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 Curia Generalis
Fratrum Minorum
Capuccinorum

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI: a man transformed in prayer

Letter of the General Minister of the Friars Minor Capuchin

TO ALL THE FRIARS OF THE ORDER
TO THE CAPUCHIN POOR CLARE SISTERS

1. A reflection that has been developing
during my service among you

in the values of the Capuchin Franciscan
tradition.

I am reaching out to you with this letter with which I want to share some reflections on prayer. I write as I am moved by a thought that has been with me for a long time and that pushes me to face a situation that, together with the brother General Councilors, I find in my visits to the circumscriptions of the Order: difficulty in the practice of prayer. I am certain that we can all agree among ourselves, as also we would say to those we meet in our ministry and our work, that prayer is a central element in the life of every baptized person and, in particular way, in the experience of someone who has embraced the religious life. But the reality does not confirm this significance. It is not my intention to add anything to the treatises and manuals on prayer; the literary production on this theme is rich and abundant. I do, however, ask you to read this letter together with chapter III of our Constitutions, where you will find a deep and beautiful synthesis, rooted precisely

On July 2, 2016, Pope Francis, thanking me for the gift that our General Curia had given him for the feast of St. Peter, wrote these very words: "Prayer, as a humble entrusting of oneself to God and his will, is always the way out of the ways we are closed in on ourselves both personally and in common. It is the great way for opening ourselves to the Gospel and witnessing to hope with the enthusiasm of disciples who are faithful to Jesus." What, then, is the intention behind these words? I would like to encourage each of you to take a look at your relationship with God; not in the theory of ideas, but in the concreteness of the every day. Our brokenness and struggles are not spotted so much in our convictions about prayer, but rather in our daily practice. The Franciscan Sources tell of the sorrowful cry of St. Francis, "Love is not loved." To me comes the phrase, 'Prayer is not loved, and is little lived and practiced!'

2. 'Skipping' prayer

Our daily lives are punctuated by moments dedicated to prayer, to work, to meals taken together, to recreation, and to rest. The march of time and of our days moves within an adherence to the rhythms and activities that are lived in our fraternities. It is important that none of these comes to be passed over nor disproportionately exaggerated. The rhythms and the activities of our daily lives should help us to live a healthy balance between the various moments. The experience, however, is that often we make exceptions for ourselves; and the first among these is the 'skipping' of both mental and common prayer. Easily enough, pastoral activity with all its demands, time spent with friends, and the use of the mass media become reasons for dispensing ourselves from the times of common prayer; I don't hesitate to affirm that this kind of attitude is increasing significantly in our fraternities. I am convinced that when the making of exceptions for ourselves becomes a habit, the awareness of our belonging to the Lord in the consecrated life grows weak. It's true: God is honored and loved not only in prayer. Our relationship with Him is built from the evangelical life, from charity, from the gift of self in the work we are called to fulfill. But if the times for praise, thanksgiving, and silence become fewer and fewer, this relationship slackens and the motivations for what we do are weakened. There arises the danger of seeking only ourselves, concerned in the first place with gratifying our own expectations. When the relationship with God becomes weak and is no longer the fundamental reference point of our existence, we risk living in a hypocrisy that, professing to be a religious, a consecrated person, finds itself living the dynamics of a life contrary to this name. Let us ask ourselves together a question I take from the gospel of Luke and which I quote here in full:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord do you not care that my sister has left

me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." (10: 38-42)

What have we chosen? *Capuchin tradition, too, from the outset, by proposing the example of both Martha and Mary, teaches us how to unite contemplation and action harmoniously.* (Const. 15, 4)

3. Together in the presence of God

We truly pray as brothers when we gather together in the name of Christ in mutual love, so that the Lord is actually in our midst. (Const. 46, 2) Our Constitutions present prayer experienced together as an important aspect of our identity. Our fraternity exists because it has been called together by a Father who makes us brothers. This paternity generates new bonds that overcome those of blood, of kinship, of fondness, and of our belonging to ethnicities and geographical areas. We are called to speak our 'here I am' to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us to communion with Himself. PCO VIII, in Proposal 17, has stressed this in an unmistakable way:

The first work of the friars is seeking union with God. The times of fraternal prayer are not a way to avoid our work and pastoral care or an escape from the human toil of work, but are a service that comes from our state of life as consecrated persons. Therefore no friar



shall dispense himself from the primary task of liturgical and mental prayer, aware that when one prays he is interceding “on behalf of all humanity.” (Const. 49,1)

When we celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours, we show forth both our belonging to the whole Church as well as the communion that she herself generates. We belong to the People of God which lives and remains a living thing by the continuous and faithful action of the Holy Spirit. Let us often recall this basis of our life of faith, which is able to renew and motivate anew our relationship with God in prayer.

4. Tradition and creativity

Fraternal prayer calls for care and preparation. We all appreciate if moments of celebration such as anniversaries, birthdays, and name days are matched by signs that show the happiness and joy: a gift, flowers, a special meal or a present for the one celebrating. On the other hand, very often our common prayer is characterized by monotony and hurry, as if the only purpose was that of fulfilling an obligation. Often attempts to introduce a more celebratory way of reciting the psalms is shot down and refused. A sober and creative animation of prayer fosters the practice of common prayer, shakes us out of the habitual, and perhaps makes us more attentive to participating in what we are doing. Why not allow from time to time some space for the spontaneity that the Spirit suggests? The duty of praying together remains an essential element of our religious life but it can't be the only reason we pray. I ask each of you and your fraternities: When was the last time that you dedicated time in a local chapter to discussing the fraternity's life of prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist with the faithful that frequent our churches?

5. The Eucharist celebrated in fraternity

I hear with joy that in some circumscriptions of the Order they have introduced the custom of dedicating one day a week to the fraternity. The friars gather together for monthly retreats, local chapters, study and analysis of



various documents, and moments of ongoing formation. It is a very good and meaningful thing that on these days the friars celebrate the Eucharist together. Gathered around the altar we affirm and witness to one another that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our being together as brothers. The Eucharist recalls to us that we need to be forgiven, that we are to forgive one another, that there is a Word to receive and to live, and that there is an existence to offer and to give, just as the one who gives us his Body and Blood has done. Brothers, I invite us all to celebrate the Eucharist together in our fraternities at least once a week. I can testify that the faithful who frequent our friaries and churches admire and are edified to see that the friars give time to cultivating fraternal relationships and to living the experience of the fraternal life in an authentic and concrete way with moments of prayer open to all. So our Constitutions also urge us: *[W]e celebrate a Mass daily in all our houses as a brotherhood. Should this not be possible, the Eucharist with the participation of all the brothers is to be celebrated frequently.* (48, 2)

6. A silence filled with his presence

Along with the Eucharist and the celebration of the Divine Office, the prayer of our friars has been nourished for centuries by mental prayer made up of longer times of silence. Our origins are rooted in the eremitical life and many of our brothers distinguished themselves by an edifying mystical life and by the compilation of manuals and treatises on the life of prayer. In 54, 1 of the Constitutions we read: *We preserve and promote the contemplative spirit that shines in the life of Saint Francis and of our first brothers. Therefore, we give greater importance to it by*

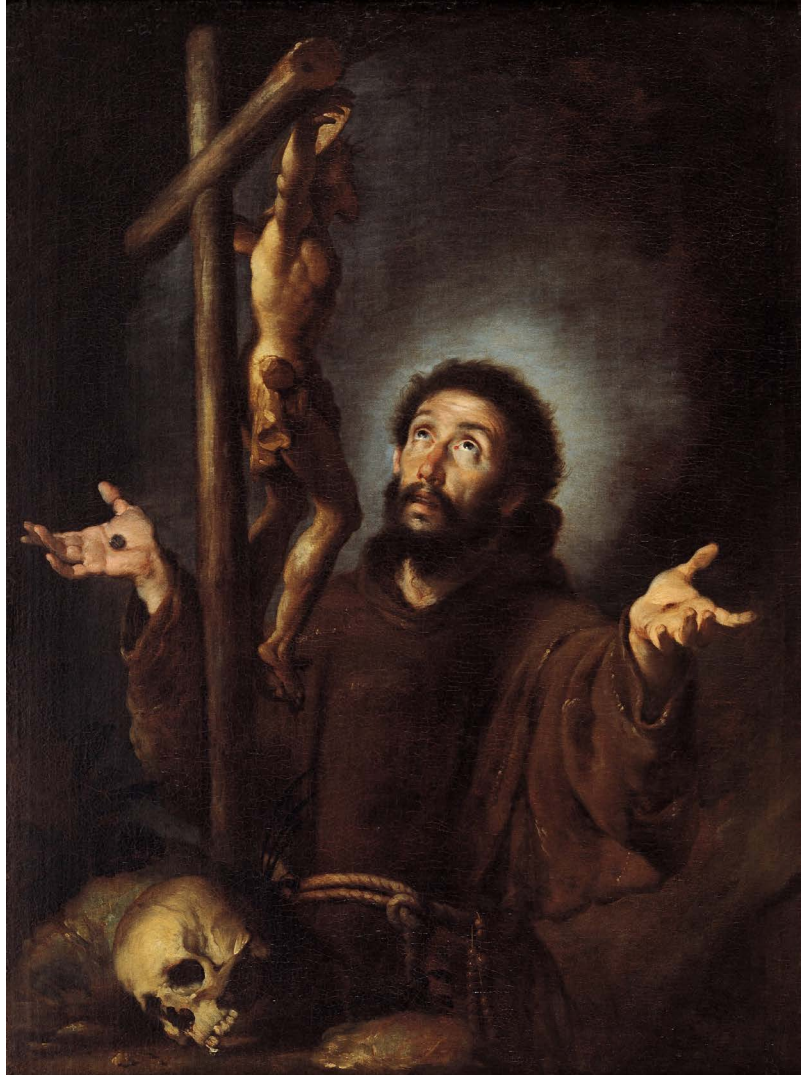
cultivating mental prayer. Continuing in number 54, in paragraph 4, we find written: *Moreover, so that the spirit of prayer and prayer itself may never grow lukewarm within us, but may burn more intensely from day to day, we must apply ourselves each day to its practice.* This affirmation is made even more explicit and concrete in 55, 2: *Each brother, wherever he may be, is to make sufficient time each day for mental prayer, for example, one whole hour.* In many of our fraternities the schedules provides that this hour is broken up into two periods, one in the morning and the other in the evening. Unfortunately there are those who abandon both the first and the second.

I must note with disappointment that mental prayer has become weak and little practiced in our fraternities and is losing the meaning and importance that it represents in relation to our identity. To be together in silence in the presence of God, at the beginning and end of our day, not only sustains our life of faith, but is an eloquent sign of our being brothers who perhaps have to endure conflicts, struggles, and misunderstandings, but are there together, in choir or in our chapels. By praying together in silence we witness to one another that what he hold in common is the Lord. Let us ask the Holy Spirit that, through our prayer, He give us an interior vision turned always to the Lord. Someone who prays, who is capable of silence, takes on a benevolent, merciful outlook toward everything that is around him. PCO VII affirms:

The hermitage, which for the first Capuchins was always on the edges of the town, is not a place in which to avert one's gaze, but to acquire a broader vision of reality, contemplated from the vantage point of God and the poor.¹

7. To be transformed in prayer²

Thomas of Celano describes the prayer of St. Francis with an evocative image: *not so much praying as becoming totally prayer.* (FA: ED II: 310) What does this image say to us? Is it



something that pertains to an edifying story of a saint or is it able to lift up in us the desire to live a deep and filial relationship with the living and true God? I'll share with you a statement, simple but profound at the same time, of a holy monk of Mount Athos: *Prayer is given to the one who prays!* The one who prays with humility and fidelity realizes that the giving of space to be apart with God is no longer a seeking based on its own effort, but is itself the good food of our daily lives. Prayer will be that breath that our Constitutions speak of at the beginning of Chapter III: *Prayer to God is the breathing of love stirred into life by the Holy Spirit through whom the inner man begins to listen to the voice of God speaking to his heart.* (45, 1) This breathing of love becomes ever more pure and authentic if it is supported by daily faithfulness. I recall having read a book by a young rabbi who recounted that every day he spent an hour in silence before God. With time he realized that he could do no less, and the prayerful

¹ N. 31

² Regarding how St. Francis prayed I would like to note a book by our confrere Raffaele Ruffo, *Non voglio essere ladro: Francesco d'Assisi e la restituzione dei beni* (Bologna: EDB, 2015)

silence was no longer a struggle but a time to which he looked forward.

8. The Word of God

We have many writings from St. Francis, and also in particular *The Office of the Passion*³. In all of these writings, but especially in this one, we touch upon the deep familiarity that the Saint had with the Word of God. He had read it, meditated upon it, chewed it, and made it his own, such that he was able to cite the Word of God with ease and have recourse to it in every moment. This is an urgent invitation for all of us, both individually and in common, to cultivate *lectio divina*. Where a time for listening and discussing the Word of God in common has been introduced in fraternity, one notes that it becomes easier to communicate with each other even on spiritual themes, on what nourishes the spiritual life of each of us.

9. God is new every day

Let us confess it: from prayer we always look for some sensible fruit, immediately perceivable. This is a holy desire that belongs properly to a believer who longs to perceive the closeness of his God. But then there are days, months, and years in which nothing happens. You sit in choir and ask yourself, 'What am I doing here?' and you respond to yourself, 'I'll go do something else, read a book, continue to prepare a homily.' We live in a society of thrills, it is true; that which is thrilling is held to be highly meaningful! Also in the life of prayer, after we have had powerful experiences in which we have perceived clearly the beauty of being with the Lord, there arises the desire that this perception last forever. But that's not how it is. I believe that this situation can go with the experience of the 'without anything of one's own' that makes

us free before what has been, and continually opens us to the newness of God. Someone said that God is new every day. We are called to let ourselves be formed by the Spirit who prepares us for an encounter with Himself that is always new, and in this newness there is also space for dryness and struggle in prayer. Dear brother, on the days when during your prayer your thoughts wander and the mind and heart are exploring memories or planning what you have to do next, don't run away; remain there with your body, let yourself be taken into the arms of 'Sister Fidelity,' stay as you are able before the Lord. If we linger on comparisons with experiences of light and consolation from the past, we cannot enjoy the newness of today and the faithfulness of being with God when his newness is hidden but nevertheless very enlightening. Prayer becomes deep when interior freedom grows. We are no longer determined by results or by the different shades of our feelings, but we are free to receive what God prepares for us. We are called to set off into the deep, to not fear to challenge ourselves with the deep waters and the darkness of night, perhaps even having the same experience as Peter, who, filled with struggle and fear as the waters were covering him could only cry out, 'Lord, save me!' It is moving to think of the strong hand of Jesus that grasped him and brought him back into communion with Him. To be with Jesus in prayer is a beautiful and holy adventure, full of passion and courage. It would be a real sin to deprive ourselves of this journey. Brother, if perhaps you have interrupted this journey, take it up again with trust! I ask you furthermore not to read these words as a pious exhortation, for you know that your General Minister has no other tools available except to urge you, invite you, and beseech you; the rest is entrusted to your freedom, to your capacity to love. Know one thing: when I ask you, 'Brother, be with God in prayer,' I am truly desiring the best for you, as does everyone else who helps you to pray.

³ FA: ED I: 139-157.

10. The cloister

I now ask for your attention on an architectural aspect that characterizes most of our traditional Capuchin friaries: the cloister. In the monastic world the cloister represents the physical and spiritual universe of the monk; it is the place of encounter with God, creator and redeemer, but also the place of the silence that is an indispensable condition and disposition for dialogue with God. I think that we have all visited some abbey with a majestic cloister with columns, frescoes, flowerbeds, and the fountain at the center. We Capuchins, though we are not monks, have maintained the cloister at the center of the friary, but we reduced it to what was essential. The decorative elements are missing and in the middle there is normally the well. Does not this empty quadrangle represent in a raw and strong way that space that each of us is called to create for God within ourselves? Does the presence of the well not remind us of when Jesus says, *whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life?* (John 4:14) Often today our houses follow other architectural criteria and

this is something easily comprehensible, but those signs that call us back to what we want to live as consecrated persons should never be allowed to disappear.⁴

11. The mantle of St. Francis

Thomas of Celano tells how St. Francis always sought out a hidden place where he could join to God not only his spirit but every member of his body. When it happened that he was suddenly overcome in public by a visitation of the Lord, so as not to be without a cell, he would make a little cell out of his mantle. Sometimes, when he had no mantle, he would cover his face with his sleeve to avoid revealing the hidden manna.⁵

It is important that when we pray each one finds his place and his time, but also the physical posture that can help us to enter into a climate of silence and recollection. We need to learn how to alternate the personal and communal times of silence that are dedicated to mental prayer. There comes to mind what my confreres at the friary of Rapperswil in Switzerland do for Night Prayer in the evening: they gather in a circle around a candle, together

⁴ On the architectural choices of Capuchins and their meaning see Giovanni Pozzi, *Devota sobrietà. L'identità cappuccina e i suoi simboli* (Bologna, 2015) 13 – 26.

⁵ FA: ED II, 309.





with the people who wish to pray with them, to conclude the day with a prolonged moment of silence. At this moment the gestures say much more than any words. Visiting the brothers in France last February I appreciated very much that they had reintroduced, in every fraternity, the practice of beginning the day with an hour of silence spent together in choir or in the prayer space of the friary.

12. Men of God

Who taught you to pray? Speaking for myself, I remember how in the evening, kneeling by the bed, my mother taught me to pray, while my father brought me with him to church. My most vivid memory is how I experienced with him certain fascinating moments of the liturgy of Holy Week; I didn't understand anything but was nevertheless struck deeply by what was happening on the altar and by the songs of the assembly. I don't know if prayer is still taught in Christian families from the most tender infancy, but I do believe that today

there are many, even Christians, who do not know how to pray because nobody has taught them. I think of the great good done by our brother Ignacio Larrañaga,⁶ who taught many people to pray, teaching in a systematic and ordered way. He understood that there exists a great desire for prayer, for a relationship with God, and therefore a great number of people to teach and accompany. I am convinced that this is also asked of us. Many people ask us to be men of God before being specialists in the different human and theological disciplines. Our fraternities should become true and proper schools of prayer. It is important to share our prayer with the people. May our pastoral ministry guide people on the way of contemplation. We are called to be men of God, as were our saints who made incarnate the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount and were hardworking in charity. But what always emerges, as an irrefutable constant of their existence, is the relationship lived with the Lord in prayer. I assure you that the school of the saints is always open and I hope that it always has passionate students.

⁶ By way of example I cite here his *Muestrame Tu Rostro (Hacia la intimidad con Dios)*. This book speaks in the first place about his own journey of prayer, while his *Encuentro: Manual De Oración* is a proper manual of prayer.



13. I wish you faithful prayer

Dear brothers, I conclude here, handing on this letter to each of you and to the fraternities of our Order. Let us challenge ourselves peacefully and truthfully, for what is at stake is precious: it is our relationship with Him who loves us and treats us with mercy. I will be very direct: Brother, it is question of fidelity. Bring your body, your whole person, and your feelings before God every day and then you will be certain that God will take your 'here I am'—at times even a little weary and sleepy—and bring to fulfillment the good work He has begun in you. Let us quiet the discussions about prayer, but rather live and practice it!

I hope that this letter of mine helps you. Talk about it together, but without looking for any

reason to point fingers at each other. To each of you, my brothers, I hope for the gift of prayer that is ever more profound as I too will pray for this as I can. And keep praying for me!

I dare to pray that in your consecrated heart you will be able to feel and say with Francis: You are all our riches to sufficiency. You are all our sweetness! (FA: ED I, 109)

I extend fraternal greetings to all of you!

4 October 2016
Solemnity of our Seraphic Father St. Francis

h. Mauro Jöhri

Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister OFM Cap.



ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI:
a man transformed in prayer