



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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**WE HAVE PROMISED GREAT THINGS TO GOD**

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## **CIRCULAR LETTER TO ALL THE FRIARS OF THE ORDER CONCERNING OUR CONSTITUTIONS**

Prot. N. 00484/07

**We have promised great things to God, but God has promised us even  
greater!**

*Dear Brothers,*

May the love of God the Father, who at Pentecost brought the Paschal Mystery to fulfilment and poured out the Holy Spirit on children of adoption, fill you with His grace and give you peace and consolation.

May the Holy Spirit enliven in us the memory of the great things we have promised to God and of the still greater things that God has promised to us so that we may open ourselves to the grace of the renewal of our life.

### **1. AN EXTRAORDINARY OPPORTUNITY FOR RENEWAL**

1.1 When I wrote to you for Christmas I suggested you embrace, even if symbolically, the statue of the Child Jesus lying in the manger. Once again I send you another invitation: to pick up a book, the text of our Constitutions. Read it carefully and meditate upon it because we wish to take up the task decided by the 83<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter (2006): a task that will involve us for a number of years and will be crowned, we hope, by an extraordinary General Chapter in 2010.

1.2 We wish to make this an exceptional and effective opportunity for ongoing formation and for the renewal of our life by allowing ourselves to be open to the inspiring grace of the coming jubilee celebration of 2009. This will be the eighth centenary of the approval of the *propositum vitae* that the “Most High revealed” to Brother Francis and which the Lord Pope verbally confirmed in 1209 (cf.

*Testament*, 14). All this will require a great effort on everyone's part so that each of us may be committed to live the Rule Honorius III definitively approved in 1223 and live it according to the Constitutions (Cf. *Formula for Profession*; *Const.* 20,4).

## **2. IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A GREAT HISTORY**

2.1 Called by the General Chapter to take up such a particularly demanding task regarding our fundamental legislation, we need to be aware that the undertaking entrusted to us should be situated within the fertile course of our history. This task should be carried out with a sense of continuity and faithfulness to that same history. Therefore we should recall that every time the Order has intervened on the Constitutions it has always realised this work with the ardent desire and clear intention of genuine fidelity to its original inspiration, the life and Rule of Saint Francis. In this way, while properly adapted to the times, our life may follow the sound tradition of our first brothers. And as a mirror of our life, the Constitutions have constantly kept vibrant and alive the fundamental character of our vocation, aimed totally at the conversion of our heart so that the Order may always be renewed (cf. *Const.* 4,1-2).

The Constitutions should spur us on to continue along the way with the same attitudes and the same sensitivity, great attention, a deep and loyal attentiveness, heartfelt care and respect that the Order has reserved for its fundamental legislation in recent decades, while adhering to the Church's teaching during the Second Vatican Council as well as since the Council. Therefore, in order to carry out the task with which we have been entrusted, it is worthwhile to briefly recall the journey that gave the text of the present Constitutions to us.

2.2. While the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was still in progress, the 1964 General Chapter decided to establish a Commission to renew and update our fundamental legislation. For four years that Commission dedicated itself to the difficult task entrusted it, laying the foundations upon which the special General Chapter of 1968 could build the new text of our Constitutions. This represents a real mile stone in the renewal of our fundamental legislation that had remained substantially unchanged for centuries. With the 1968 text approved *ad experimentum*, the Order was aware of the need to return to the task in the General Chapters of 1970 and 1974. Then in 1982, following the norms of the 'motu proprio' *Ecclesiae Sanctae* and the explicit will of the Congregation for Religions and Secular Institutes, the General Chapter gave its attention again to the development of the text of the Constitutions so that their definitive approval could be sought of the Holy See. The 1968 text was considerably inspired by the emphasis on the "renewal and *aggiornamento*"

(*accommodata renovatio*) effectively promoted by the Second Vatican Council. The General Chapter of 1982 further improved the text and integrated it with elements of Capuchin tradition, drawing in particular from the 1536 Constitutions, an inspiring source of the spiritual tradition of the Order. After the 1982 General Chapter a Chapter Commission was charged with the redaction of the text approved by that Chapter, especially its adaptation to the new Code of Canon Law promulgated on 25 January 1983. This further work progressed for some years, also in dialogue with the Holy See, which, among other things, granted General Superiors and their Councils the faculty to issue new provisory norms regarding the things required by the new Code and not yet inserted into the Constitutions – norms which, on the other hand, had to be presented to the next General Chapter. Meanwhile the carefully revised text of the Constitutions was sent to the Congregation which definitively approved it on 25 December 1986. The General Chapter of 1988 carefully examined and approved the proposals prepared by the General Definitory and which, not yet present in the Constitutions, had to be inserted into the Constitutions according to the Code of Canon Law. The Congregation approved the Constitutions by Letter on 7 January 1990. The General Chapters of 1994 and 2000 introduced some further changes to the Constitutions, which the Congregation then duly approved with respective letters on 27 October 1994 and 29 November 2000.

### **3. GENESIS OF THE WORK TO BE DONE**

3.1. The interventions of 1994 and 2000 were not great in terms of quantity. In fact, no thought was given within the Order to continue to make any large scale intervention on the Constitutions. They had only just been approved (1986) after the extensive revisions of 1968 and 1982 and after the long period when the same Constitutions had been lived *ad experimentum* according to the request of the Holy See for all Religious Institutes. Among other things the Pope had reminded us: “... in your present General Chapter ... *now that the period of experimentation is completed*, you wished to revise the Constitutions in order to give them *that order* which, after the approval of the Holy See, *must become definitive* and allow your Institute to take up a new phase in its journey in the service of the Church and the world with renewed enthusiasm and without uncertainty of any kind” (John Paul II, *Discorso al Capitolo generale*, 5 July 1982; cfr. *Analecta OFMCap* 98[1982]192).

3.2. However, at the meeting of the Minister General and his Definitory with the Presidents of the Conferences held in Assisi at the beginning of September 1998, a request was made to distinguish matters that should be treated in the Constitutions from those that could be included in the Ordinances of the General Chapters. It was voted that the General Chapter in 2000 decide the

establishment of a Commission of experts tasked to present an actual study for the General Chapter of 2006 (cfr. *Atti dell'Incontro*, p.39).

The General Chapter of 2000 accepted this petition and approved the appointment of a Commission “to carry out the task required by can. 587 of the Code of Canon Law.” In actual fact, however, in 1988 the Order had already decided to take up again the tradition of General Chapter Ordinances, while also referring explicitly to can. 587. Thus the petition was already accepted (cfr. *Preface to the Ordinances of the General Chapters of the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor*).

3.3 In compliance with the decision of the General Chapter of 2000, the General Definitory began the new work on our fundamental legislation. As already mentioned, this work only anticipated the transfer of part of the non-fundamental juridical norms from the Constitutions to the Ordinances. The General Definitory was quite aware of the delicacy of the operation. More than a mere intervention, the General Definitory recommended an attitude of necessary caution out of respect for our Constitutions and their specific character.

3.4 The work progressed during the previous sexennium (2000-2006) and arrived at this conclusion. Apart from the task of setting apart juridical texts, it is also appropriate to include in the Constitutions elements that had emerged from new trends expressed in the reflection of the Church and the Order, especially the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* and the documents of the Plenary Councils of the Order. For this purpose the Presidents of the Conferences of Major Superiors of the Order were also consulted twice. In his Report to the 2006 General Chapter, the Minister General Brother John Corriveau, presented a precise and complete synthesis of the steps that had been taken and the work done at various times.

3.5 During the 2006 General Chapter the capitular friars received a booklet with the title: “Constitutions and General Statutes.” After the introductory note on the work done by different groups and then by the special Commission, the booklet presents a synopsis and a hypothetical text of General Statutes and Constitutions. Next to the title ‘Constitutions’ it says explicitly that the text is a ‘project.’ The text contains a large number of modifications and changes. However the General Chapter was not called to discuss the quality of the text as such. In fact the text showed the course that developments had taken without prejudicing, however, later redactions. In fact the General Chapter discussed whether or not it was opportune to work upon the Constitutions and the General Statutes, but did not enter into the specifics of the text of the ‘project.’



#### **4. THE WORK THAT WE HAVE BEEN CALLED TO COMPLETE**

4.1 The General Chapter of 2006 decided that the work on our fundamental legislation continue, pursuing the objective of a balanced distribution of legislation between the Constitutions and the Ordinances or General Statutes (1<sup>st</sup> motion, *Analecta OFM*Cap 122[2006]819). This is a very delicate operation. It is not easy in fact to separate the more strictly juridical parts from the Constitutions. For even from a superficial understanding, it is clear that the Constitutions permit a style where the spiritual content and the proposal for its practical realisation are strictly bound together. In carrying out such task careful attention will be needed to maintain the particular character of our Constitutions and avoid the risk of having a text that speaks only on the level of spiritual suggestions with a supplementary text of Ordinances or General Statutes – that is, a collection of precepts detached from their deeper values and motives. Furthermore, in reference to these, the General Chapter has also asked us that these be “up-to-date, concrete, brief and adequately attentive to pluriformity” (cf. 3<sup>rd</sup> motion, *Analecta OFM*Cap 122[2006]819).

4.2 At the same time the General Chapter asked that the work on the Constitutions respect their doctrinal and spiritual content as much as possible and that they be further enriched by drawing from recent documents of the Church and of the Order (cf. 2<sup>nd</sup> motion, *Analecta OFM*Cap 122[2006]819). The two verbs – “to enrich” and “to respect” – outline the character of the work to be done. These present a double criteria regarding the content and method on which to base the efforts of the Order concerning the Constitutions and Ordinances. The work asked of the Order today is not of the same dimensions as that carried out in 1968 and 1982.

Furthermore, we are called to work in continuity with the legislative tradition of the Order, safeguarding the specific character of our Constitutions, enriching them with the teachings on the consecrated life that the Church Magisterium has given us in recent years. Nor should we forget that new contributions and suggestions from the field of Franciscan studies and from the reflections of the Plenary Councils of the Order – especially PCO VI on the theme of *Poverty in Fraternity* and PCO VII on *Minority and Itinerancy*. While inserting contributions from these reflections into the text, it will be necessary to test and weigh up those things missing from the text and those that can truly enrich it and bring it up to date, yet without compromising the foundational theological core values of our charism and the very language and style that are characteristic of our constitutional text. Evidently this enrichment is more qualitative than quantitative (*non multa, sed multum!*), the result of the journey of the Church and of the Order as expressed in the more recent documents.

## 5. HOW SHALL WE DO THE WORK?

5.1 The work on the Constitutions necessarily requires the involvement of the whole Order and its consultation in specific ways that will be communicated in time. Indeed, the principal agent in such an undertaking is properly the entire Order and therefore all the Brothers. All of us then ought to be involved in this extremely important undertaking. And we wish to live this task as a journey of renewal in the spirit of our vocation and a greater fidelity to our promise to the Lord when we professed to “live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.” We should be aware that the present and the future of the Order very much depend on the quality of our being and our credibility, fundamental conditions that can give value to the work we have been called to complete and to which we wish to dedicate ourselves with all possible commitment.

At this moment I firmly appeal to all the Ministers and Guardians to give their full attention to this particular animation of the brothers entrusted to them, so that the brothers may approach the present Constitutions with renewed fervour, deepen their understanding of them and, above all, practice them as a help “not only to observe the Rule we have promised, but also to fulfil the divine law and follow the gospel counsels” (*Const.* 186,3). The same Constitutions (cf. 185,3) recommend the Superiors to precede the friars in the life of our fraternities and in the observance of the Constitutions and, with courageous charity, lead the friars to observe them. With that “courageous charity” let each and every Minister involve himself personally in a particular way to sensitize and animate the brothers in this work of evaluation and proposal for a sound revision of the Constitutions.

5.2 The General Definitory has already taken the first steps in calling together a small group of friars before Christmas 2006. They were asked to evaluate developments made to this point and to offer suggestions. From these various suggestions we have taken up the idea of preparing some ‘study aids’ to help deepen particular themes at the ecclesiological level emerging from the recent teachings of the Church’s Magisterium on the theology of the Consecrated Life, as well as developments within the Order in recent times. In this way we believe we can derive valid criteria with which to directly approach the actual text of the Constitutions and to set in motion a re-reading of the contributions received from the work of the preceding sexennium so as to proceed toward that enrichment mentioned above. In particular we have asked:

- Br Francisco Iglesias for a concise historical excursus on our Constitutions, especially from 1964 until today, as well as some outlines of the structure and content of the Constitutions, both in general, and for each chapter;
- Br Costanzo Cargnoni for a bibliographical study on our Constitutions and our proper law since 1964;

- Br William Henn for a study on the new magisterial developments in the field of ecclesiology, especially in the ecclesiology of communion;
- Br Paolo Martinelli for a contribution highlighting new magisterial developments in the field of the Consecrated Life;
- Br André Menard for a study outlining the innovations which the VI° and VII° PCO have brought to the Order and highlighting the relationship between the actual Constitutions and same recent PCOs to scientifically verify development in the understanding of the *mens* (mind) of the Order on poverty and minority.

In time these contributions will be sent to all the brothers to encourage a better understanding of the Constitutions presently in force and to offer the brothers these perspectives to facilitate possible interventions on the actual text, also in light of the contributions of the previous sexennium.

5.3 Furthermore the General Definitory has established a Commission whose purpose is to follow, guide and coordinate the work of all the Friars. For the composition of the Commission we have followed a two-fold criteria: representatives from all the geographic areas, as well as experts. This is the list of the Brothers who make up the Commission: Br Christopher Popravak (Mid-America Prov.), Br Piotr Stasiński (Warsaw Prov.), Br Prudente Lúcio Nery (Minas Gerais Prov.), Br Mathew Paikada (St Joseph Prov., Kerala), Br Roberto Genuin (Venice Prov.), Br Paolo Martinelli (Lombardy Prov.), Br Claudio Bedriñán (Rio de la Plata Prov.), Br Leonhard Lehmann (Rhine-Westphalian Prov.), Br Miguel Anxo Pena González (Castile Prov.), Br Jean-Bertin Nadonye Ndongo (Congo Gen.Vice Prov.).

We have designated Br Felice Cangelosi, Vicar General, as President of the Commission, and Br Peter Rogers, Definitor General, as Vice President. The Commission will also have the benefit of a permanent Secretary in the person of Br José Maria Sanz (Castile Prov.) who will reside in Rome.

The Commission will meet for the first time on 9-10 October this year. This Commission will give us more detailed instructions for the work we will need to do.

## **6. A SURE MEANS OF RENEWAL**

In this moment, as we set about to carry out the decisions of the General Chapter, we must be imbued with the will to dedicate ourselves with love to the study of the Constitutions, mindful that their purpose “is to help us observe the Rule better and more perfectly in the changed circumstances of our life. We find in them a safe support for our spiritual renewal in Christ and a powerful help for

implementing the consecration of our life by each brother totally dedicates himself to God” (*Const.* 7,1-2). The Prologue of the Constitutions of 1536 used a metaphor and spoke of the Constitutions as a “hedge” whose function is to protect the observance of the Rule (cf. *Prologo Costituzioni 1536* in *I Frati Cappuccini*, vol. I, pp. 253+; [www.capdox.com](http://www.capdox.com)). Using another image, we can see our Constitutions as a compass that we use to orient our journey. Just as a compass always point north and thus allows us to fix our position relative to the destination of our journey, so too the Constitutions always point us towards the One to whom we have chosen to direct our steps. They keep us mindful of the One to whom we have given the gift of our lives. They have a special value because they say how to journey. They point out the charism of our Order. Therefore they are truly precious!

## **7. THE WILL OF SAINT FRANCIS**

7.1 We wish and need to work on our fundamental legislation aware that the Constitutions are a repository of our Franciscan charism. They orientate the path of the Fraternity. At the same time they are the expression of changes that have occurred in the course of time. In particular it helps to recall with wonder how the friars, assembled in the Chapter of 1536, managed to produce a text of such coherent and exacting Constitutions within a short space of time despite pressures from difficult circumstances. Those Constitutions represent the arrival point of what the first generation of friars intended to live. They are the fruit of the experience of the first years of life of the new “Congregation”. Compared to the so called “Statutes of Albacina” (1529) they give new emphases in different places.

A profound desire to return to the original inspiration of Saint Francis, to observe the Rule without exceptions, animated our first Capuchin brothers. Therefore they welcomed the Testament as the prime spiritual commentary on the Rule and a source of profound inspiration for the Capuchin life (cf. *Const.* 6,4).

Those early brothers of ours knew what they wanted. Their reference point was the Seraphic Father Saint Francis. They were animated by the fervent desire to radically incarnate that gospel way of life – a way of life that is of divine design alone because Saint Francis had not devised it but felt guided directly by the Most High, submitting unconditionally to the action of God. Sustained by this inner conviction and a close adhesion to the will of Francis, the first Capuchins succeeded in giving the Order the Constitutions, which established its spiritual tradition and have characterised its history to this day.

Aware of the thrust towards renewal permeating the whole Church, as children of their time and according to the sensibilities of that epoch, the first Capuchins made Saint Francis alive. They did this in conformity with their vocation. They had no fear or dread in living and proposing what Francis himself had lived. We should pay particular attention to the fact that those Capuchin friars were animated by a strong desire for reform: they wanted to make something striking and decisive of their lives. They had a clear objective and chose the means of reaching it, wishing to live in conformity with the ideal Saint Francis had lived and bequeathed.

7.2 Do you remember how Saint Francis speaks in the Testament about his vocation? “And after the Lord gave me some brothers no one showed me what I must do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I had to live according to the form of the holy Gospel. And I had this written with few words and with simplicity and the Lord Pope confirmed this for me” (*Testament*, 14-15). The Constitutions represent our way of approaching the Rule and consequently how we wish to live it. When the first Capuchins, in the Prologue of the Constitutions of 1536, affirmed to have written them in order to observe the Rule “more spiritually”, they certainly intended to affirm: “in a complete way, without overlooking anything” (cf. *Prologo Costituzioni 1536* in *I Frati Cappuccini*, vol.I, pp.253+; [www.capdox.com](http://www.capdox.com)). Is this important? I believe it really is. The Constitutions, as a matter of fact, cannot be detached from the Rule and should be considered in strict connection with the Rule. They cannot be considered simply as the result of a clever insight into Francis but as flowing from the same source! “The Most High himself revealed to me”, and this should be considered well, is a striking expression that Francis deliberately used to assert that the form of gospel life expressed in the Rule (and Constitutions are subordinate to it) has its origin in God. It is a gift of God to Francis and to the brothers God gave him, to the Church, to us who come eight centuries later, to the world in its totality and to all creation. We who have embraced this form of life are bound to live it with commitment and fidelity.

## **8. WHO ARE WE AND WHERE TO WE DO WANT TO GO?**

8.1 In recent times and in various places, also during the last General Chapter, the question has arisen about our identity. What does it mean to be a Capuchin and a Capuchin today? What is our specific charism? Questions such as these will find their answer in the work on the Constitutions that all of us are preparing to take up.

8.2 On this point however it is also necessary to ask which spirit animates us today? What do we want to live? What is the witness and message that we

intend to bring to the world of today? We cannot begin to work on the text of the Constitutions as if this matter were of little consequence.

The conditions of life have changed from the time of the first Capuchins to today. The Church herself has travelled a long way. There have been periods when our life was threatened by political regimes opposed to faith in Jesus Christ, his Church, and consequently Christians and Religious Institutes. Today we live under different conditions. The threats that harm our life today are different from those that characterised the past. Those of today highlight our weakness and the ease with which we risk to fail to observe that radical Christianity Francis and the first Capuchins teach us.

In the Order however there are many shining examples of testimony to a total dedication to the Lord and generous service of the brothers, especially the poor. Nor can we fail to recall how our entire history is adorned with a manifold presence of holiness. Our Saint Brothers have constantly accompanied and marked the life of the Order and its work of evangelisation in all regions and geographical areas. It is no mere accident if even in recent years the church has proclaimed so many of our brother Saints and Blesseds. These Brothers of ours are a concrete sign of the vibrancy of our charism for our times. We should look to them in order to know where to head.

When setting our hand to the Constitutions and asking ourselves questions of capital importance regarding our identity and what we want to live, it is necessary that we consider the Order's rich testimony to holiness in order to plumb the depths of our Capuchin Franciscan charism, to re-orientate the direction of our life via a strong and genuine renewal.

## **9. LET US PICK UP OUR CONSTITUTIONS AND BEGIN TO READ THEM**

In conclusion, brothers, our first step should be exactly this: an attentive, meditative and prayerful re-reading of our Constitutions done personally and by the fraternity. It is not possible to work on a text without knowing it profoundly. The more familiar we are with the Constitutions, the more we can relish and esteem their richness.

The attitude in which we approach the text is equally important – not with coldness, but as persons engaged in and intent upon renewal – persons open to the breathing of the Holy Spirit!

If we begin with these principles the work of proposing necessary modifications and carrying out the in-depth work on our Constitutions will be easier. As a result of this work the Order will be renewed and more conscious of its proper identity. It will acquire a greater credibility for its mission in the world of today.

Brothers, let us not waste time! Let us begin straight away and take up the text of the Constitutions and read it in the way I have just presented to you.

While invoking upon you a special outpouring of the Spirit so that He may accompany us and guide our work, I greet you all fraternally.

Br. Mauro Jöhri  
Minister General OFMCap.

Rome, 27 May 2007  
The Solemnity of Pentecost

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