

MOTHER  
MARIA  
LORENZA  
LONGO

ROME; SEPTEMBER 17, 2021.

PROT. N. 00585/21

TO ALL THE CAPUCHIN  
POOR CLARE NUNS

My Dear Sisters,

May the peace of the Lord be with you!

1. The imminent beatification of the Venerable Mother Maria Lorenza Longo is an excellent opportunity for starting a dialogue on the spiritual physiognomy of the foundress of your first monastery and initiator of the Capuchin reform for women, which was certainly marked by her spirit and ideals and which defined its “*proprio*”, or its own uniqueness, within the Franciscan Second Order.

Every Christian is called by the Lord to embody the Word, and to make his or her life a mission. As Pope Francis teaches, “*every saint is a message which the Holy Spirit takes from the riches of Jesus Christ and gives to his people.*”<sup>1</sup> And upon coming to know this message, it would not be necessary to dwell too much on the details, which could very well be subject to shadows and weaknesses. “*What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person.*”<sup>2</sup> Let us, therefore, try to bring

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exultate, Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World*, No. 21; Rome, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem, Gaudete et exultate*, No. 22.

forth this «manner of holiness» of Mother Maria Lorenza, realizing that we also are invited to perceive the totality of our life as a mission. And therefore, to recognize the word that God wants to say to the world through us.<sup>3</sup>

## I. MARIA LORENZA: PILGRIMAGE AND EAGERNESS TO SERVE

2. Maria Requenses was born in the Catalan region (probably in Lleida, in 1463) during the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age. While still in her youth, she married Joan Llonc, with whom she had several children. During these years, Maria was fundamentally a wife and mother, living a hidden life of service and dedication to her family. Her day to day life became disturbed due to a tragic attempt at poisoning by a maid, which left Maria paralyzed and in poor health, with limitations and great suffering.

In the meantime, during the last part of the fifteenth century the territorial unity of the Iberian Peninsula was taking shape under the dominion of the «Catholic» kings. The Hispanic crown dominated the seas, finding new horizons of expansion in the Americas. And in the Mediterranean, the Spanish power reached the island of Sardinia and then the kingdom of Naples in southern Italy. Joan Llonc was sent to Naples to accompany the king as regent and serve in his chancellery. The whole

family moved there, whose surname, Italianized, became Longo.

During these years, Maria's heart learned to suffer with love the restrictions of her illness and of being uprooted from her native land. A few years later, her husband's death left her in an even more vulnerable situation: widow, disabled and dependent.

3. In religious spheres during these times, there was a commotion bubbling up between critics of ecclesial institutions – which were becoming increasingly erratic, and those growing inspired toward evangelical change and reform. The «pre-Tridentine» Catholic environment was rich with initiatives; lay leaders and great women alike lived deeply their faith by offering various services to the most disadvantaged and by attaining mystical heights through the intimacy of prayer.<sup>4</sup>
4. The neediest of Naples found in this lady the sign of God the Father's loving consolation, and she herself learned over the years to discover the face of Christ in every poor person, giving herself without reserve, materially and spiritually. By walking this path of solidarity, she came to recognize this city as her new homeland.

Sometime later, the Lord asked her to take another step in this pilgrimage of eager service: the initiation and direction of a work of ongoing and comprehensive care. Here enters Ettore Vernazza, a widowed lawyer who dedicated his life and his fortune to

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Idem, *Gaudete et exultate*, No. 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of great female figures during the “pre-Tridentine” period include: St. Catherine Fieschi of Genoa (1447-1510); St. Angela Merici (1474-1540), or Queen Isabella of Castile, herself (1451-1504).

the care of the needy, founding the first «Hospital of the Incurables» in Genoa. In the same manner, he founded another one in Rome, after which he moved on to Naples with the same project in mind. With tenacious perseverance, he prevailed upon Maria Lorenza, who soon became willing to stand at the forefront of this dream. She accepted it with a spirit of faith, aware of her limitations, after having perceived during Holy Mass the invitation of the Lord to love him even more in the incurable poor.

The Naples hospital was organized, established, and overseen by Mother Maria, who with her solid strength and dedication assisted the sick, encouraged volunteers and collaborators in their commitment of service and tried to sensitize the rich in order to bring them into solidarity with the poorest of the poor. Together with her, some women of noble lineage became great benefactors to the cause and personally took care of patients.

The first Capuchin friars to arrive in Naples were welcomed at the hospital and gave themselves with dedication to assisting the «incurables» while their final place of residence was being prepared. The same happened with the Theatine Fathers on their arrival in the city, with St. Cajetan himself at the head of the community.

5. When the work began taking on a life of its own, and her physical strength was failing, a new and intense desire for pilgrimage was

born in her heart. She wished to pursue her ultimate goal of visiting the Holy Land, “*to venerate the precious antiquities bathed in the blood of the Redeemer.*”<sup>5</sup> But, that desire soon changed when she discerned that it was more pleasing to God for her to stay in Naples and «consecrate a monastery of virgins under the patronage of Santa Maria di Gerusalemme.» Before long, she gathered a group of women eager for a radical dedication to prayer and solitude and they began reciting the Divine Office together. With the spiritual accompaniment of St. Cajetan, and limited by illness and age, Maria Lorenza nonetheless pressed on, and in 1535 obtained the papal bull of approval for a new monastery of “*Nuns of the Third Order of St. Francis under the Rule of St. Clare.*”<sup>6</sup> This first place of residence was located on the premises of the hospital.

Maria Lorenza set out to secure the future of the monastery by establishing norms and guidelines based on the Rule of St. Clare, the Constitutions of St. Colette and the reforming experience of the Capuchins. She also attempted to provide a solid institutional framework by endorsing pontifical documents in relation to the various legal aspects of the foundation. The following year she was allowed to raise the number of nuns to thirty-three, an eloquent symbol for a community desiring to live its own experience of the mysteries that abounded during the earthly years of the Lord Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Silos, *Dell'histoire della Religione de' Chierici Regolari dalla sua prima fondazione*, Naples, National Library, 165r, in; Vincenzo Criscuolo, *Maria Lorenza Longo e il monastero delle cappuccine di Napoli nell'annalistica teatina tra cinque e seicento; Convegno di studi Fonti Storiche della Ven. Maria Lorenza Longo*, Nola, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Paul III, papal bull: *Debitum pastoralis officii*, February 19, 1535.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Paul III, papal breve: *Alias nos*, April 30, 1536.

Finally, the pope issued a «*motu proprio*» which recognized the monastery of Santa Maria di Gerusalemme as that of the Order of St. Clare (where its first rule was observed in a «very strict» manner) and stipulated that the «Order of St. Francis called Capuchins» act as permanent chaplains and visitors.<sup>8</sup>

6. Blessed Mother Maria most likely ended her earthly pilgrimage in 1539, having reached her heavenly goal – the Holy City – while leaving along the way deep traces of her personal example of dedication to God, a firm foundation of charitable work through the organization of the Hospital of the Incurables, and above all a decisive starting point for the basic juridical framework of what was taking shape as the Order of Capuchin Poor Clares, where many women encountered a conducive environment for living the contemplative life in a spirit of reform.

In the following decades, the foundations of monasteries followed, hosting groups of women wishing for a rigorous contemplative life, with prominent holy founding figures and many others who have remained unknown. Some foundations were planned and well prepared, but others were rather spontaneous initiatives, or transformations of groups of tertiary women who realigned themselves as Capuchins. In the context of the century of reforms – one of the great movements within the Church – with the emergence of new congregations and institutions, and then with the structures that emerged from the Council of Trent, the

Capuchin nuns made their contributions of cloistered austerity, of simplicity and temperance while seeking the face of God, and of focusing on the essential while leaving all things superfluous and artificial behind. They gave testimony to love for the nakedness of the Cross. Their great contribution to the reform of the Church has been to return to their roots and stay there.

In general, these foundations did not make direct reference to the figure of Maria Lorenza Longo, but to the form of life and the type of observance she initiated through the Rule of St. Clare. In fact, her mission was not that of foundress presented as a model for the realization of the charism, but rather that of a powerful instrument of Providence that took the first step on a journey followed by a team of great women who have continued to deepen the charism until this day.

## II. THE IDENTITY OF THE POOR CAPUCHIN SISTERS

7. In our day, in this changing world, what is the message God wants to give to the world through the Capuchin Poor Clares, as they continue to advance the inspiration of Blessed Mother Maria Lorenza?

There has been, in the fifty years since the Second Vatican Council, a great movement of renewal in the two-fold direction of returning to the original sources of charisms and of critical dialog with today's world.<sup>9</sup> Your current Constitutions are a magnificent proof of this. Together

<sup>8</sup> Papa Paolo III, *Motu proprio "Cum Monasterium"*, 10 dicembre 1538.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Vatican Council II, *"Perfectae caritatis" Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* No. 2.

with the other branches of the Franciscan Second Order, you have deepened your knowledge of the writings, of the history, and above all, of the re-evaluation and study of the Rule of St. Clare.<sup>10</sup> Your identity as poor sisters is clearer and more evident today.

The Magisterium of the Church itself has made a great contribution in its recent considerations of the contemplative life, which no longer presents itself as a way of perfect and sure consecration, but as a particularized experience of an aspect that belongs to the whole Church and is understood in relation to the holy people of God: “*Contemplative communities ... do not propose a more perfect realization of the Gospel but, carrying out the demands of Baptism, constitute an instance of discernment and convocation at the service of the whole Church: a sign that indicates a path, a search, reminding the entire people of God the first and last meaning of what they live.*”<sup>11</sup> Your identity within the Church is more transparent and meaningful today.

8. What then is the defining Capuchin attribute found among the contemplatives who are the Poor Clare family? What is the characteristic accent that has marked the development and expansion of the monasteries from the beginning? What, ultimately, is the spiritual physiognomy of your Order?

Your Constitutions offer a beautiful and simple formulation that I shall take liberty to quote at length: “*Faithful to our particular vocation, we want to preserve and observe the Rule of St. Clare as a constitutive form of our life, following that genuine spirit that has always had vigor in the Order. It springs from the Gospel and leads us to the evangelical life, proposing to us «the way of simplicity, humility and poverty». Thanks to it, we make ours «the Form of life and the way of holy unity and of the highest poverty that the blessed father St. Francis delivered verbally and in writing», so that they would observe it, to St. Clare and her sisters. Therefore, to be faithful to the original inspiration and constant tradition of the Order, let us care first of all assiduous contemplation of God in silence and solitude, continuous praise, the commitment to adhere to Christ crucified with love and spirit of annihilation. Furthermore, we cultivate our fraternal relationships with simplicity and spontaneity; we give sincere testimony of a poor and austere life, such that it can be a prophetic sign for modern society; let us intensely nourish the ecclesial dimension of our vocation together with concern for the poor and the weak, following the example of our holy sisters, especially St. Veronica Giuliani*”<sup>12</sup>

9. How useful it is for us to peer further into these beautiful and meaningful

<sup>10</sup> Among the many valuable investigations carried out by experts, we note the collective studies of the Poor Clares of Umbria: The Federation of St. Clare of Assisi of the Poor Clares of Umbria-Sardinia, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita. In ascolto di Chiara nella sua Regola*, Edizioni Messaggero, Padua, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, “*Vultum Dei Quaerere*” Apostolic Constitution on Female Contemplative Life No. 4, Rome, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Constitutions of the Order of Capuchin Poor Clares (*transl.*) No. 3, Rome, 1986.

expressions, and to enrich ourselves with a clear sense of the defining identity and spiritual physiognomy of your Order. Continuing in this spirit of dialogue, I offer you a selection of some texts from our *Ratio Formationis* that speak to us of the «*proprio*» that we as Capuchin Friars Minor are invited to cultivate and which can also be words of inspiration for you:

“The Capuchin reform attempted to interpret, once again, the Franciscan form of life. The secret lies in going back, again and again, to Brother Francis, the *Forma Minorum*, not simply in order to repeat his experiences, but to recreate his genuine insights in new cultural contexts. Fidelity and creativity are key dispositions if we wish to follow Christ more nearly and love Him more dearly. With the *Rule* and *Testament* of Francis in their memory, Capuchins set themselves the task of rediscovering a more simple lifestyle, living in solitary places but not isolated from people, in simple structures that did not compromise freedom, seeking silence whereby they could, as a brotherhood, listen to the Gospel Word and put it into practice at the service of the most humble.”<sup>13</sup>

“The contemplative gaze of God rests on the poor in heart, the afflicted, the dispossessed, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers and those who suffer persecution in the cause of right. Contemplation means to desire to see things through the eyes of God, to see what

others do not dare to look at. Whoever listens to God’s voice prepares his ears to hear the cries of the poor. The Capuchin reform was born with a profound desire to return to the hermitages and lonely places, so favourable to an encounter with Christ poor and crucified, where silence is transformed into service and consolation for the victims of the plague, and contemplation becomes compassion.”<sup>14</sup>

“Jesus presents us with a God who loves to make Himself small, to reveal Himself to humble and simple folk. It is on the cross, in the mystery of God’s smallness revealed, that love becomes real in an act of total expropriation and unconditional self-giving. This is the foundation of minority. Minority is a quality, not a quantity, which in turn gives shape to our own desires, unmasking the temptation to be great and do great things. Francis discovers in the poor and the crucified the art of building free relationships, and a new way of looking at the world centered on what is fundamental. Moving in that same direction, the Capuchin reform managed to combine in a wonderful way simplicity in moderation with the search for the essential.”<sup>15</sup>

The Capuchin reform is not a past historical event; it is an attitude to life that forms part of our charismatic identity. The desire to be constantly renewed invites us to look within, while avoiding nostalgia for the past, and to take on the risks involved in our journey towards an unwritten future. Faced with profound

<sup>13</sup> *Ratio Formationis OFMCap* No. 57, Rome, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> *Ratio Formationis OFMCap* No. 69, Rome, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> *Ratio Formationis OFMCap* No. 67, Rome, 2020.

social change, the Christian response is not one of fear, enclosing us within the false security of traditionalism. On the contrary, only faith and trust can help us discern the road ahead. We are called to get up and walk, to start again, with the Gospel and the insights of Francis and Clare in our hearts.<sup>16</sup>

10. When contemplating as a whole the beauty of the «image» that emerges from the mission of Blessed Mother Maria Lorenza Longo, an impression remains that through her life journey, with her varied experiences and works, by her profound sense of pilgrimage and eagerness to serve, she had intuitively lived the very core of the Capuchin reform, and became a docile instrument in the hands of God to carry out his divine plan, opening up paths towards the future.

We ask the Father of Mercies that her beatification be a stimulus for bringing the

Gospel to life so that it resounds in today's world as God so desires; and may it also open us up to the future with confidence as docile instruments of action inspired by the Lord who guides history.

Through the intercession of St. Francis, St. Clare and soon to be Blessed Maria Lorenza:

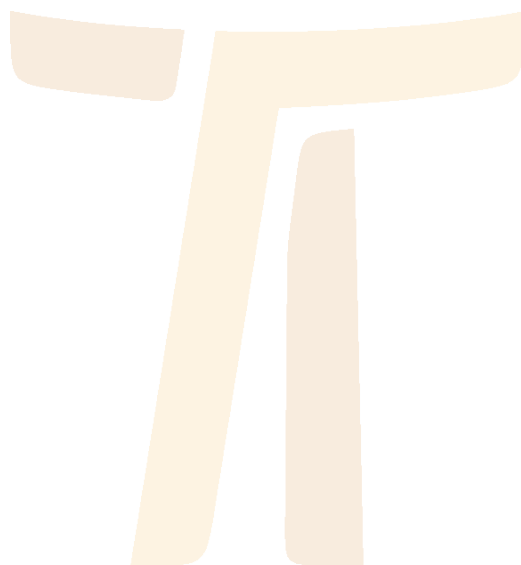
*May the Lord bless you and keep you,*

*May he show his face to you  
and have mercy on you,*

*May he look upon you with kindness and  
give you his peace.*



BR. ROBERTO GENUIN  
GENERAL MINISTER OFMCAP



ROME; SEPTEMBER 17, 2021.  
FEAST OF THE SACRED STIGMATA  
OF ST. FRANCIS.

<sup>16</sup> *Ratio Formationis OFMCap* No. 73, Rome, 2020.