

CIRCULAR LETTER N. 23

Prot. n. 000031/05

“TO HIS LIKENESS”

**Building Communion
in a World of Asymmetrical Relationships**
(Part Three of a series)

**Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for he created and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body and to his likeness according to the Spirit.
(Adm 5:1)**

To all the brothers and sisters of the Order

Dear brothers and sisters:

- 1.1 During March of 2004, the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order – the theme of which was: *Our fraternal life in minority* – was celebrated at Cristo Risorto Friary in Assisi. As part of our preparation for that plenary council, I wrote two circular letters. *That Excessive Love* (Circular Letter n. 21) reflected on the mystery of the Cross – central to Francis’ embrace of humility. *The Courage to be Minors* (Circular Letter n. 22) looked at the implications of humility as a value and qualifying characteristic of the fraternity founded by Francis. With the present letter, I resume these reflections in the light of the proposals put forward by the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order.
- 1.2 Throughout the gospels we find Jesus seated at table with apostles and disciples, Pharisees and Scribes, tax collectors and public sinners, rich and poor, friend and foe alike. A festive meal of friendship is his preferred image to describe the Kingdom: “People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Lk 13:29). Friendship – like that shared at a festive meal – is a privileged instrument in building the relationships of the Kingdom. Pope John Paul II uses the language of friendship to describe the inner dynamics of the communion of the Church: “...to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43). Chapter 14 of Luke’s Gospel opens with the words: “Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath” (Lk 14:1). Jesus used that meal as the setting for teaching us about building the communion – the sister- brotherhood – of the kingdom.

“IS IT LAWFUL TO CURE PEOPLE ON THE SABBATH OR NOT?” (Lk 14:3)

- 2.1 Immediately upon entering the house Jesus finds himself face-to-face with a man suffering from the dropsy. The day is a Sabbath, and Jesus is confronted with the question: “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?” (Lk 14:3).

Much was at stake. In the Sabbath rest religious Jews recognize human impotence before the absolute and transcendent power of God. For example, in the Book of Maccabees (see 1Macc 2:29-38), a thousand Jews perished at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes because their warriors refused to take up arms on the Sabbath. They would not profane the Sabbath even for the sake of protecting their own wives and children!

It would be easy to view this incident involving Jesus as an example of how he stood up to the rigid legalism of the Scribes and Pharisees. More importantly, however, the passage contains a new revelation. Jesus equates the transcendence of God as the transcendence of Love. “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Lk 6:5). “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” (Lk 6:9).

- 2.2 Trinitarian love, which is both transcendent and humble, dominated the experience of Francis. His prayers and writings are filled with praises of the Trinity. Like the Biblical Jews, Francis stood in awe before God who is “wholly Other” and transcendent:

Most high and supreme God trinity and unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, ...without beginning and end, ...unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, praiseworthy, glorious, exalted, sublime, most high, gentle, lovable, delightful, and totally desirable above all else for ever (ER XXIII, 11).

The Trinitarian relationship, rather than being altered by the Incarnation, breaks into time and history through the Incarnation to become part of our human experience, and humility is its principle characteristic: “this Word of the Father...received the flesh of our humanity and frailty” (2LtF, 4).

- 2.3 In our human-centered world, the Son assumed the image of our humanity. In the God-centered world of Francis, we assume the image of the Son. Both perspectives are correct, but that of Francis is much deeper:

Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for **he created and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body** and to his likeness according to the Spirit (Adm V, 1).

Contemplating Jesus, Francis understood the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son. That relationship, then, defined and shaped the discipleship of Francis. Just as the Son – the “Word of the Father” – is the model in which we are created – “God...created and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body” – so the Son becomes the model of our response to this self-emptying love, forming us to “**his likeness according to the Spirit**” (Adm V, 1). As we have been embraced by the Father’s self-emptying love in the Incarnation – “this Word of the Father...received the flesh of our humanity and frailty” –, so must we embrace the totality of the Son’s response revealed in the humble, “excessive love” of the Cross:

Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him! Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by him! Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that he who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally (LtOrd 28-29).

- 2.4 Filled with a profound desire to respond to the Father in “**his likeness**”, Francis embraced the way of the gospel – “the very foundation of fraternal life” – which “**draws us into the intimate relationship of the Trinity**” (VII PCO, 1b)¹ This is our privileged manner of creating and becoming church.

Pope John Paul II affirms that the Church has its origin in the Trinity, and that it is in Trinitarian love that the Church finds its identity:

Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit which Jesus gives us [see Rom 5:5], to make us all “one heart and one soul” [Acts 4:32] (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 42).

- 2.5 The Church discovers its mission in that same Trinitarian love:

It is in building this communion of love that the Church appears as “sacrament”, as the “sign and instrument of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race” [*Lumen Gentium*, 1]” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 42).

It is the mission of fraternal life “to **extend in history the gifts of communion proper to the three divine Persons**” (*Vita Consecrata*, 41). The Trinity is an inexhaustible mystery which defies definition but, like a multifaceted diamond, reflects a new and startling beauty from every different angle and in every different light:

In his *Praises of God*, St. Francis proclaims: “You are humility!” [PrsG 4] because our Trinitarian God is relational by nature, i.e., a free communion of persons without domination or subordination (VII PCO, 1a).

The Trinity is relationship without domination. The Son is not controlled or overshadowed by the Father and, in turn, does not circumscribe the Holy Spirit. The gifts of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are always fully actuated without limit or subordination within the Trinitarian relationship. Beginning with this facet of the Trinitarian mystery which flows from the particular perspective of St. Francis, the Plenary Council specifies what it means for a lesser brother to “extend in history the gifts of communion proper to the three divine Persons.” The Council asserts that since humility opens human hearts to the experience of divine relationship, when we live as true lesser brothers, we [humans] “slowly become a free communion of persons without domination or subordination, thus achieving true humility” (VII PCO, 1a). For Francis and the Plenary Council, the truth is clear: free and equitable relationships save!

When Trinitarian love burst upon the world in the Incarnation, a new and vital power of unity was revealed to the human family: “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...born, not of blood or of the will

¹ For the English text of the proposals of the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order see the *Analecta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Capuccinorum* [henceforth *AOFMCap*], 120 [2004], 801ff. For the English text of the proposals of the Sixth Plenary Council see *AOFMCap*, 114 [1998], 833ff.

of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1:12-13). Living this Trinitarian love, we become a sign and sacrament of the intimate union of God with human beings and, indeed, with all creation:

Francis embraced the plan of God for his creatures as a family of sisters and brothers: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, etc. [see CtC]. He never referred to himself simply as “Francis”, but always as “Brother Francis”. “Brother” revealed the relationship with every creature to which God called him (VII PCO, 1c).

- 2.6 The transcendence of God is the transcendence of humble, self-giving love. Francis is so totally absorbed in the mystery of Trinitarian relationship that in his *Praises of God* his words echo not as the testimony of one who has witnessed Trinitarian relationship from the outside, but as the testimony of one who has experienced it from within! This experience is the foundation of minority:

Minority came to birth in Francis of Assisi as amazement in the face of the love of God who, in order to free us from evil and to introduce us into the divine life, did not hesitate to become human, making himself obedient to death on a cross [Phil 2:6-11; 2LtF, 1]. Thus he became *simple* and *subject to all* (VII PCO, 2).

“THE GUESTS CHOSE THE PLACES OF HONOR...” (Lk 14:7).

- 3.1 As Jesus took his place at table, he noticed “how the guests chose the places of honor...” (Lk 14:7). The Kingdom of free and equitable relationships must be established in the real world of inequality and power. It was true at the time of Jesus. It is equally true today.

The modern social sciences make it clear that, because all social relationships are asymmetrical, it is impossible to live without exercising power (VII PCO, 18).

Social relationships are asymmetrical because no two human beings are completely equal: one may be more experienced, another more intelligent; one may possess more physical beauty, another a better education or other skills; one is born in North America, another in Africa. The differences and inequalities between individuals are as varied as our humanity is numerous! For that reason, the PCO proposal concludes: “it is impossible to live without exercising power.” Power enters into every human relationship.

- 3.2 Our world is shaped by the dominating forces of economic, military and technological power which produce structures of injustice and enormous human suffering. The Seventh Plenary Council articulated some of the consequences of structured, dominating power:

...an unfair concentration of wealth which causes a large number of migrants; ...self-serving powers that marginalize the poor and destroy the environment; relationships marked by domination and social stratification; ethnocentrism and religious intolerance; a culture which seeks change through violence (VII PCO, 6).

The asymmetrical nature of human relationships leads to the abuse of power, forms of which can also deform the life of the brothers:

- Willful acts of violence, debasing language, threats either spoken or implied...
- Sexual exploitation or abuse of another person [which] is a greater offense against Franciscan minority than against chastity.
- We passively participate in acts of violence and in the degradation of others when we accept violence and explicit sex as forms of entertainment (VII PCO, 22).

3.3 Power “can assume a positive or life-giving, creative role and be at the service of people, or it can become corrupted, and in turn destructive in its application” (VII PCO, 22). Therefore, “a good use of power is the ‘genuine sacrifice’ characteristic of one who has had a profound experience of Jesus [see Rom 12:1]” (VII PCO, 18). Franciscan minority embraces that power which builds unity. It is an essential condition for the building of communion and sister-brotherhood in the Kingdom. Luke 14 continues our instruction.

“GO AND SIT DOWN AT THE LOWEST PLACE...” (Lk 14:10)

4.1 “Do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ...and then in disgrace you... [must] take the lowest place” (Lk 14:8-9). Jesus’ comment seems to make a joke of their infantile attempts to “jockey for position”, but it has a more serious purpose. Speaking to the leaders of Israel, Jesus underscores the type of power which builds the relationships of the Kingdom: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). He describes to them the “good use of power” founded on humility.² It is the same power which God released into humanity in the Incarnation: “Serving the Father’s will so that all creation could return to him, the Word did not consider his equality with God a thing to be grasped... This glorious *kenosis* of the Son of God” has the capacity “to heal, reconcile and free the entire creation” (see VII PCO, 2). Humility is the power which builds the Kingdom.

4.2 Francis embraced humble power with passion and enthusiasm. In the humble power of the leper’s embrace he experienced brotherhood with Jesus:

In Jesus, Francis was embraced as brother in a relationship which transformed what was bitter into “sweetness of soul and body” [Test 3] (VII PCO, 46).³

His humility, in turn, became a power to heal, transform and reconstitute relationships with everyone around him. The Plenary Council proposals create a parallel between Jesus and Francis. Just as “the Word...united himself with humanity [in humility, as brother] in order to heal, reconcile and free the entire creation” (VII PCO, 2), so too for Francis, “**brother’ ...revealed his mission to heal relationships through submissive humility**” (VII PCO, 1c). For Francis, “being ‘lowly and subject to all’ was not the result of fear or psychological submission, nor [was it] a sign that he had

² Circular Letter n. 21 [see *AOFMCap*, 119 (2003), 37ff] treats of the humility of God and its consequence in the life of Francis. Circular Letter n. 22 [see *AOFMCap*, 119 (2003), 510ff] treats of the foundations of Franciscan minority, namely, the renunciation of all power which dominates (at 2.1-2.2), the embrace of humble service (3.1-3.2) and identification with those pushed aside by the dominant culture (4.1-4.2).

³ See Circular Letter n. 21 at 5.1.

given up his own free responsibility” (VII PCO, 2a); rather, his “courageous choices of minority,...redeemed and radically reconstituted his relationships: authority without power which dominates; service characterized by humility; extension of fraternal relationships to all creation; a life lived on the social periphery” (VII PCO, 6). Through humility, “Francis committed himself to a new world of redeemed relationships” (VII PCO, 46).⁴ The Plenary Council invites us into that same new world by redeeming our use of power.

- 4.3 The Sixth Plenary Council challenged the Order to embrace a series of economic choices to free the brothers and their fraternities from greed and competition, in order to create what has come to be called a “fraternal economy” (see VI PCO, 6). The purpose of this fraternal economy differs radically from that of the global economy of our day. Whereas the global economy aims to create wealth, the “fraternal economy” seeks to build communion. The means chosen to build these two economies also differ radically. Whereas the global economy is built upon the concentration of wealth [greed] and competition, the Franciscan fraternal economy is built upon the principles of solidarity, participation, transparency, equity and austerity.⁵ The Seventh Plenary Council seeks the a similar reform with regard to our use of power:

The Capuchin use of power emphasizes more the building up of relationships [communion] than the quick resolution of tasks (VII PCO, 19).

The purpose of the Capuchin use of power is identical to that of the fraternal economy: to build a communion of love. As the Sixth Plenary Council proposed concrete economic choices to make economic relationships the catalysts of communion, so too the Seventh Plenary Council proposes choices in our use of power that will free our power of domination, and thus serve to build communion. A right use of power is characterized as being:

- non-exclusive/inclusive, i.e., everyone affected by decisions is included;
- participatory, i.e., all participants have a real say;
- equal, i.e., final decisions equally respect the needs of all those affected;
- marked by a willingness to dialogue with a view to reaching a possible consensus; and
- non-violent. (VII PCO, 19)

Power, redeemed of domination and force, creates bonds of communion.

- 4.4 The Plenary Council offers a vision of fraternity founded upon Trinitarian relationship: “a free communion of persons without domination or subordination” (VII PCO 1a). In this context, St. Francis makes the Holy Spirit – “the general minister of our Order” – our model of authority. The Holy Spirit is relationship, the personification of the love between Father and Son. Therefore, Franciscan authority is ordered toward communion, that is, toward the service of building and maintaining relationships. Proposal 20 describes the foundations of that authority which builds relationships:

⁴ See Circular Letter n. 21 at 6.1-6.3.

⁵ See Circular Letters 14-17.

(1) service to others; (2) the coherence between what one says and what one does; (3) attentive listening to others; and (4) the office of authority looking to the common good.⁶

- 4.5 “Serving the Father’s will so that all creation could return to him, his Word...united himself with humanity, ...to heal, reconcile and free the entire creation” (VII PCO, 2). We are caught up in the eternal embrace of love between Father and Son: “through your holy love with which you loved us, you brought about his birth as true God and true man...” (ER XXIII, 3). Francis makes no distinction between the love which creates and sustains us – and all creation –, and the love which brought about “his birth as true God and true man.” In order to “heal, reconcile and free,” God went to the extreme of drawing us into Trinitarian relationship. This embrace brings freedom: “Poverty, minority and itinerancy, as well as being constituent elements of the following of Christ, bring Franciscan freedom” (VII PCO, 4).

Our contemporary world is obsessed with freedom, a freedom which it often identifies with self-realization, autonomous control, the free expression of every desire, and even, the control and domination of one’s neighbor. There is, however, an alternate, more secure road to freedom: “building the kingdom of God, ...building brotherhood wherever and whenever we can” (VII PCO, 4). A poverty which frees the human heart of greed and competition and a minority which liberates human power of the urge to dominate and subordinate become means to free, first our own fraternity, then, our Church and our world of “the effects of structural sin, inconsistent inner drives, manipulation by other power interests...in order to build a viable fraternity in the 21st Century” (VII PCO, 4). Minority *is* Franciscan freedom! Minority *is* the means to invite others into the healing embrace of our humble God.

“INVITE THE POOR, THE CRIPPLED, THE LAME, AND THE BLIND...” (Lk 14:13)

- 5.1 Seated at the table of the Pharisee, Jesus addresses himself to the role of the poor in building his Kingdom. His teaching begins with an exhortation to remain conscious of the poor. Then, looking beyond the humility which builds relationships, he speaks of the Kingdom of the humble! In his parable, the rich and important have no time for the banquet of the Kingdom.

Jesus puts himself in the tradition of the later prophets:

...I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord – the remnant of Israel (Zeph 3:11-13).

The later prophets saw with bitterness that it was the corruption and the abuse of power on the part of the rich which led to the ruin of the nation. Zephaniah envisioned a new Israel built upon a faithful remnant, a people humble and lowly. In the Incarnation, God reveals a new and more startling logic! Only a humble Church can evangelize a world divided, distorted and disfigured by the dominating forces of economic, military and technological power:

As the poor Christ continues his journey of unity among creatures under

⁶For a commentary on these principles in the context of the loving obedience of the brothers see Circular Letter 22 at 5.1-5.5.

the humble Eucharistic forms of bread and wine (Adm I, 17), so we, through the waters of Baptism, become Christ..., traveling on earth with the divine mission of healing, reconciling, liberating and redeeming (VII PCO, 2a).

The Order as such must become an expression of the liberating love of the humble Christ: “[We] reaffirm our choice of minority as an essential characteristic of Capuchin Lesser Brothers, not just as individuals, but also as an institution” (VII PCO, 3).

- 5.2 Francis’ embrace of the leper and his move to the periphery of society was an essential dimension of his conversion and of his experience of Christ. Therefore, echoing the Sixth Plenary Council,⁷ the Seventh Plenary Council again calls the Order to renew its option for the poor stating that we must:

...gradually (i.e., by taking small steps) make a “significant” shift towards the periphery of today’s society, where we wish to pitch our tents among the lowly ones of today, as Jesus, Francis and the first Capuchins did in their day (VII PCO, 3).

- 5.3 There is still another institutional dimension of “moving toward the periphery” and becoming the humble Christ. We are challenged to “joyfully accept the consequences of weakness, precariousness and vulnerability as we humbly serve in all our institutions and structures” (VII PCO, 3). Again, we are called to promote “a culture of peace based on the confident choice of vulnerability” (VII PCO, 6).

Francis also spoke about “the confident choice of vulnerability.” He identified it with the choice of the Cross: “We can boast in our weaknesses and in carrying each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Adm V, 8). There was one crucial point in the drama of the Crucifixion during which, humanly speaking, Jesus had a choice. In the manner of a Greenpeace protester, he could have refused to carry the Cross! The Romans could have threatened and beat him, but they could not have forced him, against his will, to carry the Cross. The Gospel of John is very terse: “they took him; ...carrying the Cross by himself...” (Jn 19:16-17). Jesus *chose* to carry the sign of his humiliation; this was his “confident choice of vulnerability.”

The Church as such appears increasingly vulnerable in our world. It is simultaneously emarginated by a secularism indifferent to gospel values and threatened by fundamentalist movements which often do not hesitate to use force. We are invited to embrace this vulnerability because only a humble Church can speak to an arrogant world obsessed with power.

- 5.4 The brothers living in regions of the world experiencing declining numbers, increasing age, and the consequences of secularism are called – in “**his likeness**” – to embrace this vulnerability and “live it in faith as a concrete expression of our choice to live in minority” (VII PCO, 15). The embrace of vulnerability is neither resignation to extinction nor is it passivity! For the aging Provinces of Western Europe and North America, this acceptance in faith includes the invitation “to draw up new projects adapted to their possibilities [and to] have recourse to international solidarity for personnel” (VII PCO, 15). In this, the Province of France can serve as an example. Five Provinces, each one rich in its own history and traditions, have been restructured

⁷See VI PCO, Proposals 9-12.

into a single Province. The brothers of France – whose average age is 72.4 years –, with a long a glorious missionary tradition, have reached out to the Province of Tamil Nadu (India) for assistance in giving life to the Franciscan charism in their homeland. More recently, they have begun to search for assistance in establishing a missionary fraternity in Algeria. “We can boast in our weaknesses and in carrying each day the holy Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Adm V, 8).

- 5.5 Speaking a word of encouragement to our “brothers in those countries where Christianity is a negligible minority”, the Plenary Council stated:

Our brotherhood pledges to stand by and support our brothers, especially in those lands where the freedom of religion is at risk, religious tolerance is on the increase, and religious fundamentalism is spreading rapidly (VII PCO, 16).

The brothers confronted by intolerance and fundamentalism are invited to bear witness “through example and word, in a spirit of minority akin to that of St. Francis before the Sultan” (VII PCO, 16). In mid-February, representatives from all regions of the Order will gather in Indonesia to reflect on this challenge and to offer a visible sign of support to the brothers who live this experience daily.

- 5.6 The embrace of vulnerability is still another dimension of our identification with the poor and humble Christ. In our vulnerability we become the blind, the weak, and the lame – a choice and an action that builds the Kingdom. “They took him...carrying the Cross by himself...” (Jn 19:16-17) – the beginning of the world’s salvation.

Conclusion

- 6.1 Jesus, the teacher, who sits at the table of the Pharisee, is not a theoretician. He uses the tragic situation of the man suffering from the dropsy as an opportunity to reveal the deeper meaning of the transcendence of God. Seeing people jockeying to improve their social position, Jesus designates humility as the power which builds the relationships of the Kingdom, and the privileged members of his Kingdom are revealed when he observes those whom his host has excluded from the dinner table.

“Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, **they were watching him closely**” (Lk 14:1). The Italian version of the text specifies that it was *la gente* – “the people” – who were watching him closely. It paints a picture of a privileged few gathered around the dinner table, and a mass of people – like the starving refugees of Darfur –, watching from afar. Jesus’ final remark certainly unsettled the Pharisees seated at the table: “None of those who were invited will taste my dinner” (Lk 14:24).

The proposals of the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order are not social theory. The 55 proposals express the challenges and idealism of our brotherhood as we attempt to respond “**to his likeness**” (Adm V, 1), in the footsteps of Francis.

- 6.2 The Sabbath teaching of Jesus offers us additional hope and a challenge. Seated at table with the Pharisees on the Sabbath, Jesus was undaunted by the challenge of building the relationships of the Kingdom in a world marked by social stratification and asymmetrical relationships. For believing Jews, the Sabbath rest was a two-fold

experience of communion with the Transcendent One and with family. We are invited to enter into this “Sabbath rest”. The “Sabbath rest” of contemplation will lead us, as it led Francis, to embrace conversion “**to his likeness**” (Adm V, 1), and in the “Sabbath rest” of communion with our brothers we will discover the “courage to be minors”.

Fraternally,

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General Minister

25 January 2005
Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul