

## **LESSER BROTHERS IN COMMUNION: Growing with the Church since Vatican II**

- 1.1 The Vatican Council was the most fundamental shift in the basic self-understanding of the Church in almost 1500 years. Karl Rahner believed that Vatican II, in terms of its profound and fundamental shift in the life and theological orientation of the Church, was on the same level as the “Council of Jerusalem” in 49 AC in which the Church had to embrace the wider vision of welcoming Gentile Christians into the former Jewish-Christian community and the Constantinian Adoption of the Church as the Imperial Religion in the fourth century.
  
2. The Vatican II revolution is grounded in four fundamental insights:
  - 2.1 At Vatican II, the Church moved from being a European-centered Church to a world-wide/multicultural genuinely catholic Church. Rahner and Congar agree that it was only at Vatican II that the Roman Catholic Church began to exist as a world church as such. Before that, it was a European church with colonies spread throughout the world ... colonies which had to adapt completely to modes and styles of the European church. At the beginning of the Third Millennium, two-thirds of the membership of the church live outside of Europe.

The realization of universality led the Council to a renewed awareness of the deep and profound relationship which must exist between the local and universal church. The Council realized that the Church does not exist in the abstract: it is incarnated in specific regions, cultures and peoples that make up a given local church. In the 1960's the Church suddenly realized that it simultaneously existed in hundreds and even thousands of different cultures. This raised the question: what is the source of authentic unity and not just the mere uniformity which was presumed to be unity in the past.
  - 2.2 The second revolutionary insight of the Council was the recovery of grace as a gift of God. The Council interpreted grace as God sharing God's own life with us. Grace is a relationship - it is God's offer of love and mercy and our response to that offer. Therefore, the Church does not “own” grace. Rather the Church is the sign and mediator of God's universal love for all peoples and cultures. The new understanding of grace had a revolutionary impact on the understanding of liturgy, the sacraments, church governance, sin and the relationship of the Church with other religions.
  - 2.3 The third fundamental insight of the Council was the primacy of baptism and the universal call to holiness. This had profound implications regarding authority in the Church as well as the role of the laity and the meaning of discipleship.
  - 2.4 The fourth revolutionary insight of the Council was the remarkable rediscovery of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God acting in every human, the church and the world. The Holy Spirit is the source of life and unity in the Church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Paragraphs 1.1 - 2.4 are taken from John J. Markey, O.P., “*George Washington, Napoleon, John Paul II and the Future of the Vatican II Revolution*”, 2003 STM Review, pp.

- 3.1 These basic principles of Vatican II gave rise to the formulation of a new ecclesiology, a new self-understanding of the Church. Rather than viewing herself as guardian and dispenser of grace to the world – the Church became the people of God in pilgrimage to the Father ... a communion. In the words of *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the Church exists as “the home and school of communion” in the world (parag. 43).
- 3.2 If Vatican II gave rise to the most fundamental shift in the basic self-understanding of the Church in almost 1500 years, it likewise has ignited the most comprehensive reconsideration of our Capuchin Franciscan identity in more than 450 years. The theology of communion has had a profound impact upon the Order’s understanding of her identity and mission in the world. Returning to our Franciscan and Capuchin roots, we have a progressively clearer understanding of the identity and mission of the Order within the theology of communion. Gospel brotherhood is the Franciscan incarnation of the theology of communion. We are a brotherhood of evangelical witness. This is an ongoing discovery of identity which continues to have revolutionary impact upon the life of the Order.

### **Home and School of Communion**

- 4.1 This impact was first perceived on a structural level. Just as the universal Church does not exist in the abstract, but in hundreds and even thousands of local churches incarnated in precise regions, cultures and peoples — so the universal Order does not exist in the abstract, but is incarnated in hundreds of local fraternities. A Province is not defined by its ministries but by its local fraternities. Each Province must be reborn and refounded as a “*network of local fraternities*”. This ongoing process has been gradual but dramatic. At times, it has been painful. Choices have been made to leave ancient friaries and return still vital ministries to the care of local churches. Each local fraternity must be composed of a sufficient number of brothers to live an intense life of prayer, fraternal dialogue, common life and collaboration in the service of the gospel. We see with new clarity the importance of fidelity to the vowed life. The Guardians of the Order have a crucial role in the animation of local fraternities and the local chapter is an indispensable tool in the growth of fraternal communion.<sup>2</sup> The creation and animation of this network is the principal role of the Provincial Minister and his Definitory.
- 4.2 Through a series of international congresses through the 1980's, the initial formation structures of the Order were reformed to reflect this new self-understanding of the Order as a brotherhood of evangelical witness. This revolution is not complete. For example, at the Congress on the Postnovitiate in the late 1980's, there was an implicit assumption that, if a young man had a solid formation for priestly life, he would also be an excellent religious and Capuchin. During the 1990's, this assumption made a 180 degree turn. The new assumption of the Order is this: If a young man is formed well for fraternal and evangelical life, he will be an excellent minister in the Church!

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<sup>2</sup>See Circular Letter 22, paragraph 5.5

The consequences of this “new assumption” are not yet clear. For this reason, there will be a new international congress on postnovitiate formation in September of next year.

- 4.3 Pope John Paul II has given us marvellous images of the local fraternity. In his letter of 26 September 1996, he called the local fraternity “a warmly human and welcoming point of reference for the poor and for those who sincerely search for God.” In *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, he gave us another image: “the home and school of communion”. If we are to live up to the expectations of the Church, the restructuring of Provinces as well as the strengthening of local fraternities both numerically and relationally is not sufficient. Our fraternities must “reflect the light of Christ ... (and) make his face shine before the generation of the new millennium.”<sup>3</sup>
- 4.4 *School of Holiness*: Our fraternities will be the “home and school of communion” when they become true “schools” of holiness. The burning bush of Exodus 3 is a fitting image of an evangelical fraternity. Only the holiness of God can purify our relationships and cause our fraternities to “reflect the light of Christ ... (and) make his face shine”.<sup>4</sup>
- 4.5 *School of Fidelity*: A fraternity cannot be a “school of holiness” unless it is also a “school of fidelity”. This is clear from our Constitutions:

The nature and goal of the three gospel counsels, promised by vow at profession, is that, with a heart liberated by grace, we may be united with Christ in a chaste, poor and obedient life for the sake of the kingdom of heaven following in the footsteps of Saint Francis (Const. 21, 1).

The brothers are almost universally faithful to the promises of their religious profession. Still, I believe it is important that each circumscription have a clear consensus on the boundaries which these vows impose. When these boundaries are called into question, the very basic communion of our brotherhood is seriously weakened. In my *Report to the General Chapter of 2000*, I proposed concrete boundaries to protect the vowed life of the brothers.<sup>5</sup>

- 4.6 *Renewed life of Faith*: Commenting on the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples, Pope John Paul II states: “Regardless of how much his body was seen or touched, only faith could fully enter the mystery of that face.” He concludes, therefore, that “one can never really reach Jesus except by the path of faith.”<sup>6</sup> An Order which describes itself as a *fraternity of evangelical witness* must be rooted in a very concrete faith in the mystery of Christ in his Church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, parag. 16

<sup>4</sup>See Circular Letter 20, paragraph 2.2

<sup>5</sup>*Report to the General Chapter of 2000*, paragraph 13.8 - 13.10

<sup>6</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 19

<sup>7</sup>See Circular Letter 20, paragraph 2.3

- 4.7 *Faith is a gift of God*: “we cannot come to the fullness of contemplation of the Lord's face by our own efforts alone, but by allowing grace to take us by the hand.” (NM 20). Circular letters 18 and 19 dwelt at length on the prayer of the brothers. The Order requires a new animation of the personal and communal prayer of the brothers.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Spirituality of Brotherhood**

- 5.1 Faith, nourished and renewed by the personal and liturgical prayer of the brothers, will cause our fraternities to radiate the holiness of God, the source of communion for the Church and the world. It will give birth to a “spirituality of communion”, for “identity” is transformed into “spirituality” when it becomes the principle of our action in the world.<sup>9</sup>
- 5.2 In *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the Holy Father indicates the importance of such a development:

Let us have no illusions: ***unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose***. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.<sup>10</sup>

If our local fraternities are to be “the home and the school of communion”, our outreach to the world should be characterized by a “spirituality of brotherhood”. This is the underlying motivation of the Sixth and Seventh Plenary Councils of the Order.

### ***CPO VI***

- 6.1 The new economy spawned by high technology continues to transform relationships between peoples and nations. VICPO, *Living Poverty in Brotherhood*, challenges us to make our fraternity “the home and the school of communion” within this new energy shaping our world. VICPO transforms Franciscan evangelical poverty into a “spirituality of brotherhood” by re-imagining poverty within the theology of communion. The central intuition of VICPO is this:

*Redeemed relationships with the people of the earth are the central objective of evangelical poverty – redeemed relationships with the goods of the earth are simply the means to that end.*

This is the clear conclusion to proposition six, the linchpin of VICPO:

*“Francis judged that greed and avarice disrupt relationships with God, just as*

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<sup>8</sup>See Circular Letter 20, paragraph 2.4

<sup>9</sup>*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

*ambition and competition damage the sense of brotherhood among people. In order to live the gospel ideal of love and brotherhood in its fulness, Francis and his first companions adopted a form of life that involved courageous choices of poverty for those times.” (Prop. 6)*

- 6.2 Lived courageously and intentionally, the “fraternal economic choices” of VICPO will create a new *fraternal economy* which differs radically from the *global economy* of our day. The central objective of the global economy is to increase wealth. The central objective of a *fraternal economy* is to increase communion between people. The means which the *global economy* uses to achieve its end include cut-throat competition and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few by the domination and control of financing, production and marketing. The means to achieve the purpose and end of the *fraternal economy* are solidarity and mutual dependence, participation, and protection of the weakest. The principles of a *fraternal economy* will profoundly change our attitude toward the goods of the earth, work, the poor, as well as administration.<sup>11</sup> This, in turn, will transform our relationships to one another and to the peoples of the earth. The *fraternal economy* will never replace or overturn the *global economy* but it will make our Order “*the home and the school of communion*” in this newly emerging economic world.<sup>12</sup>

VICPO should transform relationships among the brothers in our fraternities. Extended into our ministries, the same values of VICPO can transform relationships with the people we serve and among the people we serve.

## **CPOVII**

7. VICPO is a prophetic response to the global economy. VIICPO will attempt to forge a prophetic response to the exercise of power and to our modern culture’s thirst for self-realization. Franciscan minority is rooted in three important principles: the renunciation of that power which dominates; the embrace of humble service; and the identification with those pushed aside by the dominant society of our day.
- 7.1 Francis made an uncompromising demand that the brothers abandon that power which dominates and controls. His insistence that the brothers abandon domineering power are equally as firm as his insistence that they abandon wealth: “Let all the brothers not have **power** or **control**... especially among themselves” (ER, V, 9). “None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others. ...Let them, instead, be the **lesser ones** and **be subject to all** in the same house” (ER, VII, 1-3).<sup>13</sup>
- 7.2 No other image of Jesus filled Francis with greater enthusiasm than the image of the master washing the feet of his disciples. He adopted this as his model of authority and service for his fraternity: “Let no one be called ‘prior’, but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother. Let one wash the feet of the other” (ER, VI, 3). “Let those who

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<sup>11</sup>See Circular Letter 17, parag. 7 - 7.5

<sup>12</sup>See Circular Letter 15, *Solidarity and Mutual Dependence*

<sup>13</sup>See Circular Letter 22, paragraphs 2.1 - 2.2

are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers.” (Adm IV, 2-3)<sup>14</sup>

7.3 Standing before the bishop of Assisi, Francis made a definitive break with a whole manner of living and being. He visibly and publicly abandoned his social position. This choice was inspired by Jesus: “Remember...that our Lord Jesus Christ...was poor and a stranger and lived on alms – he, the blessed Virgin, and his disciples” (ER, IX, 4-5). Henceforth, Francis related to the world as one who had “no place” in the dominant society of his day. He insisted that this be the vantage point of his brothers: “They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” (ER, IX, 2)<sup>15</sup>

7.4 CPVII will reflect upon the consequences of these principles in the life of the Order today. I wish only to make allusion to few areas of concern:

- A new description of fraternity flowing from minority: “a free communion of brothers without domination and without deprivation”;<sup>16</sup>
- The manner in which we exercise authority: avoid that power which dominates in favour of a power which flows from service, personal authenticity and dialogue;<sup>17</sup>
- Our obedience to the Church;<sup>18</sup>
- Our institutional commitments within the Church;<sup>19</sup>
- The “face” of the Franciscan priest: priest as brother (Heb. 4:14) and priest as servant (John 13);
- Our relationship to the poor.<sup>20</sup>

7.5 CPOVII can complete and complement CPOV. The Fifth Plenary Council of the Order, celebrated at Garibaldi, Brazil in 1986, summarized a Franciscan vision for justice, peace and respect for nature with these words:

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).

“No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness” (Pope John Paul II, World

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 3.1 - 3.2

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 4.1 - 4.2

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 1.1 and 5.2

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 5.3 and 5.4

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 6.1 - 6.3

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., paragraph 6.4

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., paragraph 7.3

Day of Peace message, January 1, 2002, n. 15). This was the heart of the pope's message to the representatives of the religions of the world gathered in Assisi to pray for peace on January 24, 2002. The pope succinctly proclaimed the logic of the Cross. Justice flows from redeemed and restored relationships. Without renewed and restored relationships there can be no justice. Without forgiveness and reconciliation there are no restored relationships! The Cross is the focal point for the reconciliation of God and humanity: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Furthermore, by the blood of his Cross, Jesus has established historical peace: "He is our peace...[he] has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity" (Eph 2:14-15). Francis understood well the message of the Cross. In the middle of his Canticle of the Creatures he prays, "Praised be you, my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love" (CtC 10). Francis praises God for those who forgive because forgiveness alone can restore the brother/sister relationship which God calls us to live on earth. Brother/sister relationships restore justice. Through his "excessive love" shown on the Cross, Jesus establishes the pattern and provides the divine energy. The "excessive love" of the Crucified One can leap over all obstacles to restore relationships. Restored relationships inaugurate justice.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

8. "We wish to see Jesus' (*Jn* 12:21). This request (was) addressed to the Apostle Philip by some Greeks who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. ... The men and women of our own day — often perhaps unconsciously — ask believers not only to 'speak' of Christ, but in a certain sense to 'show' him to them." (Novo Millennium, 16)

A Province is a network of local fraternities. Our efforts to create a climate of faith and prayer can make these fraternities true schools of communion. Our animation of the Plenary Councils of our Order will project into the world a true spirituality of brotherhood, a source of unity for humanity and a force to build the Church of Jesus Christ.

br. John Corriveau  
General Minister, OFMCap.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 7.1 - 7.2