



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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**THE PRAYER OF THE BROTHERS**

**Circular Letter n. 18**

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**THE PRAYER OF THE BROTHERS**  
**(Part One of a series)**

**“Let us always make a home and a dwelling place ...  
for him who is the Lord God Almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (ER XXII 27).**

Prot. 00702/01

**To the brothers and sisters of the Order**

*Dear brothers and sisters,*

On October 2, 2001, former general minister Br. Paschal Rywalski will celebrate his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. We thank God for the gift of his life which has so enriched our brotherhood. Br. Paschal never ceased to put our life of prayer at the top of his priorities as he visited the brothers throughout the world. I take the occasion of his birthday to begin a series of letters on our life of prayer, invoking the “Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute” (LR V 2).

**The Brothers’ Personal Prayer**

*“This kind can come out only through prayer”*

(Mk 9:29).

Accompanied by Peter, James and John, Jesus descends the mountain of the transfiguration. He has contemplated the glory of his Father. Peter, James and John have contemplated the glory of God reflected in the face of Jesus. Peter exclaims, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, let us make three dwellings!” (Mk 9:5). Immediately after this intense experience of fraternity and contemplation they are thrust into the midst of human drama and suffering as they come upon an excited crowd of scribes, pharisees and people milling about, arguing and disputing with Jesus’ disciples. The center and object of all this fuss – a frightened child, deprived of the ability to speak, possessed by an evil spirit

which “whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid” (Mk 9:18).

1.2 Biblical scholars maintain that this child deprived of the ability to speak represents society deprived of the Word of God. A child ably depicts the energy and idealism of our contemporary societies. It is very significant that Mark chose a child possessed by an evil spirit to portray our societies, convulsed as they are by the evil spirits of ethnic strife, moral decay and greed, because a child is obviously an object of compassion, not condemnation. Coming down from the mountain, returning from that transfiguring moment of prayer, Jesus, moved by tenderness, turns to the child and says, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” (Mk 9:25). His contemplative gaze pierces to the heart of the child and, symbolically, to the heart of society deprived of the Word of God. The observation Jesus makes to his disciples underscores the point: “This kind can come out only through prayer” (Mk 9:29). Only a prayerful fraternity has the power to penetrate a society deprived of the Word of God!

*“You will be my witnesses”*

(Acts 1:8).

2.1 The opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (1:8) establishes the essential connection between the Holy Spirit and witnessing the resurrection to societies deprived of the Word of God:

... you will receive power **when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.**

2.2 Our Constitutions describe St. Francis as “full of the Holy Spirit” (6:1), “raised up” by the Holy Spirit (144:3), and “inspired by the Holy Spirit” (8:2). Echoing the Acts of the Apostles, the Constitutions describe his – and our – mission in the church:

This same Spirit raised up Saint Francis and his apostolic fraternity so that, ... it might offer all its energies ... **especially to those who are most in need of hearing the gospel message** (144:3).

The members of this brotherhood are “united by the Holy Spirit in the same calling” (11:3), “led by the Holy Spirit” to build up the church (109:1), and are “always being renewed by the Holy Spirit” (182:3).

2.3 What is true of St. Francis and our brotherhood is true of each individual brother. “Led by the Holy Spirit,” each one comes to know Jesus Christ and is led to the Father (see Const 1:1-2). The Holy Spirit instructs him on how to observe the Rule and Constitutions (7:3). Our Constitutions sum up the life of a lesser brother-witness in these words:

**...let us desire nothing else**, let us wish for nothing else, let nothing else please us **than to follow the Spirit of the Lord** and its holy activity and to please him always **that we may truly be brothers** and men poor, meek, thirsting for holiness, merciful, clean of heart, those, in fact, **through whom the world may know the peace and goodness of God** (44:4).

### **Witness and Contemplation**

3.1 After correlating the *Holy Spirit* and *witness*, the Acts of the Apostles links *witness* and *contemplation*. This is clear from the criteria used for choosing Judas’ successor to the college of apostles:

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us — one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection (1:21-23).

To assist their mission to societies deprived of the Word of God, the Eleven chose a witness. Pope Paul VI gave this rationale:

Man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. ...It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41).

A witness is much more than a person versed in the teachings of Jesus. A witness has an intimate experience of the person of Jesus. To become a witness one must contemplate how Jesus relates to people, his passion for the will of the Father, his deep compassion for human suffering. Like Peter, James and John on the

mountain of the transfiguration, a witness must first contemplate the glory of God reflected in the face of Jesus.

3.2 Contemplation leading to witness is a gift of the Holy Spirit, the source and inspiration of every Capuchin vocation. “Prayer to God, as the breathing of love, has its origin from a movement of the Holy Spirit through which an interior person listens to the voice of God speaking to the heart. ...we live Christ and pray in his Spirit which cries in our heart: *Abba, Father!*” (Const 45:1, 5). Witnesses are formed by the Holy Spirit through contemplation.

This point is reinforced by Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata*. Commenting on the transfiguration event, the pope stated:

The three disciples caught up in ecstasy hear the Father’s call to listen to Christ, to place all their trust in him, to make him the center of their lives. The words from on high give new depth to the invitation by which Jesus himself, at the beginning of his public life, called them to follow him, to leave their ordinary lives behind and to enter into a closer relationship to him (VC 16).

3.3 Witnesses are formed through contemplation. Is not this fact burned into our collective consciousness by the lived experience of our brotherhood? The post-Reformation European societies were experiencing a crisis in their Christian identity. The 16<sup>th</sup> century Capuchin fraternities enabled the Word of God to penetrate societies in crisis. Those early Capuchin witness fraternities were formed in isolated hermitages of contemplation. “This kind can come out only through prayer.” This is both corroborated by our history and remains an enduring challenge to fraternities today which fervently desire to bring the healing Word of God to societies which experience its deprivation.

***“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”***

(Mk 9:7).

4.1 “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” These words express the purpose of the apostles’ presence on the mountain, as well as the goal of their contemplative experience. These words likewise sum up the purpose and goal of our contemplative prayer, as echoed in the conclusion of Peter’s Pentecost sermon: “Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that **God has made him both Lord and Messiah**, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). The Jews understood perfectly the implications of that astounding assertion: “They

were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’” (2:37). Peter spells it out for them: “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ...” (2:38). Allow your life to be judged by Jesus Christ and submit to him! And the consequence of such submission: “...you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). This is the road of true discipleship.

Peter understood this from personal experience. No sooner had Peter received the revelation, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!,” than Jesus began to define Peter’s discipleship. Coming down from the mountain, Jesus alludes to his own death for the first time. The contemplation of the transfigured face of Jesus on the mountain was followed by the contemplation of the man of sorrows in the garden and on Calvary and the threefold renewal of faith in Galilee: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21:15). This prepared Peter for the Pentecost experience. There is a clear, well-trodden path to discipleship and witnessing: allow your life to be judged by Jesus Christ, submit to the judgment of Jesus, and receive the Holy Spirit.

4.2 It was fidelity to this path of discipleship which enabled Francis to boldly declare: “...no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the holy gospel” (Test 14). It is this passion to submit our hearts and our lives to Jesus Christ which lies at the core of our Capuchin Franciscan commitment to the life of the holy gospel: “In all circumstances of our life **let us follow the gospel as the supreme law**, assiduously read the words of salvation, and like the Blessed Virgin Mary, carry them in our heart. Thus, **as the gospel increasingly fashions our life, we may grow in Christ in all things**” (Const 1:6). For this reason, mental prayer – “the spiritual teacher of the brothers” (Const 52:6) – has always been an essential dimension of our fidelity to our vocation as well as our service to God’s people. The gospel comes alive in our hearts before it is alive on our faces: “Let us, therefore, devote ourselves to the praise of God and to meditation on his Word through which we become ever more inflamed, so that we lead others joyfully to the love of God by our activity. In this way our entire life of prayer will be imbued with an apostolic spirit while our apostolic activity will be fashioned by the spirit of prayer” (Const 13:4-5). Prayer itself is a blessed work of love. What we desire, then, is allow our work to be penetrated by such prayer.

4.3 When the Constitutions speak of mental prayer they do not begin with a description of a method, but rather, with a faith-filled commitment of our time! “It is of the greatest importance to form one’s conscience about the vital necessity of personal prayer. Each brother, wherever he lives, should take sufficient time every day for mental prayer, for example, an entire hour” (53:2). If we are to be attentive to the command of the Father, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”, we must ascend the mountain with the Lord. Like the prophet Elijah, we must seek our Horeb and “...stand on the mountain before the Lord” (1Kgs 19:11) and await his presence “at the entrance of the cave” (19:13).

4.4 Unfortunately we often use work to excuse ourselves from the discipline of mental prayer as if work and prayer were incompatible! The Sixth Plenary Council affirms: “Work contributes to the completion of creation, is beneficial to society, unifies the community, and fulfils the individual... The Franciscan tradition has always seen work as a grace” (see Prop. 14 and 15). Since prayer and work are equally grace, one should not detract from the other. A spiritual director once helped me to reconcile prayer and work. When I confessed to him my inability to acquire the discipline of mental prayer, he asked me what aspect of my ministry gave me greatest energy and joy. I quickly responded, “preaching!”. His advice: “Pray your homilies! Your desire to impart the Word of God to others will give birth to it in your own heart – and your preaching will be filled with the Spirit of God!” Our Constitutions give a hint of this: “In the spirit of the holy gospel let us especially **reflect on and preach** to the faithful the mysteries of the humanity of Christ...” (54:2). I witnessed still another dimension of the same reality in a provincial minister who committed himself to one hour of prayer each day before the Blessed Sacrament as an essential dimension of his service to his province. Each morning found him at prayer with a list of the brothers of his province. Every day he remembered in prayer each one by name. Just as love for the house of Israel led Elijah to Mount Horeb, this minister’s loving service to his brothers led him to prayer. Our zeal to impart the gospel of Christ can likewise lead us to our mountain of the transfiguration to hear those words which transform not only our lives but our ministries: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

#### ***Work and Activism***

4.5 The Sixth Plenary Council made an important distinction between *work* and *activism*:

We live in a fast-moving society, under stress from commitments, deadlines, and the modern communications media. Our fraternities do not escape these pressures, and so, besides avoiding idleness we need to avoid excessive **activism**, even in the apostolate... (see Prop. 17).

Activism is more than an excessive dedication to work. Activism causes us to live in such a superficial and frantic manner that it renders us incapable of reflection and equally incapable of experiencing the depth of our own humanity. We come to identify the worth and meaning of our lives with constant motion. I believe that it is not *work* but *activism* which is the true enemy of prayer. "Where there is rest and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor restlessness" (Adm XXVII 4). One can make a convincing argument based on personal experience that activism is the enemy not only of prayer, but of work itself because activism renders us superficial:

...Confronted with this tendency, we must take care that our work [read, "activism"] does not eventually damage fraternal life by eliminating time for reflection, study, and interaction with our brothers. Above all, we must ensure that it does not compromise our "prayer and devotion," thereby unbalancing our life... (Prop. 17).

Activism is the enemy of the inner journey of faith and contemplation. It renders us incapable of waiting at the entrance of the cave with Elijah because it robs us of inner tranquillity:

...The prevalence of activity may lead us to place too much trust in what we do and to put ourselves first, as if the Reign of God were not the work of the Holy Spirit, and as if listening, hospitality, and silence before God were meaningless (Prop. 17).

4.6 Two Capuchin friars once met Mother Teresa of Calcutta over breakfast. In the course of their conversation she said to them, "If you want to do more work, spend more time before the Blessed Sacrament." Mindful of the stress caused by overwork, even in the ministry, one of the friars retorted, "Who needs more work?" She replied, "The world needs more work." The distinction between work and activism could not be clearer. In the mind of Mother Teresa, prayer and work are not enemies. Rather, she saw work as flowing from prayer, the

outpouring of love, the *abundantia amoris* [i.e., “the abundance of love”] referred to in our Constitutions (see 148:3).

### ***Study and Reading***

4.7 The rediscovery of a culture of study and reading assists us in the journey of personal prayer and also overcomes the superficiality of our age. One has the impression that some brothers’ knowledge – even of essential documents of the church – often derives from the incomplete and superficial critiques they garner from the daily newspapers. Here, too, brothers must assist one another. Several years ago I received a great grace when a scholar of our Order posed a question and made a generous offer. He asked, “Does anyone assist you with your reading?” I was surprised by the question and delighted with the results. From that moment he began guiding my reading. I indicate to him the areas of interest in my life and ministry. He consults with his colleagues to offer me a reading list of the best contemporary works. This brother has reawakened in my life the joy of reading. Could not other learned brothers of our Order offer this service to the brothers of their fraternities and provinces?

### ***Spiritual Direction***

4.8 Spiritual direction is another invaluable aid to the growth of the spirit of prayer and fidelity to the gospel. The reason is clear from our Constitutions: “Formation [initial and ongoing] is the development of the brothers ... in such a way that our life may daily become more conformable to the holy gospel.... All formation [initial and ongoing] is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit...” (22:1; 23:1). Our Constitutions express God’s deep trust in the essential goodness of our humanity, seeing the human heart as the instrument of the Spirit of God. We might describe the human heart as the Holy Spirit’s chosen terrain: “Prayer to God, as the breathing of love, has its origin from a movement of the Holy Spirit through which an interior person listens to the voice of God speaking to the heart” (Const 45:1). We are reminded of the oft-quoted words from Ecclesiastes: “Rejoice, young man, while you are young... Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes...” (11:9). The verse concludes with the reminder: “know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9). Spiritual direction is an almost essential aid in discerning and judging the movements of our hearts, distinguishing those impulses whose origin is the Holy

Spirit from those which would have us follow idols. Spiritual direction opens us to the command of the Father: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”.

## **The Fraternal Dimension of Contemplation**

### ***Fraternal Support***

5.1 Personal prayer and contemplation are the Spirit’s gifts given to each brother individually, yet without fraternal support, personal prayer often falters. For this reason, after reminding the brothers to set aside time each day for mental prayer, the Constitutions immediately add, “The provincial and local chapters should see to it that all the brothers have that time necessary for mental prayer, whether this is done in common or in private” (53:3). Many fraternities conserve a tradition of our Order by indicating two common half-hour periods of meditation in the daily schedule of the house. This is an excellent practice. Still, it is clear that the local fraternity does not fulfil its responsibility toward the personal prayer life of the brothers simply by inserting a meditation period in the schedule. Nor does the provincial minister (or general minister) fulfil his responsibility simply by ascertaining that such a period exists! If schedules could pray, the Capuchin Order would be a marvel of contemplation! If legislation could make us holy or chapter resolutions sanctify us, we would already be saints! The schedule of the local fraternity should be tailored to the precise needs of the local brothers. “Let each one confidently make known his need to the other...” (LR VI 8). If in a local fraternity of five brothers each spontaneously spends an hour of mediation each day in the privacy of his room, there is no need for further structure! Perhaps this is the reason why the Constitutions state, “In its chapters, let the local fraternity examine itself concerning the common and personal prayer of the brothers” (53:4). We must have the trust and confidence in one another to honestly express which supports are best suited to each brother’s growth in prayer. For example, as indicated above, growth in prayer is greatly assisted by spiritual direction. The local fraternity can do much to encourage the brothers to avail themselves of spiritual direction. One province provides a list of qualified spiritual directors for the brothers in initial formation. To be a “qualified” spiritual director in this province, one must participate in several sessions of ongoing formation each year dealing with the science – and art – of spiritual direction. Could not the local fraternity compile such a list of spiritual directors? Could the local fraternity invite someone for a conference on spiritual direction? Local fraternities must

reawaken among the brothers a thirst for God. “Let the local fraternity examine itself concerning the common and personal prayer of the brothers.”

5.2 We have not even begun to explore the potential that fraternal dialogue at the local level has for promoting growth in the spirit of prayer. We are understandably reticent about sharing our interior life with others. It is a sacred place. No one should be pressured to open his heart to others in this holy exchange, no more than a husband or wife could be expected to share indiscriminately with others the intimacies of their married union. Nevertheless, as brothers in the Lord, is there no way that we could speak to one another about our life of prayer, especially about our vulnerabilities, our weaknesses, our failures in this regard? Our fears are understandable. However, whenever brothers have taken this risk, they have been met with astonishing generosity, compassion and support from one another. I have no particular method to offer you for doing this, but I urge you to make a start in the name of the Lord, trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

5.3 Not only each brother, but each fraternity must be formed by the holy gospel (see Const 22:1). The local chapter has become an essential instrument in this formation:

In the [local] chapter, loving obedience, a distinctive characteristic of our fraternity by which the brothers serve one another, finds its best expression, the creativity of everyone is fostered, and personal gifts contribute to the good of all (142:2).

The same Constitutions describe the “loving obedience” of the brothers in this way:

Docile to the Holy Spirit [and] in a fraternal sharing of life, let us search for and fulfill God’s will in every event and action (155:3).

These texts of Constitutions give the local chapter a contemplative dimension. At the same time they add a fraternal dimension to the Capuchin tradition of contemplative prayer. The Constitutions also give a particular understanding to the words of Jesus: “This kind can come out only through prayer.” Guided by the Holy Spirit – “the general minister” of our Order (see 2C CXLV 193) – we look

with faith and compassion upon the world the Lord has called us to serve, a world deprived of the Word of God. St. Francis looked with faith and compassion on his world deprived of God's Word of peace. Like the gaze of Jesus himself, the contemplative gaze of Francis penetrated Borgo San Sepolcro, Arezzo and Assisi, restoring peace. The means he used are interesting: bread and wine at Borgo San Sepolcro; the saintly preacher, Sylvester, at Arezzo; the composing of a new verse to his Canticle at Assisi (see Circular Letter 12: 4.6.1 - 4.6.2). Have you ever thought about how Francis came to choose these means in his mission as peacemaker? Could these not have been prompted by the local fraternities of brothers which pre-existed Francis' mission of peace in those respective localities? Could it not be that Francis' prayerful dialogue with the local brothers gave him a contemplative gaze able to penetrate a world lacking the Word of God? This was the case with Paul and Timothy in Philippi. Paul preached to a group of women gathered for prayer near a river in Philippi. The Acts of the Apostles records the manner in which the word of God penetrated into Europe: "The Lord opened her [Lydia's] heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul" (16:14). Today, we too search for the means to penetrate a world deprived of the Word of God. Jesus stands before us and says, "This kind can come out only through prayer." Could not our prayerful reflection in local chapter also give us a contemplative gaze able to penetrate our local worlds, and inspire us to find effective means for touching the hearts of the Lydias in our parishes and communities? A number of friars have developed the practice of reflecting together each week on the Word of God. They listen in common to the scripture readings of the following Sunday and reflect together on their meaning for their personal lives, their fraternity and the people they serve. This practice helps faith come alive in a fraternity. It can be a chosen means of the Holy Spirit to bring the gospel alive among the people we serve.

***Fraternities of Recollection (Houses of Prayer)***

5.4 Our Constitutions indicate that the prayer of the brothers can be greatly assisted by "...fraternities of recollection and contemplation in which brothers can devote themselves for some time to the spirit and life of prayer, as God gives them the grace" (56:1). A number of fraternities of recollection exist in the Order. These could be increased. If each province is unable to sustain a fraternity of recollection, it should be possible for a conference to do so. Equally important, we must better integrate these fraternities into a program aimed at

strengthening and reinforcing the personal prayer life of the brothers in all of the fraternities of the province. Even where a fraternity of recollection exists in a province, it often remains like an oasis in a desert! Such a fraternity can fulfil its mission in a province only when it becomes a point of reference to sustain the life of prayer of the other local fraternities of the province. Many fraternities of recollection in our Order also act as “schools of prayer” for the brothers and sisters of the Secular Order and for other Christians seeking deeper union with God. These schools of prayer are a marvelous expression of the new evangelization.

## **Conclusion**

6.1 When Celano describes the prayer of Francis his language is striking: Francis was separated from the world of the angels “only by the wall of the flesh” (2C LXI 94). Celano goes on to speak of Francis “not so much praying as becoming totally prayer” (2C LXI 95). This made Francis completely attuned to the presence and the movement of the Spirit of God in the world, “The blessed father usually neglected no visitation of the Spirit, but, whenever offered, he would follow it” (2C LXI 95).

6.2 “This kind can come out only through prayer.” Let us accept wholeheartedly the invitation of St. Francis to a life of union with God in order that we, too, may be given a Spirit-vision able to penetrate and touch the heart of our world which is thirsting for God:

But in the holy love which is God [see 1 Jn 4:16], I beg all my brothers, both the ministers and the others, after overcoming every impediment and putting aside every care and anxiety, to serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind in whatever way they are best able to do so, for that is what he wants above all else. ☩ Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for him who is the Lord God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (ER XXII 26-27).

6.3 I conclude by asking you to remember Br. Paschal in your prayers as he celebrates his ninetieth birthday. I can think of no more fitting a way to honor him than by reminding all the brothers to live that spirit of prayer that he so faithfully witnessed. In his Exhortation to Religious, *Evangelica Testificatio*, Paul VI wrote, “If you have lost the taste for prayer, you will regain the desire for it by

returning humbly to its practice” (42). Every journey begins with a single step, often a very small step. The life of prayer is no exception. A couple of minutes pondering the Lord’s Prayer, a brief visit to the Blessed Sacrament, a moment lingering over the words of a psalm to which we are drawn, contemplating the glory of a starry sky at night, pausing to notice the beauty of a flower – such are the things that enable love to make its entry into hearts which are made for love.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau,  
OFM Cap. General Minister

October 2, 2001, 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Br. Paschal Rywalski,  
faithful witness of the Capuchin contemplative tradition

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