



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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GET UP AND WALK!

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CIRCULAR LETTER TO ALL THE BROTHERS OF THE ORDER ON THE URGENT NEED FOR ONGOING FORMATION

(Prot. N. 00771/10)

Get up and walk!

1. Two years ago, in my Circular Letter “Let us fan the flame of our Charism”, speaking about initial formation, I drew attention to the gift of ourselves as the hub around which the whole of our life revolves. In my Letter I placed particular emphasis on the journey that we have to propose to those embracing our life, so that the consecration of themselves to God and to people would go beyond the level of mere words, and become an attitude permeating everything they do. In this sense when I speak of “formation”, I am referring to a dimension which is far more than imparting information about our life. It is a matter of an “initiation” in the true and proper sense of the word. The transmission of values is achieved only when those values are integrated to such an extent that they become a compass guiding every choice and action. In this new Letter I would like to tackle the subject of ongoing formation, using the same approach as last time: our life as Capuchin brothers finds its deepest and fullest meaning to the extent that it is given as a gift. Let me stress from the outset that my overriding aim is to encourage participation in whatever is offered by way of ongoing formation in each circumscription, and to urge its renewal and improvement wherever necessary. I recall that in 1991¹ our Order produced a “General Plan of Ongoing Formation”, and today we are laying the foundations for a “Formation Plan”, or *Ratio Formationis*, for the whole Order². So there is no need for me to deal here with the difference between initial, special and ongoing formation. The future *Ratio* will focus specifically on those aspects, and in the meantime the draft text of Chapter II of the Constitutions, prepared by the Commission, already mentions them explicitly.

¹ Cf. *General Plan of Ongoing Formation of the Capuchin Friars Minor, Analecta OFM Cap 107* (1991), 441-462.

² Cf. *Circular Letter IV: Let us fan the flame of our charism*.

1. Formation never stops – why not?

1.1 A QUESTION OF FIDELITY

2. In my letter on initial formation I made a point of stressing that the initial formation journey must assume the characteristics of a progressive “initiation” into our Capuchin-Franciscan form of life. In that context I recalled the urgency of having consistent formators, highlighting the fact that we all have a responsibility for this aspect of our life. I wrote: “In this area it is impossible to adopt a neutral stance: either we are formators, or we become deformators” (n. 14). It may seem to be playing with words, but in order to be able to “initiate” someone into a form of life, we ourselves have to be “initiates”, and this is something that is not acquired once and for all. It is interesting to note what the Suffering Servant says about this in the book of Isaiah: “Morning by morning the Lord God awakens my ear to listen like a disciple” (Is. 50, 4). My intention in this new letter is to point out some ways by which we can be continuously renewed, and to invite you, dear brothers, to take seriously the fact that we are brothers, aware of the responsibility we all have to be a support for one another. As well as the responsibility, there is also another aspect: we are gifts to one another, which means I can be grateful for the good example of my neighbour. This breathes life into the words of psalm 133: “How good and pleasant it is, when brothers dwell united!”.

3. Having responded to the Lord’s call and embraced the religious life in our Order, each of us has declared our intention to make a gift of our life, one that has to be constantly renewed here and now. For sure, there are many times when we feel everything weighing down on us and we inevitably turn in on ourselves and are tempted to give up the struggle. It happens to us all! But, if it were to happen too often, if it became a habit, then gradually, without realising it, we would be at risk of abandoning everything we had promised and our consecration would eventually wither, like a dried-up tree unable to bear fruit! In this sense I really believe that André Louf’s statement about monasticism also applies to us: “It is something embodied in humanity and in time, and therefore shot through with forces that exert a downward pull”.³ All the more reason for us to remain vigilant.

³A. LOUF, *Cantare la vita*, Magnano 2002, 35.

4. It is important that each of us takes time to replenish our energy. Time for silence, time for ourselves. But it has to be time with a purpose: to live well, to live better, that which we have promised. Our reasoning should be: "Precisely because I care about my brothers, and because I want them to find in me a good companion along the way, every so often I do something for myself!". Ongoing formation is first of all about our will to be renewed in that which lies at the heart of our choice of the consecrated life: the gift of ourselves! Secondly, it must pay attention to keeping up-to-date professionally, so that we can carry out the mission entrusted to us with the necessary competence. This aspect follows from the first. This is how our Constitutions express it:

Though it involves the person as a unified whole, ongoing formation has a two-fold dimension: that of spiritual conversion through a continual return to the sources of Christian life and to the primitive spirit of our Order, and their adaptation to the times; and an educational and professional renewal... (Const. n. 41, 2).

1.2 EVERY AGE HAS ITS OWN CHALLENGE

5. Ongoing formation is about our consecration and about what we are becoming because of it. Each one of us, as an attentive observer of all that is happening around and within us, sooner or later comes to the conclusion that life is calling us to take a new step forward. It is almost as if there were stages, each with its own particular challenges. Some meet these challenges gracefully, others find them a struggle or even refuse to take the step that is being asked of them. The most obvious parallel, I think, is old age, with its capacity to accept calmly the limitations that come with physical decline. The acceptance of ageing, the knowledge that we are moving towards a scaling down of our activities with all the many limitations this involves, is something all of us have to face sooner or later. Without a doubt, there are those who are not very good at growing old, who are not ready to let go of any of the things they have always done, or who miss the time when they were 40 and cannot look gratefully at all the things they were given to achieve in their lifetime. There are people who feel diminished by the fact that they can no longer perform all the activities they once did. In that sense life obviously calls each of us personally to move on, but this is not always evident at the time and is by no means easy.

6. There are certainly many transitions⁴ in this sense and here I want to mention briefly some of the more important ones. It is obvious that anyone who has come to the end of his initial and specific formation has to be able to move on to a stage where he is given the chance to fulfil some plans, to be fully committed and to feel, through the work he does, that he is truly alive. He must be able to put his lessons into practice! If, sensing the need to be absorbed in activity, he is denied the opportunity, he will feel robbed of something vital which was rightfully his. At this stage, as time goes by, he will feel an inner need to move from a multiplicity of occupations to a more focused choice of particularly significant activities. This then gives way to a desire to place one's life at the service of a meaningful cause worthy of whole-hearted commitment. This is the time for grand designs, when one is ready to give one's all for the cause. Anyone launching headlong into such a far-reaching plan will sooner or later - inevitably - be disappointed. He will have to reckon with human nature - his own included - with its many limitations. If you gradually learn to accept reality as it is, without losing hope, and keep going despite everything, you take an important step towards greater human maturity.

By making these transitions a person is inwardly enriched, acquiring a wisdom of life which sooner or later he will want to pass on to others. This stage of life will be experienced as profoundly satisfying. In fact, we are not "consecrated" for ourselves alone, but to make our contribution to the humanisation of the world and hasten the full achievement of the Kingdom. Having reached the threshold of 60, with half our allotted span over, we abandon our grand projects in order to be at the service of those who find themselves at that stage. We focus our attention on the needs of the people with whom we share our lives, and mobilise our creative energies to contribute to the success of someone else's project. We rejoice to see a cause progressing and to see people coming closer to seeing their dreams materialise.

⁴ Cf. on this subject J. GUINDON, *Vers l'autonomie psychique*, Montréal 2001, 112-119; G. SALONIA, *Odòs, la Via della vita. Genesi e guarigione dei legami fraterni*, Bologna 2007, 122-145.

1.3 ASKING FOR HELP

7. It is crucial to have people to turn to who can help us face each stage of the long and fascinating journey of life, someone who will let us stop and look at how far we have come. Life is a gift, and it needs to be seen and appreciated in all its richness. Everything is God's gift, including all that I have been given to live and to accomplish. Therefore it all has to be given back to God⁵, the giver of every gift. But it is also true that I can only give something back if I am conscious of it and realise what it is. Ongoing formation should help us to grow in these dimensions. Life itself forms us and calls us to change, to adapt. Often, without such moments of clear realisation we are unaware of the changes that have taken place around us and within us, and so never manage to complete certain transitions promptly and smoothly. This is why we need one another and why sometimes it is good to meet someone with special training in these areas who can make our journey easier. We are talking about a learning process in the true sense of the word, something that has an impact on our life and adds to our sense of feeling good about who we are, happy to have reached this far and eager to set out on a new stage.

8. Everything I have outlined so far is first of all part of the journey every human being is called to make through the various stages of life – a journey of growth which will only be concluded with the arrival of sister death. Basically the journey has two parts: one of progressive detachment, the other of ever-expanding spaces of internalisation. The transition from having many achievements to a few significant projects, the gradual abandonment of expectations, both of oneself and others, towards acceptance of the reality of things and people as they are, involves a long series of detachments. I abandon the expectations I project onto others or on myself, and find myself dealing with a much more realistic framework – closer to the other person's reality as well as my own. I give myself and my brother permission not to be perfect or to be inconsistent. The day I manage to do that, I will have acquired a wealth I did not have and could not have had before. Hand in hand with this gradual detachment comes a growing need for longer periods in which to stop and ponder the totality and flow of the things that are. There is a journey of internalisation going on which needs to be developed. The life of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis is

⁵ Francis frequently invites us to give back to God what we have received from Him. Cf. *Earlier Rule*, XVII, 17.

an extremely pertinent illustration of what I have just described: he would often retire to secluded places where he spent much time in prayer.

1.4 OUR CHANGING FAITH

9. Even a person's life of faith, and our vocation too, calls us to embark on a journey of constant and profound transformation. The way we believe and live our consecration at age 60 (I use this reference point because it's the one that suits me most!) is very different from how it was when we were half that age. After a phase of great enthusiasms when we wanted to change everything, we gradually moved through a stage of resizing in the true and proper sense. The brothers I live with have limitations, as I do myself. Perhaps I have also fallen, literally fallen off my horse like St Paul, and found myself far away from the path I had chosen. I may have gone through a period of spiritual dryness, where everything seemed insipid, flat and lifeless - I thought I had lost my bearings. But it is also true that in the midst of these ups and downs I met the Lord, who invited me to "Get up and walk!" I realise that my fidelity had wavered, and only because the Lord intervened was I able to start walking quickly again.

Of course, having lived through all this, I feel weaker and more vulnerable, but I am certain that I have now experienced at first hand what it means to be a sinner, a reconciled sinner! By this I do not mean that the Lord was not present in my life before; all I mean is that my awareness of His presence today is different and certainly more profound. And I also realise that even the way I believe has changed. In fact, compared to the past, I am more focused on the need to trust God than on repeating individual items of belief. I have become less formal and I see how the relational dimension has grown. None of us is exempt from these maturation processes. There may also have been emotional or affective crises, so that we distance ourselves from the fraternity, perhaps because we felt misunderstood. Thanks be to God, we found ourselves back on course, and we do not fail to thank Him for the people he has placed on our way. All of this is what has formed us and still continues to form us.

10. Although we are talking about dimensions that touch each one of us, albeit always in very different ways, we generally make a mystery out of them. But shouldn't we be much more open about them, to the point of discussing them in a fraternal conversation, even during our local chapters? Happy those who have

found a good spiritual facilitator and a fraternity that is respectful and is open to everyone and everything! And can I be so sure that certain things have happened only to me, things I would never be able to talk to my brothers about without losing face? Considering that we all share the same fragile humanity, what would it take to make us move one extra step closer to one another and so reach greater mutual openness? For this type of exchange to be possible, it is obvious that a climate of deep mutual respect has to be created, where the individual can feel listened to and never judged, let alone condemned.

11. What I have written so far is meant to illustrate the central assertion of our Constitutions when they speak of ongoing formation as a “process of personal and community renewal” aimed at “making us capable of always living our vocation according to the Gospel in the actual circumstances of our times”. The same Constitutions point to everyday life in fraternity as the pre-eminent place of ongoing formation (Const. n. 43, 3). Indeed, besides the rhythm of the different community events there is the whole process of mutual acceptance and respect to be accomplished. Most often we would like it to be our brother who has to change, forgetting that Francis says we should not expect him to be a better Christian. The only territory where we can be certain that changes are possible is our own!

12. Fraternal life puts us in the position of having to work on ourselves, and this normally makes us more understanding and more available for others. The benefits of this kind of slow, gradual transformation will be available to everyone who has dealings with us. This is why I like to insist that no-one exempts himself from the effort required for communal living. The Constitutions rightly state that it greatly promotes ongoing formation. It helps us grow towards the kind of relationships that can truly be called “redeemed”, and which are the fruit both of grace and of the effort made by each member of the fraternity. It takes great effort to work on oneself, yet it is an indispensable condition for greater human maturity, especially in relationships with others. How often I blame others for the fact that I feel bad! By acting in this way, without even realising it, I attribute to others enormous power over me and prefer to stay impassively in the role of a victim. All our attempts at changing other people are just a waste of time! Relationships in a fraternity start to improve as soon as someone begins to work on himself, without expecting the

others to do the same. And once they notice the change, they too will start to change.

13. Our Constitutions, in n. 43, 3, briefly and clearly remind us what is the privileged place of ongoing formation: “The manner in which our daily life is led greatly assists ongoing formation, for the first school of formation is the daily experience of religious life, with its normal rhythm of prayer, reflection, community life and work. “Amedeo Cencini repeats the same idea very forcefully in a recent book of his on the consecrated life. He writes:

Ongoing formation, as should be clear to everyone by now, does not consist in special courses or three days or a week of pastoral or cultural updating as a one-off event, or even in periodical spiritual meetings. It consists, first and foremost, in the action of the Father, who at every moment seeks to mould us in the image of His Son, and in our consequent and abiding readiness to accept the Father’s action. Therefore, ongoing formation in itself is from the outset a matter of interpersonal dynamics, a question of our relationship with God; but not only with God, because if the matter is in His hands, then every situation in life, every circumstance or season we have to live through, every event, whether positive or negative – from our point of view – especially every human context, every community, welcoming or otherwise, each person, confrere, saint or sinner as the case may be, and every relationship, becomes a mediation of this will of the Father to form in the disciple the sentiments of the Son.⁶

⁶ A. CENCINI, “Guardate al futuro...” *Perché ha ancora senso consacrarsi a Dio*, Milano 2010, 95.

2. A dynamic Ongoing Formation process: ways and means

2.1 A PROJECT THAT BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER

14. Besides contributing to the growth of individuals, ongoing formation should also benefit the growth of an entire fraternity. As I go around meeting different fraternities I sometimes notice a kind of fragmentation. Everyone is busy doing things, one is a pastor, another keeps an eye on the door, another goes out to teach courses, but it feels as if something is missing – the one element that keeps everything together. One could say that what's missing is a sense of our common mission. We do many things because they have to be done, but we seem to have forgotten that we possess a specific charism, and with it a mandate to contribute actively to the transformation of this world, to make it more fraternal. Let me give you an example. Precisely because we care so much about living as brothers, we ought to promote co-operation in all our activities, by which I mean enabling people to experience the benefit of being in solidarity with others and receiving the support that other people give. We could be more effective by adopting a simple motto such as: "We pledge ourselves to build a more fraternal world!" In this case, each member of the fraternity would feel committed to putting the motto into practice in his particular field of activity. I am sure this would eventually have an impact on the way we conduct our pastoral apostolate, the way we welcome the visitors who come to our door, or the way in which we teach. We would be busy on many fronts, but always animated by the profound communion that existed among us. We would see ourselves as the bearers of a message and of a particular way of doing things, aiming to transform situations, wherever we may be and whatever we may do. For this to happen we need to talk to one another more, making the local chapter a place for dialogue and for planning how to achieve our shared goals.

15. Consciously working together in pursuit of a single goal also facilitates dialogue: we share our experiences, the difficulties we have encountered along the way, as well as the beautiful surprises, etc. I mean that, both as a single circumscription and as a local fraternity, constructive planning ought to be a part of our life, in the profound awareness that we have something valuable to offer to the people we meet. In order for this to happen, it is fitting that in provincial and local chapters we should reflect on one specific aspect of our mission and manage to formulate a motto to give direction to our activity, in

such a way that it becomes the element that motivates and energises the commitment of the fraternity and of its individual members. From time to time we do need to ask ourselves: “What do we want to live? What do we want to bring to others? How do we intend to be present in the Church and to work for the coming of the kingdom?”.

We must be bold enough to give each other concrete answers, formulating a sentence supported by a dynamic verb and geared towards changing something. Obviously, different aspects will be stressed according to the cultural contexts. For example, if we want to promote a more fraternal world, we will draw attention to areas of society where conflicts are more acute: between residents and immigrants, between members of different social classes or ethnic groups, and so on. We are called to act in a given context so that the leaven of the gospel grows in an effective way. Basically it is a matter of answering a simple question: “What do we want to achieve as Capuchins, through our life itself and through our activities?” The answer should be as simple and direct as possible, and should come from the circumscription and from the local fraternities. We take it too easily for granted that we know exactly what we want to promote together as Capuchin brothers. If in the past our intention was to be first and foremost a strong call to conversion, today let us be promoters of genuine gospel brotherhood in a very different historical and social context. First of all among ourselves, and then wherever we happen to be working!

2.2 READY TO FACE NEW CHALLENGES TOGETHER

16. Our Order is undergoing a number of important and extremely demanding transitions. This applies to the various circumscriptions and also to individual friars. For some time now, statistics have been telling us that the majority of the brothers are living in the world’s southern hemisphere, and while their average age is generally below 50, in the northern hemisphere it is exactly the opposite. This means that the north, if it wants to retain a degree of flexibility, must scale down its presences and activities, while the south is faced with the necessity of finding new areas of activity and presence for its young manpower. Besides this, there needs to be careful discernment about admission to our life, and we also need to find sources of support which will enable us to move towards greater economic autonomy. The high number of vocations to our way of life requires

that they be adequately accompanied during formation. The challenges differ from place to place and each area is called to play its part. We are finding, for example, that “resizing” is far from easy. Because the brothers in general are living longer and thanks to the possibility of employing staff, we are managing to prolong many of our presences by a few decades. But this is not the solution, because obviously, to postpone a problem does not mean to solve it. Through “solidarity of personnel” we have begun to promote meetings and new ways of collaboration between brothers of the south and those of the north. Where once the movement was from north to south, today the direction is reversed. However, this does not mean that the south-north movement is a mirror image of the previous one. One has to take into account the fact that time has moved on and many changes have happened on a world scale, in the Church and in our Order too. Today, unlike then, there is more awareness of cultural differences and of the difficulties that arise when one tries to set up intercultural fraternities. Like it or not, these processes are under way and they affect all aspects of the Order’s life in one way or another. Whether in the case of a single jurisdiction or of an individual friar, all of us are called to demonstrate renewed adaptability and openness. Ongoing formation cannot do without them. In fact its task is to foster in each individual brother and in entire circumscriptions a spirituality of real openness, or in other words, of “Franciscan itinerancy”.

17. The Capuchin brother is defined first of all by the places he has chosen. He is one who is able to remain steady and for long periods in the presence of God, and to go wherever the need is greatest and where no-one else wants to go. Thus, at various times we made ourselves available to the plague-stricken, we set out for the missions entrusted to us by the Church across the centuries, we have been and still are close to migrants, we stay in places that others cannot wait to leave because the conditions of life are increasingly difficult, even impossible. In this sense our Order has a glorious history whose pages are still being written. But we know that the neediest places are constantly shifting and we need to stay awake, “dressed for action” (Lk 12, 35) if we are to be open to a new call from the Lord, ready to set out again for new frontiers. Ongoing formation should help us to live out our fidelity to these two places and to keep it constantly renewed. This will give us the ability to live through certain forms of detachment without too many anxieties, even when they are painful. We need to remember that our charism is not tied to friaries and other centuries-old

structures, but rather to the persons who embody it in the places I was talking about above: before God, and in the service of the poorest.

2.3 SPIRITUAL GROWTH

18. Spiritual growth, too, requires each of us to keep moving. We must be ready, because we do not know at what hour the Lord will pass by and call us. Without a deep sense of openness and inner mobility, we will hardly notice that there is someone knocking at our door, asking to come in and share a meal with us⁷. Besides, considering that His ways are not our ways and our thoughts are not His⁸, it would be unforgivable to remain with an attitude of inner immobility. How will we let God into our lives, let Him reveal His otherness, and lead us along unbeaten pathways, if we remain comfortably closed in on ourselves? An encounter with the living and true God sometimes involves a radical life-change. St Francis knew a thing or two about this, since God himself led him among the lepers. It literally changed his life! I believe it is a central and particular task of ongoing formation to keep us open to this shattering but always salutary encounter.

2.4 THE NEED FOR TRAINING

19. Today ongoing formation is the responsibility of each circumscription, but it is evident that the number of brothers, the distances and the sheer variety of geographical areas involved, are leading us to consider whether it might be appropriate to organise it collaboratively. It is the duty of the major superiors to create opportunities whereby the brothers can experience the process together or at times also individually. Retreat weeks, recollection days and more study days must be part of what is on offer to the brothers for their spiritual, ministerial and professional growth. We should feel a duty to take part in whatever is offered, precisely with the intention of renewing ourselves constantly and being consistent in living our life. In this sense we can safely say that ongoing formation becomes the mother of every other kind of formation. Anyone who is on the journey and does not look down on the need to take part in what is offered so that he can move forward more easily, becomes a living,

⁷ Cf. *Apocalypse*, 3, 20.

⁸ Cf. *Isaiah*, 55,9.

credible example of what it means to be a Capuchin today, and a reference point for those who have only recently begun their journey of initial formation.

20. Just as every jurisdiction has a provincial bursar or a vocations promotor, I wonder if it wouldn't be appropriate to make provision for a friar to plan and promote opportunities for ongoing formation? Obviously such a friar would not take the place of the Minister, but with the latter's advice and agreement, would ensure that ongoing formation initiatives were given due importance and continuity, and not reduced to isolated events. At the local level, the guardian is the brother who is called to animate the fraternity, particularly by calling regular meetings of the local chapter, an essential moment in ongoing formation. It therefore becomes necessary to provide guardians with suitable training. Assemblies of guardians, held at regular intervals, ought to be the preferred venues for providing them with suitable and necessary tools, so that they assume their allotted task with responsibility and peace of mind.

21. Here and there it has become common practice for a brother, after a long period of ministry or service, to ask for a sabbatical, a time to devote to himself so that he can renew his availability for whatever he is asked to do. I believe this can be very helpful, as long as the contents of the sabbatical period and the manner in which it will be spent are agreed with the Minister and his council. To stop and delve into a number of professional, theological or spiritual aspects after a long and varied experience can be immensely enriching.

22. Besides this it is also the duty of the major superiors to identify brothers who can be sent for specialised study, so that there are qualified brothers available to accompany the brothers' journey of integrated growth. Jurisdictions which do not run their own philosophy and theology study houses generally do not appreciate the urgency of preparing some of their brothers to teach. This necessarily leads to an impoverishment in the cultural level of the jurisdiction, and of the Order as a whole. This is a real shame, because a good level of education and culture never did anyone any harm! Of course, the spirit of prayer is always required, but if one takes care of that, the presence of qualified, competent brothers can become a blessing for everyone.

2.5 WHAT SUBJECTS SHOULD BE COVERED?

23. There are some subjects I would call “obligatory” and which should come up regularly in our various ongoing formation courses. It’s all very well saying that the Eucharist is the centre around which the whole of our life revolves, if we never take time to study its various dimensions, never question the way we celebrate it – if we are not careful, even the Eucharist can cease to be central and be pushed to the sidelines. This is also true of our prayer life, both communal and silent, private prayer. A good course on contemplative prayer, complete with practical exercises, does no harm from time to time. We should remember that our Constitutions call mental prayer “the spiritual teacher of the brothers”.⁹ The same is true for the word of God which is so rich and full of implications and offers so many possibilities, but every so often we need someone competent to show us some new approaches to these treasures, paying particular attention to *Lectio divina*. Nor should we neglect the human sciences, which can help us to relate properly to one another. All aspects of our fraternity life, without exception, should from time to time be the object of in-depth, common study.

24. But we should be careful not to limit our attention to our own life within the Order. We cannot remain indifferent to the afflictions of whole populations or groups of people. I am thinking particularly of the tragedy of people forced to leave their own countries on account of war or persecution or because they are searching for a more dignified life. In fact, every time we have placed ourselves at the service of migrants, especially the poorest and most defenceless, we have found ourselves in the right place. To open our eyes to what is happening, both locally and on a global scale, we need information and we need to ask for the intervention of those who deal with these matters professionally. There are Secretariats for *Justice, Peace and Ecology* and also *Franciscans International* who do excellent work, but most of the time they remain in the shadows because the brothers are not interested. In this context we are also called to reflect from time to time about how we intend to live our vow of poverty, with all the necessary implications of living “with nothing of our own”.

25. Consecration calls us to fulfil the activities entrusted to us in a fitting and professionally irreproachable way. It is not enough to have been ordained a priest – and I say this as an example – to be a good hospital chaplain or a good

⁹ Const. 52, 6.

preacher. In the same way, basic training or formation will not be enough to sustain us in any job for an indefinite length of time. There has to be a sense of doing a professional job, which means we have a duty to keep ourselves constantly up-to-date. In many places we are called upon to serve regularly as confessors. The ministry of God's mercy has been the hallmark in the life of more than one Capuchin saint. Why not meet together from time to time to discuss the problems we encounter in this ministry, and to learn from one another how to improve our own ministry? Often, what is missing is someone to start things off, an animator! As part of our obedience in charity, anyone can take the initiative, for the simple reason that we are brothers.

26. At the general level I would like to remind everyone of what we have been providing at our house in Frascati for a number of years: courses centred on the rediscovery of our roots, offered to the various regions of the Order; courses for formators (for some time now, these courses are given in the same areas where the formators will be working); courses for guardians; courses for confessors. The work of planning and organising these various courses falls to the brothers of the General Secretariat for Formation, and we owe them our special thanks.

2.6 JERUSALEM: A NEW OPPORTUNITY

27. Before I conclude this letter, I want to tell all the brothers that at last, the Order has a well equipped house in Jerusalem waiting to welcome you. Last September (28/09/2010) we had the joy of inaugurating the Centre for spirituality and biblical formation, called "I am the light of the world". This fulfils a dream that my predecessors had steadily pursued over the years. The friary was built in the 1930's as a house of formation, but could never be used as such because it was immediately turned into a prison and then converted into a psychiatric clinic. Legal ownership of the building was restored to the Order some years ago, and with the help of divine Providence it has now been renovated. It has a total of 40 rooms, in addition to the communal areas such as the chapel, kitchens, refectory, recreation room, conference hall and a large garden.

28. At present the fraternity is mostly composed of friars from the Province of Venice who for the last few years, together with Br. Pasquale Rota of the Province of Lombardy, have provided a Capuchin presence and looked after the

house in Jerusalem. There are also a few friars who are studying in specialist biblical institutes in the city. Now that the house can offer accommodation to a larger number of people, our desire is to make it available to the Order's jurisdictions for one or more weeks of biblical study, retreats and pilgrimages to the holy places. Individual brothers wishing to spend some time on sabbatical would also be welcome. The new Centre has been named after two Capuchin brothers: Blessed James of Ghazir, the "brother of charity" who was originally instrumental in acquiring the property, and Br. Pierre-Marie Benoît, who was awarded the title of "Righteous among the Gentiles" for having saved the lives of thousands of Jews during the Second World War. Here were two brothers whose enlightened initiatives responded to the urgent needs of their times, often placing their own lives at risk in the process. They gave their lives for others without flinching! I am sure the management of the Centre will inform you in due course about the various programmes on offer.

3. Conclusion

29. As I said at the beginning, my intention in this Letter was not to write a treatise on ongoing formation, but rather to reawaken interest in it and to motivate the brothers to participate in it regularly. This is all part of a basic aspect of our life of faith, namely “being born from above”, which was the request Jesus made to Nicodemus: “In truth I tell you, unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3, 3). We all know by now that it is possible to practise the faith without being a believer. Luke the evangelist says of Zechariah and Elizabeth that “both were worthy in the sight of God and scrupulously observed all the commandments and observances of the Lord” (1, 6). But when the angel announces to Zechariah that their prayer has been heard and that they will have a son, Zechariah begins to doubt. And the angel tells him he would be unable to speak until these things had come to pass, “since you have not believed my words” (1, 20). We cannot take for granted that we “believe” and have been “born from above” just because we have embraced the religious life in the Capuchin Order.

30. To use another biblical image, the patriarch Jacob, who fled in fear from his brother Esau, spent many years in the house of his father-in-law Laban, and eventually fled from him as well. When he finally decided to go back to his brother, before crossing the river Jabbok, he found himself wrestling with God until daybreak and it marked him for life. (Gen 32, 23-32). It may well be that you too are permanently running away from something, that you find yourself on a road that is not exactly the one the Lord had marked out for you. Brother, it’s time to go back, to launch out into deeper waters (Lk 5, 4). Don’t be afraid to meet “the living and true God”, to wrestle with him and to say with the prophet Jeremiah: “You enticed me, Lord, and I let myself be enticed, you overpowered me, and you prevailed!” (Jr 20, 7). The primary purpose of ongoing formation must be exactly that: to bring us back to the right way or have us take a decisive step forward in our lifelong commitment. The Lord himself is saying to you: “Get up and walk!” (Mt 9, 5).

Br. Mauro Jöhri
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Rome, November 29th, 2010
Feast of all Saints of the Seraphic Order.

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