

Minority: ideals and challenges

(Assisi, Sept. 6, 2023, Br. Mauro Jöhri)

By way of introduction

Speaking of home and hospitality, philosopher Josep Maria Esquirol adds, "One must use one's hands and see, again their gesture. In this regard there is an anecdote from the 19th century about a friar, a certain Leopold of Alpandere, who went from door to door asking for charity for the poor. On one occasion, after he had knocked, a man had come out and spit on his open hand. The religious had said, "This is for me, now give me an alms for the poor in the orphanage," as he continued to hold out his hand like a receptacle, waiting, in spite of everything, to receive something so he could in turn give it away."

I was very surprised to come across this anecdote in a philosophy essay! Moreover, I like to report this episode because I find it exceedingly significant. Leopold acts as a true friar minor: he is submissive, but he does not lack an all-Evangelical readiness of spirit. His is a way of turning the other cheek in a surprising and unexpected way. To live as a friar minor, submissive to all creatures- we must tell ourselves right away- does not mean living as a minx, but rather with a good dose of cunning. By his reaction, the friar allowed the person who made him the object of contempt to bring out the good part that characterizes him as well. By this I mean that Franciscan minority is inscribed in a projectuality. We encounter a strong hint of this, for example, in ch. 23 of Rnb: "we all Friars Minor, useless servants, humbly pray and plead that all may persevere in true faith and penance, for no one can be saved in any other way."

Reference texts

But before we even address the topic in detail, let's see how some relatively recent texts talk about it:

- Our Constitutions (2012)
- The Ratio Formationis OFM Cap
- The letter of our general ministers for the 800th anniversary of the Unbaptized Rule (2021):
- The VII.PCO: Our Fraternal Life in Minority

- Constitutions, "Fraternity and minority are original aspects of the charism the Spirit has given us; they also inform the contemplative and apostolic dimension of our vocation. Docile to the same Spirit, we commit ourselves to live this evangelical ideal in its fullness. (no. 4)

- Ratio 67. Jesus presents us with a God who loves to make himself small and reveal himself to the humble and simple. It is in the cross, the mystery of the revelation of God's littleness, that love is truly realized in total self-emptying and unconditional self-giving. This is the foundation of minority. It is something qualitative, not quantitative, which, in turn, shapes our ways of desiring, unmasking the temptation to be and to do great things. Francis discovers in the poor and the crucified the art of building relationships of gratuitousness and a new way of looking at the world, centered on that which is fundamental. In this same direction, the Capuchin reform succeeds in uniquely combining sobriety with the search for what is essential.

- 68. The essential always has to do with relationships. Welcoming, dialogue and acceptance of diversity are indispensable to be able to build transparent and inclusive relationships in our fraternities. Minority is also open-mindedness and flexibility in the face of any cultural or religious ideology that threatens our charismatic identity preventing the witness of fraternal life and collaboration at different levels among us²³.

- Letter from the Ministers General: Friars Minor. This is the baptismal name St. Francis wants to give to those who choose to trust and live according to this Rule. Minority! A word with a thousand meanings and unimaginable facets. Is it possible to find a concise formula that encompasses them all? Many and effective are the attempts put forth for this synthesis effort. And, without claiming to be exhaustive, one could probably assume that "minority" is the choice of wanting to count "less than those who count less." That yes is prophecy! This yes is a core that is almost impossible to live, but which keeps intact its ability to warn us of any risk of grandiosity or possession. Is this a virtue?

- More aptly, perhaps it should be said that minority is not so much a solitary ascetic attitude, that is, a set of behavioral options-with the risk that they are mortifying and reductive; chosen on one's own, almost in pursuit of an "inner personal perfection." It is rather a way of being in life; and in that sense it is a way of being in relationship: with people, with creation, with God. Minor is one who never tires of recognizing, at the top of his lungs, that everything that is comes from God, and therefore cannot help but live in a "state of gratitude."

- Synodality, community discernment: these are perhaps among the most recurrent expressions in the church today. We know: when there is a lot of talk about something it is probably because there is a lack of it, an urgency. Minority is also this: we are not the ones who produce the "truth"

on our own, but it is always "given to us from outside," from mutual listening "through the charity that comes from the Spirit."

- The fact of placing ourselves in listening to the other! The vital and effective synthesis of minority should perhaps be recognized in the logic of expropriation, which in the Unbranded Rule appears declined according to multiple and complementary perspectives, all qualifying the attitude of a person who, for himself, retains nothing: to give back, to give, to render, to praise, to give thanks, to bless (Rnb XXIII).

- CPO VII: I also recall that our Order 20 years ago, in 2004, being Minister General Br. John Corriveau, celebrated a Plenary Council of the Order in Assisi entitled "Our Fraternal Life in Minority." A careful reading of that text reveals many of the inspiring ideas of the project of the Fraternities of St. Lawrence of Brindisi and, at the same time, one realizes how little of that text has been put into action. Especially for those who wish to delve into the theological motivations for St. Francis' choice of minority, this text is a real mine.

A contemporary philosopher

I would like to develop my reflection on minority from a text also by J. M. Esquirol: Human, More Human. An anthropology of the infinite wound . I would like to point out that it is a philosophy essay: which may be quite surprising, nevertheless I think it may be interesting to get an idea of how St. Francis' choice of minority is seen and valued by a contemporary philosopher. The philosopher intends to present our saint as a model of meekness lived for real.

"In all the works of Francis, as well as in those handed down by the first authors of Franciscanism, the same aspect is always emphasized: that, beyond social origin, the friars were treated equally, as lesser brothers. This choice is at the origin of the profound revolution promoted by Francis: in a very hierarchical society he decided to live in the most transparent horizontality, without resentments and without quarrels. Despite this, such horizontality does not equate to uniformity. The relationship between brothers - fratres - is pure vitality. The fraternal community has a minimal structure and great dynamism.

Lesser brothers: Francis coins this expression to indicate a way of being that avoids any claim to superiority. Minor, meaning small, humble. This is the first important thing: all equally small, all equally minor. Second important thing: all should treat each other as good brothers; always ready to help and with motherly love: "And let each one love and nurture his brother as a mother loves and nurtures her child, in those things for which the Lord will give him grace." Observe how here fraternity - a word that is generally used very little - is always concrete relationship with brothers.

Francis is reluctant for anything that evokes superiority: magnatus, magister, prelatus. The ideal: minors without superiors. That is why he replaces prior with custodian and abbot with guardian - the one who guards and cares. Minority is obviously an achievement. It takes a lot of effort and

tremendous work on oneself to come to feel like a servant of others and of all creatures. One of the early fruits of such a revolution is the fact that no one is afraid of minors. The peaceful attitude will never be abandoned. When by then the adventure was long in the making, they ask Francis why he does not intervene to counter the decadence of the order. He simply replies, "If I cannot overcome and correct vices by preaching and example, I do not want to become an executioner to beat and whip, like the power of this world.

Minority is like oil, which anoints and nourishes. The brothers' adventure was a true adventure. It was true that the brothers loved and embraced each other. And it is true that they continue to do so. Francis' first biographer, Thomas of Celano, reports that when they met "it was a veritable explosion of their spiritual affection, the only love that above all other love is the source of true fraternal charity." It is many significant that, in the Rule, Francis asks the brothers to receive amiably those who come for the first time. It is certainly a good way to begin.

Peace is something that emanates from the heart. Francis did not teach to be a peacemaker or mediator, but to be peaceful is now a lesson that has been lost and that we are anxious to recover. The meekness that emerges from the peaceable heart is the result of a tenacious struggle against the tendency toward domination and power. The younger brother strives to be peaceful. And it certainly takes more strength of spirit to become peaceful than to become domineering. The easiest thing is to judge: the hardest, to refrain from doing so. The best mediation technique is to be a man of peace, a good-hearted man. The testimony of this goodness alone will instill respect and spread peace."

I will try to resume and comment

1. Equality: In all the works of Francis, as well as in those handed down by the earliest authors of Franciscanism, the same aspect is always emphasized: that, beyond social origin, the friars were treated equally, as lesser brothers.

The author points out that the choice of minority had a concrete and clearly visible implication from the beginning: equality of treatment. Living as minors means that social background does not entitle one to privileges of any kind within the fraternity. PCO VII invites us to live the primacy of fraternal life in minority as the first form of our apostolate .

2. A conscious choice. This choice is at the origin of the profound revolution promoted by Francis: in a very hierarchical society he decided to live in the most transparent horizontality, without resentments and without quarrels.

At the origin was a conscious choice that possessed in itself something revolutionary. In a society marked by feudalism, where everyone was always in some way subject to others, Francis proposed a model of life marked by peaceful coexistence. He moved from a pyramidal to a circular pattern among brothers. Clearly, Francis' choice, PCO VII reminds us, originated in his being attracted by

the beauty of God's glory manifested in Jesus, in his journey of unconditional love that led him to accept to die on the cross for love. From the dream of being a knight, an expression of omnipotence, Francis made his own the dream of becoming a brother to all and a lesser brother.

3. Richness of charisms: Despite this, such horizontality does not equate to uniformity. The relationship between brothers - fratres - is pure vitality. The fraternal community has a minimal structure and great dynamism.

It is immediately a matter of clarifying what this does not mean: not uniformity but richness of charisms, reducing governance structures to the bare minimum.

We would need to go over again here that passage in the "Mirror of Perfection" in which Francis enumerates the aptitudes of the various brothers: Bernard and his love of poverty, Leo and simplicity, Angelo and courtesy, Masseus and good sense, etc.

4. A way of being: Lesser Brothers: Francis coins this expression to indicate a way of being that avoids any claim to superiority. Minor, that is, small, humble. This is the first important thing: all equally small, all equally minor.

What is the positive meaning of this choice? That of making oneself small and humble while avoiding any intention of superiority. Our general ministers spoke of the choice of wanting to count "less than those who count less." In his letter to all the Faithful (II) Francis expressed it this way, "never should we desire to be above others, but rather we should be servants and subjects to every human creature out of love for God.

5. As brothers: Second important thing: all should treat one another as good brothers; always ready to help and with motherly love: "And let each one love and nurture his brother as a mother loves and nurtures her child, in those things for which the Lord will give him grace." Observe how here fraternity - a word that is generally used very little - is always concrete relationship with brothers.

Minority recalls fraternity. In fact, I do not believe one can live as a true minor without mutual, fraternal support. My experience of a year in Celle di Cortona confirmed me in this: the place may seem quite romantic, but after you have lived there for a while, you also feel all the restrictions that that structure imposes on you. Well, none of this weighed on me at all because the fraternal fellowship that developed between us allowed us to face the various hardships of the case serenely and lead a peaceful life. Of course, there was no shortage of challenges, but facing them together turned the whole thing into a beautiful and enjoyable adventure.

6. Change the language: Francis is reluctant for anything that evokes superiority: magnatus, magister, prelatu. The ideal: minors without superiors. So he replaces prior with custodian and abbot with guardian - the one who guards and cares.

Esquirol realizes that the project of minority also involves choices at the level of language. I don't know if we sufficiently realize how Francis was very perceptive in declining the project in all its facets, not excluding that of a consistent language: minister, custodian, guardian. He was also aware that someone might be tempted to brag about the task of minister and attach his heart to it. And here he took it upon himself to warn his brothers of this danger: "I have not come to be served, but to serve," says the Lord. Those who are constituted above others, so much should they glory in that prelatical office, as if they were deputed to the office of washing the feet of the brothers. And the more they are troubled if the prelacy is taken from them than if the office of washing feet were taken from them, the more they put together for themselves a fraudulent treasure at the peril of their own souls. In the Rnb he admonishes his brothers: similarly (after warning all the brothers, both ministers and servants, against becoming upset over the sin of others) let all the brothers have no power or dominion in this, especially among themselves. Whosoever among them shall desire to be a major, let him be their minister and servant; and whosoever among them is a major, let him do like the minor.

7. A demanding path: Minority is obviously an achievement. It takes much effort and tremendous work on oneself to come to feel like a servant of others and of all creatures.

This statement applies also and more than ever to us today. But let us see how it was practiced by the brothers from the earliest days of the Franciscan fraternity. Chapter VII of the Rnb on the way of serving and working gives us testimony to this:

Let all the brothers, wherever they may be in order to serve others or to work, be neither administrators nor chancellors, nor preside in the houses of those to whom they serve; nor accept any office that generates scandal or brings harm to their souls; but let them be minors and submissive to all who are in that same house.

And let the brothers who know how to work work and exercise that trade which they already know, if it will not be contrary to the health of their souls and which they can honestly do.

For the prophet says, If by the toil of thy hands thou eatest, blessed art thou, and it shall go well with thee; and the Apostle, He that will not work, let him not eat. And let each one remain in that trade and profession to which he was called. And for their labor they may receive all that is necessary except money.

And when it is necessary let them go for alms like other poor people.

And may they have the tools and implements necessary for their trade.

It is surprising why the chapter begins with a prohibition: let them be neither administrators nor chancellors! Scholars, I am thinking for example of Felice Acrocca, tell us that this is an addition inserted as a result of concrete experiences and that the friars shared in the chapter. At first the

text read only: And the friars who know how to work let them work and practice that trade which they already know, if it will not be contrary to the health of their souls and that they may honestly do. And for their work they may receive all that is necessary except money. And may they be allowed to have the tools and implements necessary for their trades.

Probably because of the honesty and trustworthiness of the friars employed by third parties, they were entrusted with positions of responsibility such as administrators or chancellors. Exchanging among themselves during a chapter they realized that this fact compromised their choice of minority and remedied it.

On the other hand, this passage indicates in a very concrete way what it means to live minority: it consists in the renunciation or refusal to assume positions of leadership, of responsibility to others: administrators, chancellors, presidency roles or other similar situations. At the same time, the combination of minority and submission is surprising. It goes without saying that the friars are subjects of Holy Roman Church : "but they are subject to every human creature for God's sake."

Submission is required not only to one's superiors , but to every creature, including beasts and wild beasts.

PCO VII warns: Since the path of minority is not a natural one that is spontaneously chosen, fraternities and brothers need ongoing formation to acquire and maintain a spirit of service and minority, which is nourished by prayer and contemplation. It is essential to develop a contemplative gaze, especially through the communal exercise of silent prayer . The invitation then is to

- abandon established and guaranteed positions of power to choose those accessible to ordinary people to the poorest.
- Living in precariousness.
- Available to the needs of the Church, with preference toward the most difficult and honorless services.
- Our Order does not seek for its members the episcopacy or other high ecclesiastical offices.

This suggests to me that we should also ask ourselves today how we are living this central dimension of our lives and what modifications or changes we are called to make for constructive fidelity.

Minority for Francis goes hand in hand with submission takes the form of service. "Never should we desire to be above others, but rather we should be servants and subjects to every human creature for God's sake" In the Rule he called those who wish to become majors to make themselves "ministers and servants" of their brothers. To the brothers who work with others he

reminds them to be minors and subject to all who are in that same house . Spirit of service and availability can be considered aspects or attitudes that should characterize the friar minor in every circumstance of his life.

Holy obedience confounds all bodily and carnal self-will and keeps each one's body mortified by obedience to the spirit and obedience to one's brother; and then he is subject and submissive to all men who are in the world, and not only to men alone, but also to all beasts and beasts, so that they may do with him what they will, as far as will be granted them from above by the Lord.

Francis also returns to the subject in the Testament: *Ed eramus idiotae et subditi omnibus* =And we were ignorant and subject to all (FF 118). Manselli rightly points out that this statement is made after Francis mentions the fact that the early fraternity was composed of both clerics and laity. "Clericality or not-this is what the saint means-had, among us and in regard to the society in which we acted, no difference from the fact that we all presented ourselves as ignorant and inferior to all.

8. Close to the people: One of the early fruits of such a revolution is the fact that no one is afraid of minors.

It is common knowledge that friars are generally well accepted by everyone. I really believe this is due to the attitude of minority and submission. An attitude that used to be manifested, for example, in the fact of resorting to questing, a situation in which the power was all in the hands of those who could give us something or even refuse it. The very choice to reduce the number of parishes we run and rather make ourselves available for substitutions again places us in a situation of subordination. Hence the legendary closeness of the friars to the people, a topic that was taken up and forcefully reiterated by Pope Francis during his address to the members of the 2018 General Chapter.

Of course, if the friar minor who is subject and submissive to all creatures allows them "to do with him what they will, as far as it will be granted to them from above by the Lord," it is clear that no one should ever again be afraid of the minors. But neither should we friars be afraid or even ashamed when we happen to live among people of little account and despised, among the poor and weak, the sick and lepers, and the beggars by the wayside. On the contrary, Francis invites us to rejoice in such situations.

9. Peaceful: The peaceful attitude will never be abandoned. When by now the adventure was long in the making, they ask Francis why he does not intervene to counter the decadence of the order. He merely replies, "If I cannot overcome and correct vices by preaching and example, I do not want to become an executioner to beat and whip, like the power of this world. Minority is like oil, which anoints and nourishes.

The peaceful attitude taken by Francis consequently leads him to renounce passing judgment and condemnation on his brothers who sin. We all know that striking text in the Letter to a Minister

with its exhortation not to expect the friar who has sinned to become a better Christian. Moreover, at Francis, minority entails the renunciation of being troubled by the sin of others:

And let all the friars, both ministers and servants and others, beware of becoming upset and angry over the sin or evil of another, because the devil by the fault of one wants to corrupt many; but spiritually, as best they can, let them help those who have sinned, because not those who are well need the doctor, but the sick.

That servant of God who does not become angry or upset about anything, truly lives without anything of his own. And blessed is he to whom nothing remains, for he renders to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

The renunciation of indignation over the sin of others has to do for Francis with the dimension of poverty literally understood as possessing nothing of one's own. Attachment to partisan ideas or viewpoints also unmistakably signal an un-minoritical attitude.

10. Mutual acceptance: The brothers' adventure was a real one. It was true that the brothers loved and embraced each other. And it is true that they continue to do so. Francis' first biographer, Thomas of Celano, reports that when they met "it was a real explosion of their spiritual affection, the only love that above all other love is the source of true fraternal charity." It is very significant that, in the Rule, Francis asks the brothers to receive amiably those who come for the first time. It is certainly a good way to begin.

It was a true adventure and must remain so to this day. Not just theory, but a path made together as brothers. In this regard PCO VII speaking of the local chapter, invites us to celebrate it frequently, saying of it that "it is an appropriate place of expression of our fraternal life in minority. In it each one listens humbly and passionately to his brother, and all the brothers, in co-responsibility, dialogue, charitable obedience and the Minorite exercise of authority, seek ways to grow in evangelical communion."

11. Men of peace: Peace is something that emanates from the heart. Francis did not teach to be a peacemaker or mediator, but to be peacemakers is now a lesson that has been lost and that we are anxious to recover. The meekness that emerges from the peaceable heart is the result of a tenacious struggle against the tendency toward domination and power. The younger brother strives to be peaceful. And it certainly takes more strength of spirit to become peaceful than to become domineering. The easiest thing is to judge: the most difficult, to refrain from doing so. The best mediation technique is to be a man of peace, a good-hearted man. The testimony of this goodness alone will instill respect and spread peace.

When the philosopher states that the younger brother strives to be peaceful, he strongly reiterates the urgency of working on ourselves. In this context, the renunciation of judgment also becomes central. In Rnb Francis, after inviting the brothers to manifest their needs to one another, also

invites them to refrain from comparing and judging one another: And let him who eats not despise him who does not eat, and let him who does not eat not judge him who eats.

Hence the question might arise of how to deal with fraternities who have not joined the St. Lawrence of Brindisi Fraternities project or who view it with suspicion. A sense of disappointment and stinginess might arise in the face of the slowness with which our Order is embarking on a path of renewal. Again, let us guard against upset and refrain from any condemning judgment.

PCO VII Our Fraternal Life in Minority, insisted quite a bit on the pairing of minority and itinerancy. In fact, if the choice of minority implies non-attachment to either places or assignments, it follows that the friar minor willingly accepts being moved from one place to another. Which presupposes the acquisition of a nice portion of inner freedom: what I am does not depend on a place or an assignment and I take it wherever I am asked to move.

Conclusion

Rereading the text edited by the General Curia, Let us revive the flame of our charism! The "St. Lawrence of Brindisi Project" of the Capuchin Friars Minor, I realized that there is much talk in it about fraternal life, the quality that this should have, together with the themes of prayer, poverty and mission. The theme of minority is certainly present in an implicit form, but it is not made the subject of an explicit in-depth study. For this reason, I invite you to bring your gaze to the experience of your fraternities to note what concrete aspects of this dimension you are already experiencing.

Once you have made the list of concrete aspects, I invite you to take a further step, to ask how to integrate the dimension of minority more fully into the lived experience of your fraternity.

In addition, there is also the need to deepen the pairing of minority and submission. For St. Francis the two go hand in hand. Having this dimension in mind, it becomes clear that one does not become a friar with the intention of choosing a good opportunity to climb the social or ecclesial ladder. Rather, the choice is one of wanting to count less than those who count less. The whole thing for me also has to do with the willingness to go where no one wants to go.

Evidently if in the initial formative journey this kind of choice was not proposed and duly integrated, it is no wonder that we continue to seek a place in the sun. So alongside a communal examination of how our fraternity is living minority, we are called to ask ourselves how personally I am making my own the invitation of Jesus, when he sat down and called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." (Mk 9. 35)

Minority cannot simply be considered as an optional extra! Nor is it a way of life. To live as lesser brothers is to embrace a way of life. Which must be understood as a very strong reminder of the

need to be formed. To adhere to it. Moreover, it is an essential dimension of our life both ad intra and ad extra. Francis' various texts on this leave no doubt.

Here is what Thomas of Celano recalls in his Life I (FF 386)

It is now time to focus our attention above all on the Order that Francis raised up and vivified by his love and profession. For it was he himself who founded the Order of Friars Minor, and this is on what occasion he gave it such a name. As those words were written in the Rule, "Let them be lesser," as soon as he had heard them he exclaimed, "I want this fraternity to be called the Order of Friars Minor." And truly they were "lesser," because "submissive to all," and they sought the last place and offices to which some humiliation was attached, in order thus to lay the solid foundation of true humility, on which the spiritual edifice of all virtues could be unfolded.

Let us commit ourselves dear brothers to live this dimension of the legacy left to us by Francis, so that the same may be said of our fraternity.