

LETTER TO THE ORDER
AT THE BEGINNING
OF THE NEW SEXENNIUM
LET US GIVE THANKS
TO THE LORD!

ROME, 14 APRIL 2019, PALM SUNDAY



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INTRODUCTION

1. I would like to begin this letter with a simple invitation: let us give thanks to the Lord!
It's a customary expression that one of our dear confreres used to say at the end of any conversation, meeting, or exchange of opinions. He always said it, even when a rather heated discussion was necessary – the kind that, given this brother's particular complexion, left him red in the face. Whether an agreement was reached or the opinions remained contrary, his resounding conclusion was never lacking: Well, then! Let us thank the Lord!
2. It seems to me that we have in this brother's attitude and way of expressing himself something characteristic of the experience of St. Francis; it's almost an echo of Francis's continual breaking into the praise of the Most High God. Ever more aware of the great things that the Lord had willed to do in him in the course of his life, and already certain of the even greater promises that awaited him in the future, Francis could not but conclude with the affirmation that the Most High, Omnipotent God is good. He is every good, all good, the highest good, He to whom our total gratitude goes!¹
3. Furthermore, it is the Mother of the Redeemer herself, the blessed Virgin, our mother Mary who educates us daily in thankfulness and praise, she who invites us to magnify the Lord for the great things done for us, for the brothers, and for the people of God, and who moves us to give thanks from the depths of a heart that exults in God our Savior. (Lk 1:46-55)

¹ *The Praises of God* (FA:ED I: 109)

4. The fresh air of Pope Francis's teaching invites us over and over to give thanks for the past in order to open ourselves completely to the future and to find again the energy that knows how to be passionate in the present, in the present of our own journey and story as well as in the story of the Order and the Church². In this way our life will become a *laudato si*³ that erupts from the joy of recognizing how good is the Lord with those who welcome him and his Gospel.⁴
5. Among recent events for which we are very grateful, there is certainly the celebration of the eighty-fifth General Chapter (26 August – 15 September 2018), which took stock of the journey made by our Order in the last sexennium and opened the way for us to walk decisively into the years that stand before us. Therefore, it is now the moment to begin to put into practice what came out of the work of the capitulars, without, of course, forgetting the invaluable words given to us by Pope Francis on the occasion of the audience granted to us towards the end of the Chapter.⁵

I. THE *RATIO FORMATIONIS*

6. Following the report of the General Minister, Br. Mauro Jöhri, and the election of the new administration, the main theme foreseen by the chapter agenda was the study and approval of the *Ratio formationis Ordinis*. This was the result of a broad process of study in the preceding years with the whole Order contributing, and the conclusions were summarized in the *instrumentum laboris* prepared by the competent commission. At the beginning of the Chapter one could sense a certain tension in the air, brought on by the thought that the topics to be treated and the different sensibilities would highlight

divisions within our Order. The concern was revealed to be unfounded, for the work itself expressed a powerful shared understanding.

a) **Communion on the values expressed by the *Ratio***

7. In the course of the work, each capitular had plenty of opportunity to speak – on this and on all the matters on the agenda – and nobody was denied or limited in what he could say. The interventions were appropriate and constructive, and the dialogue developed in peacefulness and with the meek and humble respect that listens to everyone. This itself already points out the atmosphere of communion that we experienced. We must recognize that this is a true gift of God, because things don't always go this way!
8. But the most important thing that came out is that the Order, from one end of the world to the other, is very much in agreement on the values that characterize our identity as Capuchin friars and the call to live the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the form of our vocation. And in this I understood, in a rather unequivocal way, that this communion is not the fruit of a simple, intellectual knowledge of our Rule and Constitutions as much as it is a 'sense' that has become a life, that has become our insides, our discipleship, our deep desire and commitment to live up to the call of the Lord with authenticity. I believe that this is an important strong point and a reason for sure trust in the journey that the Lord is asking us and the Order to make into our future.
9. However, everyone has to admit that between the ideal and the reality, between even the most authentic desire and its translation

² Apostolic letter of his Holiness Pope Francis to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life (November 21, 2014)

³ Pope Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato si'* on the care for our common home (May 24, 2015)

⁴ Pope Francis, apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world (November 24, 2013)

⁵ Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/september/documents/papa-francesco_20180914_capitologenerale-cappuccini.html#CONSEGNATO

into the concrete steps of life, there is always a rather dramatic gap. In this regard St. Paul gives us a marvelous description and motivation:

"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand." (Rm 7: 18b-21)

10. We too often find ourselves in a similar contradiction: certainly we are sincere when we cultivate the desire to be fully consistent in our response to the Lord, and we commit ourselves in this way, but then we discover how fragile we are, how our response is still little or nothing, and how we have to start anew from the beginning each day. Nor is there any lack of times when disappointment and discouragement can begin to show themselves. What is the way out of this? St. Paul, again, points it out: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rm 7:25a)
11. Precisely because we are certain that the Lord does not remain a passive spectator of our efforts and our failings – and still less just a model for imitation – but because He is daily at our side, that it is He who makes us what He desires, we are always able to undertake or take up again the journey with trust. We have before us a grand and beautiful path to take, aware that we are united in the values that make up our charismatic identity. It is our desire to make these¹ values incarnate with ever greater authenticity. It is the Lord who will know how to lead us with fidelity and effectiveness.

b) The integration and publication of the *Ratio*

12. At the General Chapter, the capitulars offered points for the enrichment and improvement of the text of the *Ratio* as it had been drafted and under study in the preceding years. Therefore, following upon the generally positive reception of the *Ratio*, the General

Chapter asked that a commission integrate these contributions into the text. The Chapter then recommended that the definitive text be turned over to the General Minister and his Council within a year, such that the *Ratio* could have final approval and come into force for all the friars of the Order.

13. To this end, the General Council thought to reappoint the small commission that produced the text of the *Ratio* as it was presented to the General Chapter. This commission is at work and looks forward to presenting the text, updated according to the contributions of the General Chapter, this coming September or October. There is therefore hope that towards the end of this year the *Ratio formationis generalis* of the Order will be ready to be given to everyone. (cf. Motion 1, 1)

c) The application of the *Ratio* in the different areas of the Order

14. The common values of our life and vocation, on which we all feel united in harmony, have to be put into practice where we are called to live and give our witness. As Br. Mauro Jöhri's report made very clear, and as our statistics show without doubt, the Catholic Church no longer tends toward having its center of gravity in the western world, nor in Europe in particular. In the west a good part of society is secularized; we could even say 'de-christianized', with a very marked numerical decline in religious and priestly vocations. On the other hand, in the African and Asian realities our Order's numbers are growing significantly, almost leveling off such as to make up for the diminishment in other places. The necessary and logical result, then, is that the values shared and accepted by all should find different translations into concrete realities according to the various settings and cultures, the different atmospheres which become the breath of our life and that of the people.
15. It will therefore be the responsibility of each conference and circumscription to develop its own plan, but keeping this in mind: it's not about swapping out elements of our charismatic identity and the specific

values of our vocation—lacking sufficient discernment—with elements proper to the different cultures. Rather, this means identifying the means by which the Gospel values of our Religion can be lived with authenticity in the different cultures, giving value to what is good, unmasking what is brittle or to be corrected according to God, and introducing the good news of the Kingdom by means of our witness.

16. This is an important and exciting task for the whole Order, and something which the Lord has asked of us expressly with the current vocational development in areas of the world very different than those upon which we have been accustomed to focus our attention. We must ask the help of the Spirit, that He may support our effort and guide our steps in fidelity to our vocation. In the coming years we will seek to study, together with the members of the International Formation Council, in what way we can “effectively accompany and confirm the promotion of the *Ratio formationis* in each conference.” (cf. Motion 1, 2)

II. THE ORDER IN EUROPE

17. I believe that we are all well aware of the situation the Order is experiencing in the European context: a rapid numerical diminishment—with the exception of parts of Eastern Europe—from which no turnaround is seen. On the human level the facts can be sad, but if observed through the lens of faith—even if in an unusual way!—the situation calls us to a response based on the certainty that, in God’s plan, the charism and its future are solid.
18. In recent years the Order has already begun certain initiatives as an attempt to respond to new situations, and there are already small signs of renewed life and authenticity. These demand our attention and our accompaniment, that they may confirm for us that the Lord is still at work, that our charism continues to have many good opportunities to be present and give productive witness to the Gospel even in our secularized world. I would even say that this world ‘awaits’ us, if we are able to make ourselves available, living

our vocation as lesser brothers with simplicity and honesty. It seems to me quite evident that the Lord is encouraging us strongly. Therefore, we must and can make ourselves available, because there is still much to do!

19. The new administration of the Order is committed to following up on, in ways we will seek out together, the repeated and unanimous requests of the General Chapter capitulars to proceed with the revision of the conferences and circumscriptions, together with the development of both collaboration between circumscriptions and the Fraternities for Europe Project.

a) Revision of the conferences and circumscriptions

20. Given the rapid shifts going on in all of Europe, and because of the consequent changes in our presences, the General Chapter asked the new administration of the Order to study the question of updating the European conferences of major superiors as well as the circumscriptions that surround the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. This is a necessity that everyone can see and it makes itself ever more pressing. One thinks of the situation of the Conference of the Iberian Peninsula (CIC), but also of the fragility of our presences in the other Mediterranean countries, Greece and Turkey in particular as well as others (ASMEN). With regard to CECOC (Eastern Europe) and CENOC (Northern Europe) there are other questions that need to be studied, especially that of houses of formation.
21. Our Constitutions entrust the task of establishing conferences to the General Minister and his council. (n. 144, 2) There is no doubt, however, that at least the major superiors in question have to be involved in the reflection, because things are done better if all contribute with their own observations. In the logic of faith and of the charism of our fraternity, if all feel involved and we all make our contribution, we will not only better understand what the Lord asks of us but also work more in conformity with his will.

22. Numerical diminishment has already resulted in the reduction of the number of circumscriptions, almost always with the unification of two or more provinces. Other steps of this kind are also being taken and will have to be foreseen for the future. Such shifts bring with them certain sufferings; this is very understandable. They lift up in us certain resistances, at times very strong. Here it is good to observe that, if, on the one hand, attachment to one's own province is a strong sign of belonging and love for the institution that has allowed us to be 'born' as members of the Order, on the other hand we cannot allow those circumscriptions (that have existed for centuries in the orderly development of the Order in Italy and Europe) to become, in these changed times we are living in, an obstacle to recognizing each other as brothers, or even as a refusal to do so. That would be a serious injury to the identity of our charism.
23. When we succeed instead in not letting ourselves be overly conditioned by those structures which now carry the risk of asphyxiating us, and we know how to be open to others with kindness, whether they be of a different language, nation, culture, or from a different formation experience, our personal lives and the life of the Order will always benefit. This will become a journey of healthy growth and mutual enrichment, precisely in the context of a numerical decline. For not one of us lives his vocation because of numbers or structures; we are all called—making use of structures always in need of renewal—to build Gospel brotherhood. It is in this that we have opportunities to respond effectively to the Lord who calls us.
- b) Collaborations: current and to be developed**
24. For the Church in Europe and the west, the twentieth century was very much characterized by a strong missionary impulse. It was religious men and women above all who gave themselves in great numbers for the mission lands of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, where they brought the first announcement of the Gospel to places where the Christian faith had been little or even unknown. They gave birth to a great many new communities which today are lively churches, flourishing and growing.
25. How many of our Capuchin friars left their own lands and provinces to go enthusiastically to 'the missions,' ready to give everything for the growth of the Kingdom of God! And how many were the provinces that committed themselves to sending and supporting them! If the goodness of a tree is known by its fruit, we have to recognize that—even keeping all of our weaknesses in mind—the work of these missionaries was truly effective and many times even magnificent. The Lord was at work, without doubt, but making use of the sincere willingness of brothers without fear of leaving, and of the generosity of those who let them go. Indeed, we may even feel a touch of envy, and we remain in admiration of our missionaries and how they were able to give of themselves, in work and in witnessing to the Gospel, and in not a few cases, sacrificing their very lives.
26. But why not see that the vocation that drove those missionaries to become true workers for the Gospel is the same vocation we have received? So, if we embrace it completely, the Lord will allow us too, today, to do as they did, to do the same, and even more!
27. In these years collaboration between different circumscriptions has become a form of the fundamental missionary dimension of our vocation. (cf. Const. 175, 5) It is a positive thing to see a significant movement of friars, from the provinces of India especially, who are sent to assist in the 'old' circumscriptions of the west. Without such help, not only would our presences run the risk of becoming overly reduced, but even the life and meaning of our charism would feel the effects, together with the our ability to respond "where the Gospel needs to be proclaimed anew, where the lives of entire groups of people are no longer inspired by the Gospel, and where many baptized people have lost a sense of faith, either partially or totally." (Const. 176, 3)

28. There are many positive aspects in these collaborations, which certainly are to be maintained and strengthened as far as possible, according to the mandate of the General Chapter. Other, negative aspects, have also been pointed out, due in some limited cases to failures to observe what our Constitutions provide, but above all due to a certain disorder in particular implementations. This must lead us back to the applicable guidelines for collaboration in personnel that were approved *ad experimentum* by the General Chapter of 2012.⁶ The *Ratio formationis* will also contribute to this matter in some areas, for example in describing what formation a friar must have already received before being sent in mission or collaboration.
29. Let us cultivate the hope that an attentive accompaniment of these new and emerging dynamics, which in their turn express, in an updated way for our time, our willingness to go without reservation where the needs of the people of God seek our reply. This will contribute to both the vigor that has distinguished the Order for centuries and a renewal of our enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God.
30. There is another form of collaboration between circumscriptions that we have had now for some time and with great benefits, and which will be an important characteristic of the Order in the future: the generous openness, with emphasis on the fraternal dimension, to collaboration between circumscriptions that are neighbors or in the same area. Those who have made a decision to go in this direction, and have faced up to the difficulties involved without running away, know how many benefits such a collaboration brings, in particular for the younger generations of the Order. In this way the younger friars learn with less difficulty how to be open to the worldwide dimension of our fraternity, and because they are confident in the greater diversity of our richness, they are not limited or saddened by the weaknesses of a single place.
31. In this area the responsibility of the major superiors of all the circumscriptions, without exception, is called upon strongly. With their choices, aimed at a hard-working and serious collaboration, they can do a lot to foster fraternal growth in the Order. On the other hand, with contrary choices, they can do a lot of harm.
- c) The Fraternities for Europe Project**
32. Already for some years we have been asking ourselves what we can do so that our presence in the west may continue into the future. In 2014 the provincial ministers and custodes of Europe met in Fátima to discuss the question. Already by then there had been some small experiences (e.g. Clermont-Ferrand, France), but it was at that point that the Order was able to promote more decisively the Fraternities for Europe Project. Br. Mauro Jöhri described the project in these terms: "We wish to try a new path, putting together inter-cultural fraternities, which, in the light of the Gospel and our Constitutions, will live prayer, fraternal life, and mission in an authentic and coherent way. The resource of interculturality will witness to how brothers coming from different cultures, if they look to Christ present among them, can live, give of themselves, and work together. We are supported by the knowledge that the charism of Francis of Assisi, lived and witnessed to, still has much to say and communicate to the men and women of our time. We do not yet know what will be the result of taking this path, but with a hopeful heart we wish to begin to take the first steps."⁷
33. The project was thus developed and currently there are six fraternities, each different in its own way. They are Clermont-Ferrand and Lourdes in France, Kilkenny in Ireland, Antwerp in Belgium,

⁶ *Guidelines for fraternal collaboration between circumscriptions*, *Analecta OFM Cap* 128 (2012), second part, 710-714.

⁷ Br. Mauro Jöhri, *Fraternity for Europe: Reflections and Recommendations following the Fatima meeting*, *Analecta OFM Cap* 131 (2015), 50-52.

León in Spain, and Spello in Italy. Because this initiative has already given such positive fruit, and according to the mandate of the General Chapter, we wish to continue to support the project even further. For the time being, we are thinking and working toward establishing another two fraternities of this kind, at Meersel-Dreef in Belgium, near the border with the Netherlands, and at the shrine of Máriabesnyő, our ancient presence in Hungary. Then we also want to give this kind of value to Le Celle di Cortona. It is one of our 'Franciscan Places' par excellence, which we believe could be very helpful to many friars in their need to taste anew the roots of our spirituality, to return to the sources, and to experience for a brief or extended period a peaceful atmosphere of simplicity, prayer, and welcome.

34. Naturally, for all of these initiatives, we ask the willingness and enthusiasm of the brothers who wish to throw themselves into this beautiful adventure. Let them make known their desire to their provincial ministers and the general councilor of their area. They will know how to coordinate everything and respond in the best way, according to the hope that each cultivates within himself and the new opportunities for growth and witness that the Project offers.

III. THE ORDER IN ASIA AND AFRICA

35. God has not withdrawn his hand from us; on the contrary he is making the Capuchins grow greatly in the regions of Asia and Africa. It is a sign of God's love for the Order, and a great, ongoing blessing for us. How beautiful it is to know that almost everywhere in the world you can find brothers joyously committed to living this same blessed vocation! We need, then, to embrace this advantage and seek to help each other, so that the thriving tree that is growing in these regions—through inexhaustible divine goodness—may be

abundant in the good sap of the values of our charism. The regions we are speaking of are vast and represent many cultures and different traditions. Nevertheless, because of our one charism, we can reflect on certain needs they have in common.

a) The incarnation of the charism

36. I don't believe there is any doubt that if the Lord is granting the Order to grow so vigorously in Asia and Africa, it is because He knows well that the charism finds fertile ground in these places and that the friars can make it incarnate in an authentic way. The immediate task that the Lord entrusts to us and on which we are all reflecting is the challenge of authentically translating the values of our charism into cultures that are very different, original, and rich, so that the good leaven of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ may come to be present in them. This task is first of all for the friars themselves who come from these cultures; it is difficult for a European or North American to incarnate the charism in a culture that isn't his. He can help to transmit the values proper to our Capuchin Franciscan life, but to bring them to life in a deep and original way in a different culture is the task of those born into that culture, those who, because they breathe that air, will be able to understand how it is possible, in their particular context, to set alight the fire of Franciscan spirituality. (cf. Motion 1, 4)

There are two topics in particular that are worth reflecting on at all times, because they are central to our identity and can have very great consequences for the development of our Order: fraternity⁸ and the lay brotherhood.

37. It is understandable that, in a situation of expansion, our new presences might begin with just one friar. But this is comprehensible only as an initial moment. The issue becomes problematic and questionable when, in territories where we are already abundantly

⁸ The life of lesser brotherhood is our specific contribution to the announcement of the Gospel and to mission: "That same life of brotherhood, the leaven of ecclesial communion, foreshadows the definitive unity of the People of God and provides the witness essential for the Church's apostolic mission." (Const. 88, 4)

present, new places are opened, generally to take on responsibility for parishes, but in which the minimum presence of three friars is not guaranteed. (cf. Const. 118, 8) Brotherhood in these cases becomes only theoretical; without the daily common life that is made of praying together, encounter, the sharing of our life and faith, and the ordinary service for one another that is shared by all, then the particularity of our life, which is brotherhood, comes to be lacking. This brotherhood is the privileged 'place' in which each finds the God that speaks to him and offers him what he needs for real human and spiritual growth according to our vocation. Without such a life of brotherhood we lack this 'place' where, beyond personal feelings, we share ourselves for the growth of all, and together we are able to discern well what is the will of God for the same local or provincial fraternity, and for the Order as a whole.

38. There was a time when twelve friars were required to establish a fraternity. This is not possible today. But neither can we think that our charism will find ways to incarnate itself with divine efficacy in the different cultures if we are not firm in our option for fraternities that are a significant presence, both in numbers and in the vitality of our bonds as brothers. It will also be difficult to offer an effective witness of our life if we present ourselves only as pastoral workers, totally given to ministry and not to the expression of the life of brotherhood.
39. The scarcity of lay brothers is evident enough in the newer areas where the Order is developing. This begs the question: is it the Lord who only wants Capuchins ordained for sacred ministry, or is it us? Do we know only how to present our life and think of ourselves as friar-priests? I do not believe this is a question of numbers, but of our charismatic identity! Our vocation is that of being friars and minors; any other 'qualification' neither adds nor takes away from this identity. Rather, it is beginning from this identity that everything else receives its proper shape. I am not a lesser brother because I am a priest, or because I have some degree, or because

I can take on a position that is considered prestigious within my culture. I am not a lesser brother because I can govern a parish, administer the sacraments, direct a school, or have authority within the Church or the Order. I am a lesser brother only and in the measure in which I am committed to living the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of my own, and in chastity, with a particular option for generous service, humble and self-forgetting, keeping close to the last, the excluded, and the poor.

40. Therefore, in our Order there is room for everyone, not only those called to sacred orders. This is why so many of our lay brothers have been able to arrive at holiness, because being ordained is not a necessary element of our vocation. What greater witness to the Gospel we could give, with our way of thinking and the choices that we make, if we were to succeed in enriching all the cultures with this particular identity that the Spirit has given us for the good of the people of God! We need to find ways to make real steps forward in this area.

b) Openness to mission and collaboration

41. Thanks be to God, there is already a great movement of brothers from Asia and Africa who are making themselves available to go beyond their circumscriptions in order to assist the western world or in true missions *ad gentes*. There are also examples of very small circumscriptions, with their own internal personnel challenges, which nevertheless do not fail to make members available for the needs of the Order. We need to foster this missionary commitment in all the circumscriptions, opening our hearts and making brothers available, that they may go to announce the Gospel outside of their own territory. This kind of willingness is an important sign of the growth and maturity of any circumscription, its superiors, and its brothers.
42. The General Chapter noted, once again, the difficulties encountered when a circumscription depends directly on the

General Minister. We are therefore invited to proceed prudently in this area. At times we will have to continue to use this option provided by our Constitutions, because there does not seem to be an alternative. (cf. Const. 136, 1) But it's not enough just to notice the difficulties. As they grow in numbers and in maturity of faith, it is also necessary that stronger circumscriptions develop direct responsibility towards territories and presences that are struggling in the announcement of the Gospel and in the *implantatio ordinis*. This task, although it is naturally carried out in communion with the Order, must be taken on at the provincial level as much as is possible.

43. Though there has been much growth regarding the value of collaboration between circumscriptions of a particular area, and many very positive initiatives are already going on, it would be an error not to go even further. There is still a great need, particularly in the area of formation, to make more and better resources available for common formation centers. For many years the Order has invested much in adequately preparing many friars for both formation and teaching. There are hundreds of friars who have been able to acquire the necessary competencies. Now we have to find ways to help each other turn what has been received into generous service, above all for our friars in formation.
44. In some places there are important inter-provincial formation centers that have been functioning for some years. It happens in some cases that, when some difficulty arises, the ministers decide on their own, perhaps in too facile a way, to withdraw their own candidates and professors from the collaboration. In this way the inter-provincial centers are weakened and sometimes the situation becomes untenable. A better choice would be to discuss problems and

hopes openly at the conference level, and to seek together, as much as is possible, better solutions for the candidates, the provinces, and the Order. In this area it will be a great help to involve the friars of the General Secretariat of Formation in the decision making process. (cf. Motion 1, 3)

c) Conditions for mission and collaboration

45. "Fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us. That is why it is possible to love our enemies. This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a 'universal fraternity'".⁹
46. I wanted to take up this affirmation of Pope Francis, because it seems to me to indicate well the necessary foundation for a fertile openness to mission and collaboration: the logic of gifts freely given. Br. Mauro Jöhri has already exhorted us to 'fan the flame of our charism'¹⁰ as he has also offered us various encouragements for mission.¹¹ The foundation Br. Mauro points out is gift of self. Perhaps it will be good to take another look at both letters, because they offer us many useful suggestions for a productive response to the challenges before us all, the first of which is that our vocation is a call to go out of oneself in order to be freely at the service of the brothers.¹²
47. I was struck by something I heard during the General Chapter from a brother sent in collaboration to one of the European provinces. He made this bitter observation: 'I have been sold by my province.' It was probably just a moment of tiredness. However, the observation helps us to understand well

⁹ Pope Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato si'* on care for our common home (May 24, 2015), n. 228.

¹⁰ Br. Mauro Jöhri, *Let us Fan the Flame of our Charism!*, *Analecta OFM Cap* 124 (2008), 465-480.

¹¹ Br. Mauro Jöhri, *Mission at the Heart of the Order*, *Analecta OFM Cap* 125 (2009) 264-271.

¹² Cf. A. Spadaro, M. Bartoli, N. Kuster, *Sei ciò che dai. Conversazioni con Fra Mauro Jöhri. Ministro generale dei Frati Minori Cappuccini*, (Foggia: Edizioni Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, 2018).

that willingness for mission and collaboration can never be real if it is only directed towards parts of the world that offer a high standard of living or an economic return for the circumscriptions that send friars, such that availability for places that suffer poverty and privation comes to be lacking. So we cannot approve of circumscriptions using the leverage of their economic resources to secure for themselves or 'buy' the service of friars from provinces that have personnel to offer. It cannot be this way for us.¹³ The Order and all the circumscriptions will know other, appropriate ways to support those who make themselves available and are called to go generously 'among the Saracens.'

48. Brotherly love, which drives us to go and evangelize the world according to the mandate of the Lord – let us repeat the Pope's words – *can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us*. Let us trust rather in divine providence, because "God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward."¹⁴

IV. THE ORDER IN THE AMERICAS

49. Many of the considerations already noted also go for the Americas. If, some decades ago, this seemed to be the area in which the Order was developing the most, with a shape of its own and with certain accents that seemed to express our charism well in the particular cultures, today we realize that

the dynamic of growth has stopped. There are already even various circumscriptions, in the Spanish-speaking regions in particular and in some provinces of North America, that are suffering very much from a significant reduction in the number of friars. I believe this is the right moment to reflect together on what is going on.

50. Given the great strength the Order still has in the Americas, it is not the time to give in to discouragement, even if some places find themselves in great difficulty. It is rather the time to join forces, to see together the ways that will allow us to assist one another and to revitalize, as much as we can, the flame of our charism on this great continent.¹⁵ Above all, here too we must take decisively the path of collaboration between circumscriptions, which is already going strong in some areas and with real fruitfulness. We believe that this will be an effective response, giving value in a concrete way to our brotherhood especially in those places that are currently suffering.
51. Given the positive results and the mandate of the General Chapter, the General Council intends to look into the possibility of intercultural communities also in the Americas, similar to the Europe Project fraternities. We believe that circumscriptions beyond the old world can also benefit from the new life that this particular initiative can bring. Therefore, in order to overcome the geographical designation and to mark this jubilee year dedicated to St. Lawrence of Brindisi – a man who knew how to unite in a marvelous way long periods of prayer, a cultured education, and a tireless commitment to implant and make vigorous the Order – we have thought to no longer call the project 'Fraternities for Europe' but 'St. Lawrence of Brindisi Fraternities.'
52. Because our brothers in the Americas themselves are the most directly involved in this journey, and

¹³ "In keeping with Capuchin tradition, let [the friars] be one in mind and heart with people of every state of life, and let their work of evangelization not be tied to the security of economic resources or social prestige. Instead, let their trust be in God and in the credibility of the gospel life." (Const. 177, 5)

¹⁴ Pope Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato si'* on care for our common home (May 24, 2015), n. 245.

¹⁵ Europeans consider all of the Americas to be one continent. – trans.

have greater right to reflect on and choose the fitting steps and how to realize them, the General Council plans to call a Pan-American Summit of all the major superiors of the continent, to be celebrated in October 2020. From this gathering we will develop the criteria for a greater mutual assistance, as well as suggestions for eventual changes to the structure of the circumscriptions (provinces into custodies, unions of provinces, new custodies, new definitions of the territory of circumscriptions, etc.).

V. SOME OTHER PROPOSALS FOR ANIMATION

53. What we propose to do with the Summit in the Americas in 2020, we also believe useful and necessary for the whole of Europe in 2021. We have time to prepare this well, but I trust that in the meantime everyone can have healthy and sincere discussions in the light of the signs of the times by which the Lord desires to point out the way for us, and which we are called to read and interpret together.
54. Given the journey of development that we are called to make in the coming years, and considering that it can be a response very much in line with the earnest appeals of the Holy Father, aimed at making the Church move herself toward the dimension of 'going out' in service to the people of God,¹⁶ we believe that it will be a great help for the whole Order to reflect anew on the missionary dimension of our life. Therefore we intend to celebrate, towards the middle of the sexennium, a Plenary Council of the Order on the theme of mission. We trust that making such a study in this area will help to orient more surely the steps the Order is taking. This will drive us to take up again a powerful consideration of our life of faith and prayer, our vocation as self-gift, and the charism of brotherhood.
55. Convinced that the instructions of the General Chapter express what the Lord wills for us,

supported by the wisdom at which the whole Church has arrived, and by the teaching that she has given for all Christians, we want to insist on the strong commitment to putting into effect all the efforts of which we are capable that it should never happen that one of us, or someone working and living in our places and ministries, commits abuse against a minor.¹⁷ It is evident that the whole Order has made a great effort in recent years to set up adequate guidelines or protocols. Those who have not yet done so must see to it promptly.

56. But the awareness and responsibility of all must keep in mind that it is not enough to be equipped with a protocol; a commitment is necessary in the formation of all the friars and for all our collaborators, those who have contact with minors in particular, in order to ensure that the protocols are put into place with effectiveness. Above all a constant supervision is necessary, that actions are taken and policies for the protection of minors are put into effect, such that every means for the protection of minors is taken and to avoid future conduct that is so devastating for them. These policies and protocols are to fit particular situations and are to be continually updated. We cannot foresee the evil that we would not want to occur, so let us commit ourselves to preventing it! (cf. Motion 3, 1)
57. Thus, the general councilors will seek to be particularly solicitous to support these efforts, which belong to everyone and to each of us. They will be checking on what is in place when they visit the different circumscriptions. We shall seek to work with conviction and energy in this area, and this will be reason for further blessing from God.

CONCLUSION

58. In these first months in the service that the General Chapter has entrusted to me, I have come to be aware of at least one thing: our

¹⁶ Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), nn. 20-24.

¹⁷ Cf. Apostolic letters *motu proprio* of Pope Francis *As a loving mother* (June 4, 2016) and *On the protection of minors and vulnerable persons* (March 26, 2019).

Order is great ... it is truly great! It is great not only because the number of friars is very high, among the highest of men religious, and at work in almost every part of the world, but because I have seen in you an energy and an originality in responding to the Lord that is truly unique! The Order is great not only for its glorious history in the past but also because it is called and has every gift needed for building a grand story in the present and in the future! Let us thank the Lord for this, and do so strongly, and let us place in him all of our certain, renewed trust.

59. This year we rightly recall our exalted saint Lawrence of Brindisi, who knew, with great effectiveness, how to lead the Order and promote its growth in holiness. Reading the various newsletters sent from the circumscriptions, it is good to see that this anniversary is being well celebrated by various initiatives, both small and large. But let us not limit ourselves to remembering him; his unceasing work and activity in service to the Order and the Church, his repeated journeying over all the roads of Europe – unconcerned with fatigue and misfortune – so that he could be present where needs demanded and to carry out with generosity the missions that the pope entrusted to him, may all of this inspire us today, with renewed zeal, to travel the paths the Lord opens for us.
60. Meeting with the Holy Father at the end of the General chapter, he pointed out three characteristics/ways that must distinguish everything we do, and which I summarize here: continue to be friars of the people, close to all people in kindness, even the humblest. Be big-hearted friars towards all, able to welcome with mercy and to minister generously the mercy of God. Be friars that pray, that pray a lot, but in a simple way that will be a support to the simple way of prayer of the people. These are things in which we recognize ourselves and that we can all do, in every part of the world and in every time, whatever our situation or the work that awaits us.¹⁸

61. The Lord has confidence in us. The Church has confidence in us. Let us begin without fear, trusting in the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, patroness of the Order, and in the intercession of St. Francis, St. Clare, St. Lawrence, and all of our saints. May sincere commitment strengthen and bring joy to the hearts of all and may the voice of each erupt with the same, consoling need to thank the Lord.

ROME, 14 APRIL 2019
PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION



BR. ROBERTO GENUIN
GENERAL MINISTER

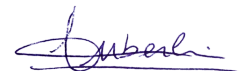
GENERAL VICAR

BR. JOSÉ ÁNGEL
TORRES RIVERA



GENERAL COUNCILORS

BR. NORBERT AUBERLIN
SOLONDRAZANA



BR. FRANCESCO NERI



BR. CARLOS SILVA



BR. KILIAN NGITIR



BR. PIOTR STASIŃSKI



BR. PIO MURAT



BR. JOHN BAPTIST
PALLIPARAMBIL



BR. VICTORIUS DWIARDY



BR. CELESTINO ARIAS



¹⁸ Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/september/documents/papa-francesco_20180914_capitologenerale-cappuccini.html#BRACCIO