

# Letter from Porto Alegre

The third meeting organized by the International Commission for Justice, Peace and Ecology was held at Porto Alegre, Brazil from March 13 to 18, 2006, on the theme of “Gospel Brotherhood, Economic Justice and the Eradication of Poverty”.

54 brothers from five continents spent a week together listening to the cry of the poor in today’s world. Sharing their own experiences they took stock of what has been achieved to date and looked ahead to what still remains to be done in terms of witness and action, in the light of the values that inspire our charism and in line with the history and prophetic witness of the Capuchin Order.

The meeting at Porto Alegre was intended to give all the brothers an opportunity to produce a clear response, a call to commitment, in the face of a need that has gradually become more and more insistent in our Order: namely, of bringing together gospel brotherhood and economic justice at the present time, when “in a world of competition and strife.... we commit ourselves as minors and itinerants to carry out a prophetic mission, expressing our solidarity with the poor and marginalized (and) walking alongside them to transform the world according to the gospel spirit of fraternity” (PCO VII, 48).

Now that the week of listening, reflection and sharing is over, the delegates who were present at Porto Alegre wish to deliver this “Letter from Porto Alegre” to all the brothers of the Order. Deliberately concise and simple in style, the text presents a forceful blend of example (that of Francis and the first Capuchins) and critical analysis of the socio-economic situation of the world today; a fusion between the prophetic commitment of many brothers in various parts of the world

and the counter-challenge which our “fraternal economy” can provide to the economic models that generate poverty and exclusion in today’s world.

The five principles for a prophetic critique of the currently prevailing systems (participation, equity, transparency, solidarity, austerity) and the eleven guidelines for action contained in the Letter show us how to move from analysis and reflection to action, so that our presence becomes a prophetic witness and an example of life-transforming solidarity.

We send out the Letter from Porto Alegre, confident that the ministers and guardians, the Justice and Peace promoters in the various circumscriptions, and indeed all the brothers, will shoulder the responsibility which the delegates at Porto Alegre assumed on behalf of us all, in the face of the cry of the poor. At Porto Alegre, the thinking was universal in scope (think globally); now it remains for each brother to embody in his own situation the universal values of which we have gained a renewed awareness (act locally). By ensuring that the document is circulated in the fraternities and allowing ourselves to be engaged, individually and communally, by the urgent challenge of responding to that cry, we will be taking the first steps in the right direction!

Fraternally,

Br Tewelde Beyene  
Director of the International  
Justice, Peace and Ecology Office

Rome, March 26, 2006

Dear Brothers,

Greetings from the third meeting organized by the International Commission of the Order for Justice, Peace and Ecology. After the 2004 meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on *Gospel Brotherhood in a Multi-ethnic World* and the 2005 reunion in Nagahuta, Pematangsiantar, Indonesia, on *Inter-religious Dialogue in the Context of Fundamentalism*, we, the 54 delegates from all the conferences of the Order, have gathered with the Minister General in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to reflect on the theme - *Evangelical Brotherhood, Economic Justice, and the Eradication of Poverty*.<sup>1</sup> These meetings are the fruit of the 2000 General Chapter’s decision to strengthen the efforts of justice and peace as an integral part of our Christian and Franciscan Capuchin life.

Porto Alegre, with its World Forums on Social Justice, has become synonymous with the struggle against poverty and the search for a more just world. We hope that the name of this lovely city, in the Province of Rio Grande do Sul, might become for the Capuchin world a symbol of our

fraternal commitment to the poor. We call to mind that, in this same Capuchin province, in Garibaldi in 1986, the Fifth Plenary Council of the Order met to consider the theme of *Our Prophetic Presence in the World*.

In our meeting, we heard examples of the witness given by various brothers who today live and work for and with the poor in different parts of the world. For example, there is a fraternity of brothers in the Northern Vice Province of Central America that lives in an indigenous village of the Lencas tribe in Honduras, sharing their poverty and their struggles against injustice. In 2004, one of these brothers, Emilio Gaverrete, spoke before the United Nations, along with *Franciscans International*, highlighting government oppression of the Lencas and advocating for their rights. We visited some projects of the Capuchin Province of Rio Grande do Sul: a cooperative of men and women who have organized themselves to live by recycling garbage, an industry of garment workers that is organized and run by poor women, and a settlement of peasant farmers that advocates for agrarian reform and ecological farming.

<sup>1</sup> The meeting was held from March 13-18, 2006.

All of these works demonstrate to us the possibility of working effectively to overcome extreme poverty and living in solidarity with other people and with all creation.

We see these examples as representative of all your efforts, our brothers throughout the entire world. These projects require that the brothers sacrifice their comforts and privileged positions to accept the vulnerability of the poor. They are the face of the Order visible to the poor and little ones of the world. Your ministries and prophetic witness are essential to the life and spirituality of the Order. Thank you!

In our various conferences and discussions this week, we were reminded of the urgent need to continue to speak



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and act against increasing poverty and the growing gap between the rich and poor of the world. We learned that neither the socialist system nor the neo-liberal capitalist system of economics has been able to significantly reduce extreme forms of poverty in the world. The *2005 UN Human Development Report*, issued in September, 2005, stated that “every hour poverty kills 1,200 children,” and indicated that the disparity between the rich and the poor of the world continues to grow, so that “the 500 wealthiest individuals earn all together more than the 416 million poorest people” in the world.<sup>2</sup> We also learned that, of the world’s 6 billion people, it is estimated that almost half (2.8 billion) lives on less than \$2 dollars per day, the international line for extreme poverty. Almost 20% of the world, 1.2 billion people, lives on less than \$1 dollar per day. Over 600 million children worldwide live in absolute poverty and some 115 million children never attend school. For the countries of Africa and the other poorest nations of the world, paying the interest on their foreign debt now robs them of the resources they need for basic food, health care and education.

While socialism as an economic system has all but totally collapsed, the neo-liberal system, with its concept of the free market, has extended its “globalization” throughout the whole world. It is a system that creates much wealth but concentrates and secures this wealth in the hands of the very few. We believe that the problem of poverty in the world is not due to the scarcity of resources. The world possesses enough goods to meet the needs of every man, woman and child. But, while the rich become richer, hundreds of millions of people are systematically excluded from participating in those goods. They, along

with the poor Lazarus of the Gospel, stand at the doors of commercial centers, exclusive residential zones, as well as our friaries, and wait for the crumbs to fall from the table of abundance.

This reality not only divides the planet into developed countries and under-developed countries, it also now divides countries from within, in the very same manner. Even rich nations now exhibit signs of a permanent underclass. Poverty today, with all its deprivations in education, health, political representation, cultural participation and the environment, etc., is now a systemic poverty, that is hard to respond to and difficult to change.

We ourselves have often been desensitized by the tragic proportions of poverty. We have been lulled into believing it inevitable. We too have slid into a deeper individualism and isolation from one another as brothers and from the poor of the world. At the same time, we see signs of hope, not only in our Capuchin brothers, but also in the many committed people, social agencies, church workers and religious groups who continue to work for a more just global society. We think that we have in our hands, in the Capuchin charism, one important key that opens the door to that future. During the last ten years, the Order has been developing an alternative

economic framework that we have named the “fraternal economy.” The fraternal economy, in contrast to the “market economy,” takes human relationships, and not wealth, as its ultimate goal. A market-driven economy, where competition and economic advantage are the main motivations, necessarily creates winners and losers, and so often sacrifices honesty and fairness to profit. In the market economy, security is placed in wealth, and isolation from other people is heightened. The fraternal economy, on the other hand, sees our brothers and sisters as our greatest treasures and as our ultimate security. It creates redeemed relationships with God, between human beings and with the entire creation, a world which suffers from exploitation without end.

The fraternal economy is not an economy of paternalism, social work or disengaged charity, but one of solidarity with our brothers and sisters, after the model of the incarnation. Jesus did not empty himself as a philanthropist (Phil. 2:6-11). He emptied himself to share our condition and to enrich us with his poverty. Thus, our Capuchin fraternal economy is ultimately a spirituality of solidarity, which allows us to contemplate, at one and the same time, our God and our brothers and sisters. The fruits of this contemplation are union with the human family and confidence in God’s companionship with us.

The fraternal economy begins with the recognition found in PCO VI: 6, that Francis did not make a choice against money in itself, but against the consequences of a monetary economy, which created greed and envy, and unleashed violence and destruction in people’s relationship with God and one another.

In his *Testament*, Francis says that his “way of penance” began with his encounter with the leper, an embrace that overcame the exclusive and excluding norms of society

2 *The 2005 Human Development Report*, published on September 7, 2005, can be found at [www.hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005](http://www.hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005).

(Testament 1-4). In the *Legend of Three Companions*, Francis explains to the bishop of Assisi that his renunciation of worldly goods was not related primarily to penance and asceticism. Rather, Francis rejected material possessions so as not to have to defend them with military arms and thus destroy his peaceful relationships with men and women. (Legend, 35.) The austerity of the Franciscan life, therefore, was the consequence of a radical option to live in relationship with everyone and to re-create the bonds of communion among all people and with God. In this way, austerity came to be a sign of credibility for the brothers and their protection against the virus of greed.

Seen as such, the “fraternal economy” is a new form of relating to the world and, at the same time, a prophetic announcement. It is much more than a simple system of accountability or a fraternal sharing of the income of the house. Its five principles constitute a prophetic criticism of a current system that many of us have accepted as the only system possible:

1. **Participation** assures that all those affected are involved in the important decisions that are made. It is an important value against manipulation and the concealing of information.
2. **Equity** does not propose that everyone has the same, but that everyone has the right to what is necessary for a dignified life. It is a form of recognizing personal and cultural differences. It rejects valuing people according to their possessions.
3. **Transparency** guarantees honesty, accountability and ethics in transactions. It is a strong criticism of the corruption, dishonesty and manipulation at various levels of society.
4. **Solidarity** criticizes and counteracts the profit motive that concentrates wealth in the hands of the few and acts as the motor of the “market economy.” Solidarity bases itself on the experience of St. Francis - that all we possess comes from God and that the only thing that is truly ours is our sin. (Reg NB, XVII: 7 and 17.)
5. **Austerity** is not just a personal choice of a simple lifestyle but also a communal choice against all that destroys relationships with God and with our brothers and sisters. It is a fundamental fraternal value that preserves the other values of Franciscan life. It is a manner of rejecting a system that functions by constantly creating desires to sell more. Without the “self-limitation” of austerity, solidarity becomes the object of abuse and destruction.

The Capuchin reform was originally a call to return to contemplation. But, the plague in the Camerino region called the brothers out of the enclosure of their hermitages to serve the needs of the sick. This willingness to serve won the esteem of the people and helped the Order survive in spite of many problems. What the leper was to Francis in his day and the plague-ridden sick were to the first Capuchins, the poor are for us today: brothers and

sisters on the road to conversion and mutual evangelizers of a new fraternal economy.

The first Capuchins’ care for the sick was a specific act of charity. But, when coupled with an austerity of life, it proclaimed an important value of the fraternal economy: that the movement from isolation to solidarity is fundamental for the redemption of the world. Our encounter with the lepers and the infirmed enriches us, as it does the poor and the entire world.

Our Capuchin history shows us examples of how the brothers constantly renewed their creativity by finding the needy and excluded of their time: the first squad of firemen in Paris was formed by the Capuchins; Solanus Casey in Detroit and Leopoldo de Alpandere in Granada and fra Cecilio of Viale Piave have fed the hungry. Today, brothers are giving us new examples, like those brothers in India who work with the Dalit and those in Africa who work with the refugees and those displaced by the continent’s many wars. We see further examples in Latin America, where some friars are working with the indigenous, and in Europe, both in the East and in the West, where friars are working with the thousands of immigrants and homeless on their city streets.

Today, most of our brothers around the whole world live on the “periphery” (PCO VII, 3), near to the poor. We only have to open our doors to welcome our poor brothers and sisters among us or to go out to serve them. Some of our brothers open their doors, not only to serve the poor, but also to live with them and to share their life and social conditions (PCO I, V, VI, VII.). This insertion among the



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poor is necessary for our Capuchin identity and spirituality. The characteristics of our Order - contemplation, austerity and care of the needy- have served and can continue to create redeemed relationships. Emmanuel Levinas says: “The material necessities of a brother are my spiritual needs.”<sup>3</sup> This insight does not mean that we win heaven by our works of charity. Rather, it shows us that the encounter with the poor purifies our image of God, while contemplation purifies our intentions and guides our Gospel way. Austerity, together with the other values of the fraternal economy, is the basis on which to work for the globalization of solidarity.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 99.

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Dear Brothers, we wish to propose some concrete activities to help us confront the problem of economic poverty, as a Gospel brotherhood:

1. Examine and change the established economy in our communities, our circumscriptions and our Order, according to the principles of the “fraternal economy,” not only as a form of accountability, but also as an economic alternative with great prophetic power.
2. Study and learn the economic situation of that extensive population of our planet now excluded from the goods of the earth. We need to encourage our brothers to go beyond the media’s biased interpretations of poverty’s inevitability and the profit motive’s supremacy.
3. Understand more deeply and apply the social doctrine of the Church and the documents of the Order on this theme of the fraternal economy, so as to promote economic justice in all our works.
4. Read and re-read the documents of PCO V, VI and VII in the light of the “theology of communion.”
5. Guarantee that our projects of solidarity are community projects of the whole fraternity, local and provincial, and evaluate continually the dynamics of the social action we carry out.
6. Know, assist and utilize *Franciscans International* as a privileged tool of the Franciscan family at the United Nations, for social transformation and an integral evangelization.
7. Continue our special solidarity with the “Cry of the Poor,” presented by our African brothers to the 2000 General Chapter, in its three dimensions of war, AIDS and external debt.
8. Strengthen our initial and ongoing formation on these themes (especially of the fraternal economy), by offering workshops, experiences and courses of study, and by encouraging the scholars of our Order to write on these topics.
9. Apply the principles of the fraternal economy in our ministries, and, in a special way, as we work with the poor for their empowerment.

10. Support and protect presences of insertion as privileged places to meet the poor and crucified Christ (Cf. PCO VII, 3), and seek international support in the Order when such presences are in danger.

11. Strengthen the JPE commissions in the circumscriptions of the Order and participate in communication networks and alliances of action to advocate for justice, peace and ecology.

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Dear brothers, at the end of these days together, we want to express our appreciation and encouragement for the work accomplished by the Order in these last two sexeniums. We are convinced that we have found a new security and a new foundation for hope: not in the competition of the global economy, but in the solidarity of the fraternal economy. This discovery was confirmed for us by a poor woman whom we met in a cooperative that recycles garbage in Porto Alegre. The workers there, assisted by one of our brothers, earn a minimum salary of four dollars per day. This single mother of several children told us, “We don’t have much money. What helps me more is the solidarity that we have among ourselves, where we mutually help each other.” This cooperative lives the fraternal economy!

We are convinced that the message of our Gospel brotherhood for the economically poor consists not in what we have nor in what we spend. Our witness is especially in **how** we live and in **how** we serve. We are called to globalize solidarity, for “the fruit of solidarity is peace.”<sup>4</sup>

The Delegates to the International Meeting  
of the Capuchin Order  
on Evangelical Brotherhood, Economic Justice  
and the Eradication of Poverty

Porto Alegre, Brazil

4 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 39: “The theme of the papacy of my venerable predecessor Pius XII was *Opus iustitiae pax*, peace as the fruit of justice. Today it can be said, with the same correctness and analogous force of biblical inspiration, (cf. *Is* 32,17; *Sant* 3,18), *Opus solidaritatis pax*, peace as the fruit of solidarity.”

