

CIRCULAR LETTER 12

ON COMPASSION

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Let us look on the One whom we have pierced ...
and be filled with a spirit of compassion”

(see JN 19:37 and ZECH 12:10)

1.1 *“If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard”* (PROV 21:13). Our brother, Saint Francis, is unmistakably one who heard *“the cry of the poor”*. That same cry has been heard by countless Capuchin brothers ever since Br. Matteo di Bascio answered a call which led to the formation of the Capuchin fraternity. The Fifth Plenary Council described hearing the cry of the poor and responding with actions which lead to justice and the transformation of the world as “an integral part of our Franciscan vocation,” a defining characteristic of our Franciscan spirituality and of the brotherhood of evangelical witness which our Order must live in this world (V PCO 86).

A Vision Rooted in Prayer and Contemplation

Francis’ experience of God

2.1.1 The life, vision, and activity of Francis were formed by his personal experience of God. The total giving of self to God in faith at the beginning of his life led to the complete surrender of self to love of God and neighbour at the end of his life. *“Having laid aside everything which pertains to this world, we see a Francis completely taken up with divine righteousness”* (1 CEL 15). Integral to Francis’ experience of God was his experience of the Crucified One. At San Damiano, Francis approached the image of the Crucified as had Moses the burning bush: *“He fell down in devout and humble supplication”* (2 CEL 10). In silent adoration Francis discovered the true dimensions of his life: *“Touched by grace, Francis found himself other than he had been when he entered.”* Celano goes on to stress: *“From then on compassion for the Crucified was rooted in his very soul”* (2 CEL 10).

2.1.2 The Franciscan sources are filled with expressions such as: *“Led by the Spirit”* (2 CEL 10), *“The Lord granted,” “The Lord gave me,” “The Lord revealed to me”* (see TESTAMENT). Francis was identified with Jesus, not so much because he imitated the life and actions of Jesus “on the outside,” but because he was filled with the same Spirit which, the gospels tell us, filled Jesus: *“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness”* (MK 1:12). *“Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee”* (LK 4:14). Like Jesus, Francis, too, was a person led and even “driven” by the Spirit.

A world seen through the eyes of God

2.2.1 Francis’ personal experience of God changed his perception of the world. Jesus, pierced and hanging on the cross, became for him the lens which gave him insight into a

new way of relating to the world. Jesus crucified was now the focus, the center of all creation, including the human family.

2.2.2 A poor person was no longer simply a fellow human being in need, but a sacrament of Christ's presence. *"Let us see the One whom we have pierced ..."* Francis was overwhelmed by the largess of God who conferred on human beings the dignity of being sisters and brothers of Christ, God's own adopted children. For this reason Francis exhorted the friars never to look down on people (LATER RULE II, 17). Manselli points out that to be authentic, every friar had to cultivate a "total commitment to human brotherhood in Christ." This was the new and revolutionary value contained in Francis' gospel vision and message. Francis, relying directly on his personal experience of Jesus, gave a privileged place in this embrace of brotherhood to the poor and marginalized. In the gospels, the poor and the marginalized are the privileged companions of the person of Jesus, the first recipients of the good news (see LK 4:12-18).

2.2.3 "Brotherhood" was an eye-opening experience for Francis, transforming his vision of the world. Because fraternity embraced all creation, Francis was caught up in what might be called the "cosmic fraternity." Celano described how Francis, gazing in wonder upon the humblest realities – light, water, fire, wind, earth, trees, animals, flowers – was able to discern the hidden realities of nature. Not content with praising God for creatures, Francis fraternized with them, speaking to God's creatures *"with great inner and exterior joy, as if they had been endowed by God with feeling, intelligence and speech"* (LEGEND OF PERUGIA 49). All creatures form a single family before the face of God. This was a fresh and new intuition of Francis.

Francis' Mission of Peace

3.1 *"God, to whom we were reconciled through Christ ... has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation"* (2 COR 5:18). Francis' vision Of God and the world impelled him to become an apostle of peace and reconciliation. The service of peace was so fundamental a characteristic of the Order that Celano described the vocation of Bernard as taking up the mission of peace (see 1 CEL 24). Peace was a crusade which Francis believed was revealed to him personally by God: *"The Lord revealed a greeting to me ... 'May the Lord give you peace' "* (TESTAMENT 23). Francis even used this characteristic greeting when he addressed a great flock of birds gathered in a field near Bevagna (see 1 CEL 58). After reminding the brothers: *"You talk about peace, all the more so must you have it in your heart,"* he insisted: *"We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost the way"* (LEGEND OF THE THREE COMPANIONS 58).

Our Mission of Peace

4.1 The Fifth Plenary Council spelled out this mission today:

"Francis passed on to us a special charism for peace, justice and respect for nature. The point of view of the poor is the privileged position from which we, his sons, consider and proclaim these values. Reconciliation and respect for creation are the means Francis gives us in order to reach true peace and harmony. This forms an integral part of our Franciscan vocation" (V PCO 86)

4.2 This “mission of peace,” by its very nature, includes justice. In fact, peace without justice cannot be authentic peace. The social doctrine of the church has been articulated in hundreds of ecclesiastical documents leaving no doubt that a conscious awareness of the demands of justice in our world, as well as a conscientious response, is an essential test of Christian faith and spirituality. Our Franciscan heritage roots our work for justice in images and in the language of peace and reconciliation, and this greatly influences and determines our characteristic contribution. What are the special characteristics of our “mission of peace”?

A. Adopting the Viewpoint of the Poor

4.3.1 “*The Lord himself led me among them [i.e., lepers] and [felt deep compassion for them]*” (TESTAMENT 2). Compassion has been described as a spiritual consciousness of the personal tragedy of another and a selfless tenderness directed toward it. For Francis, there was no distinction between the “selfless tenderness” he experienced before the cross of San Damiano and the “selfless tenderness” he experienced in the embrace of the leper. It is noteworthy, in fact, that in his *Testament* he mentions only the latter! St. Thomas Aquinas observed that greed “makes a person incapable of compassion” (IIA, IIAE, Q.118, ART.8). Greed kills our capacity to feel compassion! The person who is filled with greed is unmoved by the misery of another. By becoming poor, Francis emptied himself so that his heart could be free for and full of compassion. The Fifth Plenary Council directed that the point of view of the poor be “the privileged position” from which we proclaim the values of justice, peace and respect for nature. Such a view point is nourished in a brotherhood inspired by poverty and filled with compassion for the crucified, “*the One whom we have pierced.*”

4.3.2 This “selfless tenderness” has led friars into innumerable works among the poor. Each of these works was founded on an experience of genuine compassion: a brother or group of brothers became aware of some “personal tragedy” experienced by another or others, and began serving those needs with their own hands. As ministries become institutionalized, there is always a tendency for the brothers to be taken up with the administrative aspects of the work, and direct service to the poor often becomes the duty of paid employees. In the ongoing renewal of these precious ministries, provinces must recapture the attitude of Francis who at the end of his life “*hoped always to start over again, wishing to go back to serving lepers*” (1 CEL 103). Perhaps it could be a part of the pastoral plan of each province that there be at least one provincial ministry in which the brothers serve the poor with their own hands. Since Francis’ identification with the poor grew out of his personal experience of lepers, this foundational experience of Franciscan spirituality has led a growing number of provinces to include direct service to the poor in the corpora]works of mercy as an integral part of the post novitiate formation experience (see CIRCULAR LETTER 9, 3.7).

4.3.3 Particularly in Latin America, but in other areas as well, the Fifth Plenary Council gave birth to a considerable number of “insertion experiences” among the poor: “... that we might hear their authentic voice, it is the duty of the Order to have fraternities among the poor” (V PCO 92). The inspiration for these initiatives was a compassion which aimed at sharing the life, experience, and aspirations of the poor. The object of the insertion was to duplicate in every way possible the life conditions of the people. From a distance of ten or more years, these “insertion experiences” are now being evaluated in light of other

essential values of our Capuchin charism, in particular, fraternity and prayer. The resulting synthesis of values can only enhance the obvious evangelical power of this witness.

4.3.4 In a letter addressed to our Order on 18 September 1996, Pope John Paul II requested that we establish a fraternal life which can be “a warmly human and accessible point of reference for the poor.” In many of the older European friaries, traditionally there was a dining room for the poor near the main entrance. There travelers and the poor found a warmly human and dignified welcome. The words of the Pope and the tradition of our Order Challenge us as brothers gathered in local chapter to consider the quality of welcome which the poor find at the door of our friary.

4.3.5 The Fifth Plenary Council had the clear insight that “the viewpoint of the poor” must be the point of reference for the Capuchin vision of peace, justice and respect for nature. Perhaps that is the reason why Br. Jacques Bélanger, former general definator and first president of the International Commission for JPE, often suggested that each province or region of the Order have both a house of prayer, as indicated in our Constitutions, and a fraternity of insertion among the poor, as indicated by the Fifth Plenary Council. Our identification with the poor as a brotherhood is nourished by our ministries of direct service, our insertion experiences as fraternities and as individuals, and the quality of hospitality in our friaries. Such experiences shape fraternities filled with that genuine compassion which Francis discovered in gazing upon the cross of San Damiano and embracing the leper. Such immediate experiences also determine and form the perspective from which our Order can

judge and respond to the structural causes of poverty and human suffering in our world. Rooted in the experience of compassion, we can as individuals and fraternities, bring our spiritual and intellectual resources to the cause of the poor and oppressed. With the help of the social sciences we can assist the poor and all people of good will to see that human inequalities are not the result of the will of God but of human evil which must yield to change and conversion. I recall the words attributed to Dom Helder Camara: “When I feed the poor they call me a Christian; when I ask why they are poor they call me a Communist.” I believe that we should not be afraid to ask those questions and urge others to ask them also. The new name for poverty is often “social exclusion.” In the name of the gospel, we should not fear to ask why it is that in otherwise affluent societies, some are excluded from the benefits of that society’s wealth in its many forms (e.g., food, housing, education, health, etc.).

B. A Simple Lifestyle

4.4 There is a remarkable statement of Francis which takes on new meaning for us in today’s interconnected world:

“I was never a thief: by that I mean that, in accepting alms, the inheritance of the poor, I have always made it a point to accept less than I needed so that I would not defraud the other poor. To act otherwise would be to steal”

(LEGEND OF PERUGIA 111)

It is a well-documented fact that the wasteful habits of rich consumer societies squander resources necessary to provide even basic necessities to the poor of our world. The disastrous impact of wasteful consumer habits on the ecosystem of our planet is equally well-documented. These facts give added purpose and impetus to our efforts to simplify our lifestyle. Austerity of life, so well described in Chapters Four and Seven of our Constitutions, creates a life style which does not offend the poor or exploit unnecessarily the resources of the world.

C. Rejection of Violence

4.5 *“They are truly peacemakers who are able to preserve their peace of mind and heart for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite all they suffer in this world”* (ADMONITIONS 15). Francis challenges us to discover in our inner selves the deepest roots of peace as well as our own tendencies toward aggression. This is particularly important for those who work to change the structural causes of poverty in our world. Unless we unmask our personal sources of anger, the work for justice itself can become an excuse to vent personal frustrations. The Fifth Plenary Council stated: “An integral part of Francis’ conversion was his renunciation of violence” (V PCO 96). Our presence and participation in movements seeking justice must be a ferment for reconciliation and nonviolence. Modern spiritual leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were convinced that those who use force to resist force are ultimately contaminated by the very evil against which they struggle. Nonviolence, however, is not passivity. Gandhi identified nonviolence with the search for truth: “The way of peace is the way of truth ... truthfulness is even more important than peacefulness.” Our commitment to nonviolence also includes the renunciation of the diet of violence which is so much a part of modern entertainment (see CIRCULAR LETTER 4, 4.2). Furthermore, the letters and pronouncements of Pope John Paul II increasingly call us to renounce all forms of institutional violence, such as capital punishment and ever more repressive forms of incarceration.

D. The Ministry of Reconciliation

4.6.1 “God, to whom we were reconciled through Christ ... has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation” (2 COR 5:18) When we read about the life and ministry of Francis and the early friars in the Legend of Perugia and in the Fioretti, we encounter agents of reconciliation. One noteworthy characteristic is the wide diversity of instruments used to bring about reconciliation:

to restore peace to Borgo San Sepolcro and reconcile the thieves, the brothers prepared a meal with plenty of bread and good wine (FIORETTI XXVI);

to liberate Arezzo from the demons of hatred and war, Francis sent the sainted preacher, Sylvester (LEGEND OF PERUGIA 81); and

the singing of a newly-inspired verse of the Canticle reconciled the bishop and the mayor of Assisi (LEGEND OF PERUGIA 44).

4.6.2 Reading these beautiful legends, I have often wondered how Francis came to choose his “instruments” of reconciliation: bread and wine for San Sepolcro, Sylvester for Arezzo,

a song for Assisi. *“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”* (ROM 5:20). Francis had the gospel intuition to look for signs and instruments of redemption in the very places where the absence was most evident! Injustice in our world is rarely eliminated by single grand gestures.

Cardinal Arns remarked that “the important events of history are the thousands of humble actions that heal and reconcile.” However dramatic his trip to see the Sultan, Francis’ most creative efforts to change the world were to be found in “the humble actions that heal and reconcile” which he performed right in Umbria and in the Rieti Valley. *“Wisdom ... is found by those who seek her ... she will be found sitting at the gate”* (WIS 6:12-14).

The Holy Spirit is at work changing our world. It should be the special gift of Franciscans, particularly those passionate about structural change in our world, to discover the new and dynamic instruments of justice and reconciliation which continually spring up in our world. This requires a contemplative vision of faith. Like Francis, we begin by discovering the forces of hope which exist at our very gate!

Animating the Mission of Peace

5.1 Having identified the mission of peace, justice and respect for nature as “an integral part of our Franciscan vocation,” the Fifth Plenary Council rightly called for a concrete program for its promotion and animation (V PCO 97). The general curia, as well as many provinces of our Order, responded by creating secretariats and commissions to fulfill this important role. Many brothers have grown tired of this effort. They see little effect from the thousands of actions – both large-scale and small – undertaken by the brothers to promote peace, justice and respect for nature. However, we must remember that the primary change we seek is in our own hearts and within our own fraternities. Our fraternities are called to be “warmly human and accessible points of reference” for those who thirst for justice and true brotherhood within our world. Where commissions and secretariats exist, allow them to guide our reflection and coordinate our efforts. May those provinces which lack commissions be inspired to establish them in order that this essential dimension of our spirituality can become a more visibly lived reality.

5.2 A 14th century spiritual treatise stated: “The created human soul has two eyes. One (the right) represents the power to gaze into the eternal. The other (the left) gazes into time and the created world.” It is evident from the early sources that Francis was able to see with both eyes of the soul. Francis gazed upon the world with the eyes of God. Like Francis, we must learn to gaze upon the world with “both eyes of the soul.” Justice is not an abstraction or a lifeless concept. Gazing upon the person of Christ, poor and crucified, might be described as the vision of the “right eye of the soul.” With the “left eye of the soul” we must also gaze upon the world Jesus came to save.

This vision will be formed in us when we read the documents of the church and reflect upon the realities of our world in the light of their gospel message. Our vision of the sufferings of humanity and the degradation of the ecosystem in the light of the cross can fill us, like Francis, with compassion. It is that compassion which will help prevent our pursuit of justice from degenerating into a harsh individualism or an equally grim collectivism. At the same time, a constant reflection on the social doctrine of the church will help to ensure that our spirituality does not become an escape from the harsh

realities of our world. Only this two-fold vision can preserve the perspective we have received from Francis.

Perhaps the local fraternity might reflect on the following two questions:

What moves us to feel compassion as we look at the neighbourhood in which we live?

What specific action could we take, what specific gesture could we make, to express that compassion?

Conclusion

6.1 By the time this letter arrives, in many of our fraternities Advent will have already begun. May the preaching of Isaiah, the great prophet of justice, open the eyes of our souls to the divine will for all God's people:

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is 2:4).

When the time of prayer and preparation yields to the time of celebration at Christmas, may we draw inspiration from Mary and Joseph, whose experience of the "viewpoint of the poor" was very personal and concrete. Marginalized and unwanted, they were the ones to whom God revealed the life of blessedness and peace. May we learn from them to make room in our lives for the poor.

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