

Circular Letter no. 1

To all brothers and sisters of the Order

“The only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14, Liturgy for the Feast of St. Francis).

Dear brothers and sisters,

The approaching feast of our father Francis offers me an opportunity to greet you in his name. The feast of Francis is a personal reminder to each of us to live the Rule and Testament of St. Francis and the Constitutions of our Order with utmost fidelity and wholehearted enthusiasm.

I wish to begin this reflection by touching upon a theme I already developed when the general chapter delegates celebrated eucharist at the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ was central to the conversion experience of Francis. Francis had personal experiences of the Crucified in the cross of San Damiano and in the leper. Both were deeply contemplative experiences, one experience completing the other. The cross of San Damiano symbolizes Francis’ lifelong search for unity with Christ in prayer – a search which caused him to withdraw to caves and deserted places for weeks and months at a time. The leper gave Francis a personal experience of the sufferings of the Crucified. Christ crucified in the cross of San Damiano, Christ crucified in the leper stand at the very heart of the Franciscan experience. Without San Damiano – without the long periods of prayer – Francis would have been a social worker. Without the leper, Francis would never have experienced Monte Alverna.

“We proclaim a crucified Christ ... a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-25).

Totally identified with the Crucified, Francis learned the wisdom of the cross. V PCO described this wisdom:

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

That Francis viewed the world from the “privileged position” of the poor is very clearly indicated in the *Regula non Bullata*:

And when it may be necessary, let them go for alms.... And should people shame them ... let them know that such shame is credited not to those who suffer it but to those who cause it. And alms are a legacy and a just right due to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us (Rnb IX, 3, 6-8).

Francis also learned from the cross the wisdom revealed to us in Ephesians:

“Christ ... is our peace ... reconciling us to God ... through his cross which put enmity to death” (Eph 2).

Peace and reconciliation were fundamental to the ministry of Francis. In his Testament, Francis claims that it was the Lord himself who revealed to him his trademark greeting: *“May the Lord give you peace!”* In his Canticle he sang: *“Praised be you my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love ... Blessed are those who endure in peace for by you, Most High, they shall be crowned.”*

Brothers and sisters, Francis and our Franciscan heritage speak very prophetically to our world today. The global economy views reality only from the viewpoint of balance of payments, economic realignments, rationalization of the means of production. The global economy has little time for those thousands of lives which lie broken by its sudden shifts and its thirst for profit. The world has urgent need for voices speaking with the clarity and the power of the gospel and viewing that same reality from the perspective of the poor. A Franciscan learns to interpret reality, not only from television news and the editorial pages of newspapers, but especially from the gospels and the lived experience of God's little ones.

Francis gained his passion for peace and reconciliation experiencing the familial, social and civic divisions and violence of Assisi and 13th-century Italy. The cross revealed to him another way. In Francis, vendetta gave way to reconciliation. The numbing, random violence which touches in differing fashion every corner of our world must awaken in us the same passion for peace and reconciliation. Christ is our peace! Christ has destroyed the enmity dividing Hutu and Tutsi, shopkeeper and drug addict, Serb, Croat and Muslim, economic refugee and unemployed citizen, Jew and Palestinian, husband and wife, father and child!

Brothers and sisters, as Franciscans, we have always been conscious of our special call to be united with the poor and to see the world through their eyes. In modern times, God has gifted our Order in a new and special way. We have become one of the very few truly international brotherhoods embracing all continents and almost 100 nations. This gives us a special responsibility to be bearers of peace. Francis contemplated Christ crucified in his neighbor, Francis contemplated Christ crucified in the cross of San Damiano, from this font of wisdom Francis inspired reconciling love in Arezzo, Damietta, Assisi, Borgo San Sepolcro. The disarmed heart of Francis inspired creative, reconciling peace in his world. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, recognizes this gift in Francis. May the

world come to recognize this gift in us, his sons! May a world burdened by enmity and numbed by violence find in us “disarmed hearts”.

As we celebrate the Feast of Francis, we take to heart in a new and hopeful manner the wisdom of the cross which is our heritage: **the point of view of the poor ... reconciliation and respect for creation.**

May the Lord give you peace!

Rome, September 2, 1994

Circular Letter no. 2

To all the brothers of the Order

Brothers,
Greetings from the General Minister and Definitory!

We are glad for the opportunity to share with you some brief reflections regarding the work we have accomplished and our vision of the task before us governing and animating our Capuchin brotherhood.

We met for three weeks during the month of September. Of the 26 sessions during those weeks, 10 (nearly 30 hours) were dedicated to presenting a panoramic view of the various jurisdictions of the Order and reflecting upon the Guidelines and Priorities for the Years 1994-2000, defined by the various regional language groups during our recent General Chapter (Analecta OFMCap, June-July 1994, 428ff). Obviously, this also allowed us some practice with "the

tools of the trade" and enabled us to get to know one another better, since most of the definitors are new. We undertook the imposing task of constituting - in large part, brand new - fraternities for the curia, the international college, St. Fidelis Guest House (Via Cairoli), and Frascati, and naming the official commissions that serve the Order. The search for personnel was, at times, indeed difficult. But a generous spirit of availability prevailed and we are grateful to both friars and communities who responded in that spirit. In addition, we have begun to plan meetings of the general definitory with the Conference of Major Superiors.

Thus, in a context of fraternal dialogue, we sought a better understanding of both the problems and the potential existing in the various regions of the Order - different by culture, sensibility and need - and represented by the variety of members on the definitory. During our common reflection several situations and needs within the

community emerged with particular urgency. For the present, we would like to

highlight the following:

- the renewal of fraternal life at the local level;
- evangelization;
- cooperation throughout the Order as a whole;
- the rethinking of structures of government (Ch. 8, Constitutions);
- and
- the reorganization of economic structures.

Faced thus with the challenge of situations that need attention and problems that need resolution, we encounter an invitation to authenticity and to commitment. The presence of these and other problems in the Order must not trap or paralyze us so as to make it impossible to overcome them. What is important, on the contrary, is to have guidelines for the future and reasons for hope.

For our part we have taken a first step toward responding to these challenges with the composition of the offices and commissions that serve the Order within the general curia. In particular:

- The Office of Formation, which is to focus its attention upon helping the formation personnel both in the old and young provinces; upon the growth of collaboration in development in this field; upon the importance of local chapters and all other means that render fraternities living and vital.

- The Office of Evangelization, a new organ, with a wide scope for the study and engagement of the global theme of evangelization as it confronts our Order: evangelization understood generally, not confined to the sense of "missionary," but taking in issues of secularism and individualism; evangelization as it addresses Islam and the other religions and sects; evangelization vis-à-vis inculturation; evangelization and the impact of the opening of Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, we envision this office having a direct link with the Office

of Justice, Peace and Ecology, since many challenges facing both are related. One specific

contemporary problem that we envision the JPE addressing vigorously is that of

violence, in both its obvious and hidden manifestations. This dramatic problem

ravages society at large, but is one that confronts us from within our fraternity as well.

- The Office of Research and Reflection is a body within the administration that we hope will assist the whole Order as it identifies and studies the many and varied problems facing Capuchins today. It is our hope that an office of this kind will help the ongoing

education of the Order.

- The Technical/Juridical Commission had been given the task of describing the competence of the chapter commission for the study of Chapter 8 of the Constitutions ("The Government of the Order") as envisioned by the general chapter.

We have approached the Holy See with the question of changing no. 116, 4 of the Constitutions, according to the vote of the recent general chapter.

At the same time, in accord with the desire of the general chapter, the
definitory has vigorously reaffirmed the commitment of former
general definitories
to the recognition of the fraternal charism of our Order.

- The Commission for Economic Solidarity will concern itself with the requests of the needier areas of the Order.

- In the establishment of the Office of the General Bursar/Treasurer we have followed the directions given by the general chapter, forming a group of three friars, acknowledging the desire for openness and the need to seek the technical assistance of trusted lay persons.

We have indicated three specific goals for the economic sector:

1. the implementation of an accounting system and a uniform method of financial reporting for the houses, funds and diverse projects that depend directly upon the general curia. Such a system needs to be easily understood while at the same time being clear and complete.
2. the introduction, within all the services that depend on the general curia, of a system of budgeting, in order to be able to present clear, advance information about the economic needs of the curia's various

structures and projects.

3. the establishment of three small groups of consultants and advisors to assist with and verify the work of the Office of the General Bursar/Treasurer in questions relative to finances, currency management and legal matters.

Within this context, we consider it necessary to examine our economic solidarity in the concrete: for instance, evaluating current practices regarding study burses.

As we have highlighted several times already, we want to give particular importance to collaboration at every level. It was very much on the minds of the brothers at the general chapter; we would especially like to help the regions of the Order that have need of formation personnel, as we have just begun to do, for example, with the communities in the South East Africa Capuchin Association (SEACA). In addition, many provinces have now begun to collaborate in initial formation. We encourage them to go forward on this road, notwithstanding the inevitable difficulties, sharing with others their experiments and the wisdom gained from their experience in this regard.

In the appendix of this letter it is possible for you to see that the list of the members of each office and commission is rather reduced. For the moment, in fact, we have chosen to form small groups so that in these first months they might reflect upon the scope, organization, programing, etc. relative to their offices. Following this we will finalize the membership.

We are not so foolish as to suggest that we have completed the work of initial planning for the sexenium in these first meetings. Our intention, on the contrary, was to make decisions only about those things that were most urgent. Then, during these last months of the year, we plan to visit and meet with the friars in our respective

zones in order to gain a clearer sense of specific situations and needs. We will gather for another plenary meeting during the week of 16-21 January 1995, and continue our work toward other decisions with better understanding.

In attempting to be faithful to the task given us by our brothers, we propose to serve and animate the Order with special attention to the following:

- our presence in the regions assigned to us, at chapters, assemblies, celebrations, visitations and conference meetings, to which we give priority as we formulate our calendars and program;

- the application of the principle of subsidiarity, thus asking, in many instances, that conferences, major superiors and local chapters assume some responsibilities;

- encouraging friars everywhere to work according to the priorities they established at the general chapter.

Finally, brothers, we wish to address an appeal to all of you at this moment in which the church, during the synod of bishops, reflects on the charism of the consecrated life. Ours is a call to radical and continual renewal, in order that we might recognize and respond to the challenges that face the Order, the church and society at the end of the millennium. Ours is a call to personal and communal engagement in prayer, service and reflection in a manner that will maintain the vitality of our Capuchin vocation and identity.

Rome, 4 October 1994

Feast of the Seraphic Father, St. Francis

Christmas Message

Circular Letter n. 3

Dear sisters and brothers,

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”
(Liturgical text, Christmas Midnight, Is. 9:1)

As we approach the feast of the Incarnation, so precious to our Christian and Franciscan traditions, I wish to share with you some of my reflections and the content of my prayer for the Order during this Advent and Christmas season. Isaiah accompanies our journey through Advent to the crib of Bethlehem. He is the preeminent prophet of Israel because he knows his people. He knows their stubbornness: *“Their neck is an iron bar”* (Is 48: 4). He names their sin: *“The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand ... The whole head is sick, the whole heart faint”* (Is 1:1-18). He can taste and feel their suffering. The first reading of Christmas is addressed to the people of Zabulon and Naphtali, Jews whose territory had been annexed to Assyria thirty years earlier in a Kuwait-like operation. They are cut off from Israel, no longer part of the nation, cut off from the covenant, the promise, without identity, without hope.

Isaiah speaks to the very heart of Israel’s stubbornness, sinfulness, hopelessness and fear: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”* To the people of Naphtali and Zabulon he promises no “Desert Storm” of liberation that will restore their political boundaries. Their freedom will rise from the very heart of their pain. Isaiah hints at something excitingly new: FROM THE VERY HEART OF YOUR DARKNESS, YOU WILL FIND AND NAME YOUR LIGHT.

“In those days Caesar Augustus published a decree...”

Luke has Isaiah’s feeling and sensitivity for the hopelessness and frustration of his people. Roman power was tightening its grip. The “Pax Romana” was a power rendering all equally powerless. It brought pain and dislocation to the likes of Mary and Joseph. It was anything but peace! Luke uses the very proclamation of suffocating Roman power to announce an event which had already taken place in which male power – epitomized by the “Pax Romana” – for once, had no part whatsoever: the virgin had conceived and was about to give birth to a son! Peace is proclaimed to shepherds ... those so insignificant that Roman power does not even bother to include them in the census! No one who comes to Bethlehem escapes Roman power ... but all are touched and visibly changed in the core of their being. Suddenly, the truth leaps down from heaven: FROM THE HEART OF YOUR DARKNESS YOU WILL FIND AND NAME YOUR LIGHT.

It was this insight that led Francis to Greccio. Francis wanted to take part in Bethlehem. He was not satisfied with beholding a spectacle as one views a game. He wanted to experience Bethlehem – its sight, its sounds, its smells. He wanted to touch and even to taste! Celano describes Francis at Greccio:

His mouth was filled more with sweet affection than with words. Besides, when he spoke the name ‘Child of Bethlehem’ or ‘Jesus’, his tongue licked his lips, as it were, relishing and savoring with pleased palate the sweetness of the words (1 Cel 86).

Celano indicates that the promise of Isaiah was fulfilled, “*the night was lighted up like the day*” (1 Cel 85):

The gifts of the Almighty were multiplied there, and a wonderful vision was seen by a certain virtuous man. For he saw a little child lying in the manger lifeless, and he saw the holy man of God go up to it and rouse the child as from a deep sleep (1 Cel 86).

Celano rounds off his account: “*each one returned to his home with holy joy.*”

From the heart of your darkness, find and name your light. Personal conversion is the invitation and promise of St. Paul: “*God’s grace has been revealed.*” This grace will light up your darkness and give you power “*to give up all that does not lead to God.*”

“*You have nothing to fear!*” (Lk 2:10): this is the angel’s message when we are trapped in fraternal relationships burdened by bitterness, real or perceived injuries, alienation and stagnation. “*God’s grace has been revealed!*” Embrace those in your midst gifted with reconciliation and forgiveness. Name your light!

When the aging of our provinces and the seeming inability of our gospel message to permeate the numbing indifference of our secularistic world robs us of hope, we hear with new ears the Christmas proclamation: “*A savior has been born to you, the Messiah and Lord!*” (Lk 2:11). With confidence and hope we begin with fresh vigor and enthusiasm to discover the light of God within the very secularism which oppresses us. Discover the light! Welcome the light!

Brothers and sisters, in the quiet of our personal prayer and meditation as well as in our fraternal conversations throughout this Christmas season, let us awaken within ourselves and within our fraternities a new Greccio experience; discover the light, live in hope!

“This day ... a savior has been born to you,
the Messiah and Lord.”

Rome, 1 November 1994
Feast of All Saints

Circular Letter n. 4

To all our Capuchin brothers
and our Capuchin Poor Clare sisters
Respective Residences

Dear brothers and sisters,

“If you speak of peace,
all the more so must you have it in your hearts...”
(*Legend of the Three Companions*, 58)

1. On 22 January 1995, two young Palestinian suicide bombers threw themselves into the midst of a crowd of equally young Israeli soldiers, killing themselves, 19 Israelis and wounding more than 60 others. Shortly afterwards, the brother of one of the young Palestinians spoke these words:

I cried a little at first, but later I stopped. When I saw the flesh and blood of Jews, I was happy.

Such a violent hatred causes the very humanity within us to wither. Such a violent hatred, all too common in our world, makes us feel somewhat like the brother who balked and even sulked at the suggestion of Brother Francis that he use the greeting “*God give you peace!*” (see *Legend of Perugia*, 67). This brother was ashamed to use such a greeting because he felt it would make him look ridiculous! We may not feel ridiculous, but we are certainly left with a sense of doomed futility as we confront our ministry of peace.

2. Yet, the ministry of peace and reconciliation is central to our Franciscan life and vocation. It is amazing how often Brother Francis spoke of this mission. I give but a few examples:

I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that, ... they do not quarrel or fight with words ... or judge others; rather let them be meek, peaceful and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone ... (RB III, 10-11; see also RNB XVI, 6).

The underlined phrase gives some idea of the importance Francis attached to this admonition.

The Lord revealed to me a greeting, as we used to say “May the Lord give you peace” (Testament 23).

The true peacemakers are those who preserve peace of mind and body for love of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite what they suffer in this world (Adm XV).

He always most devoutly announced peace to men and women, to all he met and overtook. For this reason many who had hated peace ... embraced peace (1 Cel X, 23).

3. This work of peace and reconciliation begins within ourselves, in our own hearts, within our own fraternities, in our own provinces. We will never have the ability to exorcise the demon of violence from human society unless we first address the violence present in our own lives. There is an anger and a violence which makes the whole world a desert. Our fraternities and our individual lives are not immune from this withering disease. Brother Francis had the courage to face the sources of violence in his own heart! There is a very revealing conversation between Francis and the Bishop of Assisi:

Bishop: It seems to me that it is very hard and difficult to possess nothing in the world.

Francis: My Lord, if we had any possessions we should also be forced to have arms to protect them, since possessions are a cause of disputes and strife, and in many ways we should be hindered from loving God and neighbor. Therefore, in this life we wish to have no temporal possessions (*Legend of the Three Companions*, 35).

Francis did not begin with a critique of his world. He began with a critique of his own heart. Francis found his personal “source of violence” in the desire to possess, to own, to control.

4. There is a call to conversion here: “*If you speak of peace, all the more so must you have it in your hearts!*” Before we can dismantle the armory of violence in our world, we must attend to our own hearts. We ask ourselves the question: What is my personal “source of violence”?
- 4.1 *Is it exaggerated individualism?* It is this that causes me to strike out in violence at anyone or anything which threatens or challenges my right to personal fulfillment and personal control over my own destiny. It is the rationale which underlies the “right” to abortions and, perversely, the violent reaction against it! Particularly as a North American, I must personally recognize this as a cultural reality of sin which I inherit.
- 4.2 *Are we simply coarsened by violence?* So much of the content of modern entertainment is conditioned by violence. Often violence is the entertainment! With modern techniques of vision and sound, the most violent events can be simulated with startling realism. How often do we allow the mass media to entertain us with such ugly pornography? How does this “diet” of violence affect our levels of toleration, our values, our hope? Writing in the context of virginity and celibacy, Br. Raniero Cantala-messa warns us to beware of the formidable power of seduction exercised by image in our

civilization:

The best way to overcome the seductive power of images is not to “fix our gaze” on them, not to become “enchanted” by futilities. If you look at them they have already won a victory over you. That, in fact, is all they want from you: that you would look at them. “Avert my eyes from pointless images,” we are taught to pray by one of the psalms (119:37).

These words apply with equal force to the efforts to master our anger and violence. And the remedy is also valid: *“Healthy fasting from images has become more important than fasting from food.”*

- 4.3 *Do we subscribe to institutional violence? Can a Franciscan truly believe in militarism, ever more repressive forms of incarceration and even capital punishment? Or are these simply signs of our fears and our sense of futility?*
5. *“If you speak of peace, all the more so must you have it in your hearts.”* If we would bring peace to our world, Francis teaches us the necessity to face with honesty the sources of violence which infect us. He also teaches us the reward of such honesty:

... May they be drawn to peace and good will, to benignity and concord through your gentleness. WE HAVE BEEN CALLED TO HEAL WOUNDS, TO UNITE WHAT HAS FALLEN APART AND TO BRING HOME THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR WAY (*Legend of the Three Companions*, 58).

We need to acknowledge the sources of violence in our hearts. That is the first step. The second step is to dismantle the armory of violence that has been grafted onto our makeup, creating that “false self” which wars against the Spirit of Christ. This is necessary if, like Francis, we will love the world with “disarmed hearts.” This is often a slow and painstaking work, requiring much reflection and

patience. It is a work that can only be completed by the grace of God, for which we humbly pray. It is in this spirit of confidence in God that I say to each and every one of you: God give you peace! And in the secure possession of that gift, we will be empowered by the Spirit to make that other well-known prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace!

Rome, 23 February 1995

Let Peace Prevail on Earth

Circular Letter No. 5

To all brothers and sisters of the Capuchin Franciscan Order

Dear brothers and sisters,

On 19 April 1995, a bomb exploded in the heart of Oklahoma City, in the United States of America, killing scores and wounding hundreds. "The truck bomb ... brought the terrible realization that America has bred its own sort of new political monster, one afflicted with hatred so malignant that only murder on a grand scale can satisfy it" (Time International, 1 May 1995). The richest and most powerful nation on earth experienced helplessness and rage in the presence of mindless violence against its citizens. What other nations have endured for decades has now been visited on American society. No one is immune.

Who can deliver us?

- 1.1 The terrible fear that grips our modern cities is based on the fact that with all of the modern techniques of police surveillance, with all the military might and nuclear power available, our modern cities cannot defend themselves against the irrational hatred of an individual or group. Whether it is a bomb in Oklahoma City or poison gas in a Tokyo subway, we feel helpless and vulnerable. We react: fearful withdrawal, protective barricades, angry calls for vengeance. But these are not solutions. They merely prove that we are hostages of fear.
- 1.2 It was such fear that Brother Francis encountered at Gubbio: "The citizens all lived in great fear ..., and they went about armed when they left the city, as though going forth to war" (Fioretti XXI).
- 1.3 With great simplicity the Fioretti announce the deliverance of Gubbio: "Placing all his confidence in God, [Francis] made the sign of the most holy cross and went forth from the city together with his companions." Francis' trust in God was based on the cross and brotherhood; these would be the instruments of deliverance.

CROSS AND BROTHERHOOD

- 2.1 The gospels contain many striking accounts of Jesus confronting and expelling the demon of violence from people's lives. One of the most dramatic takes place in the region of the Gerasenes. Jesus overcomes the alienation and pain that keeps the afflicted person chained to the demon violence, restoring him to calm self-possession. Interestingly, the local people had mixed feelings about what they had witnessed. They were afraid of the power of Jesus. Perhaps they feared that their own demons might be challenged.
- 2.2 Only once did Jesus resort to violent action, when he overturned the

tables of the moneychangers and chased them out of the temple precincts. It was not a typical action of Jesus. What does he teach through this event? Did he want to reveal his deep indignation with injustice, particularly when perpetuated in the name of religion? It is important to note, however, that he chose to turn away from it and he followed the road that led to Calvary. Jesus makes peace by the blood of his cross. His "strategy" for peace is not pacifism, but the practice of a love that is "stronger than death." It is with this power of the cross that Brother Francis went forth to meet the wolf, the sum of all the fears of Gubbio.

- 2.3 Long before he went invested with the cross to encounter the wolf of Gubbio, Francis had already raised the same cross high above the heads of his own brothers at the Portiuncula. The sacred scriptures describe the messianic age as an era of exceptional peace. Francis set about creating just such a "new Jerusalem" at St. Mary of the Angels. He called his brothers to intense prayer, sincere communion in brotherhood and the mutual bearing of burdens. We notice that respect for one another, especially in speech, was very high on the agenda of their lives. A brother guilty of detraction was made to beg pardon for his fault and recite the Praises of God aloud, so that everyone could hear him! (see *Mirror of Perfection*, 82) This effort to build gospel peace meant that Francis himself had to embrace the cross. Could not this effort help to explain his discourse on "perfect joy?" It was worth the price! Francis was able to carry the power of brotherly unity and evangelical peace when he went "together with his companions" to encounter the wolf of Gubbio.

DISPELLING FEAR

- 3.1 The cross and brotherhood determine the outcome: "Come to me, Brother Wolf, I command you, in the name of Christ, not to hurt me or anyone!"

- 3.2 Francis was able so speak the truth with love 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." Francis made no attempt to minimize the crimes of the wolf against the people of the town.
- 3.3 Francis was able to speak the truth with love to the people of Gubbio. He asked them to reflect upon how the social climate of Gubbio had contributed to the violent reaction of the wolf: "... such calamities were permitted by God because of their sins."

LEARNING FROM FRANCIS

- 4.1 If the victims of the Oklahoma City bomb were anonymous and chosen at random, the bomber himself was not anonymous. If police reports are correct, he has a name: Timothy. His presumed accomplices also have names: Terry and James. The rage that drove them was also known to others, even if the murderous results of that rage were not anticipated. Therefore, if police surveillance could not protect the victims, perhaps the words, "Come to me, brother Timothy! I command you, in the name of Christ..." could have changed the perpetrator.
- 4.2 Could not the cross of Christ and true brotherhood give a Capuchin the compassion, the courage and the coherence to utter these words? We will never touch the rage and violence which beset our neighborhoods if we do not begin within our own local and provincial fraternities. All too often we allow the "wolf" to dwell in our very midst: passive aggression, violent denunciation, alcohol and drug abuse, racism, sexual abuse and abusive ridicule. Our own brothers cannot experience healing and learn new ways of dealing with life unless our fraternities provide them with an honest and safe haven in which to open their hearts.

- 4.3 We often reflect upon and discuss the causes of violence in our world: poverty, alienation, discrimination, psychological and physical abuse. The causes are endless. Such awareness helps us to understand and this gives birth to compassion within us. However, only the cross of Christ and true brotherhood can give us the courage and power to reach out and touch the sources of pain in a Timothy, a James or a Terry (see Constitutions 99, 1-3).
- 4.4 Our fraternities must become schools of peace (see Constitutions 3, 1) where the rage we share with a wounded world finds the compassion and secure haven which will allow it to dissipate as the rage of the wolf dissipated before the firm but compassionate love of St. Francis. St. Mary of the Angels remains our assurance that such a school of peace will one day be a beacon of messianic peace touching the heart of a wounded brother or sister and allowing peace to flower in our world.
- 4.5 There is a "peace pole" at the entrance of our friary church, Our Lady of Fatima, in Brasilia. Written in four languages is the phrase: "Let peace prevail on earth!" Brothers, I pray that this peace - first welcomed and then allowed to prevail in our fraternities and provinces - will flow forth to fill the earth. The first saint of the Capuchin reform, Brother Felix of Cantalice, was certainly one who did precisely this as he walked the streets of Rome, speaking peace by his simple and joyful acceptance of every citizen. May his life inspire our efforts to let peace prevail on earth.

Faternally,

Feast of St. Felix of Cantalice
18 May 1995 - Brasilia, Brazil

FAITH SHARING ON THE GUBBIO STORY

Preparation: Read the story of the wolf of Gubbio (Fioretti XXI) twice. First, with your mind, then with your heart. Ask for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Is there such a story in your life? Is there a "wolf" in your community or province? Is there a "wolf" inside you?

Read and reflect upon the following gospel passages: Mt 5:21-26, 43-47; Mk 11:25; Lk 6:27-36, 23-34a.

Fraternity Sharing:

1. A member of the group introduces the shared time with a few words of explanation and some "rules for faith-sharing" (e.g., that we seek to share in faith, that we listen to one another without engaging in a discussion of the content of the other's sharing, etc.).
2. Pray together, Veni Creator Spiritus.
3. Read aloud all or part of the Gubbio story (Fioretti, XXI).
4. After some time for silent reflection, those present are invited to share.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Have you (or someone close to you) been touched by violence in a personal way? For example, have you been robbed or attacked? How did this affect you?
2. Is there a "Gubbio story" in your life? Can you share it?
3. Where is the wolf of Gubbio in our particular situation? How can we make peace with it?

Concluding Prayer:

Individuals are invited to pray spontaneously.

All recite the Our Father together.

Leader: Father in heaven, form in us the likeness of your Son, and deepen his life within us. Send us as witnesses of gospel joy into a world of fragile peace and broken promises. Touch the hearts of all with your love that they in turn may learn to love and forgive one another and find true peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 6

To all the brothers of the Order

Dear brothers:

1.1 In September 1996, the Order will celebrate a congress with the theme: “The Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Vocation.” This congress has already evoked considerable interest in the Order. It has also evoked a few questions and perplexities. Two of the most common questions raised are:

1) “For the past 30 years it has been an important goal of our Order to unite cleric brothers and lay brothers and to erase inequalities between them. Does not this congress militate against these important goals?”;

3) “Is it a goal of this congress to define a new image for lay brothers in the Order? If so, what is this image?”

1.2 I wish to reflect with you on some of the concerns which caused the

general defintory to convoke this congress and, in the process, offer some response to the questions and perplexities raised.

- 2.1 I begin my reflections with the General Chapter of 1982 and article 84.3 of the Constitutions approved at that chapter:

“By reason of the same vocation the brothers are equal.”

“... the brothers are equal” has been a preoccupation of the Order for the past 30 years. While I am sure exceptions exist in fact, equality of the brothers in fraternity is an accomplished fact in law. The only remaining “inequality” refers to the ability of lay brothers to assume offices in our Order. Concerning this matter, we have an ongoing dialogue with the Holy See. However, within our Order and its legislation, no such inequality exists. The positions assumed by the General Chapters of 1982, 1988 and 1994 – with the overwhelming support of the assembled capitulars – are absolutely clear and unequivocal. No congress of the Order is required to ensure the equality of brothers in fraternity and, should that be the focus of the 1996 Congress, I agree that it would tend to be counterproductive.

- 2.2 The issue of equality tends to overshadow the first part of article 84.3 which, I suggest, is much more important: *“By reason of the same vocation”* This statement is so important that, to give it constant and visible expression in our daily lives, the Constitutions immediately add this phrase: *“For this reason, according to the Rule, Testament and earliest custom of the Capuchins, let all of us be called ‘brother’ without distinction.”* The forceful and absolutely clear statement in article 84.3 ends years of ambiguity. When I entered the Order in 1959 it was not a clearly accepted principle that all brothers had “the same vocation.” Rather, there were two vocations: the vocation to the priesthood and the vocation to the lay brotherhood, existing in one Order. Because of diversity of vocation, there were two novitiates, two recreation rooms, two

distinct places in the refectory, and even two distinct chapels. Because of diversity of vocation, there arose a discussion of the relative importance of each vocation and the inevitable devaluation of the lay calling in our Order. While the Order has undoubtedly overcome the consequences as they apply to the equality of the brothers, it has not reflected in depth on other consequences. I wish to suggest a few.

- 3.1 The brothers are equal, they are not identical! Cleric brothers and lay brothers have the same vocation, but their different callings in the church and society mean that they have differing experiences of living the same vocation. Each experience brings its own richness to our common vocation. We have but to think of the contribution to our spirituality of St. Lawrence of Brindisi or Bl. Diego José of Cadiz and that of St. Felix of Cantalice or St. Conrad of Parzham. The Constitutions of 1982 represent a marvelous and inspired redefinition of our Capuchin presence in the modern world. They are the result of our return to the spirit of our founder, St. Francis, and a re-appropriation of our early Capuchin traditions. The Constitutions are the result of study and research. However, they are also the result of the shared reflections on the lived experience of brothers from different areas of the world gathered in many general chapters, beginning in 1968, five plenary councils, and many international commission meetings. Because of the consequences of the ambiguities referred to above, lay brothers, by and large, have not shared in these reflections on an international level. There were no lay brothers at the Chapters of 1968, 1970, 1974, 1976 or 1982. There was one lay brother present in 1988 and two in 1994. Participation by lay brothers in plenary councils, although somewhat more consistent, was always completely overshadowed by a great majority of cleric brothers. Therefore, lay brothers have never had an opportunity to reflect on our common Capuchin fraternal life from an international perspective. As a result, the Order as a whole lacks the richness which only such a reflection can offer. It is an

important goal of the 1996 congress to offer such an opportunity. The General Chapter of 1982 (where 100% of the participants were cleric brothers), reflected on the fraternal life experience of all the brothers, and was not divisive of the Order. In the same way, the Congress of 1996 (where 75% of the participants will be lay brothers) will be a congress of the entire Order and reflect on the fraternal life of all the brothers. (It is important to note that this will not be a “Congress of Lay Brothers;” it will be a congress of the entire Order in which lay brothers will constitute the majority of the members!) Far from being a divisive experience, it can only bring enrichment to the lives of all.

- 3.2 Traditionally, Capuchin cleric brothers have been preachers and confessors, Capuchin lay brothers have been questors and porters and involved in fraternal services. While the Order deeply values the preachers and confessors of our Order, the “image” of the Capuchin cleric has developed far beyond these traditional roles. This development has occurred, not because of a new “definition” of the Capuchin cleric, but rather in response to the needs of the church and society. Rather than giving definition to our ministerial role, our Constitutions define the relationship of these roles with our core values such as fraternity, poverty, minority, etc. Just as the Order continues to value the “traditional image” of cleric brothers even as their roles evolve, so our Order values and will continue to treasure the traditional “image” of our lay brothers even as their roles in the church and society evolve. We are also conscious that the needs of the church and society invite such an evolution in the role of our lay brothers as agents of gospel love in the world. This demands that the Order also encourage our lay brothers to continue to develop their presence and roles in society and in the church beyond the roles traditionally assigned to them. Such a development is already underway. However, it requires dialogue and reflection. Since there is usually only a small number of lay brothers in each province, it has been very difficult for them to reflect in a serious

way on their evolving role in the church and society. The 1996 Congress will not attempt to “define an image” of lay brothers in the Order, but it will offer our lay brothers a unique opportunity to share experiences and reflections across international and continental boundaries. It is hoped that this will have a positive influence upon the development of their presence in the Order, in the church and in society.

3.3 *“Since the fraternal gospel life holds the principal place in our calling, let the same religious formation be provided for all brothers ...”* (30.2). This essential principle enunciated by our Constitutions should eliminate all distinctions and inequalities during initial formation and give new depth to the religious formation of both cleric brothers and lay brothers. In many areas that is beginning to happen. However, in many circumscriptions, particularly those in which brothers begin studying philosophy and theology immediately after novitiate, the corresponding initial formation of lay brothers effectively comes to an end. Furthermore, serious difficulties still exist on the level of “special formation” of lay brothers.

The church offers a concrete model which all must follow for the special formation of clerics. Therefore, practically every circumscription of the Order can enunciate a serious program for the philosophical, theological and pastoral preparation of those brothers pursuing priestly ministry within the church. This is not the case when we speak of the special or ministerial training of lay brothers. Few provinces can enunciate a clear program for the special formation of lay brothers. In some cases it is simply presumed that lay brothers will dedicate themselves to manual labor. While this is an honored and precious option within our Order, it is an option which should be discerned and not presumed. Furthermore, those for whom other services and ministries are discerned must be given the special formation necessary and adequate for the service.

This question is of vital importance for the entire Order and for the church. If the church is to be an effective instrument of evangelization in the new millennium, it must unlock the evangelizing gifts of the laity. Fraternity – with the consequent equality and unity of cleric brothers and lay brothers – is the foundational charism of our Order. This gives our Order a special responsibility to provide concrete role models to the wider church. This question of the special formation of lay brothers opens still another fruitful area of reflection for the 1996 Congress.

- 4.1 The 1996 Congress is a moment of grace for the entire Order. I am personally very grateful for this unique opportunity to hear and share the experiences and gospel aspirations of lay brothers from across the world. We cannot expect miracles from a 3-week congress! However, it is my fervent prayer and that of the general definitory that the 1996 Congress will initiate a dialogue within the Order which will deepen our common vocation to live and proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the footprints of our Brother Francis.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap.
General Minister

13 October 1995

Circular Letter No. 7

SHRINES AND POPULAR DEVOTION IN OUR CAPUCHIN TRADITION

To all the brothers and sisters of the Order

Dear sisters and brothers,

- 1.1 On 12 December 1994, Pope John Paul II inaugurated the 7th centenary of the Shrine of Loreto, presiding at a solemn eucharistic celebration where he was joined by the cardinals and bishops of the entire nation of Italy. The President of Italy and numerous civil dignitaries were in attendance. The 30 or more Capuchin brothers who minister to the 3.5 million annual visitors and pilgrims were scattered among the people they have served so well.
- 1.2 The hidden presence of the Capuchins was entirely consistent with their history at the shrine. From the earliest days of the Capuchin Reform, the friars engaged in tasks of service, assisting the poor and sick pilgrims and seeing to the cleaning and maintenance of the Holy House and the basilica, the provision of altar breads and washing of liturgical linen. Ancient chronicles tell of our brothers, after Vespers, cleaning the Holy House on their knees (Monumental History of the Capuchins, XIV, 424, 427-429).
- 1.3 The shrine also had an important influence on the early Capuchin fraternity. Colpetrazo wrote that the first friars used to build their churches on the model of the Holy House of Loreto in order to imitate its poverty and to relive its climate of lofty contemplation (MHOC, IV, 23). The friars settled permanently at Loreto at the end of the 16th-century, first in two successive hospices, and finally in a friary built for them behind the shrine by Cardinal Antonio Barberini, brother of Pope Urban VIII. In 1934, Pope Pius XI entrusted the shrine of Loreto to the friars together with all its varied pastoral,

liturgical, promotional and cultural activities.

- 1.4 Our Order cannot allow this important centenary to pass without expressing warm gratitude to the Province of the Marches and the many brothers of other provinces for the devotion and sacrifice with which they have served and continue to serve the Shrine of the Incarnation, its visitors and pilgrims.
- 1.5 At the same time, the centenary of this major Marian shrine offers an opportunity to reflect upon our presence and ministry at the many shrines entrusted to our Order.
- 2.1 Throughout its long history, the charism of our Order has often been nourished by isolated churches in the countryside or in the mountains. These later developed into sanctuaries or shrines, oases of peace, islands of prayer, stimuli for a renewed sense of faith and religion among the people. Usually they were small places, far from the city centers, frequented by relatively small numbers of people. In general, the large, important shrines – such as Loreto, Altoetting, or more recently, San Giovanni Rotondo – are exceptions.
- 2.2 By far, the greatest number of shrines are dedicated to Mary, most often venerated under a local title. In 1750, the friars were entrusted with the care of the Shrine of Tirano (Valtellina, Italy), which had been built as a bulwark of Catholicism against the “encroachments” of Protestantism (*Lexicon Cap.*, 1710). There are also shrines dedicated to various mysteries of the life and person of Jesus such as the “Jesus de Medinaceli” in Madrid. The Celle of Cortona and the Hermitage of Montecasale are living links with the foundation of the Franciscan Order. St. Francis Shrine at Caninde-Ceara (Brazil) is dedicated to the Stigmata of St. Francis. Many shrines are dedicated to St. Anthony: Cuatro Caminos in Madrid, Lac Bouchette (Québec), Zaragoza (Aragon), etc. Often the shrine contains the body of a Capuchin or Franciscan saint or blessed and attracts

crowds of devotees: Brother Joseph Thampy Ashram in Andhra Pradesh (India) contains the body of that holy, itinerant SFO hermit; St. Bonaventure Friary-Chapel in Detroit (USA) contains the body of Venerable Solanus Casey; the shrine of St. Joseph of Leonissa is home for that saint's remains.

- 3.1 The documents of the church, our Constitutions and documents of the various plenary councils of the Order summon us to examine our presence and ministries in these many and diverse sanctuaries.
- 3.2 The First Plenary Council (Quito) – nearly a quarter of a century ago (1971) – was concerned for our communal witness to poverty. It was held at a period of conciliar renewal which placed little value on popular devotion and piety and such things as novenas, blessings, processions and the cult of the saints. Quito made a rather negative and restrictive recommendation:

Concerning shrines, the real need for our presence there should be verified; if such a need is lacking, the shrine should be given up. In the future we should not build any shrines or accept any that are offered to us, since they occupy too many religious who could give their service especially to the missions and to the poor. We should avoid ways of raising money unbecoming to our spirit of poverty. Also, our apostolate should be integrated with the pastoral program of the local church (I PCO, 58).

Even if we see some of Quito's recommendations in a new light, it still has a valid message for today. In particular, we continue to appreciate Quito's strong call to poverty and detachment from the desire for money, our service to the poor, and our insertion into the local church.

- 3.3 The Latin American church rediscovered popular religious sentiment as the concrete historical synthesis of the people's faith and cultu-

re. The Medellin Document of 1968 and especially the Puebla Document of 1979, stressed the place of the people as a “*locus theologicus*,” so that popular religion and devotion becomes a sign of the times in the church today.

3.4 The Puebla Document declared that popular religious piety has given Latin American culture its identity and spiritual unity, imbued with faith and often possessing its own appropriate forms of popular catechesis (n. 412). The people, formed by this piety, possess a wisdom with contemplative features manifested in a unique, lived relationship of the poor with nature and with other people. This gives a character to work, service, festivals, friendship and family ties, the dignity of which is not lessened by the poverty and simplicity of their lives (n. 413). Therefore, Puebla maintains that popular religious sentiment is not only the object of evangelization but, in so far as it contains an embodiment of the Word of God, it is an active form by which the people continually evangelize themselves (n. 450).

3.5 Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* saw in popular piety a concrete expression of evangelization embodied in local cultures, and he listed its gifts:

It reveals a thirst for God which only the simple and the poor can experience; when we speak of faith witness, it renders one capable of generosity and often heroic sacrifice; popular piety has an acute sense of the profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, a constant and loving presence; it gives birth to interior gifts in a measure rarely observed elsewhere: patience, a sense of the cross in one's daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion (n. 48).

Pope John Paul II loses no opportunity to reaffirm the importance of this religious sentiment as a cultural incarnation of faith and as a

safeguard of Christian culture. He has personally visited the two most famous Marian shrines entrusted to the pastoral care of our Order: Altoetting and Loreto.

3.6 The Code of Canon Law directs shrines to proclaim the Word of God, to celebrate the liturgical and sacramental life of the church, and to foster approved forms of popular devotion (c. 1234.1). The Fifth Plenary Council gave the following criteria: the fundamental values of our fraternal life, sensitivity to human values and the pastoral plans of the province and local church (n. 53). The Constitutions direct that shrines of our Order be “*centers of evangelization and of sound devotion*” (151.4).

4.1 Pilgrims come in ever increasing numbers to Assisi, the central shrine of the Franciscan family. They come to encounter Francis as universal brother, friend of the poor, man of the gospel, sign of peace and reconciliation, and God’s voice of praise in the midst of creation. Were these not the fundamental motives for which 10 years ago the most prominent of all pilgrims, Pope John Paul II, chose to accompany 100 religious leaders from around the world to this shrine of St. Francis? Is it not remarkable that popular devotion so well defines the essential charism of the Franciscan movement? Popular devotion spontaneously seeks to experience and assimilate in Francis and Clare the gospel values which can transform the life of a world in search of its new common destiny. This speaks eloquently to all Franciscan shrines. The “spirit of Assisi” can be consciously created in other shrines, each according to its own special charism, whether these have international, national or local significance.

4.2 Shrines “of the people” – of popular devotion – should contain friars who are “men of the people,” ready to welcome and serve pilgrims like the early friars of Loreto. It is this tradition which the Constitutions stress:

... let us joyfully live among the poor, the powerless and the weak, sharing their life, and let us maintain our special approach to people (4.4).

We are challenged to make pilgrims sense that they are our brothers and sisters rather than our clients. Pilgrims must experience Franciscan hospitality: *Pax et Bonum* and all that this rich greeting implies.

A visit to a shrine, when guided by one competent in the history and spirituality of the shrine and sensitive to the needs of contemporary people, can itself be an excellent instrument of practical catechesis.

Toward the end of his life, Br. Antoine-Marie de Likochine, a Capuchin of Russian origin and member of the Province of Savoy, enjoyed spending several months each year at Montecasale. He guided pilgrims and visitors to the sanctuary with a great spirit of faith and depth of humanity. He was remembered for years with great affection by both foreign and Italian pilgrims.

- 4.3 Many who come to our shrines are moved by that popular religious sentiment described by Puebla as containing an embodiment of the Word of God and, therefore, being itself a form of evangelization. This popular piety prepares them to hear the Word of God on a new and deeper level. The recent provincial chapter of the Province of Foggia approved a plan to develop a program of evangelization and Franciscan spirituality at the Shrine of San Giovanni Rotondo. Such efforts to develop programs of evangelization which depart from and build upon the popular religious sentiment which attracts people to the particular shrine can only have the most positive effects for the spread of the gospel.

The Province of Portugal founded and continues to direct the biblical movement in that country. Many people are introduced to the reading of the Word of God by means of programs which run for two hours

each evening on five consecutive nights. It is an approach which combines many features of the popular mission with the widespread diffusion of the Word of God. As a result of such work, 3,000 or more biblical prayer and reflection groups have been established in Portugal. Such a program could add a strong evangelization thrust to many of our shrines, especially those of local or diocesan nature.

In 1510, Maria Lorenza Longo visited the House of Loreto, felt miraculously cured of paralysis, underwent a conversion and decided to devote her life to God and the care of the sick. In 1535, she founded the first Poor Clare Monastery of the Capuchin Reform in Naples. People of faith make pilgrimages not only when they are in need of favors, but also in response to a call from God to discern a fuller response to the mystery of his love. For this reason, those shrines which attract large numbers of youth are also places where vocational guidance programs should be established to help channel the generosity of youth to the service and life of the holy gospel.

4.4 *“We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us”* (Rom 8:26). A thirst for God and a desire to discover the meaning of life draws many men and women, adults, youth and children to our shrines. They come to the shrine as to a “holy place” – “sacred ground” – where they enter into a place privileged by God.

This thirst for God is a gift of the Spirit and requires a place of silence and prayer where the pilgrims can again find themselves, rediscover the basic values of their lives by experiencing a recollected, silent contact with God within their own hearts.

This thirst for God is deepened by a joyful and liturgically updated celebration of the eucharist, the sacrament of reconciliation, and the liturgy of the hours, the preaching of the Word of God, courses of spiritual exercises, retreats, conventions and days of recollection.

The brothers at the Celle of Cortona (Italy), as well as at several fraternities of the Province of South France and the Vice Province of Savoia, have established “Schools of Prayer.” Br. Ignacio Larranaga of the Province of Chile has developed a similar program with his *Talleres de Oración*. Building on the tradition of the earliest Capuchins, these many and varied programs teach people the art of prayer (see Constitutions 53.6).

The Poor Clare Sisters of Grenoble (France), supported by all the other branches of the Franciscan family, have made their monastery a center of guided, prayer experience for all: pre-school children, youth and adults. Building on their own charism of prayer and adoration, the Sisters share this charism with others in a very unique way.

4.5 The first Capuchin ministry at Loreto was a service to the poor and sick pilgrims who came to the house of Mary seeking her maternal love. The welcome we offer to pilgrims should be evident, especially in the tender love we exhibit toward the poor. In recent days I received a greeting from an association entitled: “Ramo d’amore Oasi Padre Pio da Pietrelcina” dedicated to the care of the sick. At the end of September I attended a celebration wherein an early medieval confraternity of the city of Seville (Spain), dedicated to the service of the poor, was formally affiliated to the Capuchin Order. The reason? Two hundred years ago, our Capuchin brother, Blessed Diego José of Cadiz was a member of that confraternity and gave it a strong orientation toward the poor. Our shrines should be homes for the poor not only by the charity which they inspire, but especially by reason of the message and coherent vision of justice which they proclaim.

4.6 We are “*ambassadors for Christ. ... We implore you in Christ’s name: be reconciled to God!*” (2 Cor 5: 20). Shrines attract many who seek peace of heart. The ministry of the sacrament of

reconciliation remains an indispensable part of the ministry of our shrines. We are facilitated in this by the esteem and trust of the people. The advice of Brother Francis to a minister is given to all confessors as well: *“There should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may have possibly sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy...”* (Letter to a Minister, 9).

During a recent visit to France, the Bishop of Carcassonne made a special effort to visit me in order to express the gratitude of the local church for the presence of the brothers in the diocese. The bishop gave this reason: *“When we visit the friary, we sense that we are among men of God!”* People visit our shrines to encounter “men of God,” men of prayer who have encountered the Spirit in the depths of their own hearts (see Constitutions 45.1-2), and are thus able to recognize the movement of the Spirit in the hearts of their neighbors. They come to encounter “men of God” ready to listen to the story of their lives, to help them see the hand of a loving God in the tragedies and joys of their lives, and to assist them in recognizing the signs of the Spirit of God guiding their future. Not only should our shrines be places to encounter compassionate confessors, they should also include persons trained and experienced in spiritual direction which is a felt need of many religious and laity today.

- 4.7 Popular devotion as well as the personal intervention of our Holy Father Pope John Paul II have made the shrines and the city of Assisi an instrument of peace in the world. Each of our shrines can be a catalyst of peace. One of our friaries in Ireland is in a small city where the local church is deeply divided over the bishop’s decision to renovate the cathedral. A friar wisely remarked: *“We must avoid taking sides. When the decisions are finalized and the work is completed, there will be a residue of bitterness and division. That will be our moment of grace!”* Last year I received a letter from a lady in Switzerland speaking of her home village in Italy where a

Capuchin shrine had existed for hundreds of years. She gave eloquent testimony not of individual friars, but of the Capuchin fraternity as a bond of unity among local parish communities divided by misunderstandings and petty rivalries. Each and every shrine of our Order can foster such civic and ecclesiastical harmony.

- 5 Each shrine of our Order is a privileged focus of the popular devotion of our people searching for true human brotherhood, reconciliation and peace of heart. Each shrine of our Order is a privileged encounter with hearts open and thirsting for the experience of God. This gives each of our fraternities at the various shrines entrusted to our Order an opportunity to develop its unique incarnation of “the spirit of Assisi.” Brothers, we rejoice with the friars of the Province of the Marches as they join the entire Christian community of Italy in the celebration of the 7th centenary of the Shrine of Loreto. May the Virgin of the Incarnation bless us as we attempt to give new birth to the Word of God in our world and in the hearts of the men and women whom Providence sends to our doors.

Fraternally,

Shrine of the Incarnation - Loreto
30 October 1995

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 8

Christmas 1995

To all the sisters and brothers of the Order

Dear sisters and brothers,

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ...”
(Gospel, Third Mass of Christmas)

- 1 When I was a child, this was the “last” gospel. Proclaimed at the end of every Mass, it contained the promise and challenge which Christians carried forth from each and every celebration of eucharist. Today, the modern liturgy proclaims the special nature of the prologue of John’s gospel by proclaiming it only once each year, during the Christmas season. To medieval Christians, these were words of promise which they enclosed in precious lockets and carried over their hearts. Saint Francis, true to his age and his faith, was filled with wonder at the splendor of this fact:

Oh, how holy and how loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all things to have such a Brother and such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave up his life for his sheep ... (The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful, 13).

- 2.1 The preface of the Mass for Christmas states: *“The Eternal Word has taken upon himself our human weakness, giving our mortal nature immortal value.”* Francis worshiped that “Eternal Word” enfleshed in “human weakness.” He served lepers, washing their bodies and ministering to their needs, thus worshiping the crucified body of his Lord Jesus Christ. He shared what he had with the poor because *“alms are a legacy and a just right due to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us”* (The Earlier Rule, IX, 8).

2.2 If John understood so profoundly the content of the mystery of Christmas, Isaiah understood its **human significance**:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace ... (Is 52 [First Reading, Third Mass of Christmas]).

Isaiah's powerful proclamation of hope is all the more incredible when we realize that it forms the prelude to the Second Song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh which the church will next proclaim during Holy Week. Jesus is our hope because he has "*become sin for us*" in order that we might become "*the holiness of God*" (2 Cor 5:21). In assuming our weakness, Jesus has become our peace.

Imitating so completely "the Word made flesh," Francis became "the holiness of God," the one "who brings glad tidings," announcing peace, reconciliation and reckless love to people who had lost a sense of brotherhood. He proclaimed love for creation to a world blind to its beauty.

2.3 Worshiping Christ revealed in human weakness and suffering ... imitating the Lord in his poverty and minority ... making our lives the good news of peace to our world, these remain also today our true celebration of the Christmas feast.

3.1 Yet Christmas should not overwhelm us with challenge, rather it should fill us with joy. Abbot Marmion defined joy as "the echo of God's life within us." Christmas causes me to pause and to listen with gratitude to that echo which sounds within our worldwide brotherhood.

3.2 See how they worship Christ revealed in human weakness and frailty:

* Brothers Vincent and Giles who serve our sick brothers in the infirmary of Altötting;

- * The “Grupo de Ajuda para a Vida” in the AIDS hospice in São Paulo;
- * Hundreds of hospital and prison chaplains in 90 countries of our world;
- * The “Ciudad de los Niños” for street children of Lima, Peru;
- * Hundreds of brothers who daily give bread to the hungry, welcome to the homeless, extend brotherhood to the emotionally disturbed.

These are the **“echo of God’s life within us.”**

- 3.3 See how they strive to imitate the Lord in his poverty and minority:
- * Bishop Jacob Acharuparambil, both legs amputated, his left side shaking uncontrollably with palsy, his right side paralyzed by a stroke, unable to speak but communicating courage and faith through eyes alive with tender love;
 - * Two thousand or more postulants, novices and simply professed brothers who continue to be inspired by the ideals of Francis;
 - * Hundreds of brothers on every continent who seek new ways of living among the poor.
 - * Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters whose simplicity, fraternity and deep contemplation testify to the life of God within.

These are the **“echo of God’s life within us.”**

- 3.4 Rejoice with our brothers who strive to make their lives peace for the world:
- * The brothers of Downpatrick (Belfast), in Northern Ireland;
 - * Brothers in Djibouti, Comores and many other Islamic lands who attempt to build bridges of understanding and human compassion;
 - * The Capuchin martyrs of Rochefort whose testimony of forgiveness and reconciliation is recognized only today – 200 years after their death.

These are **“the echo of God’s life within us.”**

4.1 The joy of Christmas is not merely intellectual or sensible, it is spiritual, embracing the whole person. It needs to be cultivated in our personal lives and in our fraternities. The joy of Christmas has its origin in faith and blossoms in hope and charity. If the prevailing atmosphere in which we live is not suffused with joy, then an essential ingredient is missing. In these days, when we claim responsibility for the physical environment, it is ironic that we sometimes act as if the “spiritual environment” is not our responsibility! Brother Francis reprimanded the brother with the sad face, urging him to take responsibility for his demeanor and take steps to change it. He would have no compromise with that sadness which he called “an abiding rust.” When joy fails, our witness fails – and everything else we do is in vain. Here are some steps we might take to banish sadness and cultivate spiritual joy: sincere meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation; availing ourselves of the sacrament of reconciliation; communal examination of the spiritual atmosphere of our fraternities; taking to heart St. Francis’ teachings on joy (especially 2 Cel 125-129); opening our minds and hearts to the Advent Liturgy in preparation for Christmas.

4.2 *“The Word became flesh!”* These words awaken memories of the joy of midnight Masses of my childhood. My parents taught me to genuflect with great reverence at these words of the last gospel. After Mass, they led me to contemplate with awe and excitement the vision of that reality in the parish creche. May the “echo of God’s life” within our brotherhood allow us to contemplate the Christmas crib with new eyes of faith and gratitude that even today *“The Word is made flesh!”*

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap.
General Minister

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 9

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord
2 February 1996

“He has sent you into the entire world that in word and deed you may give witness”

(A Letter to the Entire Order, 8).

To all of the Ministers and brothers of the Order

Dear brothers:

1.1 The general definitory has just completed two weeks of meetings and reflection regarding the life of our international brotherhood. Our reflections have benefitted greatly from our personal experiences of the life of the brothers in many provincial chapters and pastoral visits. In the past 18 months, the definitors have been able to visit virtually every circumscription of the Order. I have been able to meet the majority of the brothers in 80 of the 150 different circumscriptions of our Order. In October 1995, we also began meeting with the conferences of the Order. These experiences, as well as the many reports and letters arriving at the general curia, cause us to write to you to propose a number of concerns and challenges which we consider to be important for the life of the Order. We will also propose various ways in which we can begin to formulate a gospel response to these concerns and challenges as we live the closing years of the millennium.

“Let them give witness that they are members of one family”
(RB VI.7).

- 2.1 The continued growth of the fraternal charism of our Order is of critical importance. The nature and characteristics of our gospel brotherhood are the central concern of our fraternal visits. Fraternity is not only a gift we offer to one another, it is our privileged manner of announcing the reign of God! This demands that we speak constantly of the quality of common prayer, build fraternal understanding, and read the signs of the times in local chapters, collaboration in ministry, living common life with nothing of our own, our presence and commitment to the poor and all other values of our gospel life.
- 2.2 We are continuing our dialogue with the authority of the church regarding the formal recognition of the fraternal character of our Order. The synod “On the consecrated life and its role in the church and in the world,” offered hope that the existence and unique character of “mixed institutes” would be fully recognized. Our hope is also strengthened by the fact that the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has established a commission with a mandate to give a legal description of such mixed institutes. We are very grateful to the congregation that a member of our Order has been appointed a member of this commission.
- 2.3 It is to be hoped that the September 1996 Congress on “Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Vocation” will give new impetus to the development of our fraternal charism and new depth to the reality of the mixed character of our Order.

“Afterwards I lingered a little and left the world” (Testament 3).

- 3.1 The Constitutions of 1982, as well as the five plenary councils, give us the ability to describe the ideals of our Order with great clarity, concreteness and precision. They represent a truly marvelous consensus uniting brothers dispersed throughout the entire world and many different cultures. The Order has also benefitted from the

four great international congresses dedicated to formation and held in the years following the 1982 chapter. These congresses have given rise to programs of initial formation in the provinces which truly pass on the ideals so well expressed in our Constitutions.

- 3.2 Still, the general definitory has serious concerns about the postnovitiate phase of initial formation. The principles of the Constitutions are very clear when they state that during the entire period of initial formation, formation in and for Capuchin Franciscan life must have priority (30.2). However, with few exceptions, this priority has never been achieved in the postnovitiate period.
- 3.3 In general, the seminary model of postnovitiate formation – centering upon the philosophical and theological preparation of our friars for ordination to the priesthood – continues relatively unchanged. The growth in affective maturity, adult faith and the interiorization of the fraternal and contemplative values of our Capuchin life are made to fit the structures of seminary, intellectual development. As a consequence, these three areas – crucial to the development of a Christian and religious vocation – are given priority only during the novitiate. The general definitory strongly believes that the experience of the Order leads to two inescapable conclusions: first, the human and religious development described above cannot be accomplished in one year; and second, the pressure and intellectualized atmosphere of the university or the seminary is not the proper setting to foster such human and religious growth initially. The definitory wishes to stress that it strongly supports the intellectual preparation of our brothers for the ministry of priesthood and for other ministries in the church and the world. However, we are equally convinced that it cannot be allowed to suffocate the human and religious development upon which the intellectual development depends.
- 3.4 Affective maturity, adult faith development and the interiorization of the fraternal and contemplative values of our Capuchin life have

always been important to our Order. Formerly, although candidates were somewhat younger when they sought admission to our Order, they came from more stable family and social backgrounds and they had matured in faith communities which enjoyed centuries of lived Christian tradition. In this social and religious context, affective maturity and adult faith grew naturally within the stable fraternal setting of our seminary communities. Capuchin values imparted during novitiate could likewise reach interiorization within such a setting. The “seminary” model of religious formation corresponds to the needs of candidates emerging from such a social and religious context. Yet, such a context no longer exists! The fractured social context of our world creates special difficulties in the affective development of all persons, including those called to religious life. This experience also complicates fraternal interaction. The absence of experience of the communal dimension of Christian life and the lack of a consistent faith practice over many years, means that the experience of faith has not taken deep root in the lives of our candidates. For these reasons, even though candidates come to our Order at a more mature age than in former years, they still require more time. Affective maturity, adult faith and the interiorization of the values of our Capuchin Franciscan life require more than one year. For this reason our Constitutions wisely insist that formation in and for our life have priority during the entire period of initial formation, including the postnovitiate phase.

3.5 The pressure and intellectualized atmosphere of the university or the seminary is not the proper setting to foster such growth nor does that setting provide the proper “tools.” It is our conviction that the large number of dispensations during the postnovitiate period and after final vows clearly indicates the consequence of an intellectual appropriation of values which never takes deep root in lived experience.

3.6 Finally, the “seminary” model of postnovitiate formation has left

our Order, in effect, with no adequate postnovitiate program for the religious formation of the lay members of our Order. In most provinces, our lay brothers' formation is treated as an adjunct to the house of philosophy or theology. Worse still, in many circumscriptions our younger lay brothers are simply sent out into the fraternities with practically no formal formation after the novitiate experience. It is the considered opinion of the general definitory that the problems so evident in the religious formation of our lay brothers are equally present in the religious formation of cleric brothers, however, these problems are simply masked by the intellectual ferment of philosophical and theological studies. The problems of faith and affectivity simply reappear later. We also believe that the continuation of the seminary model of formation also leads inescapably to the continuation of the strong clericalization of the Order.

3.7 A number of provinces and circumscriptions have already begun to develop new “tools” and structures for the postnovitiate phase of initial formation. The experience of these provinces seem to indicate that the following elements are important:

- the ministry of direct service to people especially on the level of the corporal works of mercy;
- guided reflection on what it means to be a lesser brother in the world today;
- an intense fraternal life of prayer and common life;
- a spiritual accompaniment equal to that already provided in the novitiate experience;
- regular (e.g., weekly) theological reflection with other brothers on the same level of formation and with the director on the integration of all of these values into lived experience;
- regular periods (e.g., every three months) of spiritual retreat and prayer away from the intensity of work to personally interiorize the experience.
- Integration and interiorization require time in a brother's life.

3.8 For all of the above reasons, the general defintory will propose that the provincial ministers and those brothers responsible for initial formation particularly on the postnovitiate level, initiate a study of these matters on the conference (or interconference) level. We will be sending these brothers more detailed and specific information. It is hoped that the wisdom learned from our combined experience can assist the Order in developing a more adequate program for the growth in adult faith, affective maturity and the interiorization of Capuchin Franciscan values during the postnovitiate period.

“Let them always love and be faithful to our Lady Holy Poverty”
(Testament of Siena, 4).

4.1 Evangelical poverty is one of the principle distinguishing characteristics of a Franciscan presence in the world. Living the evangelical ideal of poverty always remains a challenge and a call to reform within the Order. Our Constitutions give concrete expression to this ideal as it is called to be lived in our individual lives. However, there are many troubling questions concerning the communal and institutional expression of our evangelical ideal of poverty which are not addressed or which are inadequately addressed in the Constitutions.

4.2 Our Constitutions identify an ideal: *“Let the brothers show people by their life that voluntary poverty liberates them ... from anxious concern for tomorrow”* (67.1). We must live in obvious dependence upon providence. Furthermore, we seek to live from the fruits of our own labors and with real dependence upon the people whom we serve. How do we give concrete expression to this ideal of dependence on human and divine providence in very widely diverse circumstances?

•In provinces which habitually experience a modest surplus of income over expenditures, it can be mean determining what

percentage of the following year's budget can legitimately be held at the end of each year. However, what does it mean in those many circumscriptions in the southern world where there is a habitual, large deficit in the ordinary income of the circumscription?

- What provisions are permissible and necessary to assure adequate care for the sick and elderly in a world in which societies have such wide divergence in the provision of social assistance?
- Where it is deemed justified to maintain investments to provide a level of security for initial formation, the sick and the elderly, what type of investments are consistent with our ideals?
- How does the ideal of poverty influence the instruments of our various ministries? Diversity of ministry often leads to a wide diversity of lifestyle, even between brothers and fraternities of the same province.

4.3 *“The individual fraternities of the same area and even the provinces of the Order should be ready to share their goods or necessities among themselves ...”* (67.6). There is need to discuss international solidarity within the Order. Past structures of financial solidarity were built upon concepts of juridic dependence. Provinces were financially responsible for custodies or missions entrusted to their care. An increasingly large portion of our international brotherhood is in need of financial assistance. At the same time, these circumscriptions no longer retain juridic or even traditional ties with regions of the Order which have the capacity to assist them. How can new structures of international solidarity be created which do not denote dependence, and at the same time do not require an unacceptable level of financial centralization within the Order. How can we give international witness to the principle of the Rule: *“Wherever the brothers may be, ... let them show that they are members of the same family”* (VI, 7).

4.4 *“We will truly proclaim to the poor that God himself is with them in so far as we share in their lot”* (59.8). The challenge to “share

in their lot” is very difficult even in societies which make elaborate provision for the social welfare of their citizens. However, when we use criteria and structures created for brothers in the economically developed area of the world to determine the structures and criteria for the life of the brothers in other areas, we impose insupportable burdens upon them. How do we define “sharing the lot” of the poor in societies where poverty is total misery?

- 4.5 *“Let us preserve a common life and willingly share among ourselves whatever we receive as individuals”* (61.1). How can our expression of common life be enriched by concepts of family ties which arise from Asian or African concepts of family rather than from the more individualistic values of western civilization?
- 4.6 The Fifth Plenary Council made the following recommendation: *“To implement the Constitutions (60.6), we should effectively foster fraternities which enable us to be present among the poor and the marginal”* (V PCO, 40). V PCO gave rise to a good number of fraternities of insertion among the poor. The Order can profit greatly from a sharing of challenges and experiences. It is also important to evaluate the gospel witness of these fraternities from the perspective of the other core values of our charism – such as the witness of brotherhood and the witness of contemplation.
- 4.7 For all of the above reasons, the general definitory has the intention to convoke a plenary council of the Order to treat the question of evangelical poverty, especially in its communal and institutional dimensions. The general definitory feels that a plenary council is the proper tool with which to deal in a serious and thoughtful manner with a topic so vital to our Capuchin Franciscan ideal. We profoundly believe that a plenary council on the topic of evangelical poverty will release new gospel energy in our Order. After consulting with the presidents of the various conferences of our Order at a meeting already scheduled to be held at the end of August 1996, we hope to

convoke such a plenary council in the latter half of 1998.

The way the brothers should go about the world (RB III)

- 5.1 The gospel stands at the very heart of the Franciscan charism: “*The Rule and life of the friars minor is this: to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (RB I, 1). The charism of Francis – like that of every religious founder – has two dimensions. The charism reveals Francis’ faith vision of Jesus Christ. The charism is also a glimpse of God’s preferential love for humanity revealed in Francis. Francis had a profound sense of this reality: “*No one showed me what I had to do, ... the Most High himself revealed to me ...*” (Testament, 14).
- 5.2 When speaking about the third millennium, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II often refers to the challenge of evangelization. The Holy Father invites us to reappropriate with renewed clarity and new force God’s preferential love for humanity revealed to us in Francis.
- 5.3 Jesus revealed himself as servant – washing the feet of his disciples – and bequeathed this act as his solemn *mandatum* to his followers. Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John was the definitive model which Francis gave to his brothers as well. John 13 reveals not only how the brothers must treat one another, but how they are to relate to the world: as lesser brothers.
- 5.4 Francis’ renunciation of power is every bit as radical as his renunciation of possessions. We live as lesser brothers our contemplative vocation to worship and obey when we make ourselves servants of the signs of the Spirit of God in the world: “*For God who has loved us first, speaks to us in many ways: in all creatures, in the signs of the times, in people’s lives, in our heart ...*” (Constitutions, 45.2). We live as lesser brothers when our

lives are placed at the service of peace, justice and respect for nature: *“The point of view of the poor is the privileged position from which we, the sons of Francis, consider and proclaim these values. Reconciliation and respect for creation are the means Francis gives us in order to reach true peace and harmony”* (V PCO, 86). We live as lesser brothers when we place our lives at the service of the human family, seeking to bind the world together in universal brotherhood. Our Constitutions describe our special calling in this regard: *“While exercising among ourselves the freedom of brothers, let us joyfully live among the poor, the powerless and the weak, sharing their life, and let us maintain our special approach to people”* (4.4).

5.5 The Capuchin Order is among the very few religious congregations having a presence in the entire world. This gift of universality, which the Holy Spirit has made the privileged characteristic of the modern era of our Order, gives us an experience of the global diversity of gospel challenges. The gift of universality carries with it a special responsibility to formulate a gospel response in word and deed consistent with our charism.

Living gospel brotherhood as minors:

5.6.1 *In a secularized world* Most friars can describe with passion and clarity the negative effects of secularism in our world: decreased attachment to religious practice, lack of consensus on critical moral choices, precipitous decline in vocations to consecrated life and disappearance of many traditional ministries to society and the church. Yet within the very experience of secularism, our Order must appear as Jesus appeared in Galilee: *“proclaiming the good news of God”* (Mk 1:14). Therefore, we are called to be the yeast of the gospel within secular society. At the same time, we are to find nourishment and inspiration for faith within the very signs of alienation which surround us.

5.6.2 *Among Islamic peoples* As Franciscans, we have shared life with Islamic peoples for more than 700 years. Today, Islam is a presence and challenge to the entire world. Can the qualities of brotherhood and minority enable us to find new unity in our mutual concern for suffering humanity and our common faith in the One True God?

5.6.3 *In Orthodox societies* The almost spontaneous collapse of communist totalitarian regimes has suddenly opened up new opportunities to establish our presence in countries and societies with an ancient tradition of Orthodox Christianity. In these nations, the Orthodox churches are emerging from years of oppression, suppression and political subordination. We are challenged to bring the richness of our Franciscan gospel tradition to these lands in such a manner as to be respectful of the even more ancient Christian traditions which precede us.

5.6.4 *In a multi-religious world* Asia is the birthplace of the great world religions. Especially in Asia, our Order is emerging from its missionary origins and seeks its proper cultural identity in a society distinguished by its multi-religious nature and in which Christianity is a tiny minority. This offers us a unique challenge to enrich and be enriched by the great religions of the world.

5.6.5 *In young churches* In many areas of the world fraternal life has been subordinated to the missionary responsibility of implanting the structures of the church. This has imparted to the younger circumscriptions of our Order, particularly in America, Asia and Africa, a predominant involvement in the parochial structures of the diocesan church. As we emerge from our missionary past, it is important to discover that fraternity itself is an evangelical force for the church and the world. This challenges us to re-envision our presence in parochial structures from the perspective of fraternity. It also causes us to reflect more deeply on the other charismatic

dimensions of our Capuchin Franciscan identity and how these may also enrich the life of the local church.

5.7 Our response to these evangelical challenges has two important dimensions:

5.7.1 None of the evangelical challenges is experienced in the same manner throughout the entire world. Our response must be determined in each local church. The Fifth Plenary Council requested that each circumscription of our Order formulate “*a pastoral plan which will clearly articulate our new apostolic presence in the world*” (no. 52; see also Organizational Letter of the General Definitory, “... *Moving to Action*” of 2 February 1989) The majority of circumscriptions in our Order have responded to this challenge. Most provinces have formulated or are in the process of formulating a pastoral plan. Both the process and the concrete plans which have resulted from the process are invaluable in the evolving response of our worldwide brotherhood to the challenge of evangelization.

5.7.2 Since the Holy Spirit has made us a universal brotherhood, our evangelical response should have a universal vision. In fact, our Order experiences every great challenge of evangelization today in some part of the world. Yet, an individual province cannot possibly formulate a universal vision of evangelization both because of the restrictions of place, as well as the restrictions imposed by limited resources.

5.8 For the above reasons, the general definitory suggests that the entire Order could profit greatly should various conferences or areas of the Order decide to conduct regional congresses dealing with the great themes of evangelization as they are experienced in that particular conference or area. Two examples will suffice:

5.8.1 The secularization of society is a world phenomenon experienced

in every part of the world. However, the experience varies greatly as to both content and diversity. Few would deny that secularism – whether considered in itself or as a dimension of “postmodern” society – has had perhaps its strongest influence in northwest Europe. The entire Order would profit from the faith-inspired reflection of these brothers on the experience of living gospel brotherhood as minors in these particular societies.

5.8.2 Islam is an important reality on every continent. However, our friars living in Islamic republics have a very intense and often difficult experience of the Islamic reality. Could not a congress of brothers from the Islamic republics help our worldwide brotherhood establish a new understanding and respect for one of the world’s great religions?

5.9 The general definitory will cooperate with any conference or group of conferences that may wish to attempt to formulate a plan or vision of evangelization which goes beyond the confines of an individual province. We see this as an invaluable contribution to our Order’s attempt to fulfill its role in the mission of the church to proclaim by word and deed its faith in our Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

6 In keeping with the intent of the *General Statutes for Conferences of the Order* approved at the Chapter of 1994, the general definitory will convoke a meeting of the presidents of the conferences of the Order at the end of August 1996. The general definitory wishes to hear the observations and suggestions of all of the conferences on these important matters regarding the life of our Order in the world. The general definitory welcomes discussion and dialogue on these topics between the brothers of the Order and the ministers. Together we wish to discern with ever greater clarity the role of our brotherhood in the church and in the world.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap.
General Minister

CIRCULAR LETTER NUMBER 10

Christmas, 1996

To all the sisters and brothers of the Order:

Dear sisters and brothers,

“The Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.” (Luke 2:20)

1.1 G.K. Chesterton once wrote: “If I had only one sermon to preach it would be a sermon against pride”. This statement comes as no surprise from one who admired and loved Francis of Assisi. Francis had correctly identified pride as the cancerous growth that spoiled the innocence of humanity. From the humility of the Incarnation he learned that pride is destroyed by the sermon-in-action which we Franciscans have come to know as “minority”. It was what the shepherds saw in the manger of Bethlehem. They were so taken up by what they had “*heard and seen*” that they returned to the care of the lambs “*glorifying and praising God*”.

Good News for the Poor

2.1 At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus indicated that he had been sent “*to bring good news to the poor*” (Luke 4:18). Jesus had

already embraced the “ministry of minority” in the manger of Bethlehem, where he was manifested to the shepherds and to the world as “**the lesser brother**”. St. Paul contemplates this wonder of wonders in the famous hymn he shares with us: “*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*” (Phil. 2:6-7).

2.2 Later in the gospels, the poor and little ones are named first citizens of his reign. One day Jesus was invited for dinner at the home of one of the leading pharisees. Those in attendance were “the important people”- leaders of religion, government and commerce. Jesus was an outsider. He was not an honored guest, but a curiosity, a conversation piece! He chose this setting to tell a parable of the great dinner which ends by saying: “*none of those who were invited will taste my dinner*” (Luke 14:24). Why? The rich and powerful of this world, - *those who matter* - are too busy with worlds of their own making to accept the invitation of Jesus. They are not excluded by Jesus! They, too, are invited, but they are too preoccupied with other business. Jesus *wants* to share his world with them, but they turn down the offer. The only ones who will share the new life are “*the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame*” (Luke 14:21), the little ones of this world who have the time and the need for God.

2.3 In John’s gospel, Jesus described this gathering of the lesser ones as a brotherhood of love: “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*” (John 13:34). Furthermore, Jesus indicates clearly to his apostles and disciples that such a fraternity of love is built by the ministry of minority. The follower of Jesus is forbidden to seek places and titles of honor. Rather, “*the greatest among you will be your servant*” (Matt. 23:11). In John’s gospel, the washing of feet is the event which constitutes the Eucharistic community:

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

The Humility of Jesus Heals our Pride

3.1 Francis was so completely overwhelmed by the humility of Jesus revealed in his incarnation that he could scarcely find adjectives to describe it (see the First Version of the Letter to the Faithful 13). He quickly took to heart its evangelical message and set about establishing that “fraternity of the lesser ones” which Jesus named as possessor of the secret of the kingdom of God: “I want this fraternity to be called the Order of Friars Minor”. Celano describes what it signified: “And indeed they were ‘*lesser brothers*’ who ‘*being subject to all*’, always sought a place that was lowly and sought to perform a duty that seemed in some way to be burdensome to them so that they might merit to be founded solidly in true humility... And like living stones, gathered from all parts of the world, were erected into a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit” (1 Celano 38).

Minority described the relationship between the brothers and the relations of the brothers with their neighbors. This is clear from the writings of Francis himself:

“And no one should be called Prior, but all generally should be called Friars Minor. And the *one should wash the feet of the others*” (The Earlier Rule, VI, 3; see also Admonition 4).

“And they must rejoice when they live among people (who are considered to be) of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” (The Earlier Rule IX, 2).

“None of the brothers should be administrators or managers..., nor

should they be supervisors in the houses in which they serve, ... instead, they should be the lesser ones and subjects to all who are in the same house” (The Earlier Rule VII, 1).

“... all the brothers in this regard should not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves” (The Earlier Rule, V, 9).

3.2 Francis clearly grasped the healing power of humility by studying the humility of God in the Incarnation. Later he would describe “Sister Water” as “useful, **humble**, precious and chaste”. Ordinary, everyday water, taken for granted by most, yet essential to our lives, facilitates many transformations yet remains unchanged in its own being. Water that always seeks the lowest place. Humility makes us capable of love and service. The handicapped author of the bestseller Under the Eye of the Clock, described his feelings when a friend of the family tried to help him find a school that would meet his special needs. He called for a typewriter and signaled his gratitude by writing the words: “You are very humble to care about me”. These words express the sentiments of Francis in the presence of a humble God who cares for each one of his creatures, cares enough to become one of us, even to die for us.

3.3 The manger of Greccio reveals to us the evangelical power of Franciscan minority. After describing the Eucharistic celebration and the preaching of Francis, Celano tells us that a “virtuous man” saw a child in the manger wake from sleep at the touch of Francis. Then Celano takes us to the heart of the Greccio event: “This vision was not unfitting, for the child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant St. Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory” (1 Celano 86).

This event takes on greater significance when we remember that Celano also points out that “the brothers were called from their

various places” (1 Celano 85). The minority of Francis and his fraternity of lesser brothers gave the same reality to the manger of Greccio as the shepherds experienced in the manger of Bethlehem. Faith was reborn: “At length the solemn night celebration was brought to a close, and each one returned to his home with holy joy” (1 Celano 86).

Putting up the Crib

- 4.1 As we approach the Feast of Our Lord’s Birth, brothers in all of our friaries throughout the world will begin setting up the Crib which is so characteristic of this season. The crib - no matter how ornate - remains a lifeless piece of art unless enlivened by that fraternity of lesser brothers which gave life to the manger of Greccio. These closing days of Advent give us time to create an *authentic* setting for the Christmas crib, namely, that brotherhood of grace which is characterized by true *minority*. The presence of the crib in our churches and fraternities is a real catechesis only when it is supported by the witness of lesser brothers. The ceremony of placing the infant solemnly in the manger at Midnight Mass can become a moment of revelation and invitation for those whose hearts are hungry for peace and joy.
- 4.2 In our personal meditation as well as in our conversations with one another, we can attempt to give concrete expression in our personal and communal lives to the prescription in the First Rule of St. Francis: “... all the brothers in this regard should not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves” (The Earlier Rule, V, 9). Our *Constitutions* 84:3-6 give precision to this minority between brothers:
- “let all of us be called brothers without distinction” (84.3).
 - “the precedence necessary for the service of the fraternity flows from the responsibilities and roles actually exercised” (84.4).

--“all offices and responsibilities are to be available to all brothers, although paying attention to those which require sacred orders” (84.5).

--“everyone should help another according to the gifts he has received, even in daily household chores” (84.6).

- 4.3 Advent is also a time to consider the heart of Franciscan obedience: a common search for the will of God in submission to the Holy Spirit, the “General Minister” of our Order. Our *Constitutions* tell us:

“ By virtue of our commitment to live in obedience, without regard to distinction of office, let us strive for the last place in the community of Christ’s disciples, serving one another in a spirit of charity and remaining subject to every human creature for God’s sake. This is true obedience, as manifested in the life of Jesus Christ in the form of a servant. Docile to the Holy Spirit (and)in a fraternal sharing of life, let us search for and fulfill God’s will in every even and action (155: 1-3).

This common search calls us to empty ourselves of the false gods of individualism and self-importance. Francis models for us an obedience that is *true and loving*, an obedience which presupposes the fraternity of the brothers and finds its identity in and through this fraternity. Obedience is equivalent to faith; and faith is having listening ear. Faithful listening, obedient listening: this is *true minority*, the gospel in action.

- 4.4 The Lucan account of the birth of Jesus says: “*There was no place for them in the inn*” (Lk.2:7). There was room for others, but not “**for them**”. Yet, by excluding the poor carpenter and his pregnant wife from Nazareth, the innkeepers cutthemselves off from the revelation of the glory of God. Bethlehem tells us that every new revelation of God’s presence in human form begins with the

brotherhood of the weak and the powerless of this world: in the holy partnership of Mary and Joseph, in the community of the humble shepherds. The Christmas crib asks us to make room “**for them**” - the poor and excluded. In our local chapters, in meetings with our pastoral collaborators, in conjunction with parish committees we can ask how the Crib can lead us to give priority to the forgotten and the excluded: ***It is there you will find Him.***

- 4.5 As in the days of Greccio, the true meaning of the birth of Jesus “has been forgotten and lost to many”. May the experience of the Crib, erected in the midst of fraternities of lesser brothers - lead many back to the source of salvation - Jesus.

Fraternally,

br. John Corriveau
General Minister, OFM Cap

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 11

Evangelical Brotherhood

To all the brothers of the Order:

Dear brothers:
May the Lord give you peace!

The Congress on the Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Fraternal Charism, held in Rome during the month of September 1996, was a historic moment in the life of our Order. It was the first congress of

the entire Order in which the majority of participants were lay members of our Order. The congress requested that the general definitory address a letter to the Order regarding our essential charism: the invitation of the holy gospel and the Rule of St. Francis that we create in the world an evangelical brotherhood.

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

1. **The appeal of the Pope**

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

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

The content and importance of this statement is enhanced by the fact that the Holy Father himself puts it in the context of the post-Synodal

Apostolic Exhortation, *The Consecrated Life [Vita Consecrata]*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

elements of such a fraternity:

A fraternity of lesser brothers — servants to the world;

A contemplative fraternity;

A poor and austere fraternity;

A fraternity inserted among the poor;

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

A fraternity filled with human warmth.

In summary: an *evangelical* fraternity.

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

- 1.4 “After the Lord gave me brothers” was a clear watershed in the life of Francis. From that time on, he always saw the call to be brother as his primary response to the holy gospel. In the end, he felt a loving relationship with everyone and everything. Every single creature was his brother or sister, every stone and stream, his home. He spoke of “brother” Sun, “sister” Moon, “brother” Wind, and “mother” Earth. Through grace, Francis arrived at the point where there was no violence or division within him, nothing to divide him from his neighbor or creation. Celano says that Francis, purified through such an intense living of brotherhood, returned to original innocence (see Sr. Frances Teresa, OSC, [Living the Incarnation](#)). This quality of brotherhood encountered in Francis and his early fraternity opened human hearts to the message of the holy gospel. Brotherhood was his chosen tool of evangelization. The letter of 18

September 1996 is a very clear mandate of the church to embrace this fraternal evangelical project of St. Francis.

Evangelical Fraternity Defines our Capuchin Vocation

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

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

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

2.2 That a *fraternity* seriously read the signs of the times and recognize the stirrings of the Spirit of God among the people, it is not sufficient that the brothers individually read about great world and national events. The creation of a *fraternity* inserted among the poor requires more than a change of location or change in the physical structure of the friary. It demands a mental and spiritual journey on the part of the brothers. To effectively work for reconciliation and the reign of justice likewise demands that a *fraternity* engage in serious reflection in the light of the gospel. “*Wisdom ... is found by those who seek her. ... she will be found sitting at the gate*” (Wis 6:12, 14). Francis did not find the key to peace and justice in far-off Rome or at the

court of the Holy Roman Empire. He began his quest in his own locality at the entrance of Santa Maria degli Angeli, and together with his own brothers. In the same way, a serious effort to give evangelical witness demands of us an effective use of the local chapter. The local chapter must animate our fraternities to give more transparent witness to the gospel values which form the foundation of our way of life.

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

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

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

“For this reason, according to the Rule, Testament and the earliest custom of the Capuchins, let all of us be called *brothers*, without distinction” (84.3). Even our manner of addressing one another gives emphasis to our common call to brotherhood in discipleship. It is our way of proclaiming: “*There is ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*” (Eph 4:4-6).

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

“Everyone should help one another according to the gifts he has received, even in daily household chores” (84.6). Gifts are given by the Holy Spirit not for our personal prestige, but for the service of our brotherhood and for the world. St. Francis himself refers us to Chapter 13 of John’s gospel in which Jesus defines the nature of true Christian service: “And no one should be called Prior, but all generally should be called Friars Minor. And *the one should wash the feet of the others [see Jn 13:14]*” (RNB VI, 3-4; FF 23).

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

Evangelical Fraternity Defines our Presence in the World

3.1 St. Francis understood that the church was born as a community.

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

- 3.2 Francis perceived himself as brother and this fact determined his mode of ministering, of proclaiming the holy gospel. All too often this perception is reversed among us. Too many brothers find their identity in their ministry, and fraternal life is totally predicated on this ministerial identity: ministry determines participation in common prayer or common meals; ministry justifies the autonomous administration of monies; ministry renders some brothers totally immobile, clinging to the same house (not fraternity!) for years on end (see *CPO V*, 18). In some cases, the protection of individual ministries has led to an attempt to redefine fraternal life as such. Brothers live in their isolated ministries coming together once or twice a week for prayer and to share a meal (see *Fraternal Life in Community*, 65c), their coordinator being called “guardian.” Such “regional fraternities” cannot replace the witness of the local fraternity.

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

- 3.3 An excellent historical study presented to the recent *Congress on the Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Fraternal Charism* suggests that the clericalization of the Order came about when the gifts of our lay brothers were limited to the service of the fraternity as such. Cut off from ministerial contact with people, they were also forbidden

to seek education. The outcome was the clericalization of our Order wherein the Order came to define its purpose more and more in terms of its clerical ministries. This also deprived our evangelical outreach of the charisms and gifts of a large and essential part of the brotherhood. The signs of the times suggest that this process must be reversed, not by minimizing the clerical ministries among us, but by encouraging the emergence of all of the ministerial gifts of our lay brothers:

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

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

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

Evangelical Fraternity is Incarnated in the Local Fraternity

4.1 If brotherhood is to define the character and spirit of our Capuchin Franciscan presence in the world, it is necessary in all parts of the Order that we give new life and vitality to the local fraternity. The

various coetus groups at the General Chapter of 1994 were practically unanimous in the judgment that the local fraternities of the Order have been seriously weakened. In order to strengthen them, it is useful to reflect upon the historical realities which have contributed to this weakness.

- 4.2 In America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, the Order was originally established because of its ministerial outreach. We were sent to establish the structures of the local churches. In such circumstances fraternity existed to support and sustain those ministries. Much effort has been made to give greater witness to our fraternal charism. However, local fraternities are still generally quite weak, consisting of the minimum number of two or three brothers. When fraternity is generally reduced to such numbers, the Order cannot give vibrant witness to its fraternal charism. Every effort must be made to create more substantial fraternities of at least four or five brothers, a number which renders quality fraternal life possible.
- 4.3 The quality of the life of the local fraternity has been seriously weakened in older areas of the Order where the decrease in the number of brothers has caused provinces to cling to many friaries even when there are no real fraternities to fill them. In other cases a local fraternity of six or eight brothers exists, but it is housed in a friary built for seven- or eight times that number. One has to ask the question whether our evangelical and fraternal witness would not be enhanced were we to have the courage to acquire residences more adequate for our real needs and relinquish the former structures for suitable ecclesial or social purposes.
- 3.4 In all of the older provinces of our Order, the vocational situation has now persisted for a considerable number of years. It is abundantly evident that in the foreseeable future there will not be the number of friars necessary to create a vital fraternal presence in all our existing friaries. We cannot permit ourselves to be paralyzed

by nostalgia nor rendered inert by fears of a statistical future! The vocational reality is a sign of the times which summons us to give priority to fraternity over friary structures. We must create a renewed and vital fraternal presence and open up the possibility of new initiatives within the territory of our provinces. “*Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the reign of God*” (Lk 9:60).

Evangelical Fraternity: the Most Important Purpose of Formation

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

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

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

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

- 5.3 The new evangelization demands that the gifts of all the members of the church, particularly the laity, be placed at the service of the gospel. Generally speaking, each province has a well-articulated plan for the ministerial formation and training of its cleric brothers. The recent congress made it clear that the Order must dedicate the same attention and care to the education and ministerial training of our lay brothers.
- 5.4 This pastoral letter is the fruit of the reflection of the general definitory upon the gospel challenge to our Order contained in the Pope's letter of 18 September 1996 and by the recent *Congress on the Lay Expressions of the Capuchin Fraternal Charism*. Our Order will experience the conversion which the Pope's letter and the congress demand only if this reflection continues in each of our provinces and circumscriptions. We invite the provincial ministers to reflect upon the subject and content of this letter in their own pastoral letters, provincial gatherings and assemblies. We invite the guardians of the Order to read this letter together with the brothers of their fraternities and to make its contents the subject of reflection in their local chapters.

Conclusion

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

Fraternally,

Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord,
2 February 1997

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 12
ON COMPASSION

To all our Capuchin brothers
and our Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters
Respective Residences

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Let us look on the One whom we have pierced ...
and be filled with a spirit of compassion”
(see JN 19:37 and ZECH 12:10)

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

A Vision Rooted in Prayer and Contemplation

Francis’ experience of God

2.1.1 The life, vision, and activity of Francis were formed by his personal experience of God. The total giving of self to God in faith at the beginning of his life led to the complete surrender of self to love

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

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

A world seen through the eyes of God

2.2.1 Francis’ personal experience of God changed his perception of the world. Jesus, pierced and hanging on the cross, became for him the lens which gave him insight into a new way of relating to the world. Jesus crucified was now the focus, the center of all creation, including the human family.

2.2.2 A poor person was no longer simply a fellow human being in need, but a sacrament of Christ’s presence. *“Let us see the One whom we have pierced....”* Francis was overwhelmed by the largess

of God who conferred on human beings the dignity of being sisters and brothers of Christ, God's own adopted children. For this reason Francis exhorted the friars never to look down on people (LATER RULE II, 17). Manselli points out that to be authentic, every friar had to cultivate a "total commitment to human brotherhood in Christ." This was the new and revolutionary value contained in Francis' gospel vision and message. Francis, relying directly on his personal experience of Jesus, gave a privileged place in this embrace of brotherhood to the poor and marginalized. In the gospels, the poor and the marginalized are the privileged companions of the person of Jesus, the first recipients of the good news (see LK 4: 12-18).

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

Francis' Mission of Peace

3.1 "*God, to whom we were reconciled through Christ, ... has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation*" (2 COR 5:18). Francis' vision of God and the world impelled him to become an apostle of peace and reconciliation. The service of peace was so fundamental a characteristic of the Order that Celano described the vocation of Bernard as taking up the mission of peace (see 1 CEL 24). Peace was a crusade which Francis believed was revealed to him

personally by God: “*The Lord revealed a greeting to me, ... ‘May the Lord give you peace’*” (TESTAMENT 23). Francis even used this characteristic greeting when he addressed a great flock of birds gathered in a field near Bevagna (see 1 CEL 58). After reminding the brothers: “*You talk about peace, all the more so must you have it in your heart,*” he insisted: “*We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost the way*” (LEGEND OF THE THREE COMPANIONS 58).

Our Mission of Peace

4.1 The Fifth Plenary Council spelled out this mission today:

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

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

A. *Adopting the Viewpoint of the Poor*

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

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

brothers serve the poor with their own hands. Since Francis' identification with the poor grew out of his personal experience of lepers, this foundational experience of Franciscan spirituality has led a growing number of provinces to include direct service to the poor in the corporal works of mercy as an integral part of the postnovitiate formation experience (see CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 9, 3.7).

4.3.3 Particularly in Latin America, but in other areas as well, the Fifth Plenary Council gave birth to a considerable number of "insertion experiences" among the poor: "... that we might hear their authentic voice, it is the duty of the Order to have fraternities among the poor" (V PCO 92). The inspiration for these initiatives was a compassion which aimed at sharing the life, experience, and aspirations of the poor. The object of the insertion was to duplicate in every way possible the life conditions of the people. From a distance of ten or more years, these "insertion experiences" are now being evaluated in light of other essential values of our Capuchin charism, in particular, fraternity and prayer. The resulting synthesis of values can only enhance the obvious evangelical power of this witness.

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

4.3.5 The Fifth Plenary Council had the clear insight that "the viewpoint of the poor" must be the point of reference for the Capuchin vision of peace, justice and respect for nature. Perhaps that is the reason why Br. Jacques Bélanger, former general definator and first president

of the International Commission for JPE, often suggested that each province or region of the Order have both a house of prayer, as indicated in our Constitutions, and a fraternity of insertion among the poor, as indicated by the Fifth Plenary Council. Our identification with the poor as a brotherhood is nourished by our ministries of direct service, our insertion experiences as fraternities and as individuals, and the quality of hospitality in our friaries. Such experiences shape fraternities filled with that genuine compassion which Francis discovered in gazing upon the cross of San Damiano and embracing the leper. Such immediate experiences also determine and form the perspective from which our Order can judge and respond to the structural causes of poverty and human suffering in our world. Rooted in the experience of compassion, we can as individuals and fraternities, bring our spiritual and intellectual resources to the cause of the poor and oppressed. With the help of the social sciences we can assist the poor and all people of good will to see that human inequalities are not the result of the will of God but of human evil which must yield to change and conversion. I recall the words attributed to Dom Helder Camara: “When I feed the poor they call me a Christian; when I ask why they are poor they call me a Communist.” I believe that we should not be afraid to ask those questions and urge others to ask them also. The new name for poverty is often “social exclusion.” In the name of the gospel, we should not fear to ask why it is that in otherwise affluent societies, some are excluded from the benefits of that society’s wealth in its many forms (e.g., food, housing, education, health, etc.).

B. A Simple Lifestyle

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

“I was never a thief: by that I mean that, in accepting alms, the inheritance of the poor, I have always made it a point to accept

less than I needed so that I would not defraud the other poor. To act otherwise would be to steal” (LEGEND OF PERUGIA 111).

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

C. *Rejection of Violence*

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

the diet of violence which is so much a part of modern entertainment (see CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 4, 4.2). Furthermore, the letters and pronouncements of Pope John Paul II increasingly call us to renounce all forms of institutional violence, such as capital punishment and ever more repressive forms of incarceration.

D. *The Ministry of Reconciliation*

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

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

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

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

4.6.2 Reading these beautiful legends, I have often wondered how Francis came to choose his “instruments” of reconciliation: bread and wine for San Sepolcro, Sylvester for Arezzo, a song for Assisi. “*Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more*” (ROM 5:20). Francis had the gospel intuition to look for signs and instruments of redemption in the very places where the absence was most evident! Injustice in our world is rarely eliminated by single grand gestures. Cardinal Arns remarked that “the important events of history are the thousands of humble actions that heal and reconcile.” However

dramatic his trip to see the Sultan, Francis' most creative efforts to change the world were to be found in "the humble actions that heal and reconcile" which he performed right in Umbria and in the Rieti Valley. "*Wisdom ... is found by those who seek her ... she will be found sitting at the gate*" (WIS 6:12-14). The Holy Spirit is at work changing our world. It should be the special gift of Franciscans, particularly those passionate about structural change in our world, to discover the new and dynamic instruments of justice and reconciliation which continually spring up in our world. This requires a contemplative vision of faith. Like Francis, we begin by discovering the forces of hope which exist at our very gate!

Animating the Mission of Peace

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

5.2 A 14th century spiritual treatise stated: "The created human soul has

two eyes. One (the right) represents the power to gaze into the eternal. The other (the left) gazes into time and the created world.” It is evident from the early sources that Francis was able to see with both eyes of the soul. Francis gazed upon the world with the eyes of God. Like Francis, we must learn to gaze upon the world with “both eyes of the soul.” Justice is not an abstraction or a lifeless concept. Gazing upon the person of Christ, poor and crucified, might be described as the vision of the “right eye of the soul.” With the “left eye of the soul” we must also gaze upon the world Jesus came to save. This vision will be formed in us when we read the documents of the church and reflect upon the realities of our world in the light of their gospel message. Our vision of the sufferings of humanity and the degradation of the ecosystem in the light of the cross can fill us, like Francis, with compassion. It is that compassion which will help prevent our pursuit of justice from degenerating into a harsh individualism or an equally grim collectivism. At the same time, a constant reflection on the social doctrine of the church will help to ensure that our spirituality does not become an escape from the harsh realities of our world. Only this two-fold vision can preserve the perspective we have received from Francis.

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

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

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

Conclusion

6.1 By the time this letter arrives, in many of our fraternities Advent

will have already begun. May the preaching of Isaiah, the great prophet of justice, open the eyes of our souls to the divine will for all God's people:

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

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

Fraternally,

Rome, 1 November 1997

Feast of All Saints

Circular Letter n. 13

LIVING POVERTY IN FRATERNITY: A Reflection on the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order

31 May 1998, *Pentecost*

To all our Capuchin brothers
and our Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters
Respective Residences

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Although rich, Christ became poor,
so that by Christ’s poverty you might become rich”
(2 Cor 8:9)

- 1.1 There is special logic in this beautiful Pauline text. We are made rich “by Christ’s poverty” — not by Christ’s riches! This is the divine logic of the Incarnation. Francis took up this very text in the sixth chapter of the Rule: “*do not be ashamed, since the Lord himself became poor for us in this world.*” Thus our inspiration for evangelical poverty is Jesus himself.
- 1.2 The Sixth Plenary Council of the Order will address with the fraternal and communal dimensions of evangelical poverty. These reflections on the theme of CPO VI seek to encourage a wide and fruitful dialogue within the Order that might enable the plenary council to bear abundant blessings in an aspect so central to our Franciscan charism.

Part One

Communal Poverty: Francis' Vision

“The highest poverty”: A marvelous worldview, the fruit of Francis’ contemplation of the poverty and humility of Jesus.

2.1 Francis’ contemplation of the birth, life and death of Jesus revealed to him God’s own poverty and humility. Marveling that in the mystery of the Incarnation the Word of God took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary “*from which Jesus received the flesh of humanity and our frailty*” (second version of the Letter to the Faithful, 4), Francis affirmed that poverty was not only chosen for Jesus’ birth, but also for his life: “*Though rich, Jesus — together with the most blessed Virgin, his mother — decided, first and foremost, to choose poverty while in this world*” (ibid, 5). This point is embellished in the Earlier Rule: “*Our Lord Jesus Christ ... was a poor person and a transient and lived on alms, he and the blessed Virgin and his disciples*” (Earlier Rule, 5). Jesus’ cross was perceived by Francis, then, as the culmination of a life of total self-giving in poverty and humility: “*Christ was given to us, born for us, and offered himself — with his own blood — as a sacrifice and victim on the altar of the cross*” (second version of the Letter to the Faithful, 11). This same poverty and humility of Jesus, Francis encountered in the mystery of the eucharist: “*Such great humility! Such humble greatness! The Lord of the universe — God and Son of God — humbles himself for our salvation, cloaked in the simple sign of bread!*” (A Letter to the Entire Order, 27). The Rule, then, offers a synopsis of the Franciscan following of Christ: “*let us observe the poverty, the humility, and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Later Rule, 12:4).

2.2 Reflection on Jesus’ humility and poverty blossomed into a marvelous worldview which Francis described as “*the summit of*

highest poverty” (Later Rule, VI:4): “*Therefore, hold back nothing for yourselves, so that he who offers himself totally to you may receive you totally*” (A Letter to the Entire Order, 29). This conclusion was based on the following threefold conviction which formed the basis of Francis’ attitude toward poverty (see Thaddée MATURA, OFM, *Francis of Assisi: the Message of his Writings*, 130):

2.2.1 ***Every good thing comes from God and must be attributed to God:*** “*And let us give credit for every good thing to the most High and supreme Lord God, recognizing that every good thing belongs to God; let us thank God for everything, because everything comes from God*” (Earlier Rule, XVII, 17). Even greater insistence is voiced in the Admonitions: “*Blest is the servant who attributes every good to the Lord God. Whoever holds back something for himself hides within himself the money of the Lord God*” (Admonition XVIII, 2).

2.2.2 ***The only thing we can rightly appropriate to ourselves is our own sinfulness:*** “*We should be firmly convinced that nothing belongs to us except our own vices and sins*” (Earlier Rule, XVII, 7).

2.2.3 ***We should joyfully bear life’s sufferings as a participation in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ:*** “*...in this we can glory: in our infirmities and bearing daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Admonition V, 8; see also Admonition VI).

A Materially Poor Fraternity: A Divinely Inspired Economy

3.1 “*Compassion for the Crucified*” gave birth to Br. Francis’ vision of “*the summit of highest poverty.*” His conviction and insistence upon the ***communal embrace of material poverty***, however, was the result of the encounter of his faith vision with the reality of the

world in which he lived.

- 3.2 Francis and his brothers turned away from the greed, avarice and hunger for power that resulted in war and widespread violence in 13th-century Italy. When the bishop of Assisi remarked: “*Since you do not possess anything in this world, to me your life seems extremely difficult and harsh,*” Francis replied: “*If we were to have possessions we would also have to have weapons to defend ourselves. Wealth leads to arguments and lawsuits, and in many ways would only hinder us from loving God and loving our neighbor. That’s why, in this life, we do not want to have material possessions*” (Legend of the Three Companions, 33). That choice of communal poverty radically altered the friars’ human interaction and relationships — among themselves first of all, and subsequently, between themselves and other people — their brothers and sisters.
- 3.3 As evidenced in the writings of Francis and Clare, the deep human relationships fostered by communal poverty created a certain group cohesion and solidarity: “*Wherever the brothers gather or meet other brothers, let them **give witness that they are members of a single family**, ... if a mother cares so much and loves so deeply the child born of her flesh (see 1 Thes. 2:7), how much more ought we love and cherish our brothers ‘according to the Spirit’*” (Later Rule VI, 7-8). That communal poverty was a discovery of a warm and tender concern for one’s brother or sister becomes even more evident in the dispensation which Francis includes in the Earlier Rule with regard to the use of money to benefit the sick friars: “*The brothers ... are not to carry, receive, or have others receive on their behalf — in any way whatsoever — either money or coins ... for no reason at all, except if it is meant for the obvious needs of the sick brothers*” (Earlier Rule, VIII, 3). We find a similar attitude expressed in the Rule of St. Clare: “*Those who are sick may lie on sackcloth filled with straw and may use feather pillows for their head; those who need woolen stockings and quilts may use them*”

(Rule of St. Clare, VIII, 10).

3.3.1 The unity and deep, human happiness which resulted from this experience of the friars and the Poor Clares spoke eloquently to their contemporaries. Their lives were visible evidence of a group cohesiveness which could be achieved through egalitarian, fraternal sharing. The deep peace which united them stood in stark contrast to the strife, rivalries and divisions which resulted from an economic hierarchy which unevenly assigned privileges and rights. The rapid growth of the Order was a clear demonstration of its cohesion to which fraternal solidarity was an essential key: “*Wherever the brothers gather ... let each one confidently make known his needs to the other*” (Later Rule, VI, 7-8). In making known to each other their respective needs, the brothers reaffirmed their belonging to the one brotherhood and, simultaneously, their adherence to the way of gospel poverty. Theirs was a brotherhood without rank, wherein only the sick and elderly could claim economic privilege! Within the brotherhood, the practice of solidarity maintained unity among the friars themselves, but the real purpose of its practice was to propose to the world a divinely-inspired economy which could bring peace to all.

No shame in being dependent upon one another

3.4 The communal poverty lived by the brothers radically altered their relationships with other people. Their poverty forged strong bonds of communion and solidarity with the poor: “*They should rejoice to live among them ... the poor and the powerless, the sick, the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside*” (Earlier Rule, IX, 2). They lived a life of shared want also with the poor: “*I was never a thief: by that I mean that, in accepting alms, I have always made it a point to accept less than I needed so that I would not defraud the other poor. To act otherwise would be to steal*” (Legend of Perugia, 111). It is interesting to note that just as his concern for

sick brothers caused Francis to relax his strict prohibitions against the use of money, likewise, his tender love for the poor caused him to make a similar provision on their behalf: “*Nevertheless, when the lepers are in obvious need, the brothers can beg for alms to be used for them*” (Earlier Rule, VIII, 10-11). In choosing poverty, Francis gained a right relationship with God, the sole Provider of all human need, as well as with others who, in ceasing to be his competitors, became his brothers and sisters once again.

Francis declared that there is neither weakness nor shame
in being dependent upon other people.

3.4.1 Chapter 9 of the Earlier Rule develops a “*theology of mutual dependence,*” a new way in which people can relate economically to one another. This theology stands at the root of Francis’ concept of begging. In a world dominated by arrogant autonomy and control over all aspects of one’s personal and economic life, Francis declared that there is neither weakness nor shame in being dependent upon other people: “*When people shame them and refuse them alms, let them thank God nonetheless, since by just such humiliations will they receive great honor before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be assured that it is not the victims of such abuse who are shamed, but those who inflict it*” (Earlier Rule, IX, 6-7). In fact, Francis confidently declared that such dependence is a consequence of being human and redeemed and is, therefore, a right: “*Alms are a legacy and something to which the poor have every right because our Lord Jesus Christ acquired that right for us*” (Earlier Rule, IX, 8). To embrace interdependence requires the theological gift of love which enriches giver and receiver alike: “*... the brothers who work to receive alms will themselves be greatly enriched, and at the same time those who give the alms will be enriched as well ...*” (Earlier Rule, IX, 9). Francis then concluded: “*So, confidently make known your needs to the other,*

so that the other might find what you need and give it to you”
(Earlier Rule, IX, 10).

Interdependence: The Way to Peace

3.4.2 In begging for their subsistence, Francis and Clare and their followers proclaimed an inspired belief in a viable alternative for our society: a better society will result when we trust in the generosity of others for our basic needs and when we offer our service to others for the needs of our lives. By begging, they gave dramatic evidence that they could entrust their total dependence upon God to the benevolence and generosity of others rather than deny dependence and replace it by greed and personal power over the allocation of resources. By begging, the brothers dramatically demonstrated that interdependence is a viable and better route to peace, prosperity and happiness than unlimited greed and lust for power. Francis went so far as to refuse monetary recompense for any good or service rendered, because he considered money to be an indeterminate instrument of power which exempts one from actual, humane and fraternal consideration of the other person’s needs. The interdependence which Francis proposed in his theology of begging was also embraced by Clare and her sisters in their attitude toward work, an attitude in contradistinction to the approach of other religious movements of her time. In the words of a modern commentator: “Clare and her sisters made things in order to give them away; they worked so that they could give in alms!”

Part Two

Bridging the Centuries

4.1 The experience of Francis and the first brothers belongs to the culture and times of 13th-century central Italy. Events and personal

experiences do not travel through history; they are relayed imperfectly through narrative and legend. With the aid of the imagination we reconstruct images from the past, we attempt to understand what happened, but we cannot make the past itself live again. However, beyond narration and legend, Francis and the Franciscan event have been carried into the present day through the lived experience of the Order, a brotherhood which has sought throughout the ages to live the essence of the person and event which gave it life. With conviction we can say that the Franciscan experience does not need to be re-enacted or revived, for it has never died, it has endured throughout the ages. Our Order continues to offer to the social reality of our era the basic vitality of the primitive Franciscan fraternity. In the course of almost 8 centuries, the Franciscan vision has been enriched and, at times, thrown off course by forces both in the church and in the larger society. The Order today, while preserving its identity, must discern how to renew its prophetic gift to the world, taking into account both the positive as well as negative aspects of the society around us.

- 4.2 Greed and avarice remain integral components of the capitalist economy of our day. By definition, resources are scarce in a capitalist economy. People must compete in order to achieve control over those resources. From a Christian perspective, however, everyone is a brother or sister, not a competitor, and resources are gifts from an inexhaustibly good God. Like the seven loaves of the gospel, no one fathomed just how many could be satisfied until they began distributing them to the thousands gathered to listen to Jesus (see Mk 8:1-9). It has been said that there were two miracles involved in that gospel narrative, one major and one minor. The minor miracle, according to the anecdote, was the actual multiplication of the loaves and fish. The major miracle was getting people to sit down in groups of 50! The point is obvious: there is enough for everyone, if we would only learn to collaborate and participate in the distribution! We are faced with the challenge of transforming the current system

while preserving the advancements it has produced and can still produce for the benefit of humankind.

Communion and Solidarity

5.1 It is through communion that the church seeks to heal the division and violence inherent in the competitive nature of capitalism. The Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, states that “*the church is essentially a mystery of communion*” (n. 41) and “*fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, [is an] eloquent sign of ecclesial communion*” (n. 42). The Exhortation touches the wounds of our common humanity that cry out for healing: the wound of unredeemed solitude, the cry for forgiveness and love, the need for each person’s secularized self to be affirmed by a love that is unconditional and faithful. And so, the Holy Father declared:

“If the church is to reveal her true face to today’s world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the ‘new commandment’” (VC, 45).

He calls for “*fraternal communities*” which reveal the new commandment - “*Love one another as I have loved you*” - in concrete ways. This, he tells us, is “*the new evangelization.*” Is it not a re-enactment of the dream of Pope Innocent III, who saw the little poor man of Assisi holding up the walls of the Lateran Basilica! The Pope is precise in what he seeks from us: “*fraternal communities*” who know the mystery of communion and solidarity. “*Fraternal communion,*” he concludes, “*is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord*” (see Mt. 18:20).

What Pope John Paul II said of the moral and Christian virtue of solidarity coincides marvelously with Francis’ “theology of mutual dependence.”

5.2 Capitalism proposes competition as the best response to protect and administer scarce resources. The church proposes solidarity as a more appropriate response. In his Encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Pope John Paul II defined solidarity as a moral and Christian virtue. As a moral virtue, solidarity “*is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good*” (n. 38). This moral virtue “*helps us to see the ‘other’ - whether a person, people or nation - ... on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God*” (n. 39). As a Christian virtue, solidarity sees that “*one’s neighbor is ... the living image of God ... [who] must be loved ... with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her*” (n. 40). Francis possessed that consciousness: “*Be conscious ... of the wondrous state in which the Lord has placed you, for he created you and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body, and to his likeness according to the spirit (see Gn. 1:26)*” (Admonition V, 1). What Pope John Paul II said of the moral and Christian virtue of solidarity coincides marvelously with Francis’ “theology of mutual dependence” (see 3.4.2).

5.3 A look at how the Order has lived the communal expression of its poverty over the past 50 years may help us to embrace the challenge of communion and solidarity in the new millennium.

PART THREE

Communal Poverty in the Second Half of the 20th Century

A glance at the pre-1950 situation

- 6.1 Our 1950 statistics reveal an Order overwhelmingly centered in Europe, particularly in Western Europe. A significant number of those brothers were missionaries in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America. However, they were present there as members of European jurisdictions. Only 5% of the brothers were members of autonomous circumscriptions in the poorer southern hemisphere of our world, none of them in Africa. Given the statistics, it is not surprising that the *Constitutions of 1925* describe a brotherhood living in close solidarity with the working class people of Western Europe.
- 6.2 Like the working poor of the time, friars lived from the fruits of each day's labor:

“Only a few days’ provision of the necessities of life that can be obtained from day to day by begging, shall be made in our friaries” (1925 Constitutions, n. 118).

Like the occasional day laborers of their age, the brothers held no offices to which fixed salaries were attached. They lived from the offerings given for their occasional services as preachers and confessors, spontaneous offerings given by the faithful in their chapels and churches, manual labor in gardens and orchards, and from the quest. The fact that the livelihood of the brothers depended upon spontaneous offerings in their chapels and, in a particular way on the quest, meant that they were directly dependent upon the working poor themselves. This became a strong bond of solidarity between them.

- 6.2.1 The brothers lived as those who, while having sufficient for their needs, were still constrained to budget their goods with care:

“Let the friars rather remember that the perfection of evangelical poverty consists chiefly in having no attachment to anything on earth, and in using the things of this world most sparingly, as if

by constraint and through necessity” (1925 Constitutions, n. 89).

6.2.2 The identification of the Order with Western Europe allowed very detailed prescriptions regarding the building and decoration of churches and friaries to ensure that the dwellings of the friars were in solidarity with the working poor. The *Constitutions of 1925* describe in meticulous detail the size of windows and rooms, the weight of the chapel bell, the quality of candlesticks and the binding of missals and breviaries (see nn. 102, 104, 106).

6.2.3 Each friary was to have a room with a fireplace for “poor pilgrims and strangers” (n. 110). The friary could offer hospitality to those with whom the brothers lived in such close and easy solidarity.

6.3 Economic solidarity within the brotherhood was described in n. 114 of the *Constitutions of 1925*:

“Perfect common life shall be religiously and constantly observed. ... All goods, emoluments, gifts - in a word, everything the religious acquires by any title whatever - must be consigned to the superior ... so that all shall have in common, food, clothing and everything that is necessary.”

6.3.1 The fact that 91% of the autonomous circumscriptions of the Order were centered in Europe and North America ensured economic equality among them. The prescriptions of the *Constitutions* whereby missions were totally integrated into the province ensured that the vast majority of the brothers in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America, by reason of the rules of common life, enjoyed equal access to the goods of the province with their brothers in Europe and North America. There was, then, an economic equality both among circumscriptions, as well as among the brothers of the northern and southern hemispheres.

1950 - 1970

- 7.1 In 1970, the Order was still centered in Europe, particularly Western Europe, and in North America. However, the signs of the times were clear: vocations were increasing rapidly in Asia-Oceania and Latin America, while Western Europe and North America were clearly experiencing vocational crises. Africa did not yet figure significantly into the vocations to our Order. Still, for the first time in the history of the Order, there were a significant number of indigenous brothers outside of Europe and North America even though the majority of these brothers were juridic members of European or North American provinces.
- 7.2 The period 1950-1970 was marked by momentous social change. This is not the place, nor do I have the competence, to make a proper social and economic analysis of these changes. However, I wish to highlight those changes which had significant influence on the former vision and practice of communal poverty in the Order.
- 7.2.1 The economic wealth of the world multiplied. That wealth, however, was not equally distributed. North America and Western Europe enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, which had the effect of increasing the economic divisions between the northern and southern hemispheres.
- 7.2.2 Public and private welfare programs multiplied, particularly in Western Europe and in North America. Those programs ensured the basic needs of children, education, health care and old age. As a result, for the first time in human history, entire peoples were given security for the future. This also increased the disparity between the northern and southern hemispheres. Generally, in the south, nations lacked the capability of guaranteeing such rights for their citizens.

With the disappearance of the “working poor of 1950,” the “model” for Capuchin communal poverty was also broken. This had far-reaching consequences for the communal poverty of the brothers.

7.3 The working poor of 1950 were among the beneficiaries of the social and economic changes in Western Europe and North America. The poor were re-defined as an ever-changing group of individuals who, for various social, political or personal reasons, were excluded from the security and benefits enjoyed by the majority. With the disappearance of the “working poor of 1950,” the “model” for Capuchin communal poverty was also broken. This had far-reaching consequences for the communal poverty of the brothers. A reading of the *Constitutions of 1968* reveals those consequences.

7.3.1 Like the working poor of 1950, the brothers accepted the social improvements of their age:

Superiors may make use of insurance policies or forms of social security where this is prescribed by ecclesiastical or civil authority for everybody or for certain professions, or where such things are commonly used by the poor of the region” (n. 52).

For the first time, the concept of investment enters the Capuchin vocabulary (see n. 56).

7.3.2 There is a real change in the ordinary means whereby the brothers sustain themselves. For the first time the *Constitutions* speak of entitled income, especially salaries and pensions:

“All goods, including salaries and pensions ... shall be handed over for the use of the fraternity” (n. 51).

As a consequence, the quest rapidly disappeared, and with it an important bond of solidarity. The brothers were no longer evidently

and directly dependent upon the people for their support.

- 7.4 There was a very rapid development of ministries among those excluded from the prosperity of the age. Works for the social progress of people were seen as an integral part of evangelization. The Order expressed its solidarity with the new poor by works of justice and compassion:

“We ought to live in conscious solidarity with the countless poor of the world, and by our apostolic labor lead the Christian people to works of justice and charity which further the development of peoples” (n. 47).

“Freed from the empty cares of this world and cooperating with Divine Providence, we should regard it as our duty to relieve the needs of the poor” (n. 87).

Sustained and supported by the working poor of 1950, the Order became the benefactor of the new poor of the 1970s. This change is strongly evident in the following statement:

“Those friars are worthy of praise who live with the poor in the particular circumstances of the region, sharing their condition and aspirations” (n. 47).

- 7.5 Solidarity within the brotherhood changed little between 1950 and 1970. The prescriptions of the *Constitutions of 1925* differ little from those of 1968. Eighty-nine percent of the brothers continued to be members of European or North American provinces which had similar capacities to respond to their needs. There continued to be an economic equality among circumscriptions, as well as between the brothers of the northern and southern hemispheres. If anything, there was an exponential increase in the flow of monies toward the southern hemisphere as brothers in the north raised the consciousness

of their people to the needs of their poorer southern neighbors.

7.6 The growth of entitled income, such as salaries and pensions, meant that for the first time the *Constitutions* dealt with the question of the surplus goods of the provinces (see n. 53). In the past, there was simply a prohibition against accepting more than was necessary for the needs of the brothers. This article is perhaps the first recognition that the growth of the Order outside of Western Europe and North America was creating provincial fraternities with significantly less capability of responding to the needs of the brothers.

1970 - 1997

8.1 In 1997, 33% percent of the autonomous circumscriptions of the Order and 30% of the brothers of the Order were in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America. The statistics do not indicate the equally dramatic increase in numbers in Central and Eastern Europe. If these were to be included, it is probable that currently 50% of the brothers of the Order are juridic members of circumscriptions outside Western Europe and North America. With some exceptions, these circumscriptions all have significantly less capability to respond to the needs of the brothers and the ministries of their region than do those in Western Europe and North America.

8.2 The post-1970 period saw continued growth of economic wealth. The proportionate wealth of North America and Western Europe continued to increase, thus widening the economic divisions between the northern and southern hemispheres.

8.3 The fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dismantling of the U.S.S.R. began the integration of these economies into the capitalist system of the West.

8.3.1 The unrestricted growth of capitalism has created global economic

forces and companies beyond the control of any single political entity, and larger in force than the economies of perhaps the majority of states. Poverty has also become globalized, with the weight of world debt adding significantly to the suffering of the southern hemisphere. The emergence of powerful, regional economic blocs, such as the EEC and NAFTA, have added to the impotence of weaker economic regions.

8.4 The *Constitutions of 1982* use the identical wording of those of 1968 regarding investments (see n. 66,3). Still, the period after 1970 has seen a number of notable developments regarding investments. In some countries social insurance was not completely assumed by the State. As a result, investment funds were established in some provinces to provide for the health care of the brothers, as well as for the care of the elderly. Some provinces experienced particular needs because of an abnormally high age profile. Confronted with decreasing salaries and increasing costs due to the aging of the province, monies from the sale of surplus friaries were invested to meet those costs. Finally, the creation of some autonomous circumscriptions in Asia-Oceania, Africa and Latin America led to the creation of investment funds. To meet formation costs and the needs of the brothers in these new circumscriptions, some of the former mother provinces established investment funds.

8.4.1 The *Constitutions of 1982* enunciate an important principle:

*“For every use of goods, including money, the provinces, fraternities and brothers should use as a precise and practical criterion: **the minimum necessary not the maximum allowed**”* (n. 67,3).

8.4.2 The buildings of the Order are a growing concern in this age. In the period 1950-1997, the number of brothers in Europe decreased by approximately 50%. This rendered many friaries and other

buildings either superfluous for our needs or greatly under-utilized. CPO I [*Quito*] in 1971, raised the concern:

“Land, gardens and buildings that are no longer necessary ... should be disposed of or put to social use” (n. 53).

This concern was repeated in the *Constitutions of 1982* (see n. 60,2). At the same time, the Order grew rapidly in Asia-Oceania, Latin America, and Asia. The buildings which accompanied this growth often accentuated our distance from the poor.

- 8.5 Solidarity with the poor continues to be expressed by works of social development and compassion. The fifth plenary council of the Order gave new emphasis to two other dimensions of this solidarity: fraternities inserted among the poor (see CPO V, n. 92; Constitutions, n. 60,6), and a dedication to the eradication of the structural causes of poverty and human suffering (see CPO V, nn. 63-102).

There now exists a sizable part of the Order with considerably less ability to respond to the needs of the brothers and its ministries than in other parts of the Order.

- 8.6 The principles guiding solidarity within our brotherhood remain unchanged. However, the development of the Order outside Western Europe and North America is now more evident with considerable consequences. Thirty-three percent of the autonomous circumscriptions with 30% of the brothers of the Order are now in Asia-Oceania, Latin America and Africa. These percentages will rise rapidly in the next 10 years with the generally increasing number of vocations in these regions and the creation of an additional 10 or more provinces in these regions. Therefore, there now exists a

sizable part of the Order with considerably less ability to respond to the needs of the brothers and its ministries than in other parts of the Order. Until now, north-south solidarity has been determined primarily by juridic membership in the same province. A serious difficulty with regard to solidarity in the Order now exists. If we consider Africa, we can see this very clearly. On 1 January 1997 there were 1,008 professed friars in Africa. Of these, 419 had juridic ties to provinces, especially in Europe and North America; 589 were members of autonomous circumscriptions. These numbers clearly indicate that the present constitutional basis for international solidarity is no longer adequate. There is an evident need to re-define the terms of fraternal solidarity within the Order. Beginning in 1982, such an effort began through the creation of International Solidarity Commissions which functioned to bring needs and resources together within the Order in a fraternal and just manner.

PART FOUR

Communal Poverty: Challenges for the New Millennium

- 9 These reflections raise many questions and provide few answers. They are the questions which the Order must address, beginning with the plenary council. I wish to underline some of the challenges.
- 10 ***If the Order has lacked, since the 1950s, a clear model on which to interpret and concretize its values, what can provide that “model” today?***

For example, the criterion of the *Constitutions* is excellent: “*the minimum necessary rather than the maximum allowed.*” However, the criterion gains its force from the social and economic context in which it is applied. What is that context?

- 11 If we are to give witness to “radical poverty, both personal and communal” (Constitution, n. 4), our poverty must create a clear and evident solidarity with the poor.

What constitutes our communal solidarity with the poor?

Many brothers are deeply involved and committed to the service of the poor. In various regions of the world, there exist and have existed a number of fraternities inserted among the poor. Many brothers actively work to address the structural causes of poverty.

What do the lived experiences of these brothers teach us about the communal dimensions of our poverty?

- 12 The manner in which the brothers sustain their lives has changed much over the past 50 years. Salaries, pensions and other “entitled” income form the bases of our support in many areas of the world. The quest has disappeared.

How do we express today Francis’ “theology of mutual dependence”?

Does our witness have anything to say to the economy of greed and the competition for the resources of our world?

- 13 The social advances of the past 50 years have brought security to the lives of people and have added greatly to the quality of human life. Adequate health care, the care of the young and the old, are essential dimensions of the dignity of human life.

How does this apply to a world-embracing brotherhood?

What means can be used to ensure this essential dimension of human dignity to the brothers of our Order, especially in those regions of

the world lacking all systems of social welfare?

14.1 *How can we assure the needs of our circumscriptions in the poorest regions of the world, for example, in Africa?*

What role can investments play in meeting those needs?

Is it necessary to look at the needs of entire regions and continents?

If we treat the needs on a circumscription-by-circumscription basis, is there not the danger of creating a new category of inequality, for example, African circumscriptions with investments and those without?

14.2 The International Solidarity Commissions seek to bring needs and resources together within the Order in a fraternal and just manner. It is now time to evaluate the work of these commissions:

Do these commissions work effectively, fraternally and justly?

Can the work and structure of these commissions be improved in such a way as to ensure equal respect for the needs of all circumscriptions while at the same time avoiding undue centralization within the Order?

15 *Is it necessary to establish criteria for the creation and administration of investment funds?*

16 Our modern world values work almost exclusively in terms of its economic return.

Is it not necessary, as part of the communal dimension of poverty,

to value work which provides little economic gain?

Examples of such work are: care for creation, work on behalf of peace, the promotion of justice, and the advancement of beauty and culture.

- 17 *Can we find practical principles for our buildings that have a certain universal application while at the same time providing a practical norm for local cultures?*

CONCLUSION

When confronted with the challenge of communal poverty, we often evade the issue.

- 18 The Sixth Plenary Council is a moment of grace for the entire Order. When confronted with the challenge of communal poverty, we often evade the issue. There is resistance to our gospel call. How are we to overcome this resistance? Not by clever thoughts or lofty speeches, nor by the knowledge of our Franciscan sources. Poverty of spirit is a journey which begins where human knowledge reaches its limits and faith beckons us to “launch out into the deep.” During these days of Pentecost, we pray together that our brotherhood might receive the grace to confront communal poverty with honesty and serenity. This means allowing the Spirit to breathe new life into hearts that have become secularized and sinful. We will find light, freedom and joy if we allow Francis to guide us along the way of “highest Poverty”:

“Let us give credit for every good thing to the most High and supreme Lord God, recognizing that every good thing belongs to God; let us thank God for everything, because everything comes from God” (Earlier Rule, XVII, 17).

Renewing in our minds, hearts and spirits the conviction that all good comes from God and must be credited to God, we will develop that sense of non-ownership which allows new visions of solidarity to flower both within our brotherhood and between our brotherhood and the poor.

“We should be firmly convinced that nothing belongs to us except our own vices and sins” (Earlier Rule, XVII, 7).

Can we find the serenity and mutual forgiveness to own our sins against solidarity within our brotherhood and against the poor of the world? This humility would be a good point of departure.

“We can glory in our infirmities (see 2 Cor 12:5) and in bearing daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (see Lk 14:27)” (Admonitions, V, 8).

“Bearing ... the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” was not a threat to Francis, it was a privilege! It spoke to him of joy and freedom. It led him to experience with greater depth and understanding the human condition. It led him to a passionate embrace of God and humanity. If we follow these simple spiritual steps, I am convinced that the results will be duplicated in our lives and in the life of our Order. Together we implore Mary, Queen of the Franciscan Order and Advocate of the Poor, to obtain for us the grace of taking these first steps on this journey of faith.

Fraternally,
br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap.
General Minister

Appendix: two graphs

1. Number of autonomous jurisdictions 1950 - 1970 - 1997.
2. Regional distribution of friars in autonomous jurisdictions 1950 - 1970 - 1997.

CIRCULAR LETTER NO. 14

Reflections on VI PCO (Part One of a series)
“...THAT SUBLIME HEIGHT OF MOST EXALTED POVERTY”
(Later Rule VI, 4)

To the brothers and sisters of the Order
Respective residences

Dear brothers and sisters,

“This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you ... heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven ... which leads into the land of the living” (LR VI, 4-5).

1.1 One year ago, brothers gathered in Assisi to celebrate the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order focusing on the theme “*Living Poverty in Brotherhood.*” Conferences throughout the Order are now conducting regional assemblies to reflect upon the proposals put forth by the plenary council and the rich spirituality they contain. I wish to add my own reflections which are the fruit of dialogue with many brothers and fraternal gatherings in various regions of the world. I begin with PROPOSAL 2 which presents St. Francis’ vision of the *height of most exalted poverty*:

St. Francis’ fundamental intention was to “observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (LR I,1). It was in the Incarnation and the Cross that he saw the pattern of his radical attitude, which was: “Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves” (see LOrd 29). This means, first of all, recognizing that all the good that is in us and is accomplished through us is a gift of God, and that therefore we must return it to God in praise and thanksgiving. The second

component of this radical self-giving is more painful: that “we may know with certainty that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins” (ER XVII, 7). To these Francis adds a third, equally demanding element: “We must rejoice ... when we fall into various trials and ... suffer every kind of anguish or distress of soul and body” (ER XVII, 8) and “can boast in our weaknesses and in carrying each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Adm V, 8).

The Heart of Discipleship: “Come, follow me”

2.1 There is a striking similarity between the encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John and that of Jesus and the rich man in the tenth chapter of Mark’s gospel. Both Nicodemus and the rich man are in search of some deeper meaning in life and both look to Jesus to discover that meaning. Nicodemus asks an implied question: “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God*” (Jn 3:2). The rich man – as befits one secure in his wealth – is more direct: “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Mk 10:17). Both Nicodemus and the rich man seek to possess the “*eternal life*” offered by Jesus, his way of relating both to people and to the realities of life.

2.2 Jesus informs both men that “*eternal life*” requires radical change! Jesus is very blunt in regard to the rich man: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*” (Mk 10:25). Nicodemus immediately understands the difficulty: “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?*” (Jn 3:4). Jesus reveals to the rich man – and also to us – what it is that will open the human heart to the world of eternal life: “*Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, ... then come, follow me*” (Mk 10:21). And in

this, Jesus points the way to a new network of relationships with people and with the goods of the earth. “*Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor*” is how we enter upon such discipleship. The many possessions which impeded discipleship in the rich man were more than just material; they included power: control over one’s own giftedness, control over one’s neighbors, and the ability to demand all that leads to one’s personal convenience and well-being.

2.3 “*Come, follow me!*” Both Nicodemus and the rich man were expecting answers and solutions, explanations and directions – all of which they received, and much more! Namely, they received an invitation to a personal relationship with Jesus. Everything prior to the point when Jesus says to the rich man “*Come, follow me*” can be found elsewhere. What is unique and distinctive is the invitation to a personal relationship with Jesus in a community of disciples. Mark goes on to explain the consequences of living the choice of discipleship: “*There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children ... – and in the age to come eternal life*” (Mk 10:28-30). Discipleship is an experience that will totally transform our manner of relating to ourselves and our own giftedness, to the earth and its riches, to our neighbors in their dignity, and to God as our Father! Perhaps the rich man was open to receiving a new set of beliefs and outlook on life, but the risk of intimacy with a God who “*hears the cry of his people and comes down to deliver them*” (Ex 3:7-8) proved too much for him. Intimacy requires a surrender of power and control. The discipleship Jesus described facilitates such intimacy. Through the experience of intimacy with a loving God we are “born again.” There is no other way.

Poverty's "Purpose": That we might be *lesser brothers*

3.1 It is precisely the discipleship described in Mark 10 which Francis describes in Chapter Six of the Rule. Faithful to the command of Jesus, the brothers must sell all they have: "*Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all*" (LR VI, 1). Discipleship – the "*sublime height of most exalted poverty*" – will make them "*heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven,*" and lead them "*into the land of the living*" (LR VI, 4). The "*sublime height of most exalted poverty*" will result in the "hundredfold" promised in Mark. Francis translates that "hundredfold" with amazing concreteness:

*"Giving yourselves totally to this, beloved brothers, never seek anything else under heaven for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another, let them show that they are members of the same family. **Let each one confidently make known his need to the other,** for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit! When any brother falls sick, **the other brothers must serve him as they would wish to be served themselves**" (LR VI, 7-9).*

2.2 It is highly significant and suggestive that Francis describes the "*sublime height of most exalted poverty*" not in Chapter Four of the Rule where he describes our relationship to money (the *Constitutions* characterize this chapter as the chapter on "Poverty"), but in Chapter Six where he describes the human relationships which will result from this new economy (the *Constitutions* characterize this chapter as a chapter on "Brotherhood"). PROPOSAL 3 points out that the "*sublime height of most exalted poverty*" embodies three great principles which constitute us as disciples and enable us to relate to the goods of the earth and to one another in the same manner in

which Jesus related to the goods of the earth and to his followers. The disciples of Jesus must:

“hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves” (LOrd 29) – since all good in us comes from God and must be returned to God in service, praise and thanksgiving;

have the conviction that *“nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins”* (ER XVII, 7) – which gives birth to humility before God, our neighbor, and creation; and,

carry *“each day the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Adm V, 8) – with a willingness to redeem the world by sharing in the sufferings that result from giving birth to new life.

- 3.3 For this reason PROPOSAL 3 indicates that evangelical poverty is an essential dimension of a larger and more fundamental Franciscan choice – that of minority: *“to be ‘lowly’ is a genuine manifestation of interior poverty ... [as is] humility of heart and lack of power (see Adm. II, 3; III; IV; VI,4; etc.), and solidarity with those in need and those deprived”*. An interesting study published in *Italia Francescana* suggests that when Francis used the word “poverty” in his writings, he was speaking in opposition to “power” rather than “riches.” The object of evangelical poverty is to open us to the experience of being *minors* – lesser brothers – and to protect that identity. This insight is confirmed by one of the most reliable witnesses to the Christian tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas. In his treatise on justice, he points out that greed is a spiritual sin, not a carnal sin. Greed – he indicates – is about wanting to see myself as someone who owns things, and finding great delight in that. In other words, it is about creating a false identity around power and control with serious consequences for the human community (see II, IIae, q. 118, Art. 6).

The Door to Discipleship: “Go, sell what you own”

3.1 PROPOSAL 3 suggests a hierarchy of values with regard to minority and poverty, while nonetheless underscoring the necessity of poverty: “*Without minority, our poverty would have no meaning.*” Francis heard an emphatic call: “*Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.*” This demand of Jesus is, therefore, the door to discipleship and as such, becomes the first stipulation of Chapter Six of the Rule: “*Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all*” (LR VI, 1). PROPOSAL 6 indicates that Francis’ poverty embraced the following very precise and pointed economic choices:

the non-use of money,
the non-appropriation of goods and property,
- manual work as the ordinary means of support and help to others,
and
recourse to alms in case of manifest necessity.

4.2 The economic choices which gave substance and direction to the poverty of Francis and his early companions were made in response to a concrete and critical appraisal of the social and religious conditions of the society of their day. They judged that “*greed and avarice disrupt relationships with God,*” and that “*ambition and competition damage the sense of brotherhood among people*” (PROPOSAL 6). As a result, the early Franciscans made specific economic choices which would protect their identity as “lesser brothers,” living fraternally among themselves and with their neighbors. Those choices were also a conscious break with the more obvious injustices of the growing market economy of their day which was based on the appropriation of power and wealth by the few to the exclusion of the many. Their choice of poverty was a choice for discipleship, that is, to relate to one another and to their neighbors after the manner of Jesus. It was a conscious choice for a more

fraternal world, a more human world. It is important to remember that their choice was nourished and strengthened by the mystery of the Eucharist, in which they experienced themselves as one in the Body of Christ. By its economic choices the early Franciscan fraternity did *not* embrace *insecurity*, but rather, by those choices the brothers established a new basis *for* human security and freedom. Assisi was building security based on the appropriation of property and power by a few to the exclusion of the many. Francis and his companions built a new security based on mutual dependence and brotherly solidarity. Theirs was an alternate economy which, paradoxically, built a stronger basis for human security than the emerging market economy of their day.

What we need to do now: Make Critical Choices

5.1 The destructive human and social effects which Francis noticed in the market economy of his day persist today, and if anything, in more exaggerated fashion: “*Greed and avarice disrupt relationships with God ... ambition and competition damage the sense of brotherhood among people.*” However, the global economy of our day is different than the market economy of 13th-century Assisi, both in its scale and in its complexity. Today’s economic choices – whereby we give flesh to evangelical poverty and in that way embrace discipleship – will necessarily differ significantly from the choices of the early Franciscans. The goal is the same; the implementation will differ. In order to do what Francis did, we have to do it differently. Concretely, for example, the meaning and role of money, and the way in which private property is viewed in today’s society, are radically different than what they were when the early Franciscans made the choice to prohibit the use of money and to exclude the ownership of property. Therefore, an essential objective of the plenary council was to discern and characterize contemporary economic choices which would keep us faithful as disciples, protect our privileged identity as lesser brothers, and

separate us from the more obvious and flagrant injustices of today's global economy. The choices proposed by the plenary council were the following:

austerity of life;

commitment to work;

solidarity and mutual dependence;

a life rooted in the experience of the people, particularly the poor;

correct use and administration of goods and property; and

commitment to sustainable growth (see PROPOSAL 6).

Where to begin: Ask for God's Grace

6.1 The delegates to the Sixth Plenary Council rightly concluded that these choices, when lived in conscious fidelity, would constitute a valid evangelical witness to our world:

“We must live and give witness to our gospel form of life, which, for all its weakness, wishes to counter the prevailing economic system by putting forward a more genuinely human way: with its values of simplicity, gratuitousness, the will to serve, respect for persons and for creation” (PROPOSAL 7).

6.2 The critical choices contained in the proposals of the Sixth Plenary Council are indeed capable of transforming our relationships and of renewing our sense of discipleship. As we enter upon a new millennium and prepare for our general chapter, let us undertake a serious reflection upon the proposals of VI PCO, in such a way that these two historic occasions might offer us an opportunity to renew “and faithfully reaffirm **the value of gospel poverty as a valid alternative for our times ...**” (and) “**as the option we have made as a family**” (PROPOSAL 7).

6.3 Confronted with this challenge, we might be tempted to say with Nicodemus, “*How can anyone be born after having grown old?*”

Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (Jn 3:4). Is it possible; can we really change? We must hear again Jesus' invitation: "*Come, follow me!*" It is that invitation which puts us in close contact with the spiritual genius of Francis and which will make it possible for us to entrust ourselves to the wings of grace that carried Francis along the route of "*most exalted poverty*" – in his words: "*that sublime height of most exalted poverty.*" If only one word could perfectly convey what it is that will lead to the conversion we all need, that simple word would be: "grace." It is God's grace that inspires in us a will to change, and grace that moves us from desire to action. Nothing less is required if the thoughts I put before you are to bear fruit. Towards the end of his *The Soul's Journey into God*, St. Bonaventure offered some advice that might be good for us to recall: "If you wish to know how these things come about, ask grace not instruction, desire not understanding, the groaning of prayer not diligent reading ... that totally inflames and carries us into God ..." (VII, 6). The immediate reference of the Seraphic Doctor was to the gift of contemplation, but I believe those sentiments apply equally to the gift of living according to "*that sublime height of most exalted poverty.*" I urge you to begin and end your reflections with a heartfelt prayer for the grace of God, "*to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*" (LR X, 8).

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap.
General Minister

Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis September 17, 1999

Questions for Personal Reflection

Do you understand poverty in terms of how we relate to each other or in terms of how we relate to material things? Which is the more important effect of poverty for me:

that it makes me less attached to material things, OR
that it bonds me closer to my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Ideals present us with challenges. When faced with those challenges and what ought to be done, it is important to acknowledge and own any contrary feelings and/or resistance I may have. What are my feelings when I look at the challenges of poverty and minority (fears – anxieties – anger)? In what ways do I experience resistance within myself with regard to the invitation of VI PCO? Have I brought these things to prayer and to my intimate relationship with the Lord?

Questions for Fraternal Dialogue

1. Describe an experience from your life in the Order where the connection between poverty and fraternity became apparent to you.
2. What needs to happen in our community in order to give more authentic witness to minority? What specific sacrifice needs to be made in order to implement what needs to happen?
3. Are we perceived as lesser brothers in the place where we now live? What is the biggest obstacle to our being perceived as lesser brothers in this place?

CIRCULAR LETTER 15

Reflections on VI PCO: Part 2 of a Series Solidarity and Mutual Dependence

To the brothers and sisters of the Order
Respective residences

*“Let each one confidently make known his need to another
that the other might discover what is needed and minister to him”
(ER IX, 10).*

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. It is interesting to note that the text which Br. Francis used in the Rule to inspire *that sublime height of most exalted poverty* (see LR VI, 4) was written by St. Paul to inspire the first great act of solidarity between the churches: *“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich”* (2 Cor 8:9). The fact that Br. Francis turned to this text to inspire evangelical poverty in his brothers, indicates the intimate connection between evangelical poverty and solidarity. With eight of its 45 proposals devoted to solidarity and mutual dependence, the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order situates these virtues at the very heart of Franciscan evangelical poverty (see Proposals 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 44, and 45).

A charter for the virtue of solidarity

2. St. Paul is the most international of the apostles and in possession of the clearest vision of the universality of the gospel of Jesus. It is not

coincidental, therefore, that he wrote the “charter for the virtue of solidarity.” Paul’s vision of solidarity in the Second Letter to the Corinthians flowed directly from his vision of church: “*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit*” (1 Cor 12:12-13). Since the greatest gift of the Spirit to the church is the gift of love (see 1 Cor 13:13), Paul – as indicated above – turned to the total self-giving love of Christ, head of the church, to inspire the solidarity of the Corinthians. He appealed to the principle of distributive justice to determine the measure of solidarity: “*I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need*” (2 Cor 8:13-14). Such solidarity cannot be legislated, it exists only through the power and inspiration of love. Consequently, the solidarity of the Corinthians must be “*a voluntary gift and not ... an extortion*” (2 Cor 9:5). Because solidarity flows from the love of our Lord Jesus Christ who “*for your sakes became poor*” (2 Cor 8:9), it enriches not only the receiver but the giver as well: “*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God*” (2 Cor 9:11-12). Referring both to the gifts the Corinthians have received as well as the gift of solidarity he is asking of them, Paul used the word *charis*. In his closing remarks, speaking of “thanksgiving,” Paul used the word *eucharistia* which is rooted in the same word, *charis*. In this way the apostle pointed out that there is an essential connection between eucharist and the sharing of gifts. In fact, Paul very bluntly asserted that the failure to share gifts offends communion and sins against eucharist (see 1 Cor 11:17-34) (William Henn, OFM Cap., *Pluriformity Applied to Poverty*, Analecta OFM Cap., vol. 114, no. 3, pp. 724-725).

The Franciscan vision of solidarity

- 3.1 Rooted in the modern church's social teachings on solidarity as found in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* and on St. Francis' vision of mutual dependence (ER IX), Proposal 21 presents the Franciscan vision (see Circular Letter 13, par. 3.4.1 and 5.2):

The sharing of gifts among the various local churches is one of the essential dimensions of catholicity (LG 13). For St. Francis the sharing of gifts goes beyond legal obligation and enters the realm of mutual love: "... for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh (see 1 Thes 2:7), how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the spirit?" (LR VI, 8). *Sollicitudo rei socialis* defines the moral virtue of solidarity as a 'firm and constant determination to be committed to the common good, that is, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all' (SRS 38). St. Francis adds weight to this definition of solidarity by proclaiming a brotherhood in which there is no shame in being dependent upon one another (ER IX, 6-7). Indeed, Francis states clearly that dependence upon others is a consequence of being created and redeemed, and is therefore a right (ER IX, 8). Furthermore, interdependence requires the theological gift of love, which enriches giver and receiver alike (ER IX, 9)."

- 3.2 Commitment to sustainable economic growth in this world extends the vision of mutual dependence to embrace all of creation (see Proposals 26 and 28):

... the brothers should be committed to peace, justice and integrity of creation, using resources of Mother Earth sparingly, taking care of the least ones with a sense of fraternal responsibility (V PCO,

65), speaking out for those who have no voice and caring for future generations” (Proposal 26).

Solidarity, mutual dependence and the global economy

4.1 Globalization has produced many blessings for our world. The transformation of our Order from a brotherhood centered, in 1970, on Western Europe and North America to a truly worldwide brotherhood in 2000 would not have been humanly possible without the globalizing effects of modern communications and travel. The global economy provides large segments of the world’s population with greater security and well-being than at any other period of human history. At the same time, solidarity and mutual dependence are goals which are contrary to basic tenets of the global economy which control much of the life and thinking in our world. The primary goal of the global economy is the increase of wealth. According to its logic, wealth is created when it is concentrated in the hands of the few, not when it is shared with the many! This is a denial of solidarity.

Another basic goal of globalization is to maximize profits. Profit is increased as dependence is created. The more others depend upon goods and services, the higher the price that can be demanded! Dependence in the global economy is not something to be celebrated as the “*consequence of being human and redeemed, and ... a right*” (see ER IX, 8). In the global economy dependence is feared because it leaves people weak and exposed! In the global economy the discovery of the dependence of the other is not an invitation to service (see ER IX, 10), but rather an opportunity to exploit others for greater personal profit and advantage. As Proposal 28 states:

The market forces of the global economy give a different and tragic meaning to the words of Jesus: ‘*Those who have will get more, while those who lack will lose even the little they have*’ (Mt 25:29).

To the global economy it is incomprehensible to *seek* to be dependent upon another. Therefore, the motivation put forth in Proposal 28 is incomprehensible:

Bearing in mind the example of Francis *who could not bear to see someone poorer than himself*, we should commit ourselves to listening to people, particularly those who are excluded from sharing the benefits of the global economy (Proposal 28).

- 4.2 The efficiency of the global economy is built upon the concentration of power and the triumph of competition. This applies primarily to economic relationships. However, it produces a mentality and attitudes which go far beyond the world of economics – one which affects all areas of human life and relationships. Consequently, the approach to life nourished by the global economy rarely produces unity and communion. Most often, global economic forces and the philosophies that direct them produce division and discord.
- 4.3 In direct contrast to the basic principles of the global economy, solidarity and mutual dependence consciously seek to create an interdependent world since such a vision is more in keeping with a scriptural view of life (see Genesis 1-3). This view is also closer to “*that sublime height of most exalted poverty*” described by Francis in Chapter Six of the Rule. His poverty, while rooted in concrete economic choices such as the non-use of money, the non-appropriation of goods and property, etc. (see Circular Letter 14, par. 4.1), resulted in a world-view embracing a total vision of life (see Circular Letter 14, par. 3.2).

As one expression of “*that sublime height of most exalted poverty*,” solidarity and mutual dependence involve economic relationships while en fleshing a spiritual vision which goes far beyond the realm of economics. Proposal 22 states:

Solidarity is not primarily about giving things to others. It is, rather, mutual interdependence and brotherhood. *The culture of solidarity [and mutual dependence] creates new ways of understanding and living relationships with others.* By going among the lepers, Francis changed his way of relating to them.

Solidarity requires choices

5.1 As with “*that sublime height of most exalted poverty,*” solidarity and mutual dependence must be rooted in clear and unequivocal economic choices. For these choices – which guide dozens of our daily decisions and judgments – form attitudes and en flesh a spirituality which has a profound influence on all other relationships of life:

[The brothers] will express such choices not only by animating and participating critically in movements of solidarity and ecology, but even more by living soberly, content with little, and not blindly enslaved by the consumer society (Proposal 26; see also Circular Letter 12, par. 4.4).

5.2 The use of the word “choices” in Proposal 26 is significant and prompts me to revisit the concept of solidarity in order to ground ourselves in reality. In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Pope John Paul II reminds us that solidarity “is not a vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far” (n. 38). Solidarity is not some vague, ineffective stirring of pity that one might feel in front of a television set at the sight of earthquake victims or scenes of victims of human rights abuses. We may feel slightly guilty or even angry – *but nothing happens!* **Solidarity** makes something happen because it *is about choices* that flow from “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” – in the words of Pope John Paul II. The mind-set that gives rise to such determination is the knowledge that “we are all really

responsible for all” (ibid). Choices need to be “arrived at” after careful consideration and investigation of the facts. The work of arriving at choices can be difficult in the case of individuals. For a community, it involves hard work to arrive at serious, deliberate choices. It requires serious dialogue and the personal commitment of each individual brother. Do we have the energy to make this arduous journey together? Are we prepared to take the risks such a fraternal venture involves?

Choosing an interdependent world

- 6.1 By their embracing evangelical poverty and the economic choices which enflashed this spirituality, Francis and his early companions did not overturn or reform the emerging market economy of their day. But their choice did have a three-fold effect: (a) it affirmed and protected their identity as “lesser brothers;” (b) it separated them from the more obvious injustices and inequalities of the world in which they lived; and (c) it presented to the world a visible model of human relationships in contrast to the prevailing model of their day. These remain also for us today the objectives of our choice for solidarity and mutual dependence.
- 6.2 In March of 1999, the general definitory issued a document entitled, *International Economic Solidarity*. This document attempted to reform economic relationships between the various circumscriptions of our Order based on the principles of solidarity and mutual dependence as described in Proposal 24 of VI PCO. The entire Order is invited to study and critique this document in preparation for next year’s general chapter. After suitable modification, it is hoped that the general chapter will adopt this vision on behalf of the entire Order.
- 6.3 The principles outlined in Proposal 24 can also be applied to relationships between fraternities of the same province or

circumscription. Solidarity and mutual dependence within the same province or circumscription is of equal importance for our witness to communion as is solidarity and mutual dependence between provinces. It is vital that local and provincial chapters begin to reflect on this aspect.

6.4 The proponents of the global economy maintain that the increase of wealth in the hands of the few will gradually “trickle down” and transform the lives of the many. As was demonstrated in the presentation of Ms. Susan George to the Sixth Plenary Council, this claim is a myth. The vision of a world of interrelationships built on solidarity and mutual dependence offers a stronger basis for hope toward social change. For this reason the Plenary Council urged that “fraternal communion and interdependence should inspire and determine ... our interaction with the world, particularly the world of the poor” (Proposal 21). This offers rich material for reflection in every local and provincial fraternity of our Order.

6.5 From our earliest history, the vitality of the international brotherhood of our Order has been predicated upon the sharing and movement of brothers between circumscriptions. This sharing takes multiple forms. The most obvious is the continuing missionary outreach of our Order. For example, at this time new presences are being established in Burkina Faso and Gabon. New missions are being considered in Botswana, Bolivia and Haiti. All of these obviously depend upon the sharing of brothers.

There are many examples of the sharing of formation personnel: the three Indonesian provinces have sent formation personnel to Madagascar and Pakistan; the Indian provinces assisting formation in East and West Africa.

At the beginning of this century, brothers of the Province of Holland helped to refound the Province of Warsaw after our Polish confreres

went through a period of oppression and suppression. Today our Polish brothers are assisting in the resurrection of fraternities in Lithuania and Latvia. Seventeen brothers of Cracow have been integrated into the Province of Vienna. Many brothers come from various continents to serve their compatriots who have emigrated to Europe and America. These emigrants often find themselves at the lowest social stratus in their newly-adopted land. By reaching out to them, these Capuchin brothers are helping our European and American fraternities to insert themselves among the poorest peoples of their societies. The vitality and rejuvenation of our Order as a world brotherhood will continue to require the exchange of brothers between circumscriptions. The appropriation of the attitudes of solidarity and mutual dependence can conscientize the Order and create new structures of fraternal collaboration between continents and circumscriptions.

Loaves and Fish

7.1 The multiplication of the loaves and fish is a miracle of solidarity. In the Gospel of Mark, when the apostles complain of their inability to feed the crowds, Jesus says: “*How many loaves have you?*” (Mk 6:38). Jesus makes clear that God’s miracles do not replace human enterprise! The apostles first had to stretch their own capacities to the limit. John includes a significant detail missed by the other evangelists: “*There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish*” (Jn 6:9). I have always found it difficult to understand that in a crowd of 5,000 there should be so little food available. Perhaps John provides an insight. Perhaps others in the crowd had their bits of bread and fish, but only one boy had the generosity to share his all! With that important piece of information, John adds another crucial element to the miracle of Jesus: solidarity. In the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus gives exponential power to the generous act of solidarity of one boy with five barley loaves and two fish. *God’s miracles begin where human generosity extends to*

its limits! Indeed, human generosity is a miracle of grace.

7.2 If, as I said earlier, Paul is the apostle in possession of a universal vision, then, John is the one who best proclaims the primacy of love. There is no solidarity without love. This is why the pope can say: “Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue. ... It [is] possible to identify many points of contact between solidarity and charity, which is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s disciples” (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 40) . I believe that it is the vocation of our Capuchin fraternities to proclaim and manifest the Christian “soul” in the experience of solidarity. We hear this eloquently expressed by Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata*: “Consecrated persons, who become ‘of one heart and soul’ (Acts 4:32) through the love poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (see Rom 5:5), experience an interior call to share everything in common: material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable services” (VC 42). The pope concludes by quoting the Rule of Saint Basil: “In community life, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in one individual passes at the same time to all. Here not only does each enjoy his own gift, but makes it abound by sharing it with others; and each one enjoys the fruits of the other’s gift as if they were his own” (VC 42). What the pope and Saint Basil say about the power of the Spirit shared by brothers within one fraternity can also be applied between fraternities. When one local fraternity embraces true solidarity in the sharing of spiritual and material gifts, “the power of the Holy Spirit at work in one individual (fraternity) passes at the same time to all” and our brotherhood throughout the world becomes a solidarity network powered by the Spirit of God. Christian tradition has always seen the miracle of the loaves and fish as an image of the eucharist. While St. Paul affirms that the failure to share gifts offends communion and sins against eucharist (see 1 Cor 11:17-34), St. John teaches us that solidarity is a eucharistic act. It is my prayer that our fraternities will offer in solidarity the “loaves and fish” of their poverty which will once

again release in the world the miracle of love. Each day as our fraternities throughout the world gather around the table of the Lord, Jesus rises from the table to wash the feet of his disciples, to respond to the needs of his people (see Jn 13). May he find fraternities willing to offer in solidarity the loaves and fish which will release his miracles anew in our world.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap
General Minister
Feast of All Saints - November 1, 1999

Questions for Personal Reflection

Spend a period of personal prayer and meditation using one or more of these scriptural texts:

- "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).
- "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:12-13).
- "How many loaves have you? ... There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish" (Mk 6:38 and Jn 6:9).

Questions for Fraternal Discussion

1. For a community, arriving at serious choices involves hard work, requiring serious dialogue and the personal commitment of each individual brother.
 - What kind of commitment is required of the local fraternity in order to appropriate and implement the Franciscan vision of solidarity (see paragraphs 3 and 6)?
 - Do we value and live “mutual dependence”? How would the “culture of mutual dependence” change relationships within our fraternity?
 - Can our fraternity agree now, at this meeting, on one step that must be taken to begin this journey?
2. How do we react to Paul’s blunt warning that “failure to share gifts offends communion and sins against eucharist” (see 1 Cor 11:17-34)?
3. What must we do to create a “fair balance between your present abundance and other people’s needs”(see 2 Cor 8:13-14)?
4. “Fraternal communion and interdependence should inspire and determine our structures of solidarity within the local, provincial and international fraternities” (Proposal 21).
 - What “structures of solidarity” now exist at these levels?
 - What changes are needed at all these levels?

Reflections on *VIPCO*: Part Three
“The Poor – Our Teachers”

To the brothers and sisters of the Order
at their respective residences

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food ...” (Mt 25:34b-35).

- 1.1 Few gospel texts have had greater impact upon the popular consciousness than this passage from Matthew. This text has inspired countless Christians to dedicate themselves to the disadvantaged of our world. In the popular consciousness, to “be Christian” is to love and serve the poor. No one has built or beautified a church without questioning and being questioned about whether it might have been better if the money spent had been given to the poor. The coherence of the church’s teachings is most often judged by how she lives this passage of Matthew.
- 1.2 Yet the parable has a deeper meaning. In the parable, “all nations” are gathered before the Son of Man. In the understanding of the day, “all nations” referred to the pagans. The parable poses an implicit question: “How can non-believers encounter Christ and participate in the mystery of salvation?” In reply, Jesus tells all people of good will that they can encounter his living presence in the hungry, thirsty, poor, and imprisoned, *“the least of these who are members of my family.”* In this manner the parable becomes a powerful call to the

church to reveal Jesus to the nations by being poor, powerless, and dependent upon the very world it is sent to save. We are reminded of the words found in that visionary document of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, (8): “Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the church is called to follow the same path if it is to communicate the fruits of salvation to humanity.”

1.3 The Sixth Plenary Council saw this as a central element in the conversion experience of St. Francis. Noting that “his conversion journey took a decisive turn when the Lord led him among the lepers...,” PROPOSAL 9 also describes the process in which he “left the world” as a transformation which “changed his social condition and his residence, leaving the center for the periphery of Rivo Torto and Our Lady of the Angels.” For the same reason, among the critical and fundamental options necessary to live Franciscan evangelical poverty today, *VI PCO* lists: “***a life rooted in the experience of the people, particularly the poor***” (PROPOSAL 6).

1.4 The Fifth Plenary Council had already noted: “The oppressed and outcasts will be our brothers and sisters. They will also be our teachers” (*V PCO*, 91). PROPOSAL 10 of *VI PCO* – following the logic of Matthew 25 – goes a step further and makes one of the key affirmations of the Plenary Council:

“We recognize that ***closeness to the culture of the poor*** enriches us from a human point of view and ***is a necessary hermeneutical tool with which to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage***” (PROPOSAL 10).

Closeness to the culture of the poor is a *hermeneutical tool* – i.e., an instrument that helps us understand, interpret, and live that which lies at the heart of our Franciscan heritage, namely, evangelical poverty. Furthermore, and equally important, we are enabled to do

all of this in ways that speak to our age. This hermeneutical tool is not an option, an “extra”, which we can take or leave as we please. We are obliged to avail ourselves of it if we are to be effective gospel witnesses in our day and age. If we fail to do so, we will not be credible witnesses, because we will have failed to understand our own poverty and thus remain at a superficial level of our heritage.

While we are on the subject of “hermeneutics,” in Greek mythology, one of the attributes of the god Hermes was to illustrate and explain the wishes of the gods to human beings. In the sense intended by *VI PCO*, ordinary poor people present and embody qualities that lie at the heart of God himself, qualities God wishes to see in his people. We believe, after all, that if we are to have a “preferential option for the poor,” it is because God himself has first shown us such a love, embodied in Jesus and instinctively grasped by Francis. When a missionary brother was asked what the poor people in his mission saw and valued in the gospel, he immediately replied: “Jesus on the cross because there he is one of them.” This anecdote speaks volumes about the point of view of the poor and about our need to share their experience.

- 1.5 In Circular Letter 12 entitled, “*On Compassion*,” I reflected on the Fifth Plenary Council’s vision of our Capuchin presence with the poor. In this letter I will limit myself to the manner in which *VI PCO*, reflecting on our presence to the poor as a dimension of our life of evangelical poverty, builds upon and completes the vision of *VPCO*.

The Preferential Option for the Poor

- 2.1 The preferential option for the poor, first articulated in *VPCO* (29), is a necessary precondition if the poor are to be our teachers in the school of evangelical poverty. Living our option for the poor, we gradually take on the “point of view of the poor” (see *VPCO*, 86).

The Fifth Plenary Council treated the preferential option for the poor as the option or choice of each individual brother. A Capuchin must be both poor and a man of the poor, while the Capuchin fraternity must lead the brothers to embrace the poor. *VI PCO* expanded this option or choice to the fraternity as such:

“With the whole church we reaffirm our preferential option for the poor. This choice is not at the discretion of the individual brother, but challenges us as a fraternity...” (PROPOSAL 9).

- 2.2 “*What do you want me to do for you?*” (Mk 10:51) was probably a question the blind beggar had heard often, usually spoken in condescension or even derision. It was a question which he invariably answered untruthfully, more concerned with what he thought the other person wanted to hear than with the truth in his heart. He couldn’t see the compassion on the face of Jesus, but he sensed it in his voice. And so, he blurted out: “*My teacher, let me see again!*” The aspirations of the poor often seem so impossible and even absurd. Jesus’ response astounded everyone: “*Go, your faith has made you well!*” There are a number of other remarkable elements in the encounter between Jesus and the blind beggar in Chapter 10 of Mark. First of all, the beggar has a name and a history. He is Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Within the global economy of our day, the poor person is depersonalized, faceless, nameless, without a history, without an identity, defined by what he or she lacks: a needy person, a mother without food, proper clothing or housing for her children; a youth deficient in education or lacking employment; a senior citizen wanting in medical attention. In this society, the poor are not human beings with faces and names, they are cases, their needs determined by others. The poor are not asked what they want, they are told what they will get! By contrast, the compassion of Jesus touched Bartimaeus and called forth from his heart his deepest aspiration, a longing which he had not dared admit even to himself: “*My teacher, let me see again!*” The option for the

poor which we make “as a fraternity” must be marked by this compassion of Jesus. It must involve us in a ministry of compassionate listening. This presents us with an immediate and logical challenge:

“(This choice)... *must be visibly shown*: by living with the poor ... by serving them, preferably with our own hands; by sharing bread with them, and defending their rights” (PROPOSAL 9).

Only in this manner can the poor become for us persons rather than cases. Only in this way can we encourage them to express their deepest needs and claim the freedom and dignity that belongs to them in virtue of their creation and redemption.

2.3 In “*On Compassion*,” I distinguished four different levels on which the Order lives this option for the poor: welcoming the poor when they come to our door; involving ourselves in social works among and on behalf of the poor; inserting fraternities among the poor; and working for justice (Circular Letter 12, see 4.3.1 - 4.3.5). *VI PCO* challenges the Order, each province, and each local fraternity to ask how it is living out its option for the poor on each of these four levels. Concretely lived in this manner, our option for the poor becomes “*a necessary hermeneutical tool with which to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage*” (PROPOSAL 10). Without this visible insertion into the world of the poor we are incapable of understanding evangelical poverty:

“Being poor with the poor and becoming their brothers is part and parcel of our Franciscan charism and of our tradition as ‘brothers of the people’” (PROPOSAL 9).

2.4 Among the various choices whereby we express our solidarity with the poor, the proposals give privileged place to fraternities of insertion among the poor. The brothers participating in the Sixth

Plenary Council were able to profit from the experience of the relatively numerous insertion experiences which sprang up in our Order in the years following the Fifth Plenary Council. The first reason given for such insertion fraternities is the cause of justice:

“We believe that solidarity with those on the edge of society is one of the prime responses against the injustice of our times” (PROPOSAL 9).

At the same time, PROPOSAL 10 wanted to ensure that it is the fraternity as such which is inserted among the poor, and that the experience of insertion does not lead to the isolation of the brothers within the context of the provincial fraternity. Building upon the conviction that insertion fraternities are “not at the discretion of the individual brother” but commitments of the provincial fraternity as such, the proposal suggests a “careful selection of the insertion fraternities and the formation of the brothers who are their members.” Thus conceived and energized, fraternities inserted among the poor are intended to assist the entire provincial fraternity to embrace the culture of the poor, and in this manner enrich and deepen the province’s understanding and practice of the charism of evangelical poverty.

The culture of the poor

- 3.1 The object of our option for the poor is not simply that our fraternity identify with the poor in their need, but also that we encounter “*the culture of the poor*” which “*enriches us from a human point of view.*” After all, we are not enriched by a lack! When we “take on what is valid in their [the poor’s] way of believing, loving and hoping,” we are provided with a privileged view of the gospel of Christ which enables us “to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage” (see PROPOSALS 9 and 10). The gospel parable of the rich man and Lazarus makes this very point. The key statement in this

regard comes toward the end of the parable: “... *between you and us a great chasm has been fixed*” (Lk 16:26). It is evident that this chasm was not created after the death of the rich man, but rather, during his life: “*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores*” (Lk 16:19-20). For the rich man, Lazarus simply did not exist! He was faceless, nameless. He walked by Lazarus day after day without seeing him, feeding his dogs richer morsels from his table than what he offered the poor man. This had devastating consequences for Lazarus who had a closer relationship with those dogs than with the man himself! The dogs at least licked his sores. Still, the parable clearly makes the point that this chasm also had radical and decisive consequences for the rich: “*I have five brothers ... warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment*” (Lk 16: 28). A lifetime of security, privilege, having every whim answered, commanding and controlling creates a “culture” – a way of being, thinking, and acting. Despite the many human comforts and enrichments it may provide, it can also impoverish the human person, robbing him of his capacity to feel and love. And on the other hand, a lifetime of want and insecurity, being at the beck and call of others also creates its own “culture – its own way of being, loving and hoping.” Despite the many human discomforts and needs it may evidence – aspects which can devastate a human person – it can also be enriching. Isn’t it significant that Luke gives a name and an identity to the poor man, Lazarus, while the rich man remains nameless and without identity? In this manner, Luke gives an evangelical evaluation of the two “cultures.” *VI PCO*, heeding the message of Luke 16, declared that exposure to the “culture of the poor” is a “hermeneutical tool” necessary to reach the heart of our Franciscan charism.

- 3.2 *VI PCO* proposed that every province “draft and implement plans to establish and monitor our humble presence among the poor” (PROPOSAL 10). The motivation proposed is that by “sharing their

culture from within and being accepted as members of their society, we will be able to promote its integral development.” This vision was already present and at work in the Fifth Plenary Council. However, *VI PCO* makes an important addition: the establishment of a plan to monitor our presence among the poor is also to “ensure the constant support of the circumscriptions, as well as *ways of fraternally sharing their experiences.*” In this way, our presence among the poor might become a true “*hermeneutical tool with which to reach the heart of our Franciscan heritage.*”

An austere lifestyle: “The minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed”
(Const. 67, 3)

4.1 Consistent with our Capuchin tradition, *VI PCO* underlined the importance of an austere lifestyle in defining our embrace of the culture of the poor. In this regard, perhaps the most important statement of the Sixth Plenary Council is found in PROPOSAL 1: “The foundation and model of our gospel poverty is Jesus, the Word of God.”

Jesus is the model of our poverty. Jesus is also the model of our austerity. It is interesting to note that Jesus is not the most austere evangelical model! St. John the Baptist was considerably more austere than Jesus. Furthermore, there was a qualitative difference between the austerity of John and that of Jesus. The austerity of John put him outside human society. John lived in the desert, apart from his neighbors. “*John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey*” (Mt 3:1, 4). The austerity of Jesus allowed him to celebrate with the excluded: “*And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’*” (Mt 9:10-11).

Imitating the austerity of Jesus, the object of Franciscan austerity is to identify ourselves with the outcasts and the poor, to build communion with them, “to take on what is valid in their way of believing, loving and hoping” (PROPOSAL 9).

4.2 As the sixth paragraph of Circular Letter 13 pointed out, this was precisely the object of the prescriptions of the Constitutions prior to 1968. Circular Letter 13 indicated that the Order took as its “model” of austerity the “working poor” of western Europe, and situated Capuchin life within that social setting. Like the working poor of their time, the brothers lived by the fruits of their daily work and filled very few offices to which fixed stipends were attached. They received no pensions. They lived from the occasional stipends of preachers and confessors, the produce of their gardens and orchards, the quest and the occasional offerings given by the faithful in their churches. The identification of the Order with Western Europe allowed it to give very detailed prescriptions for buildings and their decor. The friaries were in solidarity with the homes of the working poor (Circular Letter 13, see 6.2 - 6.2.3).

4.3 No such clear model of austere simplicity exists today. Lacking such a model, PROPOSAL 13 takes the norm which the *Constitutions* (67, 3) give for individual brothers and applies that same norm to the fraternity: “The minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed.” By stating that “the Constitutional norm ... can only be meaningfully applied in the context of the societies in which our friars actually live,” PROPOSAL 13 recognizes the lack of a single, universal model valid for all. In light of this challenge, PROPOSAL 13 points to a manner in which we might be able to reestablish some external norm for our poverty lived in fraternity:

“With the introduction of budgetary controls and spending limits, local communities and provincial fraternities can limit their use of resources and give an appropriate example of moderation and even

austerity” (PROPOSAL 13).

The budgetary standard whereby we establish the norm of our poverty must, of necessity, vary from culture to culture:

“Inculturation of poverty affects our dwellings, buildings, lifestyle, the poor means we use in the apostolates, and our external appearance” (PROPOSAL 12).

4.4 In those societies where a basic standard of human welfare is guaranteed by the state, could a local fraternity identify with the poor by adopting a “budget of the poor” – one based on the minimum offered those who receive social assistance? We live in an age when, even on the roof of the poorest hovel you can find a satellite dish, the poor themselves are often victims of consumerism. For this reason, the poor cannot always help us delineate those elements excluded by our poverty. However, by taking as a starting point “a budget of the poor,” could we not give witness even to the poor of a discerning and austere use of resources and thus reestablish our identity as “brothers of the people”? Even more, could we not witness to the contentment that comes when we shake off the tyranny of material possessions and goods? Greed destroys happiness and makes people restless. Simplicity brings peace of mind and freedom. The gospel does not say to us: *join the ranks of the poor and be miserable along with them*. The gospel says: *walk with the poor, learn from their virtues, and show them that they need not remain victims, but rather become survivors and eventually teachers and evangelizers to those who oppress them*.

Many nations are unable to guarantee even basic human needs for all of their citizens. In such societies, if we adopted the norm of “the budget of the poor,” pluriformity would necessarily have to be applied to the norm itself. Our austerity is a joyful simplicity; it is not the embrace of misery which afflicts a large part of the poor of

our world:

“We do not seek to establish one Capuchin lifestyle throughout the world. At the same time, *brothers in any part of the world must be freed from misery and enjoy acceptable living conditions*” (PROPOSAL 24, c).

In the footsteps of the poor Christ

5.1 The church must “reveal Jesus to the nations by being poor, powerless, and dependent on the very world it is sent to save” (see paragraph 1.2 above). PROPOSAL 11 forcefully echoes this challenge of Matthew’s gospel:

“... being and living, powerless and totally defenseless, was not a method or condition of evangelization, but was already in itself a proclamation of the gospel” (PROPOSAL 11).

Proposal 11 concludes by saying that the culture of the poor can also teach us how to proclaim the gospel: “We should be more ready to learn from the poor and to place our trust in God alone.”

5.2 The Sixth Plenary Council asks the Order to look carefully at its evangelizing tools:

“... we must seek to implement models of evangelization that are less bound up with the power and security that comes from having many expensive resources” (PROPOSAL 11).

It is interesting and perhaps prophetic to our Order that the church chose to beatify Br. Nicholas of Gèsturi one year almost to the day after the conclusion of our Sixth Plenary Council. Nicholas was a classic questor of the Order. Known as “Brother Silence,” he quietly walked the streets of Cagliari in Sardinia for 34 years. His biographer

describes the effect of his silent passage:

“It became almost an expectation for people to stop him as he passed by, to confide a personal suffering or a family difficulty.... And with humility and patience he listened to each person, consoling each one with a few, simple words, a gesture, a promise of his prayers. He became an almost ‘indispensable presence’” (Luciano Cossu, *Beato Fra Nicola da Gesturi*, p. 9).

- 5.3 There is no doubt that efficiency very often has evident priority in our ministries. For example, most brothers who have the exclusive and personal use of an automobile justify this fact by reason of their apostolic commitments. In honesty, we must admit that very few brothers refuse the use of such means of transportation because of the evangelical witness of poverty and minority.

“Capuchins have placed particular emphasis on ... **closeness to the people** These values, when they are lived in brotherhood, ... are a powerful witness to the gospel and a stimulus for the advancement of the weakest of people” (PROPOSAL 5).

Having been blessed with the opportunity to view the life and ministry of thousands of brothers in 90 or more nations, it becomes more evident to me that our fraternities must develop new criteria for transportation. Might not this simple rule be helpful to us: “*That means of transport should be used which keeps us closest to the people.*” Such a norm would mean that we never use an airplane when a train would suffice. We would never use an automobile if public transit would suffice. We would never use an automobile if a bicycle would suffice. We would never use a bicycle if walking would suffice! This norm might also help us to judge the type of automobile suitable for the brothers. The perspective of the norm is not simply financial. A variation of the norm suggested above might read: “*That automobile is to be preferred which least isolates us*

from the people.” In general, the more steel that encloses us, the harder is it to maintain fraternal contact with people! Cost is not the only measure. Rather, the more compact the automobile, the less we are separated from the people.

If we must choose new criteria flowing from poverty and minority to judge our means of transportation, such new criteria are equally important for judging other tools for our ministry. How often have the people been edified by our Capuchin preachers of popular missions, not only by their preaching, but more by the cheerful bonds of affection among the brothers themselves as they went about their ministry. Capuchin tradition teaches us that the evangelical values of our fraternal way of life proclaim the gospel of Christ more effectively than all our instruments. This gives every local fraternity ample material for reflection.

- 5.4 “Our solidarity towards the least ones and the suffering is also well expressed in social and charitable works or structures” (PROPOSAL 25). When read in conjunction with PROPOSAL 11, we might add this insight: “The poor are not evangelized by power but by fraternity.” This challenges us to transform our social ministries from a series of services which we provide to individuals into an expression of our fraternal insertion among the poor and our solidarity with the poor. In *On Compassion*, I stressed one important aspect of our fraternal presence to the poor, namely, that it be a fraternity of brothers at the service of the poor and a fraternity within which at least some of the brothers serve the poor with their own hands (Circular Letter 12, see 4.3.2). Another important component of this transformation is to be found in the implementation of a fraternal vision of the economics of our social projects. When monies are under the control of an individual brother, the ministry does not easily build communion. Money too easily becomes an instrument of personal power on the part of the individual brother. Poverty requires that we relinquish personal economic power. A fraternal

administration of monies builds communion.

My eyes have seen your salvation

- 6 The holy couple, Mary and Joseph, for whom there was no room in the inn at Bethlehem, are certainly to be counted among the poor. When they entered the temple precinct, their poverty was evident to all: Joseph carried two young pigeons, the offering of the poor (see Lk 2:24). Like the silent passing of Blessed Nicholas through the streets of Cagliari, the poor and humble entrance of the Holy Family was a proclamation of hope and love:

“Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying, ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation ... ’ (Lk 2:28-30).

As we reflect on our call to evangelical poverty during this Christmas season, the Word of God invites us as brothers and fraternities to approach the poor families in our midst as Simeon approached the poor family from Bethlehem. Closeness to the culture of the poor can lead us to the heart of our Franciscan heritage (see PROPOSAL 10), thus making our lives a light of revelation to the nations.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap
General Minister

Feast of Bl. Mary Angela Astorch, Capuchin Poor Clare
December 2, 1999

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Do the material demands of apostolic efficiency sometimes conflict with my closeness to the poor? In such cases, what choices have I made in the past, and where might I need to reevaluate those choices?
2. To what extent do I share the lot of the poor of this world?

Questions for Fraternal Discussion

1. With regard to poverty in the use of things and of money, our Constitutions (67, 4 and 5) state that the fraternity should frequently reflect in common on all these things in the local chapter. How many times did we engage in such reflection at the local chapter in the past year? What emerged from these reflections?
2. What steps can we now take as a community to draw close to the poor?

CIRCULAR LETTER 17

THE GRACE OF WORKING

Reflections on VI PCO: Part Four and last in a series

To the brothers and sisters of the Order
at their respective residences

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working may work faithfully and devotedly....” (Later Rule V, 1)

- 1.1 In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution – with its unprecedented advance of technology – and the philosophy of work espoused by Marx, the twentieth century has spawned new insights into the theology of work. Sources for our own appreciation of a theology of work include Chapter Five of our *Constitutions* (which draws upon our Franciscan sources), the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*), as well as the more developed theology of work found in the social encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, especially *Laborem exercens* (September 14, 1981).
- 1.2 The Sixth Plenary Council of the Order helps us to reflect on the vital link between *Living Poverty in Brotherhood* and minority on the one hand, and work on the other. “Manual work as the ordinary means of support and help to others” was among the “courageous choices of poverty” made by Francis and his early companions (see PROPOSAL 6). The same proposal indicates that “commitment to work” and “a life rooted in the experience of the people” are necessary options if we are to remain “faithful to the profound intentions of St. Francis.”

Work as Grace

- 2.1 With amazing spiritual intuition and genius, St. Francis summarized his theology of work in one simple phrase: “*the grace of working*” (see *Later Rule* V, 1). Three words express an entire theology! This theology flows directly from “*that height of most exalted poverty*”:

It was in the incarnation and the cross that Francis saw the pattern of Jesus’ radical attitude, which was “*to keep nothing of himself for himself*” (see *LOrd* 29). This means first of all recognizing that *all the good that is in us and is accomplished through us is a gift of God*, and that therefore we must return it to God in praise and thanksgiving (PROPOSAL 2).

- 2.2 Br. Lázaro Iriarte noted that “both he [i.e., Francis] and Clare ... opened their gospel fraternity to candidates of every kind: nobles and commoners, educated and uneducated, clergy and laity, rich and poor” (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 2, in *Analecta OFM Cap* 114 (1998), p. 644). Francis admitted no distinctions or hierarchy among them. All were equal in dignity. Our *Constitutions* describe the heart of this gospel fraternity: “As brothers given to each other by the Lord and endowed with different gifts, let us accept one another with a grateful spirit” (84, 1).

Since all were equally “gift of God,” the giftedness of each was equally valued. Just as Francis admitted no hierarchy or distinction among his brothers, in the same way he saw no hierarchy of dignity among the various labors of his brothers, all were expressions of the gift of God. Br. Lázaro affirmed: “All shared the same equal status in poverty and work” (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 2, p. 644).

Recognizing work as “grace,” Francis welcomed and encouraged a multitude of gifts in his brothers. No gift of work should be abandoned

“provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly” (Earlier Rule VII, 3). Therefore, he allowed all such gifts to flourish: “Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise that trade they have learned” (Earlier Rule VII, 3). This attitude was entirely revolutionary. Francis’ age considered manual labor inferior, of lesser value than intellectual pursuits. Lázaro pointed out that not even St. Bonaventure appreciated Francis’ intuition (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 2.2.1, p. 649).

2.3 The Sixth Plenary Council repeatedly stresses the importance of valuing all the gifts the brothers have. “We should value all kinds of work: apostolic, charitable, intellectual and manual” (PROPOSAL 15). “Our brothers should have equality of opportunity in training for their work” (PROPOSAL 14). “We wish to underline ... the widespread need today for specialization in particular jobs, with equal opportunities and access for lay and cleric brothers alike” (PROPOSAL 15). The evident respect that we have for each brother’s differing work is itself a witness to our neighbors and hence, a form of evangelization.

The Dignity and Value of Work

2.4 “Evangelical poverty, as a way of following Christ, restores the dignity of work in a world where it has been reduced to a mere commodity” (PROPOSAL 14). To the global economy, human work is to be bought and sold like any other commodity. Its value is to be determined simply by the law of supply and demand. Thus, the work of the captains of industry or technology is often valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars per hour. The work of a mother caring for her two children in the slums of one of our modern cities has no economic value. The work of the poor does not “fulfil the individual” (see PROPOSAL 14), rather it demeans and oppresses. By rediscovering “*the grace of working*,” we have the opportunity to proclaim the

value of the gift which each individual brings to work.

Work as Service

3.1 Since work is a grace, it is also a service. We see this from the title of Chapter Seven of the *Earlier Rule*, “The Manner of Serving and Working.” The work of the brothers is a primary expression of their identity as lesser brothers, an identity expressed in service:

*None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying **to serve or work** among others. They may not be in charge in the houses in which **they serve** Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house (Earlier Rule VII, 1-2).*

3.2 There is an obvious concern in the Plenary Council’s proposals that work in our Order protect and conserve our identity as lesser brothers. In a global economy one’s work is considered a private possession which the individual markets to others, selling it to the highest bidder. This rather common attitude cannot fail to have its influence on us and on our fraternal life and witness. The words of the Rule speak directly to this point: “*Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, **nor anything at all***” (*Later Rule VI, 1*) Thus, PROPOSAL 15 enjoins:

There should always be a communal sharing and discernment of the activities chosen by individuals (see Const. 76, 2; 77, 4). This will also help to avoid the danger that a brother’s work becomes his private property and makes him impossible to transfer, and insensitive to the needs of the local and provincial fraternity.

Lay employees

3.3 “*They may not be in charge in the houses in which **they serve***

Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house” (Earlier Rule VII, 1-2). When friars worked in the houses of other people, Francis wanted them to avoid being placed in positions of power. How much more ought we to avoid wielding power when we take on the role of employer and lay people come to our houses to work for us! With regard to our being employers, the Plenary Council draws three concrete conclusions flowing from our minority: (a) that we abide by all pertinent laws, (b) that we be careful not to adopt such a solution automatically as a matter of course, and (c) that we avoid creating in ourselves a “boss mentality” (see PROPOSAL 16). Civil societies have enacted laws to protect workers against the more oppressive consequences of the global economy. As Capuchins we should not stand accused before such laws; our treatment of workers should, instead, be a witness to others. We must give scrupulous care to extend maximum protection to our workers. In hundreds of fraternities throughout the world brothers cook for each other in turn, clean their own friaries, and care for the other needs of the fraternity. Care must be taken to ensure that the decision to hire lay employees is not simply an economic decision. In my travels to friaries throughout the world, I have met dozens of cooks, secretaries, and other lay personnel who have embraced service in the friary as a vocation, and not as mere employment. They nourish us by their prayer, and serve our needs. Their dignity and commitment in faith prod us to avoid the “boss mentality.” More importantly, we ought to imbue our employees with the gospel vision, spirituality, and charism which ideally inspire us.

Work as Solidarity

4.1 Lay employment must also be seen in light of our wider vision of work viewed as solidarity in mutual relationships:

Solidarity is not primarily about giving things to others. It is, rather, mutual interdependence and brotherhood. The culture of solidarity

[and interdependence] creates new ways of understanding and living relationships with others (PROPOSAL 22).

The Franciscan fraternal spirit has always been colored and textured by the direct service which brother renders to brother: “*Let no one be called ‘prior,’ but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother. Let one wash the feet of the other*” (Earlier Rule VI, 3). For this reason, the Plenary Council states: “The active collaboration of all the brothers in the ordinary, daily upkeep of the fraternity ... fosters the growth of a sense of fraternity, equality, and reciprocal dependence or assistance.” The proposal goes on to describe a wide range of such fraternal services: “It takes not only the form of manual work, but ... jobs [that] range from gardening to computing, and each brother can make available his practical skills or intellectual abilities” (PROPOSAL 16). The interdependence created by such fraternal services is so essential to Franciscan brotherhood that the Plenary Council asserts that “whoever does not share in domestic work weakens the fraternity” (PROPOSAL 16, see also IV PCO, 19). Conversely, each one of us has witnessed how brothers serving brothers is a gift that builds fraternity. I recall Br. Henri who took upon himself the task of getting up early everyday to brave the freezing pre-dawn Canadian winter to purchase newspapers for the fraternity. I remember a senior brother in France who, unable to bend down to work the garden soil, tilled it with love on his knees. I recall Br. Anacleto and Br. Fermo at the General Curia who, due to their advanced age were unable to perform other tasks, but lovingly cared for the wine cellar and the refectory. Without doubt, you could add to this list from your own experience! It is this living tradition which we must make every effort to conserve.

4.2 The Plenary Council’s proposals underscore another important aspect: “Domestic work also makes us share in the lifestyle of ordinary people” (PROPOSAL 16). In an excellent article entitled, “*I Cappuccini: Frati del Popolo*” (see *Il Focolare*, monthly newsletter

of the Capuchin Province of Siracusa, May/August 1995 [insert]), Br. Dino Dozzi examines the foundations of this deferential title given the Capuchins by the author Vincenzo Gioberti, inspired by Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. Brothers cleaning their own friaries, cooking their own meals, working the land within their own gardens, and questing for themselves and the poor: this witness fixed the identity of the Capuchins as "brothers of the people." Our reflections on the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order draw us back to this tradition.

4.3 PROPOSAL 18 points to still another important aspect of work as solidarity, "work fraternities." The "worker priest movement" which originated in France was inspired by, among others, the famous former-friar, Abbé Pierre, and evoked a response also from within our Order. "These ventures were motivated by a concern to be present or 'incarnated' in the world of labor, especially as wage-earning, working people." The proposal goes on, "the motives behind such fraternities can still justify the choice of being a paid worker, not necessarily in a factory, but in humble occupations that are burdensome and involve dependence. This is our way of sharing in the conditions of life affecting so much of humankind, it is a gospel witness to others, and formative for ourselves." The contemporary spiritual contribution to these experiences is underscored in the last sentence of PROPOSAL 18: "The fraternity always retains its crucial role (Const. 77, 3; 79, 1-2) as the place where one lives and receives challenge and support."

Do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion

Those brothers ... may work faithfully and devotedly so that, while avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute (Later Rule V, 1).

- 5.1 Br. Lázaro Iriarte made an interesting point when he noted that in the spirituality of religious life prior to Francis, manual labor was valued almost exclusively for its ascetical value – a monk worked in order to avoid idleness. As already indicated, Francis saw a much richer value in manual labor. Idleness was not something unheard of in the early Franciscan fraternity [we have only to recall the incident of “Brother Fly” (see *Legend of Perugia*, 62)]. And while not stressed in the proposals, it must be said that idleness is not something entirely unheard of in the Order today.
- 5.2 Br. Lázaro, however, rightly pointed out a far greater danger for this day and age: “chaotic and time-wasting activity, nervous activism that leaves no room for reflection and robs life of its harmony” (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 4.2.2., p. 659). PROPOSAL 17 needs no commentary; it possesses its own eloquence:

We live in a fast-moving society, under stress from commitments, deadlines, and modern communications media. Our fraternities do not escape these pressures, and so, besides avoiding idleness we need to avoid excessive **activism**, even in the apostolate. Confronted with this tendency, we must take care that our work does not eventually damage fraternal life by eliminating times for reflection, study, and interaction with our brothers. Above all, we must ensure that it does not compromise our “prayer and devotion,” thereby unbalancing our life.

- 5.3 The professional status of the brothers and the stability required by certain works threaten the Franciscan tradition of itinerancy which calls us to be “*pilgrims and strangers*” in this world (see *Testament* 24). The social doctrine of the church and modern social legislation protect the right of workers to their employment. This forms part of most contracts between labor and management. It is also consistent with the philosophy that views work as private property. These realities of modern work also influence the way we think. We often

regard our work not as a grace, but as a “tenured right.” This engenders a sense of possession which also undermines itinerancy. The suggestions of the Sixth Plenary Council are very modest and minimal:

- we should often calmly discuss this issue, both in community and with the superiors; and

- from time to time we should evaluate our readiness to change assignments or to remain, basing our decisions on the good of the community and that of the People of God toward whom we have responsibilities (PROPOSAL 19).

5.4 Society has depersonalized and dehumanized work. A rediscovery of soul, the human soul, is needed. The friar minor is one who brings soul to whatever task he does. Notice how much of the *Later Rule* is concerned with interior qualities of soul and how relatively little there is of the external! With a lightness of touch characteristic of a sensitive musician, Francis touches those keys which allow us to hear the music of the soul, e.g. “let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble” (*Later Rule* III, 11) and “let them beware of all pride, vainglory, envy and greed” (*Later Rule* X, 7). It is clear that the friar minor, by living his religious consecration, is constantly doing “soul work,” that is, tilling the ground of his own soul. And such soul work will impress itself on whatever gift of service he brings to the fraternity, to the church, to humanity. PROPOSAL 17 speaks to all of us:

The prevalence of activity may lead us to place too much trust in what we do and to put ourselves first, **as if the Reign of God were not the work of the Holy Spirit, and as if listening, hospitality, and silence before God were meaningless.**

Should not this reflection be posted under the exit sign of every

friary and in a prominent location at every Capuchin workstation?

“By working we must earn our daily bread ...”

(Opening phrase of *Laborem exercens*)

- 6.1 The excellent study which Br. Lázaro Iriarte prepared for the Sixth Plenary Council established that it was the original intuition and project of Francis that the brothers live off the work of their own hands. This original intention was too revolutionary for the church, for the Order, and for the society of his day and was quickly abandoned. Because of modern social developments and a new theology of work, the Order today is better able to appreciate and embrace the original intention of St. Francis. In fact, beginning with the *Constitutions of 1968* work is conceived as the primary source of support of our brotherhood (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 4 - 4.2.8, pp 657-661). Living off the fruits of our own labor, we create a yardstick or measure for our poverty. This is also a visible identification with the experience of most of humanity.
- 6.2 In the *Earlier Rule* Francis made a strict connection between the brothers’ work and meeting their needs: “*Let the brothers who know how to work do so ... For the prophet says: ‘You shall eat the fruit of your labors’ ...*” (*Earlier Rule* VII, 3-4). At the same time, it is extremely important to realize that, in the mind of Francis, there is no *quid pro quo* between “stipend” and “work.” Rather, “*whoever does not wish to work shall not eat*” is the essential connection with “work” (*Earlier Rule* VII, 5).

Francis treats our work as a form of interdependence (see Circular Letter 15, “Solidarity and Mutual Dependence,” in *Analecta OFM Cap*, 115 (1999), n. 3.1, p. 252). The brothers freely and generously give their services to others. To Francis, it would be incomprehensible to place a monetary value on a gift of God! At the same time, our work provides the occasion for our neighbors to

freely offer us wages to meet our needs. Therefore, Francis can state with serenity, “*And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord*” (Testament 22). One who has worked can justly ask that his needs be met.

Once again we have a Franciscan logic which is diametrically opposed to the marketing of work. Therefore the Plenary Council sensed a need to reinforce the gratuitous nature of Franciscan service:

In order to keep alive in us the sense of gratuitous giving, each community should keep a proper balance between paid work – necessary for the support of the fraternity – and volunteer work [i.e., done without payment] (PROPOSAL 15).

6.3 The early Franciscan economy was built upon two pillars: work and the quest. Developments within our Order and in the global economy during the past 50 years necessitate that we confront questions never before encountered by our Franciscan spirituality. With that in mind, the Sixth Plenary Council attempted to extend the “Franciscan economy” beyond work and the quest, and into the complex world formed by modern, global economics.

In what might be viewed as a series of concentric circles, the Sixth Plenary Council constructed principles for a Franciscan, fraternal economy:

- At the center of the circle is the work of the brothers: “For us Franciscans, work is ... a primary source of support” (PROPOSAL 14).

- The first concentric circle includes the alms of our own people. When their work does not suffice, the brothers can turn to the *table of the Lord*: “No province has the right to ask of another that which the labors of its own brothers and the alms of its own people can provide” (PROPOSAL 24D).

- We now arrive at the second concentric circle. When the “table of the Lord” does not suffice, we turn to international solidarity: “Equity requires that each province have the capacity to respond to the needs of its brothers and ministries in ways that are tailor-made to its own culture and people” (PROPOSAL 24C).

- We arrive at the outer concentric circle: extraordinary means such as financial reserves or investments. The Sixth Plenary Council indicated that recourse to such means can be justified only *in cases of manifest need* (see PROPOSAL 29).

The further one moves from the center, the more vigorous the criteria for judgment (see PROPOSAL 29). The Sixth Plenary Council did not propose definitive solutions to these new and, at times, vexing questions. However, it did open an important dialogue and reflection within the provinces, and in the Order as a whole. It is hoped that the upcoming general chapter will give further reflection and direction to this important discussion.

Principles for a fraternal administration of the fruits of our work

7.1 Since the central objective of the global economy is the increase of wealth, the goal of **administration** within that economy is the conservation of wealth. The Capuchin Order exists as a communion, at the service of building the communion of the church, or as Pope John Paul II has said: “a warmly human and welcoming point of reference for the poor and those who search for God.” In keeping with this identity, the goal of **fraternal administration** is growth in communion. PROPOSALS 29 through 45 offer principles for such a fraternal administration: transparency, participation, and equity.

7.2 Transparency builds trust, which in turn fosters communion:

Fraternal life also requires **transparency** in local, provincial, and

general administration. Such transparency begins with the individual friar, continues in the local fraternity, and finds its completion in the circumscription to which the fraternity belongs. Transparency expresses and facilitates brotherhood and solidarity among all the constituent parts of the Order (PROPOSAL 30).

- 7.3 Where the conservation of wealth is the objective, economic decisions are tightly controlled by the smallest possible number of persons. On the other hand, where communion is the objective of administration, there is an effort to share economic decisions and goals in the widest manner possible. Therefore, for example, PROPOSAL 31 states that:

Local chapters are the ideal occasion for preparing the fraternity budget and monitoring how money is spent. Our administration of money is one of the ways in which brotherhood is expressed, and the local chapter is the proper place to examine whether it conforms to gospel values, minority, etc.

Participation was one of the important criteria in the restructuring of our International Commission for Economic Solidarity in the Order. It should also restructure the administration of provinces and of local fraternities.

- 7.4 The principle of equity, enunciated to guide international solidarity, is valid at every level of administration in the Order (see PROPOSAL 24c). Equity does not require a universal and identical Capuchin model. It seeks to ensure that the varying and differing needs of each brother and of each fraternity will be met with equal concern. Communion cannot survive where there is privilege.
- 7.5 The Sixth Plenary Council challenges us to examine the function and administration of the goods of our fraternities. Franciscan spirituality must direct and permeate even our administrative

structures.

Conclusion

8. Joseph, the husband of Mary, provides both inspiration and encouragement in acknowledging the “grace of work” in our lives. St. Matthew says only one thing about the person of Joseph, namely, that he was “a just man.” In these few, short words, he says everything, for it is the highest compliment that could be paid to a Jewish man. The hands which held the infant Jesus in a tender embrace were the hands of a craftsman, someone who worked with his hands. When we observe in St. Francis that eagerness to hold the infant Jesus in his arms at Greccio, and hear him express those words, “I worked with my hands and I still desire to work” (*Testament* 20), do we not sense here the spirit and dispositions of Joseph! In his presence let us ponder together the grace of working. I notice a curious thing in the liturgy regarding Joseph, namely, his title “husband of Mary.” In the western world hardly anyone wants to be defined in terms of a relationship! Nobody wants to be defined in terms of being someone else’ husband or wife. Joseph reminds us that belonging to another in love is the highest fulfilment of our humanity. And from that belonging to one another in love, the grace of working flows as its sign and expression. I have often been astonished at the spiritual power of our Capuchin Constitutions. In few and simple words, sublime truths are expressed. One example of this is found in 54, 4: “In the same way, let us venerate, according to ancient tradition, Joseph her spouse.” How better could we honor St. Joseph than by making every effort to “work faithfully and devotedly” as he did, and receive through his intercession a renewed appreciation of the grace of working?

Fraternally,
Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap
General Minister

Rome March 3, 2000