

Laudato Si' 2020

Theme: "Everything is Connected"

A 9 day Retreat

16 – 24 May 2020



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Capuchin GEM (Green Environment Movement) – JPIC Office - OFM Capuchins

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace and Good.

To commemorate the 5th year anniversary of Laudato Si', we invite you to join us in a 9 day retreat.

Each day, we will provide you with materials from which you can find inspiration. We will end each session with a short conclusion. All that is required of you is to provide yourself a few minutes each day to find a quiet place to read and reflect in peace.

For today, Day 3, we have four topics:

1. St. Felix of Cantalice
2. A short Recapitulation
3. Let us go to the PERIPHERIES!
4. Joy in the Peripheries: The GIFTS we received

Happy reading and God bless you always!

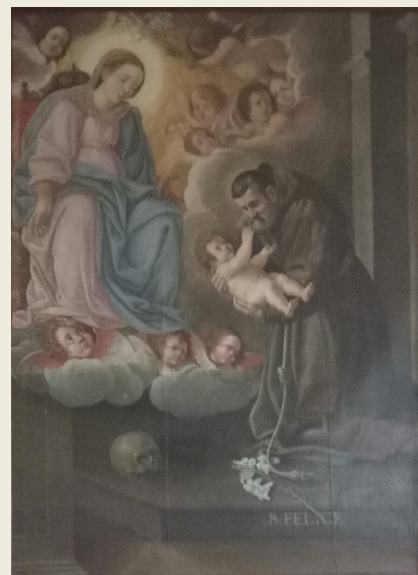
Office of the JPIC, OFM Capuchins

I. St. Felix of Cantalice

Today, we celebrate the feast of St. Felix of Cantalice. He is the first Capuchin saint and is also a lay brother. So today is also a day of celebration for Capuchin lay brothers!

St. Felix is a questor throughout his Capuchin life. Questors are brothers who go out to the world begging food and other necessities for the fraternities of the Capuchins. In their journeys they often get in touch with the poor. Following the spirit of St. Francis who always places the poor on a higher position than himself, it became part of the questors' ministry to provide first for the needs of the poor and whatever is left in the sack they are carrying, they bring back to the friary.

This practice is an eloquent expression of our Capuchin charism of universal brotherhood. I remember a brother once told me that the Capuchins should never be separated from the poor because the poor are our brothers. He then added that what the Capuchins have, they also belong to the poor.



Painting of St. Felix of Cantalice
Provincial Curia of the Capuchins of Umbria
Assisi, Italy

St. Felix is well known for his usual response to people whenever they give him something for the Capuchins. He would often say to them: **Deo gratias!** This expression led many people to later call him **Brother Deo gratias**.

The cheerful character of St. Felix lightened the hearts of those he met in the streets and his generosity brought warmth to the homeless. Being a questor, he is always in the midst of nature as he goes about begging for food.

Today, on his feast day, we ask St. Felix to intercede for us and to inspire us as we continue to reach out to the poor and creation. DEO GRATIAS!

II. A Short Recapitulation

May the Lord give you peace!

Before we start with day 3, we will just have a short recapitulation of what had already transpired.

In **day 1**, we established that **humankind, creation** and **we** are part of one family because we all came from God the Father. This filial relationship with Him makes us brothers and sisters. Jesus, the Emmanuel (*God with us*) left his throne to live among us. He did this in order to bring us back to the Father. We who are called to imitate the Gospel life of Jesus are also called to reach out to humankind and creation and to live among them. **Hand in hand with mankind and creation we walk with confidence to the waiting arms of the Father.**

In **day 2**, we touched on the importance of a personal relationship with God. God initiates the relationship, we respond to Him with love and together with humanity and creation we are drawn back to His loving arms. **Nature** and **the hearts of men** are temples that become our jumping boards to the **temple of the Holy Spirit within us**. We, who are called to live the Gospel life, need the Holy Spirit to constantly guide our ways. St. Francis always reminds his brothers that in everything we do, **we should not stifle the work of the Holy Spirit within us**. Let me emphasize it again: We are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are tabernacles of God's presence among the people.

The presence of God in our life sets our hearts on fire. With hearts ablaze, we go out to the world and we bring the message of God's love to everyone and to creation. **Hand in hand with mankind and creation we walk with confidence to the waiting arms of the Father.**

We now have two important elements of our JPIC work:

1. Awareness of our **SOLIDARITY WITH MANKIND AND CREATION** and of the **NEED TO WALK WITH THEM TOWARDS THE LOVING ARMS OF THE FATHER.**
2. Awareness of the **IMPORTANCE OF THE MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT** in all that we do. **THAT GOD MAY TEACH US IN ALL HIS WAYS** and **LEAD US, TOGETHER WITH MANKIND AND CREATION, BACK TO HIS ARMS.**

III. Let us go to the PERIPHERIES!

Today I want to share with you some thoughts about the NEED TO GO TO OUR EXISTENTIAL PERIPHERIES and MUCH FURTHER TO THE GEOGRAPHIC PERIPHERIES where people and nature are waiting for us. A heart set on fire by God's love needs to go out and set the world on fire. We cannot *"¹⁵ light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp stand, where it gives light to all in the house."* – **Matthew 5:15**

Hearts set ablaze by the touches of God are meant to go out to the world and preach the Gospel and if necessary, we can also use words.

In 2015, I was blessed to take part in giving into the light the **CPO 8, The Grace of Working**. One of the statements I like most in this document is **CPO8 number 62** which says: *"We encourage the friars to 'leave the sacristies' and to work in the existential peripheries, where no one wants to go, bringing our charism as lesser brothers. By means of our work, let us live out the prophetic element of consecrated life in the Church."*

If we are to really be in solidarity with the people and with creation, we need to go out and live among them just as Jesus lived among us. We need to be *'altri emmanueli'*.

I believe that one of the real dangers a consecrated person faces right now is the temptation to live in a 'plastic bubble'. Let me illustrate this hypothetically.

Imagine a consecrated person waking up in an air conditioned room going out to drive an air conditioned car then celebrating mass in an air conditioned church. He gives a sermon based on the 'book of Sermons, year A'. After leading his parishioners to sleep, he finishes the celebration of the mass, goes to his air conditioned car and drives home. Along the way, he stops his car at a red traffic light. A poor boy in the street approaches his car. He rolls down his window, gives the boy a coin and closes the window again. He then returns to his air conditioned room and locks himself inside. He remains inside his room as he waits to be resurrected on the next day.

In contrast: Imagine a simple priest waking early in the morning to celebrate the mass. After a short breakfast, he walks out of the convent to a nearby slum area bringing the Blessed Sacrament to the elderly and to sick people who were not able to go to mass and receive communion. He then goes around the slum area looking for couples who are not yet married and invites them to avail of the upcoming 'mass wedding' sponsored by the Parish. He is very much in touched with the situation of his parishioners that when he goes to the pulpit, he speaks with them as a brother. He feels and experiences their struggles. His homilies are intended to help them find solutions to their problems. His presence is a comfort to the people assigned to his care.

We Capuchins are challenged to go not only to our immediate existential peripheries but further to the geographic peripheries. We are called to go to places where nobody wants to go in order to bring the merciful gaze of God to the poor and to creation. This was the message of Pope Francis to the Bishops of Brazil at the beginning of his Papacy. He said to them: *"On the streets of Rio, young people from all over the world and countless others await us, needing to be reached by the merciful gaze of Christ the Good Shepherd, whom we are called to make present."*

Our Capuchin tradition is rich with stories of friars remaining in solidarity with the poor and those in

need even when others would prefer to leave and transfer to safer places.

Pope Pius the XI noted this when he said: *“Where in all the world have the Capuchins not penetrated? Where have they not shown up? When times were at their worst and help was sorely needed, in places that were abandoned and where no one else would go, there you will find the Capuchins.”*

IV. Joy in the Peripheries: The GIFTS we receive

In our previous presentation (Day 2 of the Laudato Si’ 9-Day Retreat), I mentioned that when our mission team would go to the peripheries to be of service to the poor and creation, we often return to the convent with more gifts than what we have given. Today, I would like to partake with you some of these precious gifts we have received from them.

1. Learning about GENEROSITY from the sea

Many years before, I was assigned to the Capuchin Mission Station in Nuing, Jose Abad Santos in southern Philippines. Our Friary is just a short walk from the sea. When the weather is good, we go to the beach and swim. These moments of communion with the sea allows us to learn lessons about GENEROSITY.

At regular intervals, the sea will gently draw away from the shore as she performs the cycle of the low tide. When this happens, people would gather at the coast and partake of the richness of the sea while she recedes to the distance. They carry their buckets and walk around the shore, gathering shells, mollusks and many more.

I often witness this gentle waltz between mankind and the sea. I could almost hear the sea calling out to them saying: *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” – Isaiah 55:1*

I would watch everyone gather together: fathers, mothers, children, grandparents and even their pet dogs. And the seashore would gradually come alive. People meet people. People share with people. People talk with people. People smiling. Children playing. Dogs running back and forth. I would hear laughter and sometimes even songs. Every once in a while, the wind would blow. The sea would watch the people from a distance; patiently waiting. Allowing the people to enjoy her gifts.

After a while, the sea gradually goes back to the shore as the cycle of high tide begins. Smiling people return to their homes, carrying their buckets laden with her gifts. The sea reclaims the shore and replenishes it as she waits for the next cycle. The missions bell rings in the dying of the light and grateful hearts would pause. It is time for the Angelus.

N.B. People by the sea know the importance of keeping it clean. They know that whatever they throw into the sea will always come back at the coming of the tide.

2. Learning to cherish people and spending time with them while we can

Before I entered the Capuchin Order, I lived in the city of Manila for more than ten years. Living in the

city is quite different from the life in the outskirts. There is often a sense of rush in the city. People seem to be always in a hurry.

After my final profession as a Capuchin, most of my religious life was spent in the peripheries. For a time, I was assigned to the Capuchin mission station at Nuing, Jose Abad Santos together with Brother Ricardo "Ric-ric" Rara, OFM Cap. He was my guardian and is also the chaplain of the mission station. I was one of the only two doctors in an area that stretched for many kilometers. The other doctor works in the city and is not always available for the people. Br. Ric-ric and I would regularly go up to the mountain communities hiking. We would load a bunch of medicines on one or two horses and start the journey. He would care for the spirit while I would care for the body. Every once in a while, young brothers in initial formation would join us as part of their immersion program.

Each morning, we would sit at the balcony of the mission house that overlooks the mountain ranges. There we would recite together the morning prayer. After the prayer, we often survey visually the mountain tops. We search for clouds in their vicinity. No clouds means the river is low. Many clouds means the river will be as high as our waists. To get to the highest community, we would have to cross the same river 18 times and hike up the mountain for one to two days depending on the weather.

For the whole year, we would climb up different mountain ranges to visit tribal communities or ride a boat or motorcycles to communities along the shore.

As we hike up the mountain trails, we would often meet people along the way. Meeting people in the trail is quite an interesting affair. The hikes are often long and would require many hours to accomplish but people always take the time to stop and greet each other. The usual dialogue is: "Asa ka gikan?" (Where did you come from?) or "Asa ka paingon?" (Where are you going?). It is interesting to note that people will really stop and listen. Even if they encounter a person frequently, they would talk to the person excitedly as if they had not seen each other for a long time. They celebrate each others' company. They live the moment with each other.

One day, I returned to Manila to visit one of our convents. I did not have the key to the gate and the brothers are already praying so I had to wait outside for thirty minutes. At that time, a poor person was sitting on the pavement. He was also waiting for the prayers to end so that he can ask the brothers for some food.

I sat down beside him and we talked lively for thirty minutes. After a while, he looked at me strangely and told me, "Why are you different." I said, "What do you mean?" He answered, "Because you took time to talk with me." Then and there, I realized that the peripheries have taught me another valuable lesson. It is very important for us to spend time with people. Especially with those who become invisible in the midst of a busy society. They get so used to being ignored that to be noticed is often a big surprise to them.

Whenever our young friars are in Metro Manila and I happen to be there also, we would sometimes pack some sandwiches or bread and after supper, we would ride a public transport to a park in front of the government Post Office and distribute it among the homeless. After a while, some hearts caught fire

and they started to do it individually. One brother even bought a thermos that he fills up with coffee and he would go about the streets looking for the homeless. He would offer them a cup of coffee and they would sit down together and talk. One day, he saw an old lady in Santo Domingo church along Quezon Avenue. He approached the lady and asked her: "Grandmother, do you want some coffee?" The lady looked at him and said, "I am sorry young man but I need cash!"

In the peripheries, moments spent with other people are precious because medical services are almost non-existent. People can easily die from a simple cough or diarrhea. Chronic diseases are not properly managed. Heart attack and strokes are frequent. The majority die around the age of fifty years old. Child mortality is also high. The people we encounter at one moment might no longer be with us on the next day. So we cherish them while they are still alive. We celebrate life together while it is still possible.

3. More lessons on GENEROSITY

- I use to visit the Mangyan tribal communities at Mindoro Occidental in northern Philippines. In one of my visits, we went for a two hour hike to the next village. Along the way, we saw a banana plant pregnant with fruits. Sir Claudio, the Mangyan teacher who was guiding us, stopped and shared with me a rule of hospitality they have for strangers. He said that when a traveler is hungry and he passes by a tree with fruits, he can eat the fruits to his heart's content as long as he leaves some behind for the one who planted it. One time, I was in the same mission area with Br. Dennis Tayo, OFM. He is a lay brother like me and is also a doctor. We passed by a 'Camachile' tree that was brimming with fruits. Leaning against the tree, was a long pole designed to gather the fruits. We appreciated the kindness of the person who left a pole for travelers to use. We ate the fruits to our hearts content and many more were left.
- In rural villages, each house usually have vegetables and fruit trees in the garden. If people need something that is not present in the garden, they would go to a neighbor who has it and the neighbor will give it for free. The same generosity is always reciprocated.
- Betel nut chewing is a custom of hospitality in many tribal communities. It usually consists of four ingredients: betel nut, lime, 'ikmo' leaves and tobacco leaves. The un-initiated usually becomes a little dizzy and euphoric the first time they chew the combination. By tradition, the Mangyans will only bring with them two or three of the four ingredients. This impels them to reach out to their neighbor and ask for what is missing. The missing ingredient promotes social interaction and camaraderie.
- One time, Brother Dennis Tayo, OFM and I prepared some coffee when several Mangyans came for a visit. Br. Dennis felt that the coffee was not enough and offered to prepare some more. Sir Claudio, who was with the group, assured Brother Dennis that whatever is available will be enough for everyone and all will receive a share of the drink.

On a previous occasion, Mangyan tribal communities gathered in a village called Danlog. I often visit this village to give medical services. They came together in order to discuss the processing of a legal document for their ancestral domain. The document will secure their land for generations to come. When it was time to eat, they shared the food equally and each of them ate with joy. No one complained. They ate and talked with each other happily. I watched two elders sit down with rice

only. One elder said, "It is okay, fáfá (rice) will just be fine!" They laughed and started eating.

At the end of the day, I quietly lay on my hammock and listened. The tribal elders are laughing and talking lively. I smiled knowing that the night of camaraderie is just beginning. There was no alcohol. It is not part of their culture. They just celebrated their kinship together. I closed my eyes and I sensed the sweet smoke from a campfire. I listened if there are sounds of crying children. I could still hear a few. There is still more work to be done. Later, the mantle of sleep enfolded me.

Conclusion

Time flies.

One moment we are young and carefree. We have eternity before us. We are often tempted to set things aside telling ourselves that we have time to do it later. We put our dreams on hold. We take the people around us for granted. We are young. We still have time.

One day we wake up and realize that even bending down is already an effort. Whenever we bend down to pick something, we pause for a while and ask ourselves: What else can I grab down here before I straighten up? And when we straighten up we groan.

We enter a room and then we pause. We look around aimlessly. We stop for a moment and think. We smile and tell ourselves, "What was it that I came in here to fetch?"

In a blink of a moment, we realize that time has already passed us by. The sun is almost at twilight. The giant silvery moon and the stars wait expectantly at the side. We smile, take a deep breath and sigh. We whisper underneath our breath:

"Time flies!"

May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil and bring us to eternal life. Amen.

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