



Letter of the General Minister  
**fra Mauro Jöhri OFMCap**

**“YOU ARE OUR FAITH”**

June 13, 2013

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**“YOU ARE OUR FAITH”  
LETTER TO ALL THE FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN  
FOR THE YEAR OF FAITH**

Prot. N. 00525/13

*Dear Brothers,*

1. Benedict XVI, bishop emeritus of Rome, announced the Year of Faith and Pope Francis has proposed anew its purposes and content. This event moves me to propose to you some reflections with the desire that every brother be supported in confirming and renewing his relationship with the Lord. I speak to you aware that the gift of faith must be protected and cultivated, but I also know that the believer goes through the temptation of the routine, of compromise and not infrequently there is a dryness that injects the feelings of discouragement that keep us from seeing the clear and bright horizon that faith opens to our existence.

2. Whether we belong to a circumscription growing in numbers or to one that has been experiencing a sharp decline for years, we all have to be renewed in our relationship with God. Numerical growth or inexorable diminishment may be experienced by one as a reason for pride and by another as a source of dejection. God is near in the same way to both and only a gaze of faith will allow us to welcome this truth with joy and serenity. Let us then ask ourselves how to orient ourselves in this time marked by phenomena such as globalization, the growth of individualism, disaffection for traditional values, the economic crisis, and so on.

**HERE I AM! LET IT BE DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD**

3. Let us begin our reflection with the question that the apostle Peter addressed to Jesus: *Lord, to whom shall we go?* (Jn 6:68). Who will answer the questions that flow from our hearts? Who will show us the way? The celebration of an anniversary perhaps a little unknown but particularly significant for our Order encourages me to invite you to turn your gaze to the Virgin Mary. Three centuries ago, in May 1712, our Order was officially placed under the patronage of Immaculate Mary.<sup>1</sup> The witness of tender devotion of so many of our friars, especially our saints, to the Immaculate Virgin recounts to us stories of people, who, with the work of Grace, transformed their lives into a “living credo,” men and women of unconditional trust who gave themselves totally to God. Mary the mother of Jesus is the icon of this total *here I am*.

4. To the angel who announces to her that she will conceive a son, give birth to him and name him Jesus, Mary reacts with awe and wonder and with a question: *How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?* (Lk 1:34) She does not put up objections, saying: “It’s impossible, I

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Regina Immaculata: Studia a Sodalibus Capuccinis Scripta Occasione Primi Centenarii a Proclamatione Dogmatica Immaculatae Conceptionis B. M. V. Collecta et Edita a P. Melchiorre A Pobladura, O.F.M.Cap.* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Ord. Fr. Min. Cap., 1955), 296.

can't do it!" She does not understand, but in her very question the willingness to enter into the Mystery with openness is manifested. The angel says that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and cover her with his shadow, accomplishing what is unimaginable and impossible. Everything remains mysterious, and Mary yet utters her *fiat*, the expression of her faith, of her obedience, turning her person over to God's plan. The Virgin of Nazareth agrees despite not understanding all the consequences of her yes. She says, *Let it be done to me as you have said.* (Lk 1:38) It says indeed that "mission precedes understanding."<sup>2</sup> The search for the meaning of that announcement will accompany Mary throughout the life of the One to whom she has given birth. Luke the Evangelist describes this attitude of Mary at the beginning of Jesus' life, saying that *she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.* (Lk 2:19) Mary believed in Jesus, the Word of the living God, even before seeing him and she testifies to us that faith means welcoming a promise that comes from God, not understanding immediately the particular conditions that will bring it to fulfillment. Do you remember Peter, who after fishing for a whole night without success, at the word of Jesus agrees to set off again and let down the nets? (Lk 5:4)

5. In the same way, each of our vocations faces the will of God with a free and trusting adherence. We have pronounced a yes without knowing all the consequences of our response. We trusted and we set out. The Year of Faith is a call to rediscover this aspect of our vocation. St. Clare of Assisi, at the end of her life, after much suffering and difficulty, testifies in a sure and convinced way that our vocation is the greatest gift we have received from the Lord.<sup>3</sup> Addressing himself to men and women religious on the occasion of the most recent Day of Consecrated Life, Pope Benedict XVI exhorted us to go again to the source of our vocation: *"I invite you in the first place to nourish a faith that can illuminate your vocation. For this I urge you to treasure, as on an inner pilgrimage, the memory of the 'first love' with which the Lord Jesus Christ warmed your hearts, not out of nostalgia but in order to feed that flame. And for this it is necessary to be with him, in the silence of adoration; and thereby reawaken the wish to share — and the joy of sharing — in his life, his decisions, the obedience of faith, the blessedness of the poor and the radical nature of love. Starting ever anew from this encounter of love, you leave everything to be with him and like him, to put yourselves at the service of God and your brothers and sisters."*<sup>4</sup>

## THE TIME OF STRUGGLE

6. Pray with me, brothers, that each of us, looking to the path taken with the Lord, might witness with awe and gratitude that everything is grace. We cannot ignore that our journey of faith also involves situations marked by fatigue, discouragement, and falls. Allow me to extend a tender greeting to those brothers who, for various reasons, are experiencing moments of crisis and dryness; to them I repeat the words God says to his friends: *Take courage! Do not be afraid!* I invite everyone to meditate on the gospel passage, Mk 8:14-27. The father of the possessed young epileptic experiences powerlessness, the inability to heal his son; even the disciples were unable to accomplish anything. This heartbroken father meets Jesus and asks him: *but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us. And Jesus said to him, If you can! All things are possible to him who believes.* (22b-23) The man, confused, worn out, and

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<sup>2</sup> Fabrice Hadjadj, *Comment parler de Dieu aujourd'hui ?* Salvator 2012, p. 207

<sup>3</sup> St. Clare, *Testament.*

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily for the Day of Consecrated Life, February 2, 2013.

discouraged, cries out: *I believe; help my unbelief!* (24b) This man’s cry of supplication is part of the experience of the believer: it is the request of one who asks the Lord to sustain his faith. Brothers, let us not be afraid to present our struggle to the Lord, entrusting ourselves to the prayer of the brothers when we experience the temptation to hand over our lives to the compromise that makes for situations of ambiguity and inner disintegration, or, to use more immediate terms, when we accept or are forced to live a double life. Aware that struggle comes to us, let us turn to the Virgin Mary who knew moments of surprise and incomprehension.<sup>5</sup> Meditating on Mary’s silence, one of our brothers wrote: *“Mary has traveled on her own way, and along the way she met the upsets that characterize the pilgrimage: frights, confusions, perplexities, awe, fear, tiredness...above all she faces the questions: What does this mean? Is it true? What to do?...I don’t see anything. Everything seems dark.”*<sup>6</sup>

7. Day after day, the Virgin Mary took up anew, deepened and perfected the meaning of her “fiat” pronounced in Nazareth. The Holy Spirit, who did not cease to be at work in her, is the author of the journey, as writes St. Bonaventure: “In the soul of the Virgin, the love of the Holy Spirit burned in such a singular way that in her flesh the force of the Holy Spirit accomplished with his grace wonders that incited, helped and elevated nature.”<sup>7</sup> To walk and grow in faith we must not tire of invoking the spirit of God or looking to Mary. Jesus Christ is He who gives the beginning of faith and brings it to fulfillment (Heb 12:2); Mary is the model in following him.

8. We are called to take up our existence as a vocation to communion with Him who took the initiative first and this is why it is indispensable that our daily lives be animated by silence and prayer. To taste the friendship of Him who has confidence in us, even knowing our weakness, presumes on our part the willingness to remain in his presence. The contemplative dimension of our vocation is essential to nourish the life of faith. Let us not be stingy in giving our time to prayer, both personal and with the brothers. Nothing, not even the urgency of apostolic work, can dispense us from it. I strongly reaffirm, certain of fulfilling a gesture of love towards you, that of which the Constitutions remind us: “Let our prayer be a special manifestation of our calling as lesser brothers...affective prayer, a prayer of the heart, which leads us to an intimate experience of God.”<sup>8</sup>

## YOU ARE OUR FAITH

9. At the center of relationship with the Lord there is – as for Mary of Nazareth – the welcoming of the Word of God. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, *“So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.”* (Rom 10:17) In him, the Word made flesh, faith meets *“a person to whom we entrust our whole life.”*<sup>9</sup> The writings and early biographies of St. Francis narrate how his life was continually renewed by the Word of God. In the same way as the Eucharist, the Word of God is the center of Francis’s faith, such that by means of it and in it he clings to the person of Christ, dead and risen for us. In *The Praises of God* Francis surprises us when he says, *“You are our faith”!* Faith no less than charity

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<sup>5</sup> Lk 2:3, 2:50

<sup>6</sup> FBr. Ignacio Larrañaga, *Il silenzio di Maria*, p. 44, Ed. Paoline 1979.

<sup>7</sup> St. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 4:3:5

<sup>8</sup> Constitutions, 46, slightly adapted from the official English translation.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 25.

and hope, is and remains a gift of God. That is why we must never tire of asking for this gift and giving thanks for it.

10. In the programmatic letter for the new sexennium I indicated the urgent need for our fraternities as for all the circumscriptions of the Order, in the fields of both initial and ongoing formation, to continue to renew our personal and communal relationship with the Word of God. As Francis says in his *Testament*, for him the Gospel began to speak after the Lord had given him brothers. Why would we deprive ourselves of this grace? Living the Gospel in fraternity means sharing and mutual help in our journey of faith. In our fraternities we speak about various topics and share about situations and different events; why are we silent about what is essential? Perhaps we are still anchored in a past in which one lived faith as a strictly personal relationship with God and in which the brothers had no right to enter into this relationship? Or is it hard for us to find the words to express the fruits that the Word of God produces in us? Do we fail to involve ourselves in sharing and give up on taking a step towards love precisely for fear of being judged? I think some resistance is also the consequence of a social climate that relegates faith to the private sphere of life such that it is to be practiced individually, without any expectation of being able to make a contribution to politics, economy and the other areas of civil society. Regarding the religious life directly, let us not forget that individualism weakens the quality of fraternal relationships and can also have negative consequences for our faith.

### **MISSION PRECEDES UNDERSTANDING**

11. Our Lady accepted her mission without knowing that it would bring her one day to be present at the crucifixion of her Son. She believed, entrusted herself, and embarked on her journey. I want to insist in a particular way on this affirmation, that mission precedes understanding, because this is, in a certain way, the keystone of every discipleship. The mission entrusted to us is the means by which our lives are transformed into gift, and this is fully realized precisely when someone trusts, accepting to set out and to face any situation, free from worry about the outcome. Not long ago I visited our friars who live in Sweden and those found far away in Iceland. The former come from the Province of Warsaw and the latter belong to that of Slovakia. These, our brothers, accepted the challenge of going to countries where they knew neither the language nor the culture. They ended up in a very secularized place and put themselves at the service of a Church very much in the minority, mainly composed of foreign workers who profess the Catholic faith. Our friars have to travel great distances to be with the Catholic communities, which are often quite small. I found them committed and happy to be able to carry out this mission. They did not hide their difficulties from me, but no one mentioned wanting to abandon the mission they are living. We prayed together and I saw them devoted to the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and meditation. Without faith it would not be possible. Thanks be to God we have many examples such as these in our Order and I would like them to become a healthy challenge for friars who consider themselves immovable, who remain closed to the Grace of a new obedience, of a new service, making objections that do not always draw on the criteria of faith or of minority. Faith, which is deep and unconditional trust in the Lord, leads to self-worth, to the willingness to carry elsewhere the desire to give one's own life in love and service. Faith is also the awareness that accepting to leave a place, an office, a ministry that we have done for a long time in order to take up a new one, opens us to God's surprises. This willingness protects us

from becoming holders of power, or people who take possession of the dynamics of fraternal life, preventing any change or innovation.

### **A proposal for continuing the journey**

12. Brothers, after the example of Mary and contemplating God Most High, with Francis let us proclaim: "You are our faith"! Let us ask ourselves about our way of living and ask the Spirit that our existence, our vocation be rooted in unconditional faith in Him who created, redeemed, and destined us to enjoy eternal blessings. As I mentioned in the beginning of this letter there are brothers who cultivate the gift of faith; others are in struggle and in dismay. We all need to entrust ourselves with confidence to the hands of the Lord, to hear his voice. Certain of his help, of his presence, let us set out on the way like the Virgin Mary, who *arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah* (Lk 1:39) to be with her cousin Elizabeth. The Virgin of the *Magnificat* carries her Lord in her womb. Elizabeth greets Mary with words that synthesize wonderfully the experience of the Mother of the Lord: *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.* (Lk 1:45) Mary is blessed, happy, and fulfilled by her faith.

13. I greet you with a proposal to which I have already referred in n. 10 of this letter, drawing on a deep desire I hold in my heart and that I share with you. I wish that our provincial and local fraternities be places where we support each other in the journey of faith and help each other to recognize the presence of the Risen Lord among us. Let us witness to the beauty of the faith, helping each other with mercy and patience in the struggles of belief that come to us in our lives. I propose to you a local Chapter in which the friars, enlightened and moved by the Word of God, by the Rule and by our Constitutions, can share their own faith-relationship with the Lord and what it has engendered. And if there should be any struggling brother, he can ask prayer and help. I ask the Ministers and local superiors to help me in realizing this desire I have expressed. Thank you.

With fraternal affection.

Br. Mauro Jöhri  
General Minister, OFMCap

Rome, June 13, 2013  
Feast of St. Anthony of Padua



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