

CIRCULAR LETTER 13

LIVING POVERTY IN FRATERNITY:

A Reflection on the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order

31 May 1998, Pentecost

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Although rich, Christ became poor,
so that by Christ’s poverty you might become rich”

(2 Cor 8:9)

1.1 There is special logic in this beautiful Pauline text. We are made rich “by Christ’s poverty” – not by Christ’s riches! This is the divine logic of the Incarnation. Francis took up this very text in the sixth chapter of the Rule: *“do not be ashamed, since the Lord himself became poor for us in this world.”* Thus our inspiration for evangelical poverty is Jesus himself.

1.2 The Sixth Plenary Council of the Order will address with the fraternal and communal dimensions of evangelical poverty. These reflections on the theme of CPO VI seek to encourage a wide and fruitful dialogue within the Order that might enable the plenary council to bear abundant blessings in an aspect so central to our Franciscan charism.

Part One

Communal Poverty: Francis’ Vision

“The highest Poverty”: A marvelous worldview, the fruit of Francis’ contemplation of the poverty and humility of Jesus.

2.1 Francis’ contemplation of the birth, life and death of Jesus revealed to him God’s own poverty and humility. Marveling that in the mystery of the Incarnation the Word of God took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary *“from which Jesus received the flesh of humanity and our frailty ”* (second version of the Letter to the Faithful, 4), Francis affirmed that poverty was not only chosen for Jesus’ birth, but also for his life: *“Though rich, Jesus ’ together with the most blessed Virgin, his mother – decided, first and foremost, to choose poverty while in this world”* (ibid, 5). This point is embellished in the Earlier Rule: *“Our Lord Jesus Christ ... was a poor person and a transient and lived on alms, he and the blessed Virgin and his disciples ”* (Earlier Rule, 5). Jesus’ cross was perceived by Francis, then, as the culmination of a life of total self-giving in poverty and humility: “Christ was given to us, born for us, and offered himself – with his own blood – as a sacrifice and victim on the altar of the cross” (second version of the Letter to the Faithful, 11). This same poverty and humility of Jesus, Francis encountered in the mystery of the eucharist: “Such great humility! Such

humble greatness! The Lord of the universe – God and Son of God humbles himself for our salvation, cloaked in the simple sign of bread!” (A Letter to the Entire Order, 27). The Rule, then, offers a synopsis of the Franciscan following of Christ: “let us observe the poverty, the humility, and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Later Rule, 12:4).

2.2 Reflection on Jesus’ humility and poverty blossomed into a marvelous worldview which Francis described as *“the summit of highest poverty ”* (Later Rule,VI:4): *“Therefore, hold back nothing for yourselves, so that he who offers himself totally to you may receive you totally”* (A Letter to the Entire Order, 29). This conclusion was based on the following threefold conviction which formed the basis of Francis’ attitude toward poverty (see Thaddée MATURA, OFM, Francis of Assisi: the Message of his Writings, 130):

2.2.1 Every good thing comes from God and must be attributed to God: *“And let us give credit for every good thing to the most High and supreme Lord God, recognizing that every good thing belongs to God; let us thank God for everything, because everything comes from God”* (Earlier Rule, XVII, 17). Even greater insistence is voiced in the Admonitions: *“Blest is the servant who attributes every good to the Lord God. Whoever holds back something for himself hides within himself the money of the Lord God”* (Admonition XVIII, 2).

2.2.2 ***The only thing we can rightly appropriate to ourselves is our own sinfulness:*** *“We should be firmly convinced that nothing belongs to us except our own vices and sins”* (Earlier Rule, XVII, 7).

2.2.3 ***We should joyfully bear life’s sufferings as a participation in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ:*** *“... in this we can glory: in our infirmities and bearing daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Admonition V, 8; see also Admonition VI).

A Materially Poor Fraternity: A Divinely Inspired Economy

3.1 *“Compassion for the Crucified”* gave birth to Br. Francis’ vision of *“the summit of highest poverty.”* His conviction and insistence upon the ***communal embrace of material poverty***, however, was the result of the encounter of his faith vision with the reality of the world in which he lived.

3.2 Francis and his brothers turned away from the greed, avarice and hunger for power that resulted in war and widespread violence in 13th-century Italy. When the bishop of Assisi remarked: *“Since you do not possess anything in this world, to me your life seems extremely difficult and harsh,”* Francis replied: *“If we were to have possessions we would also have to have weapons to defend ourselves. Wealth leads to arguments and lawsuits, and in many ways would only hinder us from loving God and loving our neighbor. That’s why, in this life, we do not want to have material possessions”* (Legend of the Three Companions, 33). That choice of communal poverty radically altered the friars’ human interaction and relationships – among themselves first of all, and subsequently, between themselves and other people – their brothers and sisters.

3.3 As evidenced in the writings of Francis and Clare, the deep human relationships fostered by communal poverty created a certain group cohesion and solidarity: *“Wherever the brothers gather or meet other brothers, let them give witness that they are*

members of a single family, ... if a mother cares so much and loves so deeply the child born of her flesh (see 1 Thes. 2:7), how much more ought we love and cherish our brothers 'according to the Spirit' (Later Rule VI, 7-8). That communal poverty was a discovery of a warm and tender concern for one's brother or sister becomes even more evident in the dispensation which Francis includes in the Earlier Rule with regard to the use of money to benefit the sick friars: "The brothers ... are not to carry, receive, or have others receive on their behalf – in any way whatsoever – either money or coins ... for no reason at all, except if it is meant for the obvious needs of the sick brother" (Earlier Rule, VIII, 3). We find a similar attitude expressed in the Rule of St. Clare: "Those who are sick may lie on sack cloth filled with straw and may use feather pillows for their head; those who need woollen stockings and quilts may use them" (Rule of St. Clare, VIII, 10).

3.3.1 The unity and deep, human happiness which resulted from this experience of the friars and the Poor Clares spoke eloquently to their contemporaries. Their lives were visible evidence of a group cohesiveness which could be achieved through egalitarian, fraternal sharing. The deep peace which united them stood in stark contrast to the strife, rivalries and division resulted from an economic hierarchy which unevenly assigned privileges and rights. The rapid growth of the Order was a clear demonstration of its cohesion to which fraternal solidarity was an essential key: *"Wherever the brothers gather ... let each one confidently make known his needs to the other" (Later Rule, VI, 7-8). In making known to each other their respective needs, the brothers reaffirmed their belonging to the one brotherhood and, simultaneously, their adherence to the way of gospel poverty. Theirs was a brotherhood without rank, wherein only the sick and elderly could claim economic privilege! Within the brotherhood, the practice of solidarity maintained unity among the friars themselves, but the real purpose of its practice was to propose to the world a divinely-inspired economy which could bring peace to all.*

No shame in being dependent upon one another

3.4 The communal poverty lived by the brothers radically altered their relationships with other people. Their poverty forged strong bonds of communion and solidarity with the poor: *"They should rejoice to live among them the poor and the powerless, the sick, the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside" (Earlier Rule, IX, 2). They lived a life of shared want also with the poor: "I was never a thief: by that I mean that, in accepting alms, I have always made it a point to accept less than I needed so that I would not defraud the other poor: To act otherwise would be to steal" (Legend of Perugia, 111). It is interesting to note that just as his concern for sick brothers caused Francis to relax his strict prohibitions against the use of money, likewise, his tender love for the poor caused him to make a similar provision on their behalf: "Nevertheless, when the lepers are in obvious need, the brothers can beg for alms to be used for them" (Earlier Rule, VIII, 10-11). In choosing poverty, Francis gained aright relationship with God, the sole Provider of all human need, as well as with others who, in ceasing to be his competitors, became his brothers and sisters once again.*

Francis declared that there is neither weakness nor shame in being dependent upon other people.

3.4.1 Chapter 9 of the Earlier Rule develops a *"theology of mutual dependence,"* a new way in which people can relate economically to one another. This theology stands at the root of Francis' concept of begging. In a world dominated by arrogant autonomy and control

over all aspects of one's personal and economic life, Francis declared that there is neither weakness nor shame in being dependent upon other people: *"When people shame them and refuse them alms, let them thank God nonetheless, since by just such humiliations will they receive great honor before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be assured that it is not the victims of such abuse who are shamed, but those who inflict it"* (Earlier Rule, IX, 6-7) In fact, Francis confidently declared that such dependence is a consequence of being human and redeemed and is, therefore, a right: *"Alms are a legacy and something to which the poor have every right because our Lord Jesus Christ acquired that right for us"* (Earlier Rule, IX, 8). To embrace interdependence requires the theological gift of love which enriches giver and

receiver alike: *"... the brothers who work to receive alms will themselves be greatly enriched, and at the same time those who give the alms will be enriched as well ..."* (Earlier Rule, IX, 9). Francis then concluded: *"So, confidently make known your needs to the other, so that the other might find what you need and give it to you"* (Earlier Rule, IX, 10).

Interdependence: The Way to Peace

3.4.2 In begging for their subsistence, Francis and Clare and their followers proclaimed an inspired belief in a viable alternative for our society: a better society will result when we trust in the generosity of others for our basic needs and when we offer our service to others for the needs of our lives. By begging, they gave dramatic evidence that they could entrust their total dependence upon God to the benevolence and generosity of others rather than deny dependence and replace it by greed and personal power over the allocation of resources. By begging, the brothers dramatically demonstrated that interdependence is a viable and better route to peace, prosperity and happiness than unlimited greed and lust for power. Francis went so far as to refuse monetary recompense for any good or service rendered, because he considered money to be an indeterminate instrument of power which exempts one from actual, humane and fraternal consideration of the other person's needs.

The interdependence which Francis proposed in his theology of begging was also embraced by Clare and her sisters in their attitude toward work, an attitude in contradistinction to the approach of other religious movements of her time. In the words of a modern commentator: "Clare and her sisters made things in order to give them away; they Worked so that they could give in alms!"

Part Two

Bridging the Centuries

4.1 The experience of Francis and the first brothers belongs to the culture and times of 13th-century central Italy. Events and personal experiences do not travel through history; they are relayed imperfectly through narrative and legend. With the aid of the imagination we reconstruct images from the past, we attempt to understand what happened, but we cannot make the past itself live again. However, beyond narration and legend, Francis and the Franciscan event have been carried into the present day through the lived experience of the Order, a brotherhood which has sought throughout the ages to live the essence of the person and event which gave it life. With conviction we can say that the Franciscan experience does not need to be re-enacted or revived, for it has never died, it has endured throughout the ages. Our Order continues to offer to the social reality of our era the basic vitality of the primitive Franciscan fraternity. In the course of almost

8 centuries, the Franciscan vision has been enriched and, at times, thrown off course by forces both in the church and in the larger society. The Order today, while preserving its identity, must discern how to renew its prophetic gift to the world, taking into account both the positive as well as negative aspects of the society around us.

4.2 Greed and avarice remain integral components of the capitalist economy of our day. By definition, resources are scarce in a capitalist economy. People must compete in order to achieve control over those resources. From a Christian perspective, however, everyone is a brother or sister, not a competitor, and resources are gifts from an inexhaustibly good God. Like the seven loaves of the gospel, no one fathomed just how many could be satisfied until they began distributing them to the thousands gathered to listen to Jesus (see Mk 8:1-9). It has been said that there were two miracles involved in that gospel narrative, one major and one minor. The minor miracle, according to the anecdote, was the actual multiplication of the loaves and fish. The major miracle was getting people to sit down in groups of 50! The point is obvious: there is enough for everyone, if we would only learn to collaborate and participate in the distribution! We are faced with the challenge of transforming the current system while preserving the advancements it has produced and can still produce for the benefit of humankind.

Communion and Solidarity

5.1 It is through communion that the church seeks to heal the division and violence inherent in the competitive nature of capitalism. The Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, states that “*the church is essentially a mystery of communion*” (n.41) and “*fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, [is an] eloquent sign of ecclesial communion*” (n. 42). The Exhortation touches the wounds of our common humanity that cry out for healing: the wound of unredeemed solitude, the cry for forgiveness and love, the need for each person’s secularized self to be affirmed by a love that is unconditional and faithful. And so, the Holy Father declared:

“If the church is to reveal her true face to today’s world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the ‘new commandment’ ” (VC,45).

He calls for “*fraternal communities*” which reveal the new Commandment – “*Love one another as I have loved you*” – in concrete ways. This he tells us, is “*the new evangelization.*” Is it not a re-enactment of the dream of Pope Innocent III, who saw the little poor man of Assisi holding up the walls of the Lateran Basilica! The Pope is precise in what he seeks from us: “*fraternal communities*” who know the mystery of communion and solidarity, “*Fraternal communion,*” he concludes, “*is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord*” (see Mt. 18:20).

What Pope John Paul II said of the moral and Christian virtue of solidarity coincides marvelously with Francis’ “*theology of mutual dependence.*”

5.2 Capitalism proposes competition as the best response to protect and administer scarce resources. The church proposes solidarity as a more appropriate response. In his Encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Pope John Paul II defined solidarity as a moral and Christian virtue. As a moral virtue, solidarity “is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (n. 38). This moral virtue “helps us to see the ‘other’ – whether a person, people or nation – ... on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God” (n. 39). As a Christian virtue, solidarity sees that “one is neighbor is the living image of God ... [who] must be loved ... with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her” (n. 40). Francis possessed that consciousness: “Be conscious of the wondrous state in which the Lord has placed you, for he created you and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body, and to his likeness according to the spirit (see Gn. 1:26)”

(Admonition V, 1). What Pope John Paul II said of the moral and Christian virtue of solidarity coincides marvelously with Francis’ “theology of mutual dependence” (see 3.4.2).

5.3 A look at how the Order has lived the communal expression of its poverty over the past 50 years may help us to embrace the challenge of communion and solidarity in the new millennium.

Part Three

Communal Poverty in the Second Half of the 20th Century

A glance at the pre-1950 situation

6.1 Our 1950 statistics reveal an Order overwhelmingly centered in Europe, particularly in Western Europe. A significant number of those brothers were missionaries in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America. However, they were present there as members of European jurisdictions. Only 5% of the brothers were members of autonomous circumscriptions in the poorer southern hemisphere of our world, none of them in Africa. Given the statistics, it is not surprising that the *Constitutions of 1925* describe a brotherhood living in close solidarity with the working class people of Western Europe.

6.2 Like the working poor of the time, friars lived from the fruits of each day’s labor:

“Only a few days’ provision of the necessities of life that can be obtained from day to day by begging, shall be made in our friaries”

(1925 Constitutions, n. 118).

Like the occasional day laborers of their age, the brothers held no offices to which fixed salaries were attached. They lived from the offerings given for their occasional services as preachers and confessors, spontaneous offerings given by the faithful in their chapels and churches, manual labor in gardens and orchards, and from the quest. The fact that the livelihood of the brothers depended upon spontaneous offerings in their chapels and, in a particular way on the quest, meant that they were directly dependent upon the working poor themselves. This became a strong bond of solidarity between them.

6.2.1 The brothers lived as those who, while having sufficient for their needs, were still constrained to budget their goods with care:

“Let the friars rather remember that the perfection of evangelical poverty consists chiefly in having no attachment to anything on earth, and in using the things of this world most sparingly, as if by constraint and through necessity”

(1925 Constitutions. n. 89).

6.2.2 The identification of the Order with Western Europe allowed very detailed prescriptions regarding the building and decoration of churches and friaries to ensure that the dwellings of the friars were in solidarity with the working poor. The *Constitutions of 1925* describe in meticulous detail the size of windows and rooms, the weight of the chapel bell, the quality of candlesticks and the binding of missals and breviaries (see nn. 102, 104, 106).

6.2.3 Each friary was to have a room with a fireplace for “poor pilgrims and strangers” (n. 110). The friary could offer hospitality to those with whom the brothers lived in such close and easy solidarity.

6.3 Economic solidarity within the brotherhood was described in n. 114 of the *Constitutions of 1925*:

“Perfect common life shall be religiously and constantly observed ... All goods, emoluments, gifts – in a word, everything the religious acquires by any title whatever – must be consigned to the superior so that all shall have in common, food, clothing and everything that is necessary.”

6.3.1 The fact that 91% of the autonomous circumscriptions of the Order were centered in Europe and North America ensured economic equality among them. The prescriptions of the Constitutions where by missions were totally integrated into the province ensured that the vast majority of the brothers in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America, by reason of the rules of common life, enjoyed equal access to the goods of the province with their brothers in Europe and North America. There was, then, an economic equality both among circumscriptions, as well as among the brothers of the northern and southern hemispheres.

1950 - 1970

7.1 In 1970, the Order was still centered in Europe, particularly Western Europe, and in North America. However, the signs of the times were clear: vocations were increasing rapidly in Asia-Oceania and Latin America, while Western Europe and North America were clearly experiencing vocational crises. Africa did not yet figure significantly into the vocations to our Order. Still, for the first time in the history of the Order, there were a significant number of indigenous brothers outside of Europe and North America even

though the majority of these brothers were juridic members of Europe” or North American provinces.

7.2 The period 1950-1970 was marked by momentous social change. This is not the place, nor do I have the competence, to make a proper and economic analysis of these changes. However, I wish to highlight those changes which had significant influence on the former vision and practice of communal poverty in the Order.

7.2.1 The economic wealth of the world multiplied. That wealth, however, was not equally distributed. North America and Western Europe enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, which had the effect of increasing the economic division between the northern and southern hemispheres.

7.2.2 Public and private welfare programs multiplied, particularly in Western Europe and in North America. Those programs ensured the basic needs of children, education, health care and old age. As a result for the first time in human history, entire peoples were given security for the future. This also increased the disparity between the northern and southern hemispheres. Generally, in the south, nations lacked the capability of guaranteeing such rights for their citizens.

With the disappearance of the “working poor of 1950”, the “model” for Capuchin communal poverty was also broken. This had far-reaching consequences for the communal poverty of the brothers.

7.3 The working poor of 1950 were among the beneficiaries of the social and economic changes in Western Europe and North America. The poor were re-defined as an ever-changing group of individuals who, for various social, political or personal reasons, were excluded from the security and benefits enjoyed by the majority. With the disappearance of the “working poor of 1950,” the “model” for Capuchin communal poverty was also broken.

This had far-reaching consequences for the communal poverty of the brothers. A reading of the *Constitutions of 1968* reveals those consequences.

7.3.1 Like the working poor of 1950, the brothers accepted the social improvements of their age:

“Superiors may make use of insurance policies or forms of social security where this is prescribed by ecclesiastical or civil authority for everybody or for certain professions, or where such things are commonly used by the poor of the region” (n. 52).

For the first time, the concept of investment enters the Capuchin vocabulary (see n. 56).

7.3.2 There is a real change in the ordinary means whereby the brothers sustain themselves. For the first time the Constitutions speak of entitled income, especially salaries and pensions:

"All goods, including salaries and pensions ... shall be handed over for the use of the fraternity" (n. 51).

As a consequence, the quest rapidly disappeared, and with it an important bond of solidarity. The brothers were no longer evidently and directly dependent upon the people for their support.

7.4 There was a very rapid development of ministries among those excluded from the prosperity of the age. Works for the social progress of people were seen as an integral part of evangelization. The Order expressed its solidarity with the new poor by works of justice and compassion:

"We ought to live in conscious solidarity with the countless poor of the world, and by our apostolic labor lead the Christian people to works of justice and charity which further the development of peoples" (n. 47).

"Freed from the empty cares of this world and cooperating with Divine Providence, we should regard it as our duty to relieve the needs of the poor" (n. 87).

Sustained and supported by the working poor of 1950, the Order became the benefactor of the new poor of the 1970s. This Change is strongly evident in the following statement:

"Those friars are worthy of praise who live with the poor in the particular circumstances of the region, sharing their condition and aspirations" (n. 47)

7.5 Solidarity within the brotherhood changed little between 1950 and 1970. The prescriptions of the *Constitutions of 1925* differ little from those of 1968. Eighty-nine percent of the brothers continued to be members of European or North American provinces which had similar capacities to respond to their needs. There continued to be an economic equality among circumscriptions, as well as between the brothers of the northern and southern hemispheres. If anything, there was an exponential increase in the flow of monies toward the southern hemisphere as brothers in the north raised the consciousness of their people to the needs of their poorer southern neighbors.

7.6 The growth of entitled income, such as salaries and pensions, meant that for the first time the *Constitutions* dealt with the question of the surplus goods of the provinces (see 11. 53). In the past, there was simply a prohibition against accepting more than was necessary for the needs of the brothers: This article is perhaps the first recognition that the growth of the Order outside of Western Europe and North America was creating provincial fraternities with significantly less capability of responding to the needs of the brothers.

1970 - 1997

8.1 In 1997, 33% percent of the autonomous circumscriptions of the Order and 30% of the brothers of the Order were in Asia-Ocean, Africa and Latin America. The statistics do not indicate the equally dramatic increase in numbers in Central and Eastern Europe. If these were to be included, it is probable that currently 50% of the brothers of the Order

are juridic members of circumscriptions outside Western Europe and North America. With some exceptions, these circumscriptions all have significantly less capability to respond to the needs of the brothers and the ministries of their region than do those in Western Europe and North America.

8.2 The post-1970 period saw continued growth of economic wealth. The Proportionate wealth of North America and Western Europe continued to increase, thus widening the economic divisions between southern hemispheres.

8.3 The fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dismantling of the U.S.S.R. began the integration of these economies into the capitalist system of the West.

8.3.1 The unrestricted growth of capitalism has created global economic forces and companies beyond the control of any single political entity, and larger in force than the economies of perhaps the majority of states. Poverty has also become globalized, with the weight of world debt adding significantly to the suffering of the southern hemisphere. The emergence of powerful, regional economic blocs, such as the EEC and NAFTA, have added to the impotence of weaker economic regions.

8.4 The *Constitutions of 1982* use the identical wording of those of 1968 regarding investments (see n. 66, 3). Still, the period after 1970 has seen a number of notable developments regarding investments. In some countries social insurance was not completely assumed by the State. As a result, investment funds were established in some provinces to provide for the health care of the brothers, as well as for the care of the elderly. Some provinces experienced particular needs because of an abnormally high age profile. Confronted with decreasing salaries and increasing costs due to the aging of the province, monies from the sale of surplus friaries were invested to meet those costs. Finally, the creation of some autonomous circumscriptions in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America led to the creation of investment funds. To meet formation costs and the needs of the brothers in these new circumscriptions, some of the former mother provinces established investment funds.

8.4.1 The *Constitutions of 1982* enunciate an important principle:

“For every use of goods, including money, the provinces, fraternities and brothers should use as a precise and practical criterion: ***the minimum necessary not the maximum allowed***” (n. 67, 3).

8.4.2 The buildings of the Order are a growing concern in this age. In the period 1950-1997, the number of brothers in Europe decreased by approximately 50%. This rendered many friaries and other buildings either superfluous for our needs or greatly underutilized. CPO I [*Quito*] in 1971, raised the concern:

“*Land, gardens and buildings that are no longer necessary ... should be disposed of or put to social use*” (n. 53).

This concern was repeated in the *Constitutions of 1982* (see n. 60, 2). At the same time, the Order grew rapidly in Asia-Oceania, Latin America, and Asia. The buildings which accompanied this growth often accentuated our distance from the poor.

8.5 Solidarity with poor continues to be expressed by works of social development and compassion. The fifth plenary council of the Order gave new emphasis to two other dimensions of this solidarity: fraternities inserted among the poor (see CPO V, n. 92); Constitutions, n. 60, 6), and a dedication to the eradication of the structural causes of poverty and human suffering (see CPO V, nn. 63-102).

There now exists a sizable part of the Order with considerably less ability to respond to the needs of the brothers and its ministries than in other parts of the Order.

8.6 The principles guiding solidarity within our brotherhood remain unchanged. However, the development of the Order outside Western Europe and North America is now more evident with considerable consequences. Thirty-three percent of the autonomous circumscriptions with 30% of the brothers of the Order are now in Asia-Oceania, Latin-America and Africa. These percentages will rise rapidly in the next 10 years with the generally increasing number of vocations in these regions and the creation of an additional 10 or more provinces in these regions. Therefore, there now exists a sizable part of the Order with considerably less ability to respond to the needs of the brothers and its ministries than in parts of the Order. Until now, north-south solidarity has been determined primarily by juridic membership in the same province. A serious difficulty with regards to solidarity in the Order now exists. If we consider Africa, we can see this clearly. On 1 January 1997 there were 1,008 professed friars in Africa. Of these, 419 had juridic ties to provinces, especially in Europe and North America; 589 were members of autonomous circumscriptions. These numbers clearly indicate that the present constitutional basis for international solidarity is no longer adequate. There is an evident need to re-define the terms of fraternal solidarity within the Order. Beginning in 1982, such an effort began through the creation of International Solidarity Commissions which functioned to bring needs and resources together within the Order in a fraternal and just manner.

Part Four

Communal Poverty: Challenges for the New Millennium

9 These reflections raise many questions and provide few answers. They are the questions which the Order must address, beginning with the plenary council. I wish to underline some of the challenges.

10 If the Order has lacked, since the 1950s, a clear model on which to interpret and concretize its values, what can provide that "model" today?

For example, the criterion of the Constitutions is excellent: "*the minimum necessary rather than the maximum allowed.*" However, the criterion gains its force from the social and economic context in which it is applied. What is that context?

11 If we are to give witness to “radical poverty, both personal and communal” (Constitution, n. 4) our poverty must create a clear and evident solidarity with the poor.

What constitutes our communal solidarity with the poor?

Many brothers are deeply involved and committed to the services of the poor. In various regions of the world, there exist and have existed a number of fraternities inserted among the poor. Many brothers actively work to address the structural causes of poverty.

What do the lived experiences of these brothers teach us about the communal dimensions of our poverty?

12 The manner in which the brothers sustain their lives has changed much over the 50 years. Salaries, pensions, and other “entitled” income form the bases for our support in many areas of the world. The quest has disappeared.

How do we express today Francis’ “theology of mutual dependence”?

Does our witness have anything to say to the economy of greed and the completion for the resources of our world?

13 The social advances over the past 50 years have brought security to the lives of people and have added greatly to the quality of human life. Adequate health care, the care of the young and the old, are essential dimensions of the dignity of human life.

How does this apply to a world-embracing brotherhood?

What means can be used to ensure this essential human dimension of human dignity to the brothers of our Order, especially in those regions of the world lacking all systems of social welfare?

14.1 How can we assure the needs of our circumscriptions in the poorest regions of the world, for example, in Africa?

What role can investments play in meeting those needs?

Is it necessary to look at the needs of the entire regions and continents?

If we treat the needs on a circumscription-by-circumscription basis, is there not the danger of creating a new category of inequality, for example, African circumscriptions with investments and those without?

14.2 The International Solidarity Commissions seek to bring needs and resources together within the Order in a fraternal and just manner. It is now time to evaluate the work of these commissions:

Do these commissions work effectively, fraternally and justly?

Can the work and structure of these commissions be improved in such a way as to ensure equal respect for the needs of all circumscriptions while at the same time avoiding undue centralization within the Order?

15 Is it necessary to establish criteria for the creation and administration of investment funds?

16 Our modern world values work almost exclusively in terms of its economic return.

Is it not necessary, as part of the communal dimension of poverty, to value work which provides little economic gain?

Examples of such work are: care for creation, work on behalf of peace, the promotion of justice, and the advancement of beauty and culture.

17 Can we find practical principles for our buildings that have a certain universal application while at the same time providing a practical norm for local cultures?

CONCLUSION

When confronted with the challenge of communal poverty, we often evade the issue.

18 The Sixth Plenary Council is a moment of grace for the entire Order. When confronted with the challenge of communal poverty, we often evade the issue. There is resistance to our gospel call. How are we to overcome resistance? Not by clever thoughts or lofty speeches, nor by the knowledge of our Franciscan sources. Poverty of spirit is a journey which begins where human knowledge reaches its limits and faith beckons us to “launch out into the deep.” During these days of Pentecost, we pray together that our brotherhood might receive the grace to confront communal poverty with honesty and serenity. This means allowing the Spirit to breathe new life into hearts that have become secularized and sinful. We will find light, freedom and joy if we allow Francis to guide us along the way of “highest Poverty”:

“Let us give credit for every good thing to the most High and supreme Lord God, recognizing that every good thing belongs to God; let us thank God for everything, because everything comes from God”

(Earlier Rule, XVII, 17).

Renewing in our minds, hearts and spirits the conviction that all good comes from God and must be credited to God, we will develop that sense of non-ownership which allows new visions of solidarity to flower both within our brotherhood and between our brotherhood and the poor.

*"We should be firmly convinced that nothing belongs to us
except our own vices and sins"*

(Earlier Rule, XVII, 7).

Can we find the serenity and mutual forgiveness to own our sins against solidarity within our brotherhood and against the poor of the world? This humility would be a good point of departure.

*"We can glory in our infirmities (see 2 Cor 12:5) and in bearing
daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (see Lk 14:27)"*

(Admonitions, V, 8).

"Bearing ... the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" was not a threat to Francis, it was a privilege! It spoke to him of joy and freedom. It led him to experience with greater depth and understanding the human condition. It led him to a passionate embrace of God and humanity. If we follow these simple spiritual steps, I am convinced that the results will be duplicated in our lives and in the life of our Order. Together we implore Mary, Queen of the Franciscan Order and Advocate of the Poor, to obtain for us the grace of taking these first steps on this journey of faith.

Br. John Corriveau,
OFMCap. General Minister