

Christmas is approaching and I would like to be close to each one of you, my dear brothers. This will not be a manifesto outlining a program - we still need time to reflect! Together with my brother Definitors I am taking the first steps, and as each day passes we are getting to know one another better. With regard to the conclusions of the 83rd General Chapter, we will let you know what we hope to achieve during the sexennium.



Let us take the Child in our arms!

The Christmas season, to me, is the most appropriate time to share my first words with you as General Minister – and you all know how precious Christmas was to our Seraphic Father Saint Francis! Some years ago I happened to be in our friary at Lucerne and the Guardian asked me if I would celebrate Christmas Mass for the elderly brothers. I was happy to accept. And so, on the evening of December 24, we celebrated Mass at 8 p.m. in the friars' choir. The whole place was ablaze with Christmas lights, but most resplendent of all, right in the middle of the choir, was a beautiful plaster Bambino, almost life-size. During the homily I spoke to the brothers about the great gift the Father had given us by sending His first-born son among us, but while I was speaking, I suddenly thought: Why not pass round the statue of the Baby Jesus, and invite each brother to hold it close in his arms for a moment or two? That Baby has much to do with the personal history of each of us. If you think about it, He has given us the gift of a vocation, and we have said yes and handed over our lives to Him. What is religious life, if not the choice to give

back our entire life to God in Christ? We rightly speak of consecration, of a life set apart for Him. So why not hold that plaster Baby tightly in our arms – he reminds us of the One we have chosen as the Lord of our lives. From this choice flows all the meaning and direction of our lives – our lives as consecrated persons.

Like Saint Felix of Cantalice

Some moments of intense emotion followed. It was extraordinary to see the old brothers take the Bambino in their arms, and how carefully they did so. I watched those rough and calloused hands, some deformed by arthritis, but all of them testifying to a lifetime of work spent in the service of others. The hands of bricklayers, carpenters and mechanics, or else the more delicate hands of a brother porter or of one who had been a dispenser God's mercy. Some of them had been missionaries for many years and had built schools and churches, driven trucks and mended them whenever the engine had broken down along the way. They were no strangers to manual work, and who could count how many beads they had told

while praying the rosary? Now those hands were taking hold of the Bambino, taking him to their hearts, to cradle him for an instant and hold him close. I still remember that moment intensely. It was a moment of great intensity! What they were pressing to their hearts was a plaster Bambino, who reminded them of the One to whom they had given their lives through religious profession. Who could fail to be reminded of old Simeon, who, taking the Child in his arms, solemnly exclaimed: “Now, Lord, let your servant go in peace” (Luke 2, 29)? Simeon took him in his arms after a lifetime of longing for salvation, whereas my brothers were contemplating the One to whom they had given their lives. At that moment, unbeknown to us, the whole of Capuchin iconography was coming to life again. Among our saints, one stands out above the rest: Saint Felix of Cantalice! I have never seen him portrayed except holding the Child Jesus in his arms!



“Let them remember that they have given themselves”

During the recent General Chapter, many friars pointed out the need to continue our efforts to translate into practice all that PCO VII said about our life in brotherhood in its aspects of itinerancy and minority. At the same time, many insisted that the Order must question itself about its own identity. What is our charism? What does it mean to be Capuchins today? These are simple, direct questions which we will certainly be reflecting upon deeply, continuing the work already undertaken by my predecessor. This is not the time to do so: what I do want to tell you, and I emphasise it strongly, is that each of us has taken a vow to make his life a gift to God and humanity,

to the whole of humanity. This gift is what gives relish to our lives as consecrated persons. This is why I invite you to take the Child Jesus in your arms – whether you do it concretely or spiritually doesn’t matter – to represent in the most concrete way the reality of the gift: He who has given himself to us, and we giving ourselves totally to Him. Here I am reminded of the words of St Francis in the Earlier Rule: “Wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ” (10).

Our gift is something substantial

There is something very fragile about the Child that Simeon holds in his arms. The Child gives himself entirely, without reserve, and this parable of self-giving will be concluded in the eucharistic gesture of His body broken, His blood poured out, on the cross for the salvation of us all. He holds nothing back, He gives the whole of Himself. His way of self-giving knows no limit except that of Love. And we know that Love never places conditions and never insists on a “thank you”! If only we Capuchin friars, consecrated by religious profession, could learn to give ourselves in this way, without fear and without placing any conditions. The ability to give oneself in this way is not just for extraordinary things; it is shown every time we are asked to do a favour for someone, or even just being moved from one friary to another. We know how often this makes us afraid, but afraid of what? The fear of confronting the unknown, of having to start again, of being with brothers I have never seen. Perhaps, too, the fear of having to suffer a little? Isn’t this the truth? And yet, when a person really looks inside himself, what does he find there? Is it the place he never wants to leave and never could? Habits that have become his familiar friends? True, he may find all of these things, but, if he

keeps listening, he discovers above all that attitude which has been growing in him throughout many years of service. He becomes conscious of the inner wealth acquired through generously giving his service, which in turn makes him aware that he is able to do the same elsewhere. This attitude will accompany him everywhere. How can we test our love for God and our surrender to Him? Only by the concrete love we show to our brothers and sisters. St John's first Letter leaves no doubt on that score: "Whoever does not love the brother he can see, cannot love God, whom he has never seen" (1 John 4, 20). If the fraternity is the place where our love takes concrete forms, let us not resist or hold back, but be ready to live that "obedience in love" of which our Constitutions speak. (Const. n. 164-167). We should not wait to be told what to do, but dare to take the initiative in order to intervene constructively for the good of our fraternity whenever the Spirit and sound discernment suggest it. This will lead us to open ourselves to the needs of the poor of our times and to find effective ways of being present among them, on the peripheries of our world.

Heartfelt thanks to Br. John Corriveau

To conclude, I would like to share with you a passage from a letter I received not long ago from our dear and esteemed General Minister, Br John Corriveau. This is what he wrote: "To serve the Order as General Minister has been the greatest gift of my life and a grace from God. I leave this ministry with a peaceful heart and with great hope". One thing is certain: In all his years of service to the Order as General Minister, John

never held back. You could see on his face the joy of being totally committed to the good of us all. I would like this letter also to express to him a chorus of thanks on behalf of us all. We owe much to him, and his way of serving the Order reminds us that the most profound and genuine joy is to be found in giving oneself completely and entrusting our life to the brotherhood, as the profession formula makes us proclaim!

Like the shepherds and the Magi let us too go to the manger, bringing the gift of ourselves, our bodies, our readiness to walk together with the brotherhood and never separated from it. Mindful of Jesus who said: "Give, and gifts will be given you; a full measure, pressed down, and running over, will be poured into your lap, for the measure you give will be measured out to you" (Luke, 6, 38). And St Paul echoes this when he exhorts the Christians of Corinth: "God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor 9,7).

Dear brothers: it is only by committing ourselves to a journey of fidelity and observance of what we have professed, walking alongside the brothers who are our fraternity, that we will savour true and profound joy. Many times we are asked to go beyond our strength, our plans and our own wishes. But this life, I am certain, is worth living!

My simple, heartfelt wish for you is this: have a holy and good Christmas, a moment of rest so that you may resume the journey with new vigour, enriched by the gift of the One "who gives Himself totally to you" (Saint Francis, Letter of the General Chapter to all the Entire Order, 29).



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