

CIRCULAR LETTER 10

Dear sisters and brothers,

**“The Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for
all they had heard and seen.”**

(Luke 2:20)

1.1 G.K. Chesterton once wrote: “If I had only one sermon to preach it would be a sermon against pride”. This statement comes as no surprise from one who admired and loved Francis of Assisi. Francis had correctly identified pride as the cancerous growth that spoiled the innocence of humanity. From the humility of the Incarnation he learned that pride is destroyed by the sermon-in-action which we Franciscans have come to know as “minority”. It was what the shepherds saw in the manger of Bethlehem. They were so taken up by what they had “*heard and seen*” that they returned to the care of the lambs “*glorifying and praising God*”.

ood News for the Poor

2.1 At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus indicated that he had been sent “*to bring good news to the poor*” (Luke 4:18). Jesus had already embraced the “ministry of minority” in the manger of Bethlehem, where he was manifested to the shepherds and to the world as “**the lesser brother**”. St. Paul contemplates this wonder of wonders in the famous hymn he shares with us: “*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*” (Phil. 2:6-7).

2.2 Later in the gospels, the poor and little ones are named first citizens of his reign. One day Jesus was invited for dinner at the home of one of the leading pharisees. Those in attendance were “the important people” – leaders of religion, government and commerce. Jesus was an outsider. He was not an honored guest, but a curiosity, a conversation piece! He chose this setting to tell a parable of the great dinner which ends by saying: “*none of those who were invited will taste my dinner*” (Luke 14:24). Why? The rich and powerful of this world, – *those who matter* – are too busy with worlds of their own making to accept the invitation of Jesus. They are not excluded by Jesus! They, too, are invited, but they are too preoccupied with other business. Jesus **wants** to share his world with them, but they turn down the offer. The only ones who will share the new life are “*the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame*” (Luke 14:21), the little ones of this world who have the time and the need for God.

2.3 In John’s gospel, Jesus described this gathering of the lesser ones as a brotherhood of love: “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*” (John 13:34). Furthermore, Jesus indicates clearly to his apostles and disciples that such a fraternity of love is built by the ministry of minority. The follower of Jesus is forbidden to seek places and titles of honor. Rather,

“the greatest among you will be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). In John’s gospel, the washing of feet is the event which constitutes the Eucharistic community: *“So if I, your Lord and Teacher; have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you”* (John 13:14-15).

The Humility of Jesus Heals our Pride

3.1 Francis was so completely overwhelmed by the humility of Jesus revealed in his incarnation that he could scarcely find adjectives to describe it (see the First Version of the Letter to the Faithful 13). He quickly took to heart its evangelical message and set about establishing that “fraternity of the lesser ones” which Jesus named as possessor of the secret of the kingdom of God: “I want this fraternity to be called the Order of Friars Minor”. Celano describes what it signified: “And indeed they were *‘lesser brothers’* who *‘being subject to all’*, always sought a place that was lowly and sought to perform a duty that seemed in some way to be burdensome to them so that they might merit to be founded solidly in true humility ... And like living stones, gathered from all parts of the world, were erected in to a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit” (1 Celano 38).

Minority described the relationship between the brothers and the relations of the brothers with their neighbors. This is clear from the writings of Francis himself:

“And no one should be called Prior, but all generally should be called Friars Minor. And the *one should wash the feet of the others*” (The Earlier Rule, VI, 3; see also Admonition 4).

“And they must rejoice when they live among people (who are considered to be) of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” (The Earlier Rule IX, 2).

“None of the brothers should be administrators or managers ..., nor should they be supervisors in the houses in which they serve ... instead, they should be the lesser ones and subjects to all who are in the same house” (The Earlier Rule VII, 1).

“... all the brothers in this regard should not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves” (The Earlier Rule, V, 9).

3.2 Francis clearly grasped the healing power of humility by studying the humility of God in the Incarnation. Later he would describe “Sister Water” as “useful, **humble**, precious and chaste”. Ordinary, everyday water, taken for granted by most, yet essential to our lives, facilitates many transformations yet remains unchanged in its own being. Water that always seeks the lowest place. Humility makes us capable of love and service. The handicapped author of the best seller Under the Eye of the Clock, described his feelings when a friend of the family tried to help him find a school that would meet his special needs. He called for a typewriter and signaled his gratitude by writing the words: “You are very humble to care about me”. These words express the sentiments of Franciscan the presence of a humble God who cares for each one of his creatures, cares enough to become one of us, even to die for us.

3.3 The manger of Greccio reveals to us the evangelical power of Franciscan minority. After describing the Eucharistic celebration and the preaching of Francis, Celano tells us that a “virtuous man” saw a child in the manger wake from sleep at the touch of Francis. Then Celano takes us to the heart of the Greccio event: “This vision was not unfitting, for the child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant St. Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory” (1 Celano 86).

This event takes on greater significance when we remember that Celano also points out that “the brothers were called from their various places” (1 Celano 85). The minority of Francis and his fraternity of lesser brothers gave the same reality to the manger of Greccio as the shepherds experienced in the manger of Bethlehem. Faith was reborn: “At length the solemn night celebration was brought to a close, and each one returned to his home with holy joy (1 Celano 86).

Putting up the Crib

4.1 As we approach the Feast of Our Lord’s Birth, brothers in all of our friaries throughout the world will begin setting up the Crib which is so characteristic of this season. The crib – no matter how ornate – remains a lifeless piece of art unless enlivened by that fraternity of lesser brothers which gave life to the manger of Greccio. These closing days of Advent give us time to create an *authentic* setting for the Christmas crib, namely, that brotherhood of grace which is characterized by true *minority*. The presence of the crib in our churches and fraternities is a real catechesis only when it is supported by the witness of lesser brothers. The ceremony of placing the infant solemnly in the manger at Midnight Mass can become a moment of revelation and invitation for those whose hearts are hungry for peace and joy.

4.2 In our personal meditation as well as in our conversations with one another, we can attempt to give concrete expression in our personal and communal lives to the prescription in the First Rule of St. Francis: “... all the brothers fit this regard should not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves” (The Earlier Rule, V, 9). Our *Constitutions* 84:3-6 give precision to this minority between brothers:

- “let all of us be called brothers without distinction” (84.3).
- “the precedence necessary for the service of the fraternity flows from the responsibilities and roles actually exercised” (84.4).
- “all offices and responsibilities are to be available to all brothers, although paying attention to those which require sacred orders” (84.5).
- “everyone should help another according to the gifts he has received, evening daily household chores” (84.6).

4.3 Advent is also a time to consider the heart of Franciscan obedience: a common search for the will of God in submission to the Holy Spirit, the “General Minister” of our Order. Our *Constitutions* tell us:

“By virtue of our commitment to live in obedience, without regard to distinction of office, let us strive for the last place in the community of Christ’s disciples, serving one another in a spirit of charity and remaining subject to every human creature for God’s sake. This is true obedience, as manifested in the life of Jesus Christ in the form of a servant. Docile to the Holy Spirit (and) in a fraternal sharing of life, let us search for and fulfil God’s will in every even and action (155: 1-3).

This common search calls us to empty ourselves of the false gods of individualism and self-importance. Francis models for us an obedience that is *true and loving*, an obedience which presupposes the fraternity of the brothers and finds its identity in and through this fraternity. Obedience is equivalent to faith; and faith is having listening ear. Faithful listening, obedient listening; this is *true minority*, the gospel in action.

4.4 The Lucan account of the birth of Jesus says: “*There was no place **for them** in the inn*” (Lk. 2:7).

There was room for others, but not “**for them**”. Yet, by excluding the poor carpenter and his pregnant wife from Nazareth, the innkeepers cut themselves off from the revelation of the glory of God. Bethlehem tells us that every new revelation of God’s presence in human form begins with the brotherhood of the weak and the powerless of this world: in the holy partnership of Mary and Joseph, in the community of the humble shepherds. The Christmas crib asks us to make room “**for them**” – the poor and excluded. In our local chapters, in meetings with our pastoral collaborators, in conjunction with parish committees we can ask how the Crib can lead us to give priority to the forgotten and the excluded: ***It is there you will find Him.***

4.5 As in the days of Greccio, the true meaning of the birth of Jesus “has been forgotten and lost to many”. May the experience of the Crib, erected in the midst of fraternities of lesser brothers – lead many back to the source of salvation – Jesus.

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Christmas, 1996