

CIRCULAR LETTER 9

"He has sent you into the entire world that in word and deed you may give witness"
(A Letter to the Entire Order, 9).

Dear brothers:

1.1 The general definitory has just completed two weeks of meetings and reflection regarding the life of our international brotherhood. Our reflections have benefitted greatly from our personal experiences of the life of the brothers in many provincial chapters and pastoral visits. In the past 18 months, the definitors have been able to visit virtually every circumscription of the Order. I have been able to meet the majority of the brothers in 80 of the 150 different circumscriptions of our Order. In October 1995, we also began meeting with the conferences of the Order. These experiences, as well as the many reports and letters arriving at the general curia, cause us to write to you to propose a number of concerns and challenges which we consider to be important for the life of the Order. We will also propose various ways in which we can begin to formulate a gospel response to these concerns and challenges as we live the closing years of the millennium.

"Let them give witness that they are members of one family" (RB VI.7).

2.1 The continued growth of the fraternal charism of our Order is of critical importance. The nature and characteristics of our gospel brotherhood are the central concern of our fraternal visits. Fraternity is not only a gift we offer to one another, it is our privileged manner of announcing the reign of God! This demands that we speak constantly of the quality of common prayer, build fraternal understanding, and read the signs of the times in local chapters, collaboration in ministry, living common life with nothing of our own, our presence and commitment to the poor and all other values of our gospel life.

2.2 We are continuing our dialogue with the authority of the church regarding the formal recognition of the fraternal character of our Order. The synod "On the consecrated life and its role in the church and in the world," offered hope that the existence and unique character of "mixed institutes" would be fully recognized. Our hope is also strengthened by the fact that the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has established a commission with a mandate to give a legal description of such mixed institutes. We are very grateful to the congregation that a member of our Order has been appointed a member of this commission.

2.3 It is to be hoped that the September 1996 Congress on "Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Vocation" will give new impetus to the development of our fraternal charism and new depth to the reality of the mixed character of our Order.

"Afterwards I lingered a little and left the world" (Testament 3).

3.1 The Constitutions of 1982, as well as the five plenary councils, give us the ability to describe the ideals of our Order with great clarity, concreteness and precision. They represent a truly marvelous consensus uniting brothers dispersed throughout the entire world and many different cultures. The Order has also benefitted from the four great international congresses dedicated to formation and held in the years following the 1982 chapter. These congresses have given rise to programs of initial formation in the provinces which truly pass on the ideals so well expressed in our Constitutions.

3.2 Still, the general definitory has serious concerns about the postnovitiate phase of initial formation. The principles of the Constitutions are very clear when they state that during the entire period of initial formation, formation in and for Capuchin Franciscan life must have priority (30.2). However, with few exceptions, this priority has never been achieved in the postnovitiate period.

3.3 In general, the seminary model of postnovitiate formation – centering upon the philosophical and theological preparation of our friars for ordination to the priesthood – continues relatively unchanged. The growth in affective maturity, adult faith and the interiorization of the fraternal and contemplative values of our Capuchin life are made to fit the structures of seminary, intellectual development. As a consequence, these three areas – crucial to the development of a Christian and religious vocation – are given priority only during the novitiate. The general definitory strongly believes that the experience of the Order leads to two inescapable conclusions: first, the human and religious development described above cannot be accomplished in one year; and second, the pressure and intellectualized atmosphere of the university or the seminary is not the proper setting to foster such human and religious growth initially. The definitory wishes to stress that it strongly supports the intellectual preparation of our brothers for the ministry of priesthood and for other ministries in the church and the world. However, we are equally convinced that it cannot be allowed to suffocate the human and religious development upon which the intellectual development depends.

3.4 Affective maturity, adult faith development and the interiorization of the fraternal and contemplative values of our Capuchin life have always been important to our Order. Formerly, although candidates were somewhat younger when they sought admission to our Order, they came from more stable family and social backgrounds and they had matured in faith communities which enjoyed centuries of lived Christian tradition. In this social and religious context, affective maturity and adult faith grew naturally within the stable fraternal setting of our seminary communities. Capuchin values imparted during novitiate could likewise reach interiorization within such a setting. The "seminary" model of religious formation corresponds to the needs of candidates emerging from such a social and religious context. Yet, such a context no longer exists! The fractured social context of our world creates special difficulties in the affective development of all persons, including those called to religious life. This experience also complicates fraternal interaction. The absence of experience of the communal dimension of Christian life and the lack of a consistent faith practice over many years, means that the experience of faith has not taken deep root in the lives of our candidates. For these reasons, even though candidates come to our Order at a more mature age than in former years, they still require more time. Affective maturity, adult faith and the interiorization of the values of our Capuchin Franciscan life require more than one year.

For this reason our Constitutions wisely insist that formation in and for our life have priority during the entire period of initial formation, including the postnovitiate phase.

3.5 The pressure and intellectualized atmosphere of the university or the seminary is not the proper setting to foster such growth nor does that setting provide the proper "tools." It is our conviction that the large number of dispensations during the postnovitiate period and after final vows clearly indicates the consequence of an intellectual appropriation of values which never takes deep root in lived experience.

3.6 Finally, the "seminary" model of postnovitiate formation has left our Order, in effect, with no adequate postnovitiate program for the religious formation of the lay members of our Order. In most provinces, our lay brothers' formation is treated as an adjunct to the house of philosophy or theology. Worse still, in many circumscriptions our younger lay brothers are simply sent out into the fraternities with practically no formal formation after the novitiate experience. It is the considered opinion of the general definity that the problems so evident in the religious formation of our lay brothers are equally present in the religious formation of cleric brothers, however, these problems are simply masked by the intellectual ferment of philosophical and theological studies. The problems of faith and affectivity simply reappear later. We also believe that the continuation of the seminary model of formation also leads inescapably to the continuation of the strong clericalization of the Order.

3.7 A number of provinces and circumscriptions have already begun to develop new "tools" and structures for the postnovitiate phase of initial formation. The experience of these provinces seems to indicate that the following elements are important:

- the ministry of direct service to people especially on the level of the corporal works of mercy;
- guided reflection on what it means to be a lesser brother in the world today;
- an intense fraternal life of prayer and common life;
- a spiritual accompaniment equal to that already provided in the novitiate experience;
- regular (e.g., weekly) theological reflection with other brothers on the same level of formation and with the director on the integration of all of these values into lived experience;
- regular periods (e.g., every three months) of spiritual retreat and prayer away from the intensity of work to personally interiorize the experience.
- Integration and interiorization require time in a brother's life.

3.8 For all of the above reasons, the general definity will propose that the provincial ministers and those brothers responsible for initial formation particularly on the

postnovitiate level, initiate a study of these matters on the conference (or interconference) level. We will be sending these brothers more detailed and specific information. It is hoped that the wisdom learned from our combined experience can assist the Order in developing a more adequate program for the growth in adult faith, affective maturity and the interiorization of Capuchin Franciscan values during the postnovitiate period.

"Let them always love and be faithful to our Lady Holy Poverty"
(Testament of Siena, 4).

4.1 Evangelical poverty is one of the principle distinguishing characteristics of a Franciscan presence in the world. Living the evangelical ideal of poverty always remains a challenge and a call to reform within the Order. Our Constitutions give concrete expression to this ideal as it is called to be lived in our individual lives. However, there are many troubling questions concerning the communal and institutional expression of our evangelical ideal of poverty which are not addressed or which are inadequately addressed in the Constitutions.

4.2 Our Constitutions identify an ideal: *"Let the brothers show people by their life that voluntary poverty liberates them ... from anxious concern for tomorrow "* (67.1). We must live in obvious dependence upon providence. Furthermore, we seek to live from the fruits of our own labors and with real dependence upon the people whom we serve. How do we give concrete expression to this ideal of dependence on human and divine providence in very widely diverse circumstances?

- In provinces which habitually experience a modest surplus of income over expenditures, it can be mean determining what percentage of the following year's budget can legitimately be held at the end of each year. However, what does it mean in those many circumscriptions in the southern world where there is a habitual, large deficit in the ordinary income of the circumscription?
- What provisions are permissible and necessary to assure adequate care for the sick and elderly in a world in which societies have such wide divergence in the provision of social assistance?
- Where it is deemed justified to maintain investments to provide a level of security for initial formation, the sick and the elderly, what type of investments are consistent with our ideals?
- How does the ideal of poverty influence the instruments of our various ministries? Diversity of ministry often leads to a wide diversity of lifestyle, even between brothers and fraternities of the same province.

4.3 *"The individual fraternities of the same area and even the provinces of the Order should be ready to share their goods or necessities among themselves ..."* (67.6). There is need to discuss international solidarity within the Order. Past structures of financial solidarity were built upon concepts of juridic dependence. Provinces were financially responsible for custodies or missions entrusted to their care. An increasingly large portion of our international brotherhood is in need of financial assistance. At the same

time, these circumscriptions no longer retain juridic or even traditional ties with regions of the Order which have the capacity to assist them. How can new structures of international solidarity be created which do not denote dependence, and at the same time do not require an unacceptable level of financial centralization within the Order. How can we give international witness to the principle of the Rule: *"Wherever the brothers may be, ... let them show that they are members of the same family"* (VI, 7).

4.4 *"We will truly proclaim to the poor that God himself is with them in so far as we share in their lot"* (59.8). The challenge to "share in their lot" is very difficult even in societies which make elaborate provision for the social welfare of their citizens. However, when we use criteria and structures created for brothers in the economically developed area of the world to determine the structures and criteria for the life of the brothers in other areas, we impose insupportable burdens upon them. How do we define "sharing the lot" of the poor in societies where poverty is total misery?

4.5 *"Let us preserve a common life and willingly share among ourselves whatever we receive as individuals"* (61.1). How can our expression of common life be enriched by concepts of family ties which arise from Asian or African concepts of family rather than from the more individualistic values of western civilization?

4.6 The Fifth Plenary Council made the following recommendation: *"To implement the Constitutions (60.6), we should effectively foster fraternities which enable us to be present among the poor and the marginal"* (V PCO, 40). V PCO gave rise to a good number of fraternities of insertion among the poor. The Order can profit greatly from a sharing of challenges and experiences. It is also important to evaluate the gospel witness of these fraternities from the perspective of the other core values of our charism - such as the witness of brotherhood and the witness of contemplation.

4.7 For all of the above reasons, the general definitory has the intention to convoke a Plenary council of the Order to treat the question of evangelical poverty, especially in its communal and institutional dimensions. The general definitory feels that a plenary council is the proper tool with which to deal in a serious and thoughtful manner with a topic so vital to our Capuchin Franciscan ideal. We profoundly believe that a plenary council on the topic of evangelical poverty will release new gospel energy in our Order. After consulting with the presidents of the various conferences of our Order at a meeting already scheduled to be held at the end of August 1996, we hope to convoke such a plenary council in the latter half of 1998.

The way the brothers should go about the world (RB III)

5.1 The gospel stands at the very heart of the Franciscan charism: *"The Rule and life of the friars minor is this: to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (RB I, 1). The charism of Francis - like that of every religious founder - has two dimensions. The charism reveals Francis' faith vision of Jesus Christ. The charism is also a glimpse of God's preferential love for humanity revealed in Francis. Francis had a profound sense of this reality: *"No one showed me what I had to do, ... the Most High himself revealed to me ..."* (Testament, 14).

5.2 When speaking about the third millennium, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II often refers to the challenge of evangelization. The Holy Father invites us to reappropriate with renewed clarity and new force God's preferential love for humanity revealed to us in Francis.

5.3 Jesus revealed himself as servant – washing the feet of his disciples – and bequeathed this act as his solemn *“mandatum”* to his followers. Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John was the definitive model which Francis gave to his brothers as well. John 13 reveals not only how the brothers must treat one another, but how they are to relate to the world: as lesser brothers.

5.4 Francis' renunciation of power is every bit as radical as his renunciation of possessions. We live as lesser brothers our contemplative vocation to worship and obey when we make ourselves servants of the signs of the Spirit of God in the world: *“For God who has loved us first, speaks to us in many ways: in all creatures, in the signs of the times, in people's lives, in our heart ...”* (Constitutions, 45.2). We live as lesser brothers when our lives are placed at the service of peace, justice and respect for nature: *“The point of view of the poor is the privileged position from which we, the sons of Francis, consider and proclaim these values. Reconciliation and respect for creation are the means Francis gives us in order to reach true peace and harmony”* (V PCO, 86). We live as lesser brothers when we place our lives at the service of the human family, seeking to bind the world together in universal brotherhood. Our Constitutions describe our special calling in this regard: *“While exercising among ourselves the freedom of brothers, let us joyfully live among the poor, the powerless and the weak, sharing their life, and let us maintain our special approach to people”* (4.4).

5.5 The Capuchin Order is among the very few religious congregations having a presence in the entire world. This gift of universality, which the Holy Spirit has made the privileged characteristic of the modern era of our Order, gives us an experience of the global diversity of gospel challenges. The gift of universality carries with it a special responsibility to formulate a gospel response in word and deed consistent with our charism.

5.6 Living gospel brotherhood as minors:

5.6.1 *In a secularized world* Most friars can describe with passion and clarity the negative effects of secularism in our world: decreased attachment to religious practice, lack of consensus on critical moral choices, precipitous decline in vocations to consecrated life and disappearance of many traditional ministries to society and the church. Yet within the very experience of secularism, our Order must appear as Jesus appeared in Galilee: *“proclaiming the good news of God”* (Mk 1:14). Therefore, we are called to be the yeast of the gospel within secular society. At the same time, we are to find nourishment and inspiration for faith within the very signs of alienation which surround us.

5.6.2 *Among Islamic peoples* As Franciscans, we have shared life with Islamic peoples for more than 700 years. Today, Islam is a presence and challenge to the entire world. Can the qualities of brotherhood and minority enable us to find new unity in our mutual concern for suffering humanity and our common faith in the One True God?

5.6.3 *In Orthodox societies* The almost spontaneous collapse of communist totalitarian regimes has suddenly opened up new opportunities to establish our presence in countries and societies with an ancient tradition of Orthodox Christianity. In these nations, the Orthodox churches are emerging from years of oppression, suppression and political subordination. We are challenged to bring the richness of our Franciscan gospel tradition to these lands in such a manner as to be respectful of the even more ancient Christian traditions which precede us.

5.6.4 *In a multi-religious world* Asia is the birthplace of the great world religions. Especially in Asia, our Order is emerging from its missionary origins and seeks its proper cultural identity in a society distinguished by its multi-religious nature and in which Christianity is a tiny minority. This offers us a unique challenge to enrich and be enriched by the great religions of the world.

5.6.5 *In young churches* In many areas of the world fraternal life has been subordinated to the missionary responsibility of implanting the structures of the church. This has imparted to the younger circumscriptions of our Order, particularly in America, Asia and Africa, a predominant involvement in the parochial structures of the diocesan church. As we emerge from our missionary past, it is important to discover that fraternity itself is an evangelical force for the church and the world. This challenges us to re-envision our presence in parochial structures from the perspective of fraternity. It also causes us to reflect more deeply on the other charismatic dimensions of our Capuchin Franciscan identity and how these may also enrich the life of the local church.

5.7 Our response to these evangelical challenges has two important dimensions:

5.7.1 None of the evangelical challenges is experienced in the same manner throughout the entire world. Our response must be determined in each local church. The Fifth Plenary Council requested that each circumscription of our Order formulate "*a pastoral plan which will clearly articulate our new apostolic presence in the world*" (no. 52; Cfr. Organizational Letter of the General Definitory, "... *Moving to Action*" of 2 February 1989) The majority of circumscriptions in our Order have responded to this challenge. Most provinces have formulated or are in the process of formulating a pastoral plan. Both the process and the concrete plans which have resulted from the process are invaluable in the evolving response of our worldwide brotherhood to the challenge of evangelization.

5.7.2 Since the Holy Spirit has made us a universal brotherhood, our evangelical response should have a universal vision. In fact, our Order experiences every great challenge of evangelization today in some part of the world. Yet, an individual province cannot possibly formulate a universal vision of evangelization both because of the restrictions of place, as well as the restrictions imposed by limited resources.

5.8 For the above reasons, the general definitory suggests that the entire Order could profit greatly should various conferences or areas of the Order decide to conduct regional congresses dealing with the great themes of evangelization as they are experienced in that particular conference or area. Two examples will suffice:

5.8.1 The secularization of society is a world phenomenon experienced in every part of the world. However, the experience varies greatly as to both content and diversity. Few would deny that secularism – whether considered in itself or as a dimension of "postmodern" society - has had perhaps its strongest influence in northwest Europe. The entire Order would profit from the faith-inspired reflection of these brothers on the experience of living gospel brotherhood as minors in these particular societies.

5.8.2 Islam is an important reality on every continent. However, our friars living in Islamic republics have a very intense and often difficult experience of the Islamic reality. Could not a congress of brothers from the Islamic republics help our worldwide brotherhood establish a new understanding and respect for one of the world's great religions?

5.9 The general definitory will cooperate with any conference or group of conferences that may wish to attempt to formulate a plan or vision of evangelization which goes beyond the confines of an individual province. We see this as an invaluable contribution to our Order's attempt to fulfill its role in the mission of the church to proclaim by word and deed its faith in our Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

6 In keeping with the intent of the *General Statutes for Conferences of the Order* approved at the Chapter of 1994, the general definitory will convoke a meeting of the presidents of the conferences of the Order at the end of August 1996. The general definitory wishes to hear the observations and suggestions of all of the conferences on these important matters regarding the life of our Order in the world. The general definitory welcomes discussion and dialogue on these topics between the brothers of the Order and the ministers. Together we wish to discern with ever greater clarity the role of our brotherhood in the church and in the world.

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2 February 1996, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord