

Mission in a Capuchin key: ideals and challenges

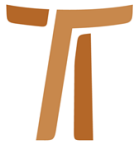
(Assisi, September 8, 2023, Br. Mariosvaldo Florentino,

general secretary for evangelization, collaboration and missionary animation)

Dear brothers, I would like to reflect with you on our apostolic-missionary life within the beautiful reality of the international fraternities of St. Lawrence. I do not pretend to present here a theoretical synthesis on this topic, but to offer some provocations on this reality in the light of what I have seen, heard and read about the current St. Lawrence fraternities, and also on the reflections that we are maturing in our service as general secretary for evangelization and mission. Therefore, what I am going to tell you is not the ultimate truth, but only insights to help us become aware, deepen our reflection, and perhaps in some aspect help us live our apostolic life more authentically.

The first idea I would like to dwell on is a phrase I have heard many times before, and which I believe all of us, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, have experienced or even assimilated: "pastoral care is our priority." This can be declined in so many ways and its consequences on our lives are equally many. This means that pastoral life is put before everything: in the face of an apostolic need, fraternal life is left in the background and prayer life is sacrificed. A friar who receives an invitation for a particular pastoral service feels obliged to accept it, unless he already has another pastoral commitment concomitantly. With this mentality, it is not possible to say "no" to a pastoral request just to preserve the fraternity's program, such as the local chapter, or the day of spirituality or some other fraternal celebration. The fraternity will have to adapt to times when no pastoral request exists. The same happens when what they request of us coincides with canonical hours or meditation: it becomes natural for the brother to routinely skip prayer, with the "valid" justification that "I have a pastoral commitment." Many times in the fraternities, because of this mentality, prayer is attended by very few friars or sometimes by none, because there are pastoral commitments.

It is also this mentality that moves fraternities to contract people to do the minor services, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, tending the garden... because then we can devote more to pastoral work. According to this logic, we should not waste our energies on doing these very simple things, which "any" person can do, when we can instead devote more to what is our specifics, such as confessing more, celebrating more masses, organizing more pastoral work. This



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logic, certainly has some truth, and is valid for other priests, however, it is not the logic of Francis of Assisi.

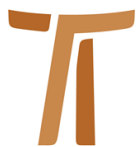
With this mentality, many friars think that "the mission (pastoral services) dispenses us from the charism" or that "there is a special status for those who have a certain pastoral service." Let us not think that this happens only in the missions ad gentes, because it is also very common in the parishes entrusted to us, and also in many friars who have the charge of a chaplaincy (barracks, hospital, schools, language groups...) or another service. For them, this assignment becomes the most important commitment, and as for the other things proper to our life "one will do what one can." However, what is most worrying is their conviction that this is right, that is, that they are living the Capuchin life well.

Also, connected to this, we find that over-activity becomes common in so many cases. Pastoral activism, generated at times by the meeting of so many needs with naïve generosity, and at other times by an inability to "be still," causes the friar to be absent from the fraternity almost all the time, and this, slowly leads him to fall into physical and emotional discomfort and sometimes leads to the loss of motivation.

This approach to our life that sees pastoral care as our center empties us of what we have best to serve the Church, that is, our charism. It makes us lose our meaningfulness, impoverishes our service and fades us.

Perhaps an answer to this situation we find in Chapter IX of our Constitutions, which speaks on "Our Apostolic Life," there is a strong insistence on the need to live our apostolate from our charism. Let us recover some of its expressions: 147.1 - "in apostolic activity we express the characteristic notes of our charism..."; 147.6 - "we willingly await any work of ministry and apostolic activity, as long as it suits our form of life... "; 148:2 - "with respect for our charism"; 148:3 - "respecting our Capuchin-Franciscan identity"; 149:7 - "behaving as true Friars Minor"; 154:3 - "so that by assuming this ministry we may preserve conformity to our vocation... where we can more easily give witness to minority and can lead a kind of life and work in fraternity. In this way God's people can appropriately participate in our charism."; and in the last issue of this chapter, 157.2 - "Let us also remember that we cannot fulfill our mission unless we are continually renewed in fidelity to our vocation." So, this insistence indicates that the Order feels the need to review our service to the Church and God's people by qualifying it with our charismatic richness.

On the other hand, we also find, and perhaps as a reaction to this "prioritization" of pastoral ministry, especially in recent times, friars who have no zeal for the apostolate; they prefer not to involve themselves in pastoral services, they do not make themselves available for demanding work, or they do only the minimum that is required, but without real zeal. They are "good"



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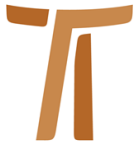
brothers, fraternal, prayerful but with little generosity to apostolic service. They want a quiet life. They need long free times to devote themselves to social networks, physical exercises, solitary recreation or with friends. They live with an exacerbated need to care for themselves. It only takes a small activity for them to feel exhausted, and they feel no empathy for the suffering, for the pastoral needs of the place where they are, or even pity for those who have so many commitments. At the pastoral level they need to be pushed or pulled all the time, and what they do is done without good will. For them, the dimension of service to God's people is not something important in our life.

To these brothers, too, our Constitutions forcefully remind them that we are an "apostolic fraternity" (146.3). In fact, Numbers 146:4 says - "Therefore our Fraternity, obeying the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation, fulfills in the Church the debt of service to all men, evangelizing them by work and word."

Our Capuchin fraternity cannot be self-sufficient, it cannot live in self-referentiality, it cannot consume itself only in its internal activities, that is, we need to spend a major part of our strength, energy, intelligence, creativity and resources in service to others. If this does not happen, fraternity suffocates. Our being brothers, minors and contemplatives, if they are (values) authentic, open us to the apostolate, make us listen to the need and respond, "Here we are, Lord, send us!" (Is 6:8).

International fraternities formed with friars from different cultures and formations must know how to deal with this issue in order to set up as best as possible the pastoral service that each is called to perform in the concrete reality in which it finds itself. There are also those among us who believe that pastoral care is the most important thing and struggle to fit into the pattern of our charismatic life: fraternal, minoritic and contemplative. But there may also be those who want to run away from service to God's people, who want a laid-back life, because they have a false idea and think that for FSL, pastoral care is not important.

In Francis of Assisi and his early fraternity, we find many signs of the importance of apostolic life. He understood that the radical following of Christ implied welcoming the sending to apostolic service, to preaching. In fact, the discernment of his vocation occurred in hearing the Gospel of the sending of the Apostles. The Pope's oral approval also took the form of a mandate: "Go with God, brothers, and as He deigns to inspire you, preach penance to all" (1Ce 33). And when in doubt whether or not he should devote himself completely to prayer, the Lord makes him understand that he should also continue preaching (LM XII:2). So, for St. Francis, living the evangelical life demands readiness for the apostolate, requires zeal for the salvation of all, and imposes being joyful in serving others. However, although the apostolic life is very important in the Franciscan charism it remains clear that for the poor man of Assisi it is a requirement of the evangelical life.



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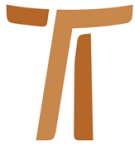
Indeed, in his very concrete way of understanding the evangelical life, it is an adaptation of what Jesus lived with the apostles. And synthetically we can say that for him, the evangelical life demands fraternity, minority and a serious dynamic of prayer that comes before any other activity. In Franciscanism, these three values are non-negotiable and it is on their basis that apostolic service is realized. Therefore, the international fraternities of St. Lawrence are called to be truly apostolic fraternities, sent by the Lord for pastoral service, but with an authentically Franciscan approach, according to the indications from our Constitutions and charismatic traditions. This, means in many cases a complete "pastoral conversion," or "a conversion of pastoral ministry," which demands study, reflections in fraternity and much prayer, in order to succeed in transforming the "diocesan" pastoral paradigm from which we are all indebted into a Capuchin pastoral ministry. It is not a matter of being better than others, but only of understanding, living and giving what we have of our own and thus enriching the service of the Church.

Certainly, this is a central issue for St. Lawrence fraternities to address. So many of the problems of non-adaptation of brothers in these fraternities have rightly been revealed on this point. The fraternities of St. Lawrence are called to live a meaningful pastoral service, therefore, they cannot be refuges for those brothers who do not appreciate service to the people of God, but neither can they be fraternities with somewhat tighter schedules but which in pastoral ministry reproduce the diocesan model.

Our Constitutions say in No. 147.2 - "The first apostolate of the friar minor is to live the gospel life in the world in truth, simplicity and joy." Our witness of life, that is, men of different ages, character, cultures, ideas and even nationalities deciding to love and serve one another with joy and humility, capable of dialogue and working together is our first evangelizing action, and it is also the prerequisite for all others. Understanding this and assuming it is fundamental. We do not need a friar who is great at preaching, or who knows how to organize pastoral ministry super well, or who is a real "tractor" in serving people, yet incapable of fraternity, or who believes that practicing the Gospel together is not important, or who does not want to be minor, or who does not give primacy to prayer. God and the Church are waiting for this "first apostolate" from us.

Let us try to say a few words about each of these basic charismatic values: fraternity, minority and prayer/contemplation, in its relation to apostolic service.

\* The apostolate in the key of fraternity - Our Constitutions in No. 147.3 insist that fraternal life in itself is already a peculiar participation in Christ's mission and qualifies apostolic effectiveness. So for us, it is not possible to untie the pastoral service we render from the fraternity in which we live. Indeed, even in the Ratio Formationis we find, "Living as brothers is the mirror of the values of the Kingdom, its most beautiful proclamation, the most authentic form of sharing the desire for



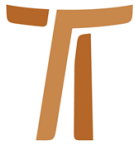
God." (RF 20). We are not a society of apostolic life, whose members live together only to facilitate the service that each one renders individually. We live together to put the Gospel into practice in our relationships. Relationships marked by love, selfless service, continuous dialogue and forgiveness, the ability to plan together, work collaboratively and evaluate jointly; all this in a continuous quest to improve service and conversion, therefore, marked by the effort to overcome the temptations of protagonism, self-sufficiency, competitions and jealousies, which are also common among us.

For this "first apostolate" to be realized, the number of friars is very important; the guidelines speak of 5 to 7 friars. Therefore, we must find ways to ensure that all FSLs reach this number, overcoming the so common idea that "for the pastoral needs of this place, 3 or 4 are enough, when not 2." This argument reveals a failure to understand what our primary apostolate is. The Constitutions say, "Let us live in the midst of the world as a gospel leaven, so that men, seeing our fraternal life conformed to the spirit of the beatitudes, may recognize that the Kingdom of God has already begun in their midst" (106:3).

Next, we must overcome the idea that in order to be more effective or to avoid clashes, all services should be distributed and each person carries out his or her assignment in total autonomy. "Let the various apostolic activities be promoted and coordinated as an expression of the whole fraternity," say the Constitutions (148:1). Furthermore, if it is possible, services that can be carried out not solitarily should be preferred, however, when this is not possible those who work alone should feel sent, accompanied and supported by the whole fraternity. There should not be among us, someone taking over a service and claiming "I am in charge here." We also need to overcome the logic that "we can do more if we are divided": for us, doing together is very important.

The same we have to say about parishes, even if there is an appointed pastor, in our case it is the fraternity that animates it. On this PCO VIII says: "The pastoral care of a parish is to be understood as entrusted to the whole fraternity. Whenever a parish is entrusted to us, the pastor should not take possession of it, but work in collaboration with the fraternity." This means that the pastor cannot do what he wants without the fraternity's participation, but also that the fraternity should wash its hands and leave him alone in carrying out this service.

\* apostolate in the key of minority - As we know, minority qualifies the fraternity and purifies relationships because it "shapes our ways of desiring, unmasking the temptation to be and to do great things" (RF 67). So, if we take minority as a true value, our pastoral work will also have a Minorite imprint. Our Constitutions say, "Remembering that the world listens more to witnesses than to teachers, let us live close to the people in simplicity of heart, behaving as true Friars Minor in our style of life and manner of speaking" (149:7).



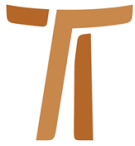
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Minority lived in service to God's people must be vividly sought with a determined intentionality. The people formed in a "clericalist" mentality tend to put us above them, even if we are lay brothers. It must be us, convinced that we want to be lesser, not to lie down where they put us and get down. This is done in the small things: doing the simplest things as they do, not accepting their arguments, "let us do this, you have more important things to do." Not by accepting that they call us with titles that put us above, for example: fathers, reverends... because by the way we allow ourselves to be called, it establishes the relationship. The Constitutions say, "According to the Rule, the Testament and the primitive custom of the Capuchins, let us all, without distinction, call each other brothers" (90:1). These two details, though very small, that is, not accepting to be served as masters nor to be called with a title that indicates superiority, generate a completely different relationship in pastoral care and in accordance with our vocation. On this, I still think it important to insist on a minoritic way of being a priest or even of being a pastor. Priestly ordination in our case does not dispense us from being minor, the same the appointment as pastor or other function in pastoral care. "Minority demands that we do not seek for ourselves forms of prestige, power, social, political or ecclesiastical domination; rather we choose to be servants and subjects of every human creature" (62:4), our Constitutions say.

Again in this paragraph on our pastoral ministry to the minors, I would like to emphasize our necessary relationship with the poor. We need lepers, the poor, those who suffer, primarily not to serve them but to be helped by them. The Ratio Formationis insists three times that "the poor are our teachers" (RF 111; 174; Annex 2:19). So, before we are the ones who help them, we must relate to them so that they help us to be what we want to be. We must reverse our conception: they are not only the recipients of our mercy; on the contrary, they are primarily agents of our transformation. It is only after we have received and assimilated the contribution that the poor give us that we become capable of having genuine, respectful and working compassion for those who suffer. Like Francis, we need the "lepers" to heal us. All our FSL must be marked by great sensitivity to those who suffer. It is not good for us to be distant from them or completely sheltered. And it is not enough to have a social work in which a member of the fraternity collaborates, or that we are the directors: we all need to be in contact with them personally. It is not normal for us to be in the world, seeking only a comfortable life, surrounded only by well-groomed people; we need direct contact with the poor.

\* the apostolate in a prayerful/contemplative key - In our pastoral life, we are invited to share with other faithful this richness of our charism, as required by our Constitutions, "Therefore, let us zealously strive to learn the art of prayer and to pass it on to others" (55:6). We must therefore be teachers of prayer in our service to God's people, introducing them not only to traditional prayers but also to contemplation. The Constitutions insist on this pastoral service: "education in prayer



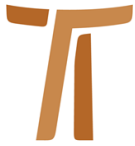
and the experience of God by a simple method will qualify our apostolic action. It will be of great benefit to work to ensure that our fraternities are authentic schools of prayer" (55:7).

That the people know that we are men of prayer, that there are times that we are not available because we stand before the Lord is in itself evangelization, however, this must be complemented with the possibility that they can participate in our prayers. It is important for every FSL to find ways to become a school of prayer.

Moreover, prayer is the engine of the apostolate. If we want to carry out authentic pastoral service we need to pray intensively. On this Brother John Corriveau in one of his letters on prayer recalled Mother Teresa: "Two Capuchin friars met Mother Teresa of Calcutta one day at breakfast. During the conversation she said to them, 'If you want to work more, spend more time before the Blessed Sacrament.' Thinking about the stress caused by excessive apostolate, one of the friars exclaimed, "And who needs to work more?"; Mother Teresa replied, "The world needs your work."" (Letter The Prayer Life of the Friars, 2001). Also in the Letter Let us Revive the Flame of our Charism, Br. Mauro Jöhri states, "From a half-hearted prayer life can only come a half-hearted, fragile service, pulling back at the first obstacle encountered along the way" (16). So, an intense prayer life, canonical hours, meditation and fraternal Mass, do not steal time from pastoral ministry, but on the contrary are necessary for the apostolate to be an authentic service, they are the best way to sustain its fidelity.

In conclusion, I want to insist on what I believe is very important for the FSL: without a doubt, the ultimate ideal is the following of Christ from his Gospel, but to this all Christians are called. Our following of Christ becomes specific when we do it in the manner of Francis of Assisi, and it becomes even more particular when we take it on in the manner of the Capuchins. Understanding this specificity, like our charismatic richness, is what can help us to be more authentic and with a valuable and unique contribution to the Church. It certainly does not mean that we are better or worse than others, but that we have something that is ours. And we must insist on this: we want to continue to be meaningful.

If this is true for all aspects of following (relationships, poverty, prayer, compassion...) as the Ratio makes clear, it is also true for pastoral ministry. We must "proclaim the Gospel with the strength of our charism" (RF Proem). Our apostolate must be marked by our being Capuchins, that is, if our pastoral ministry is lived in the same way as any other in the Church (like a diocesan priest, or a consecrated lay person, or a member of any other congregation) something is not working, even if we are doing a lot. God and the Church hope that our evangelization will be marked and enriched by the charism that the Lord has entrusted to us and whose guardian the Church is. It is therefore



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essential "to discover in our charismatic mission a way to collaborate in building a more evangelical and fraternal world" (RF 264).