

CIRCULAR LETTER 11

EVANGELICAL BROTHERHOOD

Dear brothers:

May the Lord give you peace!

The *Congress on the Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Fraternal Charism*, held in Rome during the month of September 1996, was a historic moment in the life of our Order. It was the first congress of the entire Order in which the majority of participants were lay members of our Order. The congress requested that the general definitory address a letter to the Order regarding our essential charism: the invitation of the holy gospel and the Rule of St. Francis that we create in the world an evangelical brotherhood.

The effort to reclaim fraternal evangelical life has been at the heart of the Order's response to the Second Vatican Council's challenge to all religious to reclaim their original, foundational charism. Older brothers in widely diverse provinces bear witness to a more profound sensibility to brotherhood which they find within their fraternities. Five plenary councils have been dedicated to the redefinition of the evangelical content of our fraternal life. It is within this context that, in the name of the general definitory, I address this letter to you regarding our **fraternal evangelical life**.

1. The appeal of the Pope

1.1 Pope John Paul II recognized this important development within our international fraternity in a letter dated 18 September 1996 in which he makes an exceptionally important declaration regarding the nature and mission of our Order within the church:

"This Religious Order constitutes a fraternity, made up of clerics and lay people who share the same religious vocation according to the Capuchin and Franciscan charism, described in its essential characteristics in its own legislation approved by the Church [see *Constitutions*, 4]" (Letter of Pope John Paul II addressed to John Corriveau, General Minister of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, 18 September 1996, *Analecta OFM Cap* [1996] 565-566).

The content and importance of this statement is enhanced by the fact that the Holy Father himself puts it in the context of the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Consecrated Life [Vita Consecrata]*.

1.2 The Exhortation declares that "the consecrated life by its nature is neither lay nor clerical" (60). The document goes on to define three different types of institutes of consecrated life:

Lay institutes ... "have a character and purpose which do not entail the exercise of Holy Orders" (60).

Clerical institutes ... "presuppose the exercise of Holy Orders, ... the sacred ministry is constitutive of the charism itself and determines its nature, purpose and spirit" (60).

Mixed institutes ... "were envisioned as a brotherhood in which all members, priests and those who were not priests, were considered equal among themselves" (61).

The Exhortation clearly indicates that fraternal life is common to all institutes of consecrated life (see 42; see also *Fraternal Life in Community [Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor]*, 59b). It is precisely the purpose of fraternity which sets mixed institutes apart from clerical or lay institutes. In the latter, fraternity has as its primary purpose the material, human, and spiritual support of the ministers. The essential purpose of the institute exists elsewhere, for example, in the sacred ministry which gives the institute its "nature, purpose and spirit." A mixed institute exists for the purpose of brotherhood which defines the character and spirit of its presence and ministry in the world.

1.3 By citing article 4 of our Constitutions, the Pope's letter of 18 September 1996 gives the clearest possible indication of the purpose of this brotherhood we are vowed to live. The essential elements of our charism, described in this article, have been the subject of much reflection over the past decade. Today we describe the essential elements of such a fraternity:

A fraternity of lesser brothers — servants to the world;

A contemplative fraternity;

A poor and austere fraternity;

A fraternity inserted among the poor;

A fraternity dedicated to justice, peace, and respect for nature;

A fraternity filled with human warmth.

In summary: an *evangelical* fraternity.

This reflection has produced more than a documentary response! A passion for our fraternal evangelical charism has given birth to at least 15 new missionary endeavors over the past 20 years. The strength of this charism has resulted in a spontaneous rebirth of several Eastern European provinces following 50 years of persecution and suppression. The desire to preserve vital witness has given many older provinces in northern lands the courage to restructure their fraternities despite a lack of optimism regarding vocational prospects.

1.4 "After the Lord gave me brothers ..." was a clear watershed in the life of Francis. From that time on, he always saw the call to be brother as his primary response to the holy gospel. In the end, he felt a loving relationship with everyone and everything. Every single creature was his

brother or sister, every stone and stream, his home. He spoke of "brother" Sun, "sister" Moon, "brother" Wind, and "mother" Earth. Through grace, Francis arrived at the point where there was no violence or division within him, nothing to divide him from his neighbor or creation. Celano says that Francis, purified through such an intense living of brotherhood, returned to original innocence (see Sr. Frances Teresa, OSC, Living the Incarnation). This quality of brotherhood encountered in Francis and his early fraternity opened human hearts to the message of the holy gospel. Brotherhood was his chosen tool of evangelization. The letter of 18 September 1996 is a very clear mandate of the church to embrace this fraternal evangelical project of St. Francis.

2. Evangelical Fraternity Defines our Capuchin Vocation

2.1 "Evangelical witness" is not a new ideology; it is a new conversion! One provincial minister touched upon a reality of our life in a pastoral letter to his brothers in which he stated:

"We are not praying together more, but less. We are not together at meals more frequently, but less. We are more and more protecting our own lifestyle, our own preferences, our own needs ... What we have promised to be is gospel brothers and that is the common ground that must be recovered. ... The gospels, Constitutions and Rule are our common ground."

We cannot speak about being a "gospel people" unless each individual brother makes the resolve to be a "gospel person." "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*" (Phil 2:5). This is the common ground to which Capuchin tradition calls us by means of a serious dedication to reflection upon the Word of God, meditation, the prayer of the church, the eucharist, reconciliation.

2.2 That a *fraternity* seriously read the signs of the times and recognize the stirrings of the Spirit of God among the people, it is not sufficient that the brothers individually read about great world and national events. The creation of a *fraternity* inserted among the poor requires more than a change of location or change in the physical structure of the friary. It demands a mental and spiritual journey on the part of the brothers. To effectively work for reconciliation and the reign of justice likewise demands that a fraternity engage in serious reflection in the light of the gospel. "*Wisdom ... is found by those who seek her ... she will be found sitting at the gate*" (Wis 6:12, 14). Francis did not find the key to peace and justice in far-off Rome or at the court of the Holy Roman Empire. He began his quest in his own locality at the entrance of Santa Maria degli Angeli, and together with his own brothers. In the same way, a serious effort to give evangelical witness demands of us an effective use of the local chapter. The local chapter must animate our fraternities to give more transparent witness to the gospel values which form the foundation of our way of life.

2.3 A fraternity of evangelical witness does not happen by accident, simply by putting brothers in the same house. It requires attention and animation. The role of the guardian as animator of the local fraternity is indispensable. The guardians of our Order must be empowered by their provincial ministers and by their own fraternities to be spiritual leaders. Guardians themselves must accept the spiritual animation of their fraternities as their first and most important responsibility (see *Constitutions*, 23:6; see also *Fraternal Life in Community*, 50). The Iberian Capuchin Conference (CIC) has created a much needed structure of support. Every other year

the conference convokes a week-long workshop for all the guardians of the conference. This has proved to be a most useful instrument for assisting guardians in their important role.

2.4 St. Francis wanted *minority* to be the special evangelical quality of his fraternity. In his *Earlier Rule*, Francis described how minority must permeate relationships among the brothers themselves: "... all the brothers ... should not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves" (RNB V, 9; FF 19). Our Constitutions (84:3-6) give concrete expression to aspects of this minority.

"By reason of the *same vocation* the brothers are equal" (84.3). Brotherhood in discipleship is the call which makes us Capuchin Franciscans. With Francis, we have heard and responded to the invitation of Jesus: "*Follow me!*"

"For this reason, according to the Rule, Testament and the earliest custom of the Capuchins, let all of us be called brothers, without distinction" (84.3). Even our manner of addressing one another gives emphasis to our common call to brotherhood in discipleship. It is our way of proclaiming:

"There is ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4-6).

"The precedence necessary for the service of the fraternity flows from *responsibilities and roles actually exercised*" (84.4). Differing ministries and services demand recognition, whether it be the priesthood or the service of ministry to the fraternity. However, this precedence is given for the "responsibilities and roles *actually exercised*." Even brother-bishops can be reintegrated fully into our fraternities when their service to their dioceses end. While "all offices and responsibilities are to available to all brothers," respect and precedence is given to ordained ministers regarding "*those [acts] which require sacred orders*" (84.5).

'Everyone should help one another according to the gifts he has received, even in daily household chores" (84.6). Gifts are given by the Holy Spirit not for our personal prestige, but for the service of our brotherhood and for the world. St. Francis himself refers us to Chapter 13 of John's gospel in which Jesus defines the nature of true Christian service: "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 [see Jn 13:14]*" (RNB VI, 3-4; FF 23).

Minority makes it possible for persons with differing gifts and widely diverse responsibilities within the church and society to live as equals united in true brotherhood.

3. Evangelical Fraternity Defines our Presence in the World

3.1 St. Francis understood that the church was born as a community. This filled Francis with the conviction that the gospel would continue to grow in the world through the medium of fraternity. Therefore, he sent his brothers out two by two to proclaim penance and peace (see 1 Cel 29; FF 366; see also 1 Cel 30; FF 368; see also Mk 6:7 and Lk 10:1).

3.2 Francis perceived himself as brother and this fact determined his mode of ministering, of proclaiming the holy gospel. All too often this perception is reversed among us. Too many

brothers find their identity in their ministry, and fraternal life is totally predicated on this ministerial identity: ministry determines participation in common prayer or common meals; ministry justifies the autonomous administration of monies; ministry renders some brothers totally immobile, clinging to the same house (not fraternity!) for years on end (see CPO V, 18). In some cases, the protection of individual ministries has led to an attempt to redefine fraternal life as such. Brothers live in their isolated ministries coming together once or twice a week for prayer and to share a meal (see *Fraternal Life in Community*, 65c), their coordinator being called "guardian." Such "regional fraternities" cannot replace the witness of the local fraternity.

The challenge to create fraternities of evangelical witness entails revisioning ministry as the service of our *fraternity* to the church and the world. This suggests that collaborative ministries should take precedence over individual expressions. The variety of gifts, both of nature and of grace, should work together for the common good.

3.3 An excellent historical study presented to the recent Congress on *the Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Fraternal Charism* suggests that the clericalization of the Order came about when the gifts of our lay brothers were limited to the service of the fraternity as such. Cut off from ministerial contact with people, they were also forbidden to seek education. The outcome was the clericalization of our Order wherein the Order came to define its purpose more and more in terms of its clerical ministries. This also deprived our evangelical outreach of the charisms and gifts of a large and essential part of the brotherhood. The signs of the times suggest that this process must be reversed, not by minimizing the clerical ministries among us, but by encouraging the emergence of all of the ministerial gifts of our lay brothers:

- The documents of the church since Vatican II consistently assign a significant role to the laity in the proclamation of the gospel to the world (see *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People [Christifideles Laici]*, 33);

- social and cultural transformations have shaped a new reality which causes all of us to regard each other with new eyes, and to discover in each other all the gifts of nature and grace.

3.4 "I wish that this fraternity to be called the Order of lesser brothers!" (see 1 Cel 38; FF 386). It was precisely the quality of minority which made the early Franciscan fraternity such a potent gospel force within the world. Our world, obsessed by individualism, also has need of the witness of evangelical minority. The individualism of our society has come to identify abortion with the liberation of women, and suicide as the ultimate right of the sick! Minority is also a prophetic witness for reconciliation and peace in a world torn apart by the desire for power, "ethnic hatred or senseless violence" (*The Consecrated Life*, 51).

4. Evangelical Fraternity is Incarnated in the Local Fraternity

4.1 If brotherhood is to define the character and spirit of our Capuchin Franciscan presence in the world, it is necessary in all parts of the Order that we give new life and vitality to the local fraternity. The various coetus groups at the General Chapter of 1994 were practically unanimous in the judgment that the local fraternities of the Order have been seriously weakened. In order to strengthen them, it is useful to reflect upon the historical realities which have contributed to this weakness.

4.2 In America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, the Order was originally established because of its ministerial outreach. We were sent to establish the structures of the local churches. In such circumstances fraternity existed to support and sustain those ministries. Much effort has been made to give greater witness to our fraternal charism. However, local fraternities are still generally quite weak, consisting of the minimum number of two or three brothers. When fraternity is generally reduced to such numbers, the Order cannot give vibrant witness to its fraternal charism. Every effort must be made to create more substantial fraternities of at least four or five brothers, a number which renders quality fraternal life possible.

4.3 The quality of the life of the local fraternity has been seriously weakened in older areas of the Order where the decrease in the number of brothers has caused provinces to cling to many friaries even when there are no real fraternities to fill them. In other cases a local fraternity of six or eight brothers exists, but it is housed in a friary built for seven or eight times that number. One has to ask the question whether our evangelical and fraternal witness would not be enhanced were we to have the courage to acquire residences more adequate for our real needs and relinquish the former structures for suitable ecclesial or social purposes.

4.4 In all of the older provinces of our Order, the vocational situation has now persisted for a considerable number of years. It is abundantly evident that in the foreseeable future there will not be the number of friars necessary to create a vital fraternal presence in all our existing friaries. We cannot permit ourselves to be paralyzed by nostalgia nor rendered inert by fears of a statistical future! The vocational reality is a sign of the times which summons us to give priority to fraternity over friary structures. We must create a renewed and vital fraternal presence and open up the possibility of new initiatives within the territory of our provinces. "*Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the reign of God*" (Lk 9:60).

5. Evangelical Fraternity: the Most Important Purpose of Formation

5.1 Our Constitutions very justly point out that formation is concerned not only with the growth of the individual brother, but with the development of a *fraternity* of gospel witness:

"Formation is the development of the *brothers* and *fraternities* in such a way that our life may daily become more closely conformable to the holy gospel and to the Franciscan spirit ..." (22.1).

Since the Order seeks to be an evangelical fraternity, *gospel conversion* is at the very heart of the formative process.

5.2 Therefore, all levels of initial formation (i.e., postulancy, novitiate, and postnovitiate) should clearly pass on the values of our life described in paragraph 1.3 of this letter. Each level of initial formation should articulate a catechesis for each of these evangelical priorities. The major catechetical tools of such formation are *instruction*, *experience*, and *shared reflection*. The definitory suggests that, in keeping with the concerns already expressed in Circular Letter no. 9, dated 2 February 1996, the brothers responsible for initial formation should reflect on the concrete catechesis whereby each of the values listed in paragraph 1.3 are imparted.

5.3 The new evangelization demands that the gifts of all the members of the church, particularly the laity, be placed at the service of the gospel. Generally speaking, each province has a well-articulated plan for the ministerial formation and training of its cleric brothers. The recent congress made it clear that the Order must dedicate the same attention and care to the education and ministerial training of our lay brothers.

5.4 This pastoral letter is the fruit of the reflection of the general definitory upon the gospel challenge to our Order contained in the Pope's letter of 18 September 1996 and by the recent *Congress on the Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Vocation*. Our Order will experience the conversion which the Pope's letter and the congress demand only if this reflection continues in each of our provinces and circumscriptions. We invite the provincial ministers to reflect upon the subject and content of this letter in their own pastoral letters, provincial gatherings and assemblies. We invite the guardians of the Order to read this letter together with the brothers of their fraternities and to make its contents the subject of reflection in their local chapters.

Conclusion

"This Religious Order constitutes a **fraternity** ..." This very important declaration of the Pope, coming at the end of a historic congress of our Order, gives renewed impetus to the reappropriation of the fraternal evangelical charism of St. Francis of Assisi which for almost 800 years has brought gospel vitality to the church and to the world.

Fraternally,

Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, 2 February 1997

Br. John Corriveau
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