

PROVINCIAL MINISTERS FOR THE XXI CENTURY **(The person and Role of the Provincial Minister)**

Introduction

According to the intention of the organisers, this paper provides an introductory framework, which will be developed and applied to concrete situations during the course of the entire Meeting which has now begun. I shall therefore confine myself to presenting the broad outlines of the person of the Minister and of his role in exercising his "mandate", i.e. during the time of his fraternal ministry.

Provincial Ministers for the XXI Century

1. Two years ago the Spanish theologian José Ignacio González Faus, S.J., wrote an article entitled "Bishops for the XXI century".¹ By analogy with ecclesiastical and religious authority (an analogy used in some Church documents²), it seemed to me correct to apply this title to our Provincials on this occasion of the meeting between the General Curia and the new Provincial Ministers.

2. To speak of "Provincial Ministers for the XXI Century" means to raise the question of their identity (person) and their mission (role) at the present time, when the XXI century has just begun.

3. The author I have quoted begins *first of all* by outlining a number of theses about the Church, since – he says – it is impossible to conceive of a bishop except in relation to the Church, to the members of the Mystical Body. In the same way, a Provincial Minister is inconceivable except in relation to the "Fraternity" (Order, Province) and therefore we too must first refer to the fraternity.

Only *secondarily*, in both cases, can one go on to describe the figure and role, whether of the bishop in the article by González Faus, or of the Provincial Minister in this conference.

Part I: Relation of the Provincial Minister to the "Fraternity"

4. "After hearing Christ words when sending forth the disciples Saint Francis instituted the brotherhood of the Order of Minors".³

5. General Minister John Corriveau will later speak about this "Brotherhood" and everything it means for us. In this section I will speak only about the Minister's relationships with the Province and the Order (other Provinces, the General Curia) in the XXI century.

6. We begin with the concept of a province as found in our present Constitutions: "*a group of brothers and local fraternities which has its own territory and is presided over by a Provincial Minister*".⁴

¹ José Ignacio González Faus, *Iglesia Viva*, n. 208, oct.-dic., 2001, pp. 133-148.

² *Mutuae Relationes*, n. 13.

³ Const. 3, 1; I CPO, 11; IV CPO, 15, 16; V CPO, 21,...

⁴ Const. 110, 2.

This concept, which could seem restrictive (and historically has been so, hence the problem of "Provincialism"), is corrected in the subsequent statement of n. 113, 4: "*Provincial Ministers, in a spirit of fraternal cooperation (brotherhood), should be willing to meet such needs (referring to the "good of the whole Order or of the provinces or the needs of individual brothers" in the preceding paragraph 3), by sending their brothers temporarily to another province*".⁵

Marie-Antoine, commenting on this number, specifies some of these needs: "*above all –he says– in the field of formation, teaching or any other specialised study*"; and he adds: "*it is a question of putting brotherhood into practice beyond the borders of the province*".⁶

This comment is strengthened by two structures, closely related to the province as a structure, that currently exist in our Order: **the Conferences of Major Superiors** and **the Plenary Councils of the Order**. Therefore today one cannot speak of a province closed in on itself; rather, it must be open to other provinces and to the Order as a whole.

The term "presided over" as the text has it (the Latin text says that the Provincial Minister "praeest") is, as St Augustine says, **for the benefit of all**, not for his own profit: "praesint ut prossint" and "non tam praesesse quam prodesse".⁷ (their precedence is for the good of others).

7. This new concept of a province, and the new mentality that goes with it, require the Provincial Minister to have **strong, intense relations** in two directions:

- 1: with the Province, composed of the brothers and fraternities in his own territory, and
- 2: with the Order (other Provinces, General Curia, etc.).

8. Relation of the Provincial Minister to "his" Province.

This relation consists in the fact that the Provincial exercises his fraternal ministry or service in favour of the local fraternities and of the brothers with the authority he has received, by analogy with the pastoral ministry of "teaching, sanctifying and governing"⁸; and

⁵ Const. 113, 4.

⁶ Marie-Antoine Painchaud, Montréal 1983, Les Constitutions des Frères Mineurs Capucins de 1982, p. 221.

⁷ S. Agostino, Sermo 340, Ibid. 1484.

⁸ Mutuae relations, n. 13. Per la sua importanza, cito il testo letteralmente:

"a) Quanto all'**ufficio d'insegnare**: i superiori religiosi hanno la competenza e l'autorità di *maestri di spirito* in relazione al progetto evangelico del proprio istituto; in tale ambito, quindi, devono esplicitare una vera *direzione spirituale* dell'intera congregazione e delle singole comunità della medesima, e l'attuano in sincera concordia con l'autentico magistero della gerarchia, sapendo di dover eseguire un mandato di grave responsabilità nell'area del piano evangelico, voluto dal fondatore.

b) Quanto all'**ufficio di santificare**, è pure spettanza dei superiori una speciale competenza e responsabilità di *perfezionare*, sia pure con differenziati compiti, in ciò che riguarda l'incremento della vita di carità secondo il progetto dell'istituto, sia circa la formazione, tanto iniziale che continua, dei confratelli, sia circa la fedeltà comunitaria e personale nella pratica dei consigli evangelici secondo la regola. Tale compito, se rettamente adempiuto, verrà considerato dal romano pontefice e dai vescovi qual prezioso sussidio nell'espletamento del loro fondamentale Ministero di santificazione.

c) Quanto all'**ufficio di governare**, i superiori devono compiere il servizio di ordinare la vita propria della comunità, di organizzare i membri dell'istituto, di curare e sviluppare la peculiare sua missione e provvedere che venga efficientemente inserito nell'attività ecclesiale sotto la guida dei vescovi.

Esiste, dunque, un *ordine interno degli istituti* (cf. *Christus dominus*, n. 35.3), che ha un suo proprio campo di competenza, a cui spetta una genuina *autonomia*, anche se questa non può mai, nella chiesa, ridursi a *indipendenza* (cf. *Christus dominus*, nn. 35.3 e 35.4). Il giusto grado di tale autonomia e la sua concreta determinazione di competenza sono contenuti nel diritto comune e nelle regole, o Const.ituzioni, di ogni istituto".

that at the same time he works to ensure that the province acquires, or strengthens as the case may be, its own characteristics, comprising "a particular history that becomes a tradition and that has shaped the province; a geographical situation in which it is situated; and its distinctive socio-cultural realities from which it acquires its spirit and colour".⁹

Regarding the brotherly service the Provincial is to give to his "own" province, we shall indicate some directions later.

With regard to social and cultural involvement in the region, the Provincial Minister must, among other things, pay attention to its particular culture and foster exchanges with other "forces" in the territory, both civil and ecclesiastical.

9. Relation of the Provincial Minister to the Order

The other direction in the relationships of a Provincial Minister is constituted by the Order as the centre of the charism. Indeed, he must necessarily share in this in order for his mission to exist and to be carried out in the world and in the Church, since he must do so "in line with the particular character of the Institute"¹⁰, as all Church documents unanimously indicate.

From this it follows that the whole province, and the one who presides over it, must have vital relationships with this charismatic centre, through which they will receive life, inspiration and direction in relation to the one, shared charism and to the needs of the Order and its members. Each province in turn will enrich the charism by its own particular characteristics and creativity.

Relations with the charismatic centre are normally mediated through knowledge and practice of the Constitutions, Plenary Councils and the pastoral letters of the General Minister, through pastoral visits, and through the structures of the General Curia and the Conferences of Major Superiors. (Brotherhood dictates that the needs of other provinces require collaboration, solidarity etc).

Insofar, then, as the Provincial Minister in his governance takes account of all these things, striving to keep alive these relationships with the charismatic centre, it can be said that his province shares in the life of the Order and is part of the same body, in other words, part of the very brotherhood founded by St Francis. If on the other hand a Provincial Minister does none of these things in "his" province, it can be said that it is a province that is going "its own way", without Capuchin identity and with no possible Franciscan significance for people today.

Part 2: What kind of Ministers for the XXI century?

10. These notions, expressed in thesis form for easier recall, bring us to the second part of this talk, which I begin with these questions: what kind of friars are able to bring to a positive fulfilment this relationship with the "Brotherhood" in its two-fold direction, provincial and general? What kind of people do brothers called to be Provincials in the XXI century need to be?

11. Let us begin by going back to the analogy with bishops. This time I will apply to our case a saying of Saint Augustine, where he speaks of how he once travelled to Milan to meet the bishop St Ambrose: *"That man of God welcomed me like a father, and he took pleasure in my pilgrimage as much as a bishop should. I too loved him instantly, but not as a teacher*

⁹ Mario Vacca, Somasco, Il Ministero del Superiore Maggiore nel cammino di Comunione della Chiesa, oggi, in Autori Vari, La responsabilità del Superiore Maggiore, Editrice Rogate, Roma 1988, p. 40.

¹⁰ Mutuae relations, n. 13.

of truth to begin with, since I had no hope of finding it in your Church; rather, I loved him as someone who showed kindness to me".¹¹

Here we catch a glimpse of the first features of Provincial Ministers in relation to, and in their relationships with, the brothers they are called to serve.¹²

12. **"Men of God"**.

Such was Augustine's definition of Bishop Ambrose, and we believe this should also, by analogy, define a Provincial Minister: he is a **"man of God"**. Brothers who approach the Provincial Minister wish to meet in him a man, a brother, who speaks of God by his life and through his words, a God whom he knows and with whom he is on familiar terms, as though he were beholding the invisible.¹³ And consequently they expect from him, as Paul VI said, "*simplicity of life, a spirit of prayer, charity shown to all, especially to the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, detachment from self and self-denial. Without this framework of holiness the words (of the Minister) will hardly penetrate the heart of the people (the brothers) of today. Indeed without it, they run the risk of being futile and fruitless*".¹⁴

As a "man of God" the Minister must be a man of prayer,¹⁵ a man of the Word, a man aware of the primacy of grace in his own personal life¹⁶. In this way he will be able to nourish his brothers " frequently, with the food of the Word of God", as the Code of Canon Law prescribes.¹⁷

13. **Men of unconditional acceptance**

"He welcomed me like a father", said Saint Augustine. By analogy with Bishop Ambrose, we can say that a Minister Provincial must be, **par excellence, the brother who welcomes**; in other words, who welcomes always, freely, lovingly, without making distinctions between people, In fact he should show greater mercy towards a brother who has sinned or is in difficulty¹⁸, as we learn from the masterly teaching of Francis in his letter to a Minister. He welcomes and forgives; welcomes and forgets; welcomes, and offers his friendship once again in case it had been lost.

For St Augustine, the fruit of this welcoming kindness was esteem and love for Bishop Ambrose, and so will it be for the brothers, if the Ministers welcome them in the same way.

14. **"Married to the Fraternity"**

As we saw in part one, it follows from the naturally arising relation or relationships between the Minister and "the Brotherhood" that the Provincial Minister should be "married to the fraternity" as the bishop is espoused to his diocese, in St Augustine's expression.

"Married", or "espoused", means to be bound to the fraternity by a bond that is a "sacrament" of Christ's love for his Church. The Minister should not be a "transitional" presence in the province, notwithstanding the fact that his term of office is limited. While he is Minister he should devote himself to the brothers, enjoy being with them, walk the way with them, know them personally and be known by them, so that it can be truly said that the Minister and "his" province are "completely one", as Christ willed."¹⁹

¹¹ Confessioni 5, 13,23.

¹² Rnb IV : FF 13-14.

¹³ Paolo VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, n. 76.

¹⁴ Paolo VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, n. 76.

¹⁵ San Francesco, Descrizione del superiore.

¹⁶ Rino Fisichella, Il vescovo e i suoi sacerdoti, Bollettino del Clero, n. 9, p. 433.

¹⁷ Can. 619.

¹⁸ Lmin : FF 235; Const. 108, 4.

¹⁹ Gv 17.

15. **Builders of community**

In the same way, because of his relation to the fraternity, which is essentially a communion,²⁰ the Provincial Minister should feel something akin to an obsession to create communion, instead of striving to ensure in his government that one particular line prevails, however legitimate it may be. But communion is created from within, not from without. Saint Augustine used to say: "With you I am a Christian".²¹ And St Peter said: "a fellow elder with you". It is necessary to be with the brothers, with the fraternities. Today, Provincial Ministers run the risk of dispersion and of being too long away from their Provincial fraternities because of having to attend too many meetings, and to belong to so many institutions. They need to be very careful about these real dangers.

16. **Men of prophetic, unifying synthesis**

Finally, the last feature of Provincial Ministers in the XXI century is that they are men who know how to present a "prophetic, all-embracing synthesis"

"In the Church (and in institutions like ours which are in some way related to it) there is a strange relation between locality and universality which - according to González Faus in the article I quoted earlier²²- if it were to manifest itself in these moments might be an important sign in a divided world that is wounded by the struggle between the local and the universal".

This relation applies in a special way to the bishop and the Provincial Minister, in whom the two characteristics of **locality (provinciality) and universality (Order)** cannot be separated. Every Provincial Minister must seriously try to integrate and balance the two in his own life. He must reject the extremes: not just local ones, but also "universalist" ones. Paul VI established a masterly balance between the particular Church and the universal Church, which we can apply analogically.

In our case: on the one hand the Minister, in his work of animation and governance, must avoid "particularism" ("provincialism"), "which places cultural, social and political values above charismatic and faith values, and downgrades the intrinsic unity of the Order, reducing it to a kind of federalism" (Mario Vacca). On the other, he must work to ensure that the province, lacking proper insertion into its own territory, is not reduced to a mere abstraction. Put in another way, the Provincial Minister, and all the brothers, must strive to make the province mature in the process of identifying with the charism of the Order, so that it attains charismatic significance. At the same time, they must also help the province to become integrated into a particular territory, so that it attains an embodied significance in daily life.²³

The formation of the brothers and fraternities in this two-fold direction should be the principal concern of Provincial Ministers, as we shall see in a moment.

Part 3: Areas, directions or goals in the ministry of the Provincial Minister

17. The final point we need to remember concerns the **role** of the Provincial Minister in "his" province. In other words: To what areas should he devote his attention? What goals should the Minister work to achieve?

²⁰ Const. specialmente cap. VI.

²¹ Mi fa paura ciò che sono per voi, mi consola ciò che sono con voi. Per voi sono vescovo, con voi, cristiano. Il primo è nome di obbligo, l'altro di grazia; il primo di pericolo, l'altro di salvezza". Sermo 340, PL 38, 1483.

²² González Faus, a.c., p. 11.

²³ Grups de reflexió del cevre (1997-2000), El que és nou demana novetat, p. 32ss.

Our Constitutions and the other documents of the Order are very specific today about this aspect. They clearly distinguish two areas and establish priorities:

- 1^a: the formation, or rather the formation process, of the friars, and
- 2^a: the governance of the Province.

1st Area: the priority of formation.

18. In recent years many major superiors (and many local superiors) have been almost completely taken up with administrative duties, and this is still the case today.

It was the document "**The contemplative dimension**", published by the Congregation for Religious, that clarified matters when it said: "... superiors should see themselves and be accepted **primarily** as guides for the growth, both spiritual and apostolic, of each individual and of the entire community"

Our Constitutions take the same line: "6. *Although all the brothers have a formative role, it is necessary that some brothers be appointed with greater responsibility for this duty. Foremost among these are the **Provincial Minister** and the guardians, who are the **ordinary animators and coordinators of the process of formation of the brothers***".²⁴

In another place, speaking of ongoing formation, the Constitutions say: "3. *At the same time (the obligation and right of all friars, cfr. 42,2) - ongoing formation - must be regarded as the **ordinary pastoral duty of all the Ministers***".²⁵

19. The Constitutions also define precisely **what formation is**. The text says: "1. *Formation is the development of the brothers and the fraternities in such a way that our life may daily more closely conform to the holy gospel and the Franciscan spirit according to the needs of times and places. This formation must continue throughout our lives as regards both human values and the gospel and religious life.*"²⁶

This definition is far removed from previous ones, which concentrated only on the intellectual aspect or on technical training for a profession, even if it was of an apostolic nature.

Precisely because of this change that has taken place in how we understand formation, it is clear that this area is the first duty and task of the Provincial Minister.

20. The Constitutions not only define formation but also its values **or dimensions**, as objects of the Ministers' concern. Among these dimensions we indicate the main ones, which require more urgent practical application today:

21. **The spiritual dimension**: cfr Const. 52,4; 53 (prayer); 157,2 (concern for the brothers and care for everything, especially spiritual matters); 157,5 (a faithful custodian of our life); 158,1 (adMinistering the word of God and carefully providing for the brothers' instruction and religious formation); 159,1 (to seek and fulfil the will of God)... Also, the letters of Br John Corriveau on prayer should be kept in mind.

22. **The evangelical-fraternal dimension**: cfr Const. 11,3; 23,4; 78,2; 80,1; 86; 88; 89; 92; 94; 95; 96; 140,1. Regarding knowledge of and progress in this essential value see Letters 11 and 20 of General Minister John Corriveau.

²⁴ Const. 23, 6.

²⁵ Const. 42, 3; altri testi: 5, 3; 185, 3; IV CPO n. 72.

²⁶ Const. 22, 1; Piano generale della formazione permanente, nn. 5-7.

23. **The dimension of poverty-minority:** cfr Const. 60, 1.2.4.; 61,3; 62,4; 63,2; 65,1-4; 66, 1-4; 67,1-5; 71,4; 91,3-6;... These passages from the Constitutions must be complemented by the important material contributed by PCO VI, which dealt with the topic of "**Living poverty in brotherhood**".

24. **The apostolic dimension:** cfr Const, 77,1; 78,3; 78,4; 107,1; 145,5-6; 146,1-3; 146,4; 150,3; 107,1; 176,7. Regarding dialogue with the bishops and the local Church, see "Mutuae Relationes".

25. In many matters, the Provincial Minister will exercise this first and most important task **personally** (can. 919; Rb 10; Rnb 4; 93) through visits (Const. 161,3.6); dialogue (157,4); correction (160,1-4) and in a common search for the will of God (157,3); **in other matters** making use of other brothers, especially the definitors, guardians and other experts and animators.

2nd Area: The governance of the province

26. Provincial Ministers have other tasks and duties, which can be summed up in the words "governance" or "management" – these constitute the 2nd area of responsibility.

This is an extensive area involving many duties. One gets an idea of just how many by looking at the index of the current Constitutions under the heading "Provincial Minister". Sometimes these duties involve the Minister alone, other times also his definitory. Here are some of them:

27. In relation to candidates (17,3; 18,3; 19,1; 20,2; 34,2; 36,1.2...16; 25; 26; 27.2...).

28. In relation to temporarily professed brothers (32,1; 32,3; 35,2...).

29. In relation to higher studies (39,5.6...).

30. In relation to Vice-provinces (132; 133;).

31. In relation to Custodies (136; 137; 161;).

32. In relation to the economy (66,1; 71,1-2...). See important aspects treated in PCO VI (nn. 34; 36; etc.).

33. In relation to permissions (91,3); work (79,1)...

34. In relation to the composition of fraternities and appointment of local superiors (140,1; 141,5); the vicar (141,1); bursars (171,1-2...); Curia officials (129,5).

35. In relation to the apostolate (146,3; 158,2; 176-178).

36. In relation to the General Minister (economic report: 71,5); presents missionaries to the General (176,2; 178,2); sends mid-term report (71,5-6; 163,3...).

Conclusion

37. I have given an overall and certainly incomplete vision of the person and role of the Provincial Minister. Nevertheless I hope you will find it useful in becoming more aware of your ministry towards the friars and fraternities on the one hand, and on the other, of the contribution you are called to make to the Order (other Provinces) and to the Church.

There was one final thing I wanted to tell you: do everything you have to do **trusting entirely in the Lord**. He guides and governs the history of each brother whom He has entrusted to your care. And, alongside trust goes **animation**, that quality of your own being and action enabling you to inspire life, encouragement, enthusiasm and hope... a quality which is a blend of passion for life, for Christ and His cause, and for our brotherhood.

Rome, 20th October 2003

Br. Aurelio Laita