

# ***Ratio Formationis***

## ***OFMCap***

### Chapter I

# - Notes To Guide Your Reading -

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## 1. Understanding the chapter

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The purpose of the *Ratio Formationis* is to strengthen, throughout the entire formation process, the unique identity that flows from our charism. In other words, it aims to consolidate the values that all share, which in turn must be creatively enfolded in the different cultural contexts.

The text of the Ratio will be divided into three chapters: the first presents the figure of Saint Francis, the second, the five dimensions that constitute the entire *Ratio Formationis* from the ecclesial point of view, and the third, the different stages that comprise the formation process.

The first chapter has a specific objective: to lay the foundations, or – which amounts to the same thing – to impart the colour and flavour of our charism to the set of the five dimensions, which in turn will be present in every stage of formation.

## 2. Style, structure and methodology

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To draft a text in which the story of Francis is interlaced with our own, against the background of the life of Jesus, and aiming to cast light on our formation both now and in the future, is no easy task.

We have avoided using standard hagiographical models, preferring instead a narrative method that is more *circular and evolving*: starting from the dynamic force of *inter-relatedness* it seeks to bring out the ways in which the figure of Saint Francis contributes to present-day culture.

*Silence, encounter, desire* and the *canticle* are the pivots around which the basic core values of Franciscan spirituality are arranged, in a plain yet sufficiently substantial narrative, with a view to giving charismatic force to the entire text of the RF.

## 3. What we are not claiming

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It is not the aim of this text to narrate the life of Saint Francis in every detail as if it were a complete account. His life, like that of any other human being, is an inexhaustible mystery, capable of any number of interpretations, all of them valid and complementary.

It is not a closed, definitive text. We want it to be a collective document, born of the suggestions and insights of all the brothers. The final redaction, like that of the rest of the RF, will only be concluded at the next General Chapter in 2018; until then, the text remains open.

Neither is it a document drawn up by and intended for a particular group of brothers; it is addressed to us all. Among us there are different sensitivities, and this makes us aware of the impossibility of presenting an account that will satisfy everyone. Our desire is that Saint Francis will encourage us to keep thinking and comparing our own lives and that of our fraternities with his.

## 4. Keys to interpret the text

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Anthropological: *The form of life of the holy Gospel* casts light on our searches for meaning and makes us free to assume the inalienable task of building our lives authentically.

Christological: Jesus of Nazareth is the backdrop against which to interpret both the life of Francis and our own. Although we try to recount the life of Saint Francis, the principal protagonist is Jesus. It is on the basis of *following Him* that we construct our *identity*.

Franciscan: For decades it was only possible to approach Saint Francis without taking into account the rich nuances in the process of his human and spiritual conversion. In line with the efforts of current research, without forgetting *Saint Francis*, we wish to highlight the importance of an encounter with Brother Francis.

Capuchin: There is also a Saint Francis interpreted in the light of the Capuchin reform. Our first brothers proposed to return to the most intimate and evangelical experiences lived by Francis, and took his Testament – the writing that best preserves his affective memory - as their point of reference. This was why, from the outset, they were known as *brothers of the Testament*. For our present text, too, it is a basic reference.

## *Living according to the form of the Holy Gospel*

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1. It is only by living that we learn to live. Our experiences and encounters along the way are what constantly shape our identity in a dynamic manner. To build up the person we are is an exciting challenge, and not without difficulties. But we have a model, Jesus, who by walking the paths of our humanity discovered His own divinity: the Son, by becoming our brother, reveals our ultimate and final goal: to be brothers, only to become, at last, sons and daughters of God as well. Brotherhood is the way. Francis was so fascinated by the humanity and humility of God the Most High, who in Jesus makes himself poor and crucified, that he made the Gospel our *form of life*: to be brothers, in order to be more human, like Jesus, and to tell the story through the authenticity of our life lived in brotherhood.

### I. SILENCE

*O God, sublime and glorious, come and enlighten the darkness of my heart;  
give me an honest faith, a firm hope and a perfect love,  
that I may know your holy will, obey it, and not go astray.*

2. Oh the bliss of those who listen to silence: their eyes fill with light, their steps head straight for the depths of the heart. Let silence touch us, and we enter into deeper kinship with the world, open ourselves to peace, and live a more authentic life.

In silence we glimpse the presence of the Mystery, and learn that, if we are to allow Him to meet us, it is necessary to search for oneself, taking care of that inner space which goes beyond the limits of the superficial, and makes fruitful relationships with others possible: in them we also discover who we are. Silence is the source of desire, of dialogue and beauty, and, when it turns into contemplation, is the opportunity to welcome the gentle whisper of the voice of God.

### I.I. Meaning

3. God loves human beings into existence and invites them to live, gifting them with freedom. By so doing, God grants to humankind the capacity to be architects of their own selves. This logic of creation teaches us that living consists in taking responsibility for the journey, in shaping one's own life, trying to discover our vocation: that which the world is expecting of us, the gift the Creator gives to us. Life is a gift that makes its demands.
4. The heart of the Gospel is the form of life of Jesus, who chose not to spend his life for His own benefit, but by living for others. In Him we discover that life consists in the art of the encounter. Jesus, by opening Himself to God and becoming an open door to encountering others, teaches us the Christian paradox: that to possess life, we must surrender it.

5. Who would not wish to be a great knight? In his youth, Francis dreamt of nothing else: of being the greatest, the most powerful, the most admired. He seemed to have all the answers, until one day he was confronted by war, and experienced suffering and the shadow of death. The dream turned into a nightmare. He was taken prisoner in the battle of Collestrada and, imprisoned in Perugia, he discovered that the world was not what he thought it was, that many things lie hidden beyond the surface of life, and of his own heart too. After his prison experience came sickness and crisis, when nothing made sense any more: he sees nothing but conflicts and enemies, fragments of a broken world. He feels lost.
6. When things become meaningless, life fills with fears that take us over and prevent us from knowing who we are. Then, feelings arise which we never knew before, casting a cloud over the way ahead: the anxious search for power, the desire to compete, the temptation to exclude others. Meaninglessness turns to loneliness, and loneliness to egoism, preventing us from seeing who we are. However, deep in the core of every human being, like an ever-beating heart, lies the desire for God. We must get moving, and keep searching.

## I. II. The search

7. A person discovers who he or she is when they launch out and start walking. Itinerancy (movement outward and inward, contact with other people, other cultures and ideas) is part of the deepest core of the human condition. It is this attitude that keeps us alert against conformity and compromise; from these God protects us by enticing us with the gift of a life that is open and always new.
8. To follow Jesus means to live as He lived: always on the way, proclaiming the reign of God. This model of itinerant life keeps us focused on what is fundamental. Our Franciscan tradition invites us to follow the poor and naked Christ, and to discover that His poverty frees us from the superfluous, that His nakedness leads us into the mystery of truth.
9. The life of Francis is full of questions: why do people kill one another? Why is there poverty and exclusion? Why suffering? On the way to Apulia, on his second attempt to become a knight, he is awakened by a dream: *Whom do you wish to serve, the servant or the Master?* Francis understands that anyone running away from himself never finds himself. He has to abandon his armour, come off the high horse of his pride, be taken for a coward and a failure, and start again. It would take him a lifetime to unravel the meaning of that dream in Spoleto.
10. To live means always trying again. The horizon remains open, to remind us that the meaning of life is built up, step by step, that the road is covered in tracks that disclose a part of the mystery. What we have to do is search with a passion, and walk on trustingly.

## I. III. Mystery

11. Mystery is the part of reality that is never exhausted. Behind and beyond what we see, there is so much more. Not everything that exists can be counted on the fingers of one hand, neither can the whole truth be enclosed in a book. Humanity has failed in its attempt to reduce existence to the powers of its own reason. In the same way, faith is not exempt from the danger of constructing idolatrous images of a god made to the measure of our needs.

12. To avoid falling into this temptation it is necessary to confront our experience with Jesus' experience of God. This is what we find in the Gospel: the encounters, the words and the silence through which Jesus enters the depths of the mystery of God. In Him He discovers a love that is unconditional, free and always open.
13. Not without pain, Francis has to let go of his images of God. He must leave behind the god who turns strong men into knights, who justifies the power of a few, who annihilates those who think differently, who incites hatred for the enemy. It is then that he experiences the dark night of loneliness and the absence of God. In the silence and through creatures, Francis begins to sense the presence of the Creator.

#### I. IV. Beauty

14. Human beings are naturally attracted to everything beautiful, because encountering beauty helps to overcome the experience of fragmentation. The beauty of the world opens us to a relationship of interdependence, which makes us necessary to everyone and brothers to all. There is nothing superficial about this: contact with real beauty enables us to know who we are and what we are doing in life.
15. If we look carefully, we see how the Gospel also speaks to us of Jesus' relationship with creatures: in them, He finds a place where He can contemplate God. Jesus' discovery of the beauty of the world -- the harmony of beings, their absolute dependence on God -- helps Him construct a fraternal way of being together with everything that exists. The form of life lived by Jesus -- His authenticity, His inner freedom, His ever-open hands, His eyes full of mercy and tenderness -- is beauty in all its fullness. His is the most beautiful life. Who would not wish to be like Jesus?
16. Francis, reader of the Gospel, is also a reader of creation. In the pages of the Book of Life, he reads of God's desire to enter into relationship with every creature. In each one of them he discovers the different ways in which God becomes present, and, together with them, becomes a fascinated witness of God the Creator, whom he addresses with the words: *You are beauty*.

#### II. THE ENCOUNTER

*Let no-one leave you without first having seen your eyes filled with mercy.*

17. No man is an island. God has created us unique and unrepeatable, but not self-sufficient. Individualism (the temptation to reduce reality to one's own personal reality) destroys our capacity for relationship and hinders true personal fulfilment, by turning the other person into an object of self-affirmation and domination. Interdependence requires that we recognise others as different, and that we welcome them as gifts that enrich us. Without free and open relationships, life lacks meaning, since it is in discovering "otherness" that our own identity is constructed.

Encounters are the most important experiences in the life of Francis. Nothing happens by chance; rather, everything happens at specific times and places: while searching for the way, Francis is led to the peripheries of Assisi. Outside the city walls, in the little hermitage of San Damiano, he can hear the Word more clearly and, on the strength of it, is enabled to go out to encounter the lepers and follow the poor, naked Christ.

## II. I. The Word

18. In the Gospel, Francis finds his way of life. He invents nothing, but discovers that the issue is to live as Jesus lived: *The Most High Himself revealed to me that I was to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel* (Test. 14). Jesus, as an itinerant preacher, proclaims the good news of the Kingdom: the free love of God that excludes no-one. To be precise, the Gospel —the book that recounts the encounters in Jesus' life, most of them with poor, sick and outcast people — proposes that we build our lives around this capacity to encounter others. The Beatitudes (Mt 5, 3-2) and the invitation to mercy (Mt 25, 31-46) sum up perfectly the type of encounter with the world to which Jesus calls us.
19. For Francis, the Gospel suffices, he lives *in and on* the Scriptures and *makes his home in them, as in a house* (2Cel. 104): for us who are disciples of Jesus this is the vital frame of reference and discernment. He becomes present among us each time we remember His Word, and when we try to live our lives in the light of His words. Francis himself, in love with the words of Jesus, alerts his brothers to the temptation to overlay the Master's unadorned and simple word, and invites us to live evangelically and "without gloss".
20. In Francis we see not a *deaf hearer of the Gospel*, but a man who tries to live whatever he hears (1Cel. 22). From him we learn that the word of God is only understood in depth when it is put into practice; that to live centred on the word generates a new style of relationship: brotherhood. To live as brothers is the mirror of the values of the Kingdom, its most beautiful proclamation, the most genuine form of sharing the desire for God. To welcome diversity in a brotherly way constitutes the most credible way of contemplating and telling the story of our God, who makes himself a "lesser brother" in the mystery of the incarnation of the Son.

## II. II. The leper

21. To take the risk of being present with the heart, inside the human misery of another: this is the dynamic of mercy. Some war wounds would leave their mark on the emotional memory of Francis until the end of his life. The gentle gaze of God's mercy helped him to know, to welcome and to integrate his own wounds and shadow side. Only one who has experienced mercy can show mercy. This is something that completely changes our ways of relating to others: from judgement and accusation leading to guilt, we are led to empathy and understanding, inviting us to responsibility. For Francis, sharing the life of lepers was a school in the true sense. From that moment, the free gift of mercy became the foundation of the new project of evangelical living inspired by God Himself.
22. *It seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.* (Test. 2-3). For a long time, Francis feels insecure in the presence of lepers, and protects himself: up go the walls, he keeps his distance, he hides. It wasn't a fear of physical contagion, but something more profound, it was fear of sharing the same fate as the lepers: fear of not being accepted, of being excluded, of having no rights, of not being known or loved by anyone. Being invisible: being nothing and nobody, not belonging to anyone.

23. Francis kisses the leper - although we should really say, allows himself to be kissed. It was not just an act of sheer will-power to overcome his repugnance. His kiss was the expression of a sincere emotional experience, which eventually drove out all fear and transformed his whole emotional universe. Everything starts to take on new meaning: bitterness becomes sweet, a transition takes place, from needing to be recognised by others to having a good knowledge of oneself. Thanks to the lepers, Francis begins to know himself and experiences the meaning of gratuitous giving. To kiss the Gospel and to kiss the leper are the same thing; listening to the words of Jesus and hearing the cry rising from the flesh of those who suffer, are the same thing: it is always Jesus who is speaking, and who kisses.
24. Among the lepers, far from all false security, true interior security arises. Here is the evangelical paradox: the less the power, the greater the freedom. Where there is nothing to lose, real security is born, as a gift freely given. Here Francis learns another decisive lesson that was to leave its mark on his life and on that of his brothers: the incompatibility between brotherhood and power. Anyone who wants to be a lesser brother must give up any kind of dominion.

### II. III. The Son, poor and naked, has made Himself our brother

25. Jesus, naked and crucified, lives at the half-ruined hermitage of San Damiano, surrounded by the lepers, awakening closeness and solidarity in those who contemplate Him. This is no judge who judges and condemns, this is a brother who shares our trials. *He was born poor, lives more poorly and dies utterly poor and naked on the cross.* He does not keep his Sonship for Himself; on the contrary, He makes himself our brother, showing us that brotherhood is the best way to discover God.
26. Francis wants to follow Jesus more closely, traversing every stage of His life, step by step, from Greccio (the Bethlehem experience) to La Verna (the Calvary experience). Discipleship, following the Master, is always at the centre: *He was always with Jesus! Jesus in his heart, Jesus on his lips, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, he bore Jesus always in his whole body!* (1Cel. 115).
27. Love, not sin, is the heart of the mystery of the incarnation. The Most High and All-Powerful presents himself to us, mysteriously, as the Lowest, divested of all power. God is total self-giving, absolute surrender. He keeps nothing back for Himself. The cross, *the Tree of Life*, recalls the commitment of Jesus to justice and to the excluded: so far does he identify with them that he ends up like them: hanging from a tree, like a criminal outside the city. His life and death make it clear that God is no part of a system that excludes anyone. This is the lesson of the Resurrection: it is the final, definitive word of love that God speaks concerning the life of Jesus. This was how Francis understood it.

### II. IV. The birds and the flowers

28. The big obstacle in the way our following Jesus is the fear that consists in bringing into the present something we think could happen to us in the future, thus preventing us from moving forward. The opposite of fear is trust, the serene and joyful affirmation of the present that moves us onward towards whatever must happen. *Look at the birds of the air* (Mt 6,26) ... *Look at the lilies of the field, see how they grow* (Mt 6,28). Birds (symbols of freedom) and flowers (images of providence) are put forward by Jesus as models of the trustful disciple, who feels supported by God's loving kindness and tries to live each moment in depth.

29. In Francis, a new way of being holy is revealed to us. He falls in love with flowers, holds conversations with the birds and has close encounters with creatures; among them, he feels he is one of them. To the stones of enclosed spaces he prefers the cloister of the world, filled with colourful flowers that bear witness to the beauty of the Creator, and with the music of the birds that sing for God's glory. Tired of the empty speeches of experience, Francis learns a new language from the lilies and the birds, a free and gratuitous word, full of trust and inspiring absolute confidence in the Lord.

### III. DESIRE

*Let us desire nothing else, seek nothing else, delight and take pleasure in nothing else but our Creator (RnB, 23)*

30. The search for meaning awakens the world of desire. We are talking about a key that sets our whole being in motion, launching us into an encounter with reality. Desire is always clothed in concrete experiences, keeps us alert to the energy of life, and connects us to Jesus, inspiring us to share his sentiments, to be like Him. Francis, *a man of desires*, allows God to transform his desire to be a knight into an even more sublime desire: to be like Jesus.

#### III.I. The gaze

31. *It seemed too bitter for me to see lepers* (Test.1). It is always a temptation to avert one's gaze and remain blind. Who can break the tendency we have to look only at ourselves? Conversion consists precisely in changing our way of looking at things, moving from indifference to compassion, allowing what we see to affect and transform us.

32. For God, no-one is invisible: *he looks* at the poor and *hears* their cry, he turns them into the apple of His eye. Through them, God looks at us. These are the paradoxes of the Gospel: we are seen by those we do not wish to see. Only when Francis lets himself be seen by the eyes of the God of the lepers is he able to open his own eyes and learn how to look.

33. The Christ of San Damiano, on whose open eyes Francis rests his gaze, becomes the mirror into which Clare invites us to look. In His eyes, our eyes are filled with mercy. Something in His way of looking at us moves us from silence to listening, from solitude to solidarity, from contemplation to compassion. Thus begins the process of the transformation of our desires: we start by looking at things like Jesus, and end up seeing them as He sees them. And that is not all: you end up being another Christ. And more yet: you yourself become another mirror, so that whoever sees you, sees Jesus.

34. Contemplation invites discipleship, and discipleship invites contemplation. Both sustain the meaning of our life as brothers. Together, from the vantage point of brotherhood, we extend God's gaze over the world prophetically, denouncing injustice and becoming witnesses to the hope and joy of the Gospel.

#### III. II. Brotherhood

35. *The Lord gave me brothers* (Test. 14). It was revealed to Francis that to be able to live like Jesus, brothers are indispensable. God has created us different, unrepeatable and unique. Brotherhood does not deny individuality; on the contrary, it protects it from individualism; it does not destroy the individual, but enriches him with the gift of a broader space. Our identity as brothers can only be constructed in terms of relationship.

36. The project of Clare and Francis consists in following Jesus as brothers and sisters, in different, complementary styles. While Francis restores the model of itinerant preaching proper to the first disciples, Clare focuses on listening to and serving Jesus, in the style of Martha and Mary in the house at Bethany.
37. Our identity and charism are expressed in the way we live relationships. Poverty focuses us on what is fundamental, preventing material things from becoming obstacles among us: *And those who wished to adopt this life gave all that they possessed to the poor, and we desired nothing more* (Test. 16-17). All the brothers are equal: it is up to everyone to work with their hands; preaching is not the exclusive preserve of clerics; one's place of origin does not count.
- Brotherhood guarantees freedom and fosters gratuity in inter-personal relationships, and this requires, unconditionally from all the brothers, that they renounce any kind of power. For Francis, without freedom, creativity and responsibility, no truly fraternal relationships can exist: *In whatever way it seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow his footprints and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience.* (LtL).
38. The difficulties Francis encountered in fraternal relationships give credibility to the words he spoke to a brother who asked for his help: problems among brothers are not solved by escaping to a hermitage. Not to wish others to be better Christians requires that we give up demanding that the other should meet my expectations, and should behave as I would in his place. Only in this way can we open up spaces where all is gift, freeing us from the anxious need to dominate. The secret for living up to these demands lies in contemplation. It is indispensable, for in it our eyes are charged with mercy: *Let there be no brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may have sinned, who after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy* (LtM).

### III. III. The Church

39. *And the Lord gave me such faith in churches* (Test. 4). The Franciscan project, with its creative fidelity and its sense of belonging on the periphery, gives the Church a new evangelical style. Our Lady of the Angels, the Portiuncula, the cradle of our Order, is surrounded by profound affective connotations: here were born the lesser brothers and the poor sisters; here, the brotherhood gathers around *Mary, the Virgin made church* (SalVM.1). According to Celano, this space of meeting and rest, this memorial of the origins, was the place that Francis loved most. The Portiuncula constantly calls us back to what is small and essential, it is the model of Franciscan ecclesiology and the sacrament of a church of brothers who proclaim the good news by living in brotherhood.
40. *In this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God, except His most holy Body and Blood* (Test. 10). The Church, the mystical Body of Christ, is born of the Eucharist. It is the symbol that sums up the whole life and message of Jesus: His free surrender and gift of Himself. The washing of the feet, the gesture on which the Church rests, highlights its deepest meaning and vocation: service, as its specific mode of being in the world. This involves a genuine experience of love and justice, where to see and touch the Body of Jesus helps us to see and touch Him in the bodies of the poor, and in that way to unmask all counterfeit spirituality. The Eucharist is for us *the source of the Church's life: the root, the focal point and the very heart of our fraternal life* (Const. 48).

41. The Church's meaning lies not in proclaiming itself to itself, but in proclaiming Jesus. The missionary dimension lies at the heart of our project: to be a Capuchin means being ready to go where no-one wants to go. Always in the style of Francis, who set out to meet the Sultan Malik Al-Kamil and to build peace through dialogue and respect. From him we learn that the Gospel is not imposed, but proposed, that mission starts from the recognition of the truth that dwells in the other person. The testimony of our life as brothers is without a doubt the most credible way of proclaiming this: *Let them not quarrel or argue or judge others when they go about in the world, but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming* (RB, 3).

### III. IV. The world

42. God has placed the world in our hands: outside of it there is no salvation. Our social, economic and cultural structures are undergoing a transformation. There are inevitable challenges: to put an end to the scandalous inequalities by which large parts of humanity are excluded; to achieve sustainable development that respects the environment; to find pathways of dialogue between different religions, so that God does not become the pretext for any kind of war; to build a society in which intercultural harmony is our greatest treasure. It all depends on us.

43. The malfunctions and wounds of our world can only be cured by love, by fostering a culture of encounter that breaks the logic of possession and domination and forms us in the logic of the free giving of self. It is a matter of passing from the *right to be* to the *gift of being*, thus overcoming fragmentation into friends and enemies, incompatible with Franciscan spirituality, which recognises the other as a brother/sister, never as a threat.

44. Our way of understanding poverty is deeply rooted in the experience of gratuity and interdependence, which naturally favours a culture of solidarity, helping to recover the communal sense of existence. The new times require that we abandon the culture of consumerism and design new sustainable lifestyles, being aware of the fragile environment and of the life of the poor. A world without walls, without wars and without poverty is still possible. Structures must facilitate encounters between people, and never choke the creativity of our charism: what we are, not what we have, is the greatest treasure we can offer.

### IV. THE CANTICLE

*Praise to you, my Lord, for those who forgive for love of you,  
and bear infirmity and tribulation* (CC)

45. How blessed are the moonlight and the sunlight. The *Canticle of the Creatures* is the background music that accompanied Francis throughout his life. Its light burst forth at the end of his days, in the darkest of nights. The poem is the symbolic expression of his profound experience of physical and spiritual suffering. In sacred language Francis expresses himself, while at the same time his words declare the harmony of the world. All is a hymn to the power, the beauty and the goodness of God. The world shows its beauty in its simplicity, creatures exist as gifts freely given, unaware of the desire to possess. Reconciliation of humanity with itself, with others, with the universe and with God: this is the Canticle, a joyful celebration of life, pardon and peace.

## IV. I. Blindness

46. Francis never saw the fulfilment of his dream for peace, conceived on his journey to Damietta. Crusades always end badly. On top of this sense of failure came an eye disease that finally left him completely blind: trachoma, or granular conjunctivitis, which causes insufferable pain, pressing on the optic nerve and making daylight unbearable.

To this suffering an even greater one was added: the increase in the number of brothers who were convinced that the Gospel was not enough to live by. They asked for practical guidelines for the details of their life, regulations and commentaries to cover the starkness of the Gospel.

Francis, outwardly blind and inwardly full of shadows, finds himself subjected to a strong tension: caught between the demands of many brothers and the need to defend his original insight.

47. Despair and doubt weigh heavily on Francis' heart. He wants to see, but cannot. He does not feel strong enough, nor see clearly enough, to guide the brothers. Giving up his role as spiritual guide, he finally flees. He seeks refuge in a hermitage, far away from the brothers. Once more, as it had years before, an existential blindness overwhelms him, the shadows lengthen and the saddest thing happens: the sweetness of living in brotherhood is changed into bitterness.

48. When the temptation to turn back grows ever stronger and he feels he has lost sight of the Master's footprints, Francis returns to silence and, touched by it once more, listens to the gospel word as he had done at the beginning of his journey: Jesus invites him to divest himself totally, to trust, to be as brave as when he first began. At that moment in his life, he had one final battle to win: once more to give up his dreams of knighthood, to abandon all forms of dominion and power, and this time, for ever. The Gospel impels him to resume the only path, the only way: brotherhood.

## IV. II. The wound

49. Francis does not forget that it all began with a kiss. The wounds of the lepers healed the wounds of his heart, and it was among them that he took the first steps in his vocation as a brother. Jesus too, the Master, became the disciple of a wounded woman, and learned from her the art of washing feet. This is how gratuity works: we learn to give without expecting a reward, to give for the sheer joy of giving, to give everything without reserve.

When the tensions and conflicts among his brothers increased and his own wounds were reopened, Francis remembered the history of that kiss, and found healing there once more.

50. The wounds in the body of Francis are the marks of Jesus, the signs of his identity: love making him equal to his Beloved. The meaning is clear: when you touch people and love them, you touch and love Jesus. And He touches and loves you. Everything makes sense again. Everything – even the fragility of the brothers – is seen as grace. In his own body, wounded now like the body of Jesus, Francis puts his finger on one certain truth: one cannot live without brothers. Without them, there is no God.

#### IV. III. Joy

51. We are all looking for happiness: it's an inborn tendency; without it, it's impossible to live. However, there are plenty of cut-price, lightweight offers of instant happiness around. This is happiness devalued, a false joy that ends in disillusionment, frustration and sadness.
- In the account of *Perfect Joy*, Francis opens his heart and offers us his life's wisdom: *perfect joy does not lie in success*. It takes time to understand how profound this thought really is, because our experience seems to say the opposite: that only when we are applauded, recognised, and satisfied is it natural to feel joyful.
52. How should a lesser brother act when he does not feel valued by the brothers, when they consider him dispensable, when he does not feel loved by them? Francis answers with a reply that comes from the depths of his own experience. Here is true joy: if your heart is not troubled; if you persevere in your vocation to go on being a brother to all, without claiming anything as your own (even what you think you deserve), then you will have defeated the shadows of sadness, for ever.
53. The origins and horizons of Franciscan joy are found in encountering Jesus. The Easter experience - the encounter with the Risen One - opens the doors of life to a Life open to all. It gives us the strength not to give up on the dream of a fraternity of brothers who go about the world offering a style of relationship that is inclusive and free and is a source of freedom. In a special way, our relationship with the poor focuses us on the Gospel and lets us see that, in truth, *what we are before God, that we are, and no more*. His unconditional, faithful love is the reason for our true joy.

#### IV. IV. The Testament

54. As the end of life approaches, the awareness that God is Goodness grows: *God is Good, all Good, supremely Good, totally Good*. Even the wounds and limitations of life are part of our condition as creatures, and they do not obscure the awareness that everything we have lived was a free gift. Only with such trust can death become a sister.
55. Just before he dies, Francis asks for the gospel account of the washing of the feet to be read to him (Jn 13), and only then does he entrust his last will to his brothers: love freely given, fidelity to Poverty and obedience to the Church. He claims nothing for his own. Filled with gratitude, he gives back all he has received. There is nothing left for Sister Death to snatch away from him, since, when she goes to meet him, she finds only his body, naked on the bare earth, with the Canticle on his lips. So dies Francis: naked and singing.
56. In the Testament, Francis hands on to us his memory and the most important elements of our identity. The first Capuchins tried to understand Saint Francis on the basis of that text. That was why they were called *the brothers of the Testament*. For us, the *Reform* constitutes one more element of our charism. Our fidelity consists in never growing tired of believing that the Gospel dream is possible. And in going back to the Portiuncula, together with Mary our Mother, Our Lady of the Angels, to the heart of our brotherhood, lest we ever forget that the meaning of our life is to sing as we walk. Brothers, let us begin.