

CIRCULAR LETTER n. 24

Prot. n. 00373/05

“GO TO MY BROTHERS ...” (JN 20:17)

“COURAGEOUS CHOICES FOR A MORE FRATERNAL WORLD” (VII PCO, 6)

(Part four of a series)

To all the brothers and sisters of the Order

Dear brothers and sisters:

“THE FIRSTBORN WITHIN A LARGE FAMILY ...” (Rom 8:29)

- 1.1 It is natural to be a son or daughter, but we must learn how to be a brother or a sister. With the decreasing size of families this is often something we no longer learn from our birth. Jesus was an *only* child. He had no brothers or sisters. Jesus chose to make himself brother to all, and he chose to make all his brothers and sisters: “Jesus ... in bringing many children to glory. ... is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (see Heb 2:10-11).
- 1.2 Universal brotherhood and sisterhood is the dramatic change effected by the reconciling Incarnation of Jesus, particularly evident in his death. The Gospel of John underlines this point. At the Last Supper, Jesus calls us “friends”: “I do not call you servants any longer, ... I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15). After the cross, he calls us “brothers”: “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” (Jn 20:17).

The Cross taught Francis that God’s omnipotence is revealed in the capacity to love beyond all human comprehension: “Let the whole earth tremble before his face, tell among the nations that the Lord has ruled from a tree” (OfP, Vespers, 9). The Risen Jesus reaches out with reconciling, healing love to the followers who had denied and abandoned him: to the fleeing disciples of Emmaus, he said, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Lk 24:26); to the doubting Thomas, he said: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (Jn 20:27); to the rudderless fishermen of Lake Tiberias, he said: “Caste the net to the right side of the boat” (Jn 21:6); and to the remorseful Peter, he said: “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21:15).

- 1.3 Crucified Love – love beyond all human comprehension – was at the heart of the religious experience of Francis who “discovered ... the crucified God-Man, the Christ of San Damiano, but by way of the leper” (VII PCO, 3). *Compassion* is the thread that unites Francis’ experience of lepers [“I showed mercy to them” (Test 2)] and his experience of the Crucified of San Damiano [“compassion for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul ...” (2C VI, 10)]. “Inwardly moved by God’s compassion for us ... (Francis) made himself lowly among the lowly ones ... to bear witness to all

that Christ the Crucified One was risen” (VII PCO, 2). Following Jesus, Francis *chose* to be brother to all and to make all his brothers and sisters: “He ... referred to himself ... always as ‘Brother Francis.’ ‘Brother’ ... revealed his mission to heal relationships through submissive humility” (VII PCO, 1c). The effect was dramatic: “His word was like a blazing fire, reaching the deepest parts of the heart” (1C X, 23). In Celano, the primitive Franciscan fraternity is called, “the delegation of peace” (1C X, 24). As courageous choices of minority redeemed and radically reconstituted Francis’ relationships, so is it equally true that “Franciscan minority today demands *courageous choices for a more fraternal world*” (VII PCO, 6).

“OTHER-CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS” (VII PCO, 6)

- 2.1 In our Trinitarian faith, “to be person” means to be in relationship: “Our Trinitarian God is relational by nature, i.e., a ... communion of persons” (VII PCO, 1a). As we grow as persons we move from individuality into relationship. “Francis ... was raised from his earliest youth to be arrogant” (LCh, I, 2; see Armstrong, I, 319). He was converted from self-centered individuality to other-centered relationship: “His encounter with this human being [i.e., the leper], abandoned and excluded by the society and system of his day, made Francis ‘leave the world’ and change his social status ... he became ‘minor’ ” (VII PCO, 3). He became “person”!
- 2.2 The secularizing influence of our western world concentrates on the “I” more as individual than as person. To be free is to be autonomous, independent, and able to decide one’s own future without outside influence. This is a world of extreme individualism, “the tyranny of the autonomous self,” marked by domination and violence of many kinds:

An unfair concentration of wealth ...; arrogance; narcissistic preoccupation with self-fulfillment; 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).

“Poverty, minority and itinerancy, ... bring Franciscan freedom” (VII PCO, 4). Made in the image of our relational God, we yearn for that freedom found only in a “communion of persons without domination or subordination” (VII PCO, 1a). We see this yearning for freedom in Francis’ prayer before the Crucified One:

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command (PrCr).

Freedom is found in living “your holy and true command,” namely, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). “Fraternally-structured poverty, minority and itinerancy” *enlighten* and cleanse hearts of what impedes relationship: “... the effects of structural sin, inconsistent inner drives, manipulation by other power interests, lack of skills for crossing boundaries, and anachronistic traditions that enslave us ...” (VII PCO, 4).

Like Francis praying before the image of the Crucified One, we seek hearts purified of that which impedes the building of fraternal relationships, the path to freedom. We seek in our own lives and in our fraternities the expansive freedom achieved by Francis who “embraced the plan of God for his creatures as a family of sisters and

brothers” (VII PCO, 1c).

**“AN ETHIC OF JUSTICE BASED ON THE FACT THAT WE ARE ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS”
(VII PCO, 6)**

3.1 This freedom builds justice. The Seventh Plenary Council cites the foundational experience of Francis’ conversion as the basis of a Franciscan *spirituality of justice*: “In Jesus, Francis was embraced as brother in a relationship which transformed what was bitter into ‘sweetness of soul and body’ [see Test 3]. ***Francis committed himself to a new world of redeemed relationships***” (VII PCO, 46). Franciscan justice is experiential, i.e., designed to be lived in the piazza, in the concrete circumstances of daily life. Therefore, the Proposal 46 provides an “ethic” or “praxis” which builds justice by healing broken relationships:

- to seek reconciliation above all (see V PCO, 86);
- to seek to achieve understanding and build empathy among parties in conflict;
- to allow each side to express its own experience within a conflict;
- to address the legitimate needs of all parties in a conflict;
- to live a model of solidarity among ourselves that ensures security for each brother and can also provide an example of solidarity for the world;
- to overcome ethnic, linguistic and national divisions through brotherhood;
- to be a voice among the voiceless;
- to consider the effects of proposed solutions on our sister, Mother Earth; and
- to denounce unjust policies and practices.

The duty “to denounce unjust policies and practices” is the *last* of a list of nine actions in favor of justice. Action for justice based on the triumph of individual rights rather than the healing of relationships gives denunciation a place of primacy! Furthermore, Proposal 46 presents this praxis of justice as “**our specific vocation.**” Franciscans must be experts in the praxis of reconciliation (see V PCO, 86).

3.2 The participants in the Seventh Plenary Council were thrown into confusion by the testimony of our brother (now bishop) Ambongo Besungu of the Congo who spoke of a poverty in the slums of our world cities which creates a violence wherein people’s “moral sense is compromised” and morality abandoned (see VII PCO, 48). In a world governed by self-feeding, self-perpetuating powers, we cannot embrace an authentic work for justice founded on reconciliation if we do not renew our vital contact with the victims of that power. The minority of Francis was born from the embrace of a leper and a migration to the poor and violent margins of the world outside Assisi (see VII PCO, 3). In order to build justice, we must renew our presence among the poor.

3.3 The Seventh Plenary Council urges the Order “to go out towards those forms of poverty [which] can generate new life” (VII PCO, 49). Proposal 49 suggests two concrete steps:

- a) “A physical change of place ... on the fringes of society, living in a simple, poor style.” Each circumscription is urged to have at least one fraternity among the poor (see VII PCO, Proposal 49 and Proposal 27b). If we are to be brothers of the poor, we must be present among the poor.
- b) “A sociological change, which requires us to live there with the desire not only to welcome the poor but also to be welcomed by them” (VII PCO, 49). There are several ways indicated for making our Order more accessible to the poor:

- “Undertake a serious discernment regarding the minority of our structures ... [which should be] simple, flexible and moderate in scale, far removed from power, money and influence” (VII PCO, 27);
- “Give up positions of publicly acknowledged, assured power, and choose instead those that are more accessible to the ordinary and poorest people” (VII PCO, 25);
- “All fraternities should commit themselves to a serious review of our lifestyle ...” (VII PCO, 26);
- “To complete initial formation ... service in a circumscription other than one’s own, especially in poor ones ...” (VII PCO, 29); and
- “Through ongoing formation we should ... provide ... promote ... periodic ... experiences of service to the suffering, of life shared with the marginalized ...” (VII PCO, 30).

3.4 The Seventh Plenary Council proposes nothing dramatic other than a path governed by the loving patience of God. During the Mass inaugurating his papacy, Pope Benedict XVI spoke these words: “We suffer on account of God’s patience. And yet, we need his patience. God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man.” Following this gospel way, each halting step can gradually lead the Order toward greater identification with—or what the proposal calls “baptism of the poor”—akin to that “which Francis received when he embraced the leper” (VII PCO, 49).

“A NEW COMMITMENT TO DIALOGUE IN THE SPIRIT OF FRANCIS” (VII PCO, 6)

4.1 “Let us make a conscious effort to be inclusive of others, in order to help prevent ethnocentrism from taking root in our fraternities” (VII PCO, 10). Living a vocation based on a world-embracing spirituality, part of one of the most ethnically and racially diverse religious families in the Church, the Capuchin Order has a particular calling to give witness to the power of the gospel to reconcile ethnic and racial divisions. Since I have recently written a paper on this topic – *Gospel Brotherhood in a Multi-ethnic World* – for the International Congress held at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in February of 2003, I will not elaborate further here. However, the various presentations and the “Letter from Addis” written at the conclusion of the Congress, give practical guidelines to assist our fraternities throughout the world.

4.2 “The Capuchin Order encourages our brothers in those countries where Christians are a negligible minority to bear witness to the gospel ... through word and example in a spirit of minority akin to that of St. Francis before the Sultan” (VII PCO, 16). In March of 2004, there was another International Capuchin Congress entitled, *Peacemakers through Inter-religious Dialogue*, held at Nagahuta, Indonesia. The various presentations and the concluding letter give practical guidelines and suggestions for our entire brotherhood.

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

accompaniment and support is often necessary in lands suffering ethnic division. The encounter between Francis and Sultan Malik al-Kamil is the model for our relationships with other religions. We can learn more about this by studying the encounter between Francis and the wolf of Gubbio, where the wolf is a symbolic code for religious intolerance and indifference. It is to be noted that Francis did not go alone to encounter the wolf of Gubbio. He was accompanied by his brothers. (For more on St. Francis and the wolf, see 5.2 below).

We can sustain our brothers and sisters in the face of fundamentalism, intolerance, and ethnic or racial discrimination by supporting the work of *Franciscans International*: “Franciscans International (*FI*) at the United Nations is our premier organization with which all jurisdictions in the Order should cooperate” (VII PCO, 50). Through *FI* we network with the entire Franciscan Family. *FI* has official status as a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) at the United Nations. Could not each jurisdiction assign one brother to familiarize himself with the work of *FI* and serve as a contact person? Our North American brothers have established an “Africa Desk” at the New York *FI* headquarters to bring the urgent needs of Africa to the attention of the United Nations and to familiarize our African brothers and sisters with the international resources available to assist in their ministries to the poor. The Geneva Office of *FI* has a training program for Franciscans involved in the protection of human rights. Could we not send brothers to be trained at Geneva? Building peace and justice through redeemed relationships means creating new relationships for justice. That is the precise purpose of *Franciscans International*.

“A CULTURE OF PEACE BASED ON THE CONFIDENT CHOICE OF VULNERABILITY”
(VII PCO, 6)

- 5.1 We were witnesses to the “confident choice of vulnerability” as we followed day by day the dying process of Pope John Paul II. His death was a proclamation of the sanctity of life. He, whose service as pope was marked by a constant reaching out to others, humbly thanked those who came to share the moment of his death. World leaders who otherwise would refuse to be in such physical proximity to each other, were found standing together around the simple coffin of the man who died with no material possessions whatever.
- 5.2 “One specific feature of Francis’ minority was his ability to look beyond peoples’ woundedness, limitations and sins and see the presence of God in everyone” (VII PCO, 43). This was an essential dimension of his ministry of peace. It is well illustrated in the legend of Gubbio. Francis speaks the truth to the wolf, telling him that his great anger and violence “destroys the creatures of God” and “human beings made in the image of God” (LFI, 21). Still, Francis is able to look beyond the anger and violence of the wolf addressing him courteously as “Brother” Wolf. Francis speaks the truth to the people of Gubbio, asking them to forgive, suggesting that the social climate in the town has contributed to the violent reaction of the wolf. In this manner, “we ought to be bridge-builders and pathfinders... [and] our fraternities should be focal points of peace and reconciliation in our neighborhoods” (VII PCO, 42).

“A FRATERNAL ECONOMY EVERYWHERE WE LIVE AND SERVE” (VII PCO, 6)

- 6.1 The Sixth Plenary Council said little about austerity since the ascetical aspects of austerity are well described in the Constitutions of 1982. The Plenary Council had another focus: “to deepen the meaning of our ‘**gospel poverty in fraternity,**’

specifically from the communal, institutional and structural point of view” (VI PCO, 4). The point of departure was not what Francis did, but what Francis *intended*:

Francis judged that greed and avarice disrupt relationships with God, just as ambition and competition damage the sense of brotherhood among people. In order to live the gospel ideal of love and brotherhood in its fullness, Francis and his first companions adopted ... courageous choices of poverty for those times (VI PCO, 6).

The expression “fraternal economy” does not appear in the proposals of the Sixth Plenary Council. Rather, the expression grew out of post-plenary council reflections. A *fraternal economy* prioritizes communion rather than the amassing or the protection of wealth. A *fraternal economy* includes four principle choices proposed by the Sixth Plenary Council: **transparency, participation, equity** and **solidarity**. Since these have already been described in other circular letters (see Circular Letters 14–17), I will not speak of these choices. VII PCO adds a fifth element to the fraternal economy: **austerity**. I wish to speak of the place of austerity in the fraternal economy.

- 6.2 “All fraternities should commit themselves to a serious review of their lifestyle, aiming for a real solidarity, avoiding unnecessary waste and the exaggerated use of vehicles and other tools of modern technology” (VII PCO, 26). In this proposal, austerity is more than an ascetical value, it mediates between solidarity and equity. The use of modern tools of technology varies greatly throughout the world. Think of the tools which have become ordinary and necessary to our lives in the past 10 years: cell phones, internet access, computers, and a host of other electronic devices. Access to the modern tools of technology is a major source of inequality in our world. Equity demands that the fraternal economy make available all that which is necessary, according to the diverse needs of each brother. Solidarity demands that the fraternal economy share resources between brothers and fraternities. In a world increasingly controlled by the “proliferation of desire,” an economy without austerity leaves nothing for solidarity: “Marketing and advertising collapse the distinction between necessity and superfluity. The reach of need and want run to infinity. The consumer is trained to exceed his/her satisfaction and to desire an infinite array of goods, products and services.”¹ Equity without austerity leaves nothing for solidarity! Austerity is a constitutive element of a truly “fraternal” economy.
- 6.3 Austerity roots the fraternal economy among the poor. An austere economy does not offend the poor. “We should ask ourselves whether our possessions are essential for the mission that is ours in virtue of our charism” (VII PCO, 26).
- 6.4 An austere economy is respectful of the environment: “We Capuchin brothers acknowledge our share of responsibility for the destruction of our planet (for example, the diverse forms of pollution and excessive exploitation of resources) ...” (VII PCO, 52). “In order to combat consumerism ... we agree to use judiciously, and preferably avoid altogether, consumer goods that are signs of power, ostentation and self-enhancement” (VII PCO, 53).

BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH AND AMONG THE POOR

- 7.1 Proposal 24 of the Sixth Plenary Council established eight principles which are the

¹David B. Couturier, OFM Cap., *Formation for the Fraternal Economy in the Capuchin Franciscan Order: A Psychological Analysis*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (2005), p. 93.

foundation for international economic solidarity within the Order. These principles have also created new bonds of solidarity among the fraternities of individual jurisdictions. Proposal 51 of the Seventh Plenary Council extends the fraternal economy to our ministries, particularly among the poor: “Works of social development/transfor-mation should aim to build the structures of a fraternal economy within society.”

- 7.2 The poor are the primary victims of a global economy built upon unfettered competition and the concentration of wealth. This economy keeps the poor in a condition of perpetual dependence which robs them of hope. “Works of direct aid to poor people should aim to connect people in need with people of means in a fraternal economy” (VII PCO, 51). Mutual dependence builds the brotherhood/sisterhood of the Kingdom. The Capuchin fraternity must be a mutual point of reference creating trust and brotherhood/sisterhood between the poor and persons of means. This is one reason why “assistance should not go from individual [Capuchin] to individual [poor person], but always through the fraternity” (VII PCO, 51).
- 7.3 The fraternal economy shining through Capuchin works of direct aid should ***unite poor people with poor people***. We see this illustrated in the encounter between the Prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (see 1 Kings 17:8-24). The widow is down to the last grains of meal, sufficient only to “prepare it something for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” Elijah makes what seems to be a self-centered and incredible demand: “... first make me a little cake and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son” (1 Kings 17:12-13). The widow and her son find salvation by reaching out to embrace solidarity with a neighbor: “The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail” (1 Kings 17:16). Solidarity among the poor sparked by our works of development can do more to transform their lives than the money we provide. We can build solidarity among the poor by involving them in an economy built upon the same principles as that of our brotherhood: transparency, participation, equity and solidarity. When social ministries are deprived of these fraternal principles, they can create destructive competition between the poor, each individual or family seeking its proper advantage without regard for others. This danger is particularly present in the poorest countries which suffer chronic lack of economic resources. Economic development springing from an economy of greed and competition divides the poor and has failed miserably to change their condition. We must use different values.
- 7.4 Jesus is our Savior! Our works of social development are but signs of his compassionate love. For this reason, the Seventh Plenary Council suggests that “preference should be given to those ministries where the brothers themselves directly serve the poor” (VII PCO, 51). Furthermore, there should be no competition between the social ministries of the brothers, each ministry seeking to amass an ever larger percentage of the resources available. Following the principle that assistance should always be given through the fraternity, the provincial fraternity should govern and coordinate the social ministries of the Province. Indeed, “when social development and direct aid programs sponsored by our Order can be done better by other groups, they should be handed over to them” (VII PCO, 51).
- 7.5 Another important principle is eminently clear and requires no comment: “Because these works often involve the exercise of great power, no brother should stay in a position of leadership or control for too long. To do otherwise risks abusing power and developing habits inconsistent with our life of minority. The norm of tenure for a brother in such a position might be similar to that of a provincial minister, i.e., no

more than six consecutive years” (VII PCO, 51).

CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Speaking about “courageous choices for a more fraternal world” (VII PCO, 6), the Seventh Plenary Council did not pretend to give an exhaustive list! Much less does this letter pretend to outline exhaustively the choices we must make. There are countless “courageous choices” which can build the brotherhood and sisterhood of the Kingdom. Could not each fraternity of the Order reflect on its particular challenges in local chapter, and each circumscription do the same in regional assemblies? The website of the Order offers an amazing opportunity to share the results of your reflections with the entire Order.
- 8.2 “Let us therefore often look toward the ‘virgin-made-church’ (SalBV, 1) ... to learn from her the spirit of humility, so that we may faithfully persevere in our vocation and mission in the Church and for the world” (VII PCO, 2c). Tradition teaches that the Church was born on the Cross from the pierced side of Jesus from which flowed blood and water. Mary perfected her call as “virgin-made-church” in that same mystery of the Cross. “Woman, here is your son” (Jn 19:26). In that very moment Mary accepted not only the beloved disciple, but all humanity in the embrace of motherhood ... including those who were crucifying her Son. She was not given the benefit of the empty tomb! She was called to forgive as Jesus forgave with a love beyond all human comprehension. At the foot of the Cross Mary became fully the “virgin-made-church.” After Jesus said to John, “Here is your mother,” the gospel immediately adds, “and from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (Jn 19:27). John’s Gospel records no response from Mary. Just as Jesus chose to make us his brothers and sisters, Mary chose to make us her sons and daughters. It was not an easy choice. May we look to the “virgin-made-church” to find the faith, love and courage to embrace those choices of minority which will build a more fraternal world.

Fraternally,

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General Minister

Feast of the Most Holy Trinity
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