tables. Therefore, brothers, seek from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, to whom we will entrust this task. We, on the other hand, will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2).

In the face of the multitude of commitments, then, there are other reasons to try to make time for prayer: not only to secure our spiritual life, not only not to die spiritually. There are other reasons:

A. The first consists in the fact that prayer helps me discern my apostolate; it assures me that it will not be my apostolate, but the Lord's. I am only his servant. Without prayer there is the risk that I will work so much for the Lord, but without the Lord himself wanting me to! I will do it in my own way and not according to what He wants. Basically it is about achieving the attitude of subordination and not the attitude of juxtaposition. The latter says, "first I pray asking the Lord's blessing for what I intend to do and then I do it"; the former, on the other hand, "first I pray to ask the Lord what He wants me to do and then I do what God has shown me in prayer." This is the right relationship, the relationship that Jesus and Francis of Assisi had. Our Constitutions say:

St. Francis, in order to follow in the footsteps of the Lord and the apostles, chose a form of life that in itself intimately united prayer and the proclamation of the message of salvation, wisely alternating time between contemplation and apostolic commitment (...). Our whole prayer life will

be imbued with the apostolic spirit, and all our apostolic action will be shaped by the spirit of prayer .

B. The second is that prayer gives me the strength to undertake and assiduously continue apostolic undertakings. It is worth mentioning at this point the Minister General, Br. Mauro Jöhri: The Capuchin reform arose out of a deep desire to return to the hermitages, secluded places that foster face-to-face time with God. Our Constitutions, from the very first pages, invite us "to give priority to the life of prayer, especially contemplative prayer" (Const. n. 4,3). Prolonged being in God's presence, giving Him time and affections, did not impede but rather made more vivid the ability to perceive the sufferings of others and the brothers, when the need for concrete help was manifested, did not place any obstacle in the way and with élan put themselves at the service of those most in need. Without sparing themselves. I wonder if the reticence observable in the field of mission does not arise from a weakening in the Order of the contemplative dimension. Those who contemplate a God who gives himself all to us, a God who is happy precisely in the act of giving himself, cannot remain indifferent, nor can they remain idle. From a half-hearted prayer life can only come a half-hearted, fragile service, pulling back at the first obstacle encountered along the way .

C. The third consists in the fact that prayer itself becomes the apostolate. Sometimes it is not possible to reach all areas of life with our activity nor to act effectively there where we reach. That leaves Moses' attitude on the mountain when the Israelites struggle against Amalek or when they sin against God: intercessory prayer. In the life of a religious, of a priest, such prayer cannot be lacking. As religious or priests we are called to bring God to the world, but also to bring the world to God -- in intercessory prayer.

3. Why pray if it is enough to love?

Another objection about why pray arising from that unfair contrast between the strong time and the continuous time of prayer is the following: "Why pray if loving is enough?" This question mainly concerns the area of relationships with each other, so not so much work, activity ad extra, but community life ad intra. "Prayer ultimately serves the purpose of loving, it has to translate into practice, and that matters above all"-some say. This is true - otherwise prayer remains sterile, but this does not detract from the necessity of prayer. Here again the mistake lies in contrasting these two realities.

Speaking of the fraternity it is sometimes said that it is too active pastoral work that destroys it. It can happen that way. But the real problem is not only in the relationship between fraternal life and pastoral life. There is the third element that is often taken for granted or underestimated, which is the relationship with God-prayer. This too is sometimes contrasted with fraternity at the expense of prayer - "you are not with us, it means you are not fraternal...."

In the documents of the Church, on the other hand, published in recent times almost always speak of these three elements as necessary in religious life: all three and in a specific order. Just look at the chapters of some of the documents:

- *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (1994): "gift of communion," "task of building fraternity," "community in mission."
- *Vita consecrata* (1996): "confessio trinitatis," "signum fraternitatis," "servitium caritatis."
- Pope's Address to the Union of Superiors General (2010): "the centrality of the Word of God," "fraternity," "mission."

The spirit of prayer should not be set against the spirit of fraternity. St. Francis due to the fact that he went to spend long periods in solitude did not distance himself from the fraternity. On the contrary, right there in contact with God he acquired the strength to love his brothers. The encounter with God urged him to encounter the brothers. This is the original element in the Rule of life in hermitages, inspired by the image of Martha and Mary: the quality of relationships among brothers in the hermitage. In fact, Francis' hermit model is marked not so much by solitude as by fraternal charity; charity comparable to the warm relationship that exists between a mother and child. The hermitage for St. Francis is a place where these relationships are intensified. Precisely this maternal dimension is typically Franciscan. A brother remains alone in the hermitage, but he is not isolated from the fraternity. Indeed, it is precisely the climate of mutual love in the community, and not so much solitude, that fosters contemplation. In other words, Francis in his proposal introduces fraternal life into the hermitage so that it gains greater clarity and depth there.

It seems that the problems that affect our fraternities, our fraternal relationships, ultimately arise right here: in the lack or poor contemplative dimension of our lives. Man's intimate and deep relationship with God, nurtured and strengthened in moments of prayer, is the basis of an authentic religious community and intense pastoral activity. To the extent that I discover and experience that God is my Father, to that extent I discover and accept the one with whom I live under the same roof as a brother. Today we continually run the risk of reducing religious community to a merely human construction. Instead, it is first and foremost a gift of the Spirit. "It is from the love of God spread in hearts through the Spirit that religious community originates and is built up from it as a true family gathered in the name of the Lord". The more God's love grows in hearts, the more the hearts are joined together - as in a bicycle wheel: the spokes are closer together at the center of the wheel, while farther apart on the rim.

4. Why pray if prayer is a chore and I need relaxation after stress?

Another objection about why pray concerns our rest: "why do I need to toil again in prayer after the fatigue I already experience, stress that I do not lack? - I need the rest and relaxation."

In fact, one of the biggest devourers of time that steals it from prayer is leisure in the broad sense of the term, misunderstood though. We may think here of TV, the Internet, games, communicators that keep us in constant contact with someone - so we try to justify our lack in prayer. But we know that often the very fact of spending time in this way generates even greater fatigue due to the sense of lost time that is always missing - rest in general is not to be underestimated, but disordered rest is.

Also coming to mind at this point is the deeper dimension of fatigue, not related only to the precise moment, but to the state of mind that is inevitably included in the celibate's life: loneliness. Consider the gratifications we often seek to fill the void: disordered relationships with others, alcohol, pornography etc.

There is the momentary stress and the stress experienced on the deepest level which could be called the crisis. This experience was not foreign to St. Francis, especially in the period from 1221 to 1224, known as the Great Temptation. What does he do then? He seeks God-he goes to La Verna and other hermitages to be with God, while suffering, "is it not that I have made a mistake in life?", "what will it be with these brothers who have gathered around me?" - he asks himself. But he does not go looking for the answer and consolation elsewhere. In the time of trial he seeks God: "in the day of my distress I seek the Lord, in the night my hand is stretched out and not weary; I refuse all comfort [other than that of the Lord]" (Psalm 77). Jesus says the same in the Gospel, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest..." (Mt 11:28).

The basic problem is to shift the vital center from the "I" to God, to let God do His work in me and not be the protagonist of my life: only in prayer am I able to grasp God's action and gain the strength to give it all to Him. Then truly conversion takes place - which God accomplishes, however, by my fiat. But in order to be able to say fiat, I must grasp God's action and I must also have the faith to respond that way - that is the necessity of prayer. Through prayer I learn to say fiat and have the strength to do so. In the discourse of prayer therefore, it is about the basic setting of the whole life: do I want to hold it in my own hands or do I want to really deliver it into God's hands? - "whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it" (Mk. 8:35).

Authentic prayer therefore makes us docile to changes in life i.e. conversion. Herein lies the basic problem of "Why don't we pray": we do not want to change lives. We are much more predisposed to change documents, pastoral care, others, but not our own lives.

In the end it is worth quoting another well-known scholar of the Franciscan and Capuchin charism, Lazaro Iriarte:

Along the 15th - 16th centuries originated the new families of the scalzi in Spain, the reformed in Italy, the recollects in France and Belgium. In all the reforms the typically Franciscan element is repeated: in the first renewal impulse the fraternity closes in on itself, almost yielding to the eremitical temptation, and finds itself in the sincere return to poverty and simplicity; then in a second impulse it opens up and goes out to meet men, with a renewed apostolic impulse, succeeding in overcoming the attraction of solitude .

One cannot think of a true reform of life without a serious return to the life of prayer.