

RESOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE CAPUCHIN LESSER BROTHERS

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A PORTRAIT OF SAINT FRANCIS IN THE CURRENT CAPUCHIN CONSTITUTIONS OF 2012

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SUBJECT 1: STARTING POINTS

As we begin these thoughts we have taken the liberty of adding a few preliminary notes on some important aspects of Franciscan legislation, on the relationship between the Rule and the Constitutions in general, and on the specific features of the Capuchin Constitutions, plus a short reference to methodology.

Crucial Factors

There are at least seven important qualifiers focusing on some key elements which are particular to Franciscan legislation. These derive directly from the stated intentions of Saint Francis himself:

1. the Gospel must be the effective paradigm and norm of life of a Franciscan brotherhood (cf. Test 14-15), and not just a rhetorical embellishment or formal starting point as a basis for establishing rules;

2. Any Franciscan rule of life must effectively reflect the spirit of the divine Word; (cf. *Adm 7*);

3. the practical key when passing laws should be the Saint's intention to follow Jesus Christ in all things (cf. *Adm 6*); in other words, the key itself should apply equally to the life of prayer, the practice of each of the three beatitudes we have professed, fraternal life and the apostolate, with strong emphasis on poverty of spirit as a guarantee of interior freedom (cf. *Adm 14*);

4. according to Saint Francis, any instruction referring to the relationship with God should originate in the reality of a prayerful heart, especially in adoration, praise and thanksgiving (cf. RnB 21), and always in full communion with the Church (cf. RB 1; RnB 23);

5. the dynamic principle for establishing rules about relationships within the fraternity should be that of mutual service (cf. Adm 4; Adm 19);

6. in all the rules, work should be presented as a crucial means of support and of the apostolate, out of a sense of honesty by reason of the poverty we have professed (cf. RnB 7; RB 5; Test 20-21);

7. all norms referring to the apostolate should explicitly follow the intention of Saint Francis, that our every apostolate as lesser brothers must be founded on the witness of the brothers' life, so that it becomes the key point of their works of evangelization (cf. RnB 11; RnB 14; RnB 16).

• Summary: The detailed laws that we enact in a Franciscan context must be clear and specific. In addition, they must give specific indications about how we are supposed to live the Gospel in accordance with our charism, because it is not sufficient for us to remain on the level of pious story-telling.

The Rule and Constitutions

The fact that we have our own specific legislation in a religious Institute seems obvious to us today, all the more so because the Church requires it. But in the context of Franciscanism, the existence of a whole set of laws outside of the official Rule could raise questions about how far those laws reflect St. Francis' intentions. As seems obvious from his writings, the holy man never envisaged any other laws apart from the Rule itself:

1. Test 35: "And the Minister General and the other Ministers and Custodes are bound by obedience neither to add to these words, nor to take away from them";

2. Test 34: "And the brothers shall not say: "this is another Rule";

3. Test 38; 39: "And I strictly forbid under obedience all my Brothers, both clerics and lay, to put any gloss upon the Rule, or upon these words [...] But as the Lord has granted me to speak and write the Rule and these words [...], may you understand them simply and without gloss, and with the divine assistance observe them to the end".

Francis was worried about the uncontrolled multiplication of additional laws. Here we find his personality reflected: few words, clear and simple rules to live by, so that one could concentrate totally on the spiritual dimension, the charism, the call, and the mission of the Church (cf. Test 14-15).

However, once the growth and geographical spread of the brotherhood became established, it began to feel the need for more detailed laws. Among the brothers there were those who called for a new, monastic type of Rule, but Francis resisted it (cf. LegPer 114). For him, anything too elaborate and developed was opposed to the evangelical ideal of simplicity and purity.

How then can we justify the laws of the Constitutions and maintain that they are suitable for Franciscans? Thomas of Eccleston gives us some interesting arguments (cf. *The Friars and how they came to England*, 27). This shows that Francis did admit the possibility of Constitutions

or statutes as laws complementary to the Rule, if the situation required it and always respecting the principle of short and simple words.

The Rule was born from one capitular gathering to the next. Francis did not see it as something untouchable like a fetish, and he himself was ready to add useful things to it even after it had been approved (cf. 2 Cel 193), as he used to do during every chapter.

His basic concern was that there would be an accumulation of useless rules which could easily lead people to assume a legalistic mentality instead of the one that Francis wanted, namely, founded on the freedom of the children of God. His reservations in the matter were well founded, as was shown immediately after his departure for Egypt (cf. Jordan of Giano, Chronicle 11-13). When he returned the Saint put everything back as it had been originally, but the danger remained.

• To conclude this subject we could say that the Rule of Saint Francis allows for particular details as times and places change. The only important thing is to ensure that the particular norms—Constitutions, statutes or whatever else – spring from the charismatic root of the Rule, in other words from fidelity to the following of Christ, alive in the Gospel, and that therefore their only purpose is to help the brothers to observe with greater conviction the Rule itself, the gospel counsels and the whole of the divine law. Established laws must always have an auxiliary character with respect to the Rule, and this is the only valid justification from a Franciscan standpoint for having constitutional laws.

What is specific to the Capuchin Constitutions

The teaching and example of Saint Francis shows a delicate balance being maintained between his strong charismatic inspiration and his realism about life. Francis has noticed that, in order to introduce his burning love for God and his desire to be faithful to his own vocation into everyday living, they need certain established, fundamental norms. To say this does not mean that law creates a devout religious. A religious is always born out of the actual life of someone who is marked by the charismatic choices of fidelity to the Gospel, and yet, to reinforce his commitment to the choices he has made, the religious needs some clear, fixed reference points.

Do the Capuchin Constitutions, the historic ones as much as the current ones, represent the vision of Francis about the relationship between law and a charismatic life? What, if there were one, would be their specific approach to this question?

The Rule and Constitutions constitute a body of laws. The philosophy of law considers the question of how effective a legal norm is, in other words, it asks in practice how to create an “active” law, one that draws people to observe it.

There are various factors that make a law reliable and give it an inner thrust that leads to a vibrant norm. In general, we can distinguish three levels of motivation that encourage the observance of a law and make it functional:

1. the motivation given through a categorical statement, from authority: “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors [...]. But I say this to you [...]” (cf. Mt 5,21-22);
2. the motivation that comes by way of pragmatic argument: “Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge.” (cf. Mt 5,25);

3. the motivation of encouragement to observe values: “Blessed are you, when people abuse you, persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven”. (cf. Mt 5,11).

Which of these motivations do we find in Capuchin legislation? Ever since the Statutes of Albacina (1529) Capuchin law has distanced itself from authoritarian statements, even if these first Statutes stress the observance of the Rule in order to form good habits: “Likewise we order that prayers be said [...]” (cf. OrdAlb 8 in *I cappuccini I*, 173); “We also order that in times of famine questing be done by brothers assigned to this by their superiors in order to provide for the needs of the poor” (cf. C 1536, 3 in *I cappuccini I*, 272). In general, however, Capuchin laws focus on the freedom of spirit which the brothers enjoy in their actions.

External observers noted this freedom of spirit among the first Capuchins, and on good evidence, even if they did not always view it through respectful eyes: “It is said that they seem like Lutherans, because they preach freedom of spirit”. [...] To the first count, we reply that if St Francis was a heretic, those who imitate him are Lutherans” (cf. Vittoria Colonna 1 in *I cappuccini II*, 2020-2031).

We could say that in general the Capuchin Constitutions, from the first to those of today, are categorical when it is necessary to guarantee fidelity to aspects that are essential to the life of the fraternity, even if historically this regularity, in its practical proportions, was subject to variation, plus or minus a few details. However, as a general rule there was always an effort to motivate the brothers by appealing to the values of the life they had freely chosen and professed, thus encouraging them to be faithful. The present Constitutions of 2012 are a preminent example of this practice. They affirm:

1. The impossibility of making laws and statutes for every particular case in everyday life (cf. C 2012: 187,1);
2. The possibility of imposing a command under sin, but only as a last resort (cf. C 2012: 162,3);
3. the definite purpose of the Constitutions as a sure means of living our religious consecration to the full (cf. C 2012: 9,2-3).

The Constitutions refer to that law which is supreme over every other human law, namely to the law of the Spirit expressed in the Gospel, which leads to the perfection of life in holiness. In that sense, while they remain a code of laws, they are first and foremost a spiritual guide on how to observe the law as a function of fidelity to the Gospel.

Saint Francis would usually speak of the life, or way of life, of the brothers, rather than of the Rule (cf. RnB 24,1). According to his way of thinking and his sensitivities, the charismatic calling of the brothers must be seen before anything else as a life to be lived, and not just as a law to be observed, because it is not law that shapes life, but life itself that constitutes a substantial reality which, as needs require, calls upon the law to perform a useful service for the brothers and the fraternity.

• Summary. What is specific about the present Capuchin Constitutions as far as the legal aspect is concerned is that they fully recapture the earliest Franciscan understanding of law as a reality that is subject to the ideal of life, following the practice of the Saint of Assisi. The only justification

for legal norms lies in the charismatic ideal of life. It is precisely this that gives the law its meaning and its living force.

A nod in the direction of method

Now we need to give a short clarification regarding methodology. The vastness of the material called for a clear interpretative key of the person of Francis in our constitutional document. We have chosen, as guidelines, the gospel values represented by Saint Francis, specifically those highlighted in the earliest Constitutions of 1536, which were particularly significant for the first Capuchins. Of course, any such investigation could approach the subject from a variety of different angles, bearing in mind the human and spiritual richness of the Saint's personality, which would be difficult to confine within methodological structures. This, we find, imposes a certain limitation.

SUBJECT 2: SAINT FRANCIS AND CHRIST

The current Capuchin Constitutions bring together all the rich tradition of the Seraphic Order in general, and Capuchin tradition in particular, and in equal measure respond to the needs of the new times, according to the intention of the Church expressed in the conciliar and post-conciliar documents. With all this intertwining mass of data, we now want to see which image of Saint Francis emerges from the text of the Constitutions of 2012. It is an image which should reflect how the Capuchins of today understand the Saint, and should also indicate the preferential choices they make in order to be more faithful to his ideal of the gospel life.

The Gospel is in itself the highest ideal for every Christian, and all the more so for every person consecrated to God. What is specific to the various forms of Christian life is the way they introduce it into actual life. Saint Francis, as founder, is distinctive in that he chose as his life-programme radical fidelity to the spirit and the letter of the Gospel, drawing from it directly the essential, innermost meaning of his own personal life and that with the brothers. In other words, he does not refer to any system of philosophy or ethics, theology or morals based on the Good News, but strives to welcome the Word itself, who is Jesus Christ.

The Constitutions say: "Saint Francis, the founder of our Brotherhood, embraced the Gospel from the very beginning of his conversion and made it the guiding principle of his life and activity" (C 2012: 1,3). Therefore the brothers are exhorted to follow the Gospel as their highest law in all the circumstances of life, attentively reading it and savouring it in their hearts (cf. C 2012: 1,5).

The Constitutions of 2012, referring to the call of Saint Francis, present the Gospel not from the angle of an abstract body of teaching but as the place where we encounter Jesus Christ. In the words of the gospel message the Saint finds the Lord himself, and he is not interested only in a sterile evangelical doctrine, but rather in discovering how to shape his life more and more according to Christ. Here he discovers the footprints of the poor and humble Christ, and follows them joyfully, giving up everything so that he can love God above all else. (cf. EpOrd 50-52). Capuchins receive the following of Christ as the great spiritual heritage of Saint Francis. They wish to cultivate it diligently, in word and deed, so as to be true sons of their founder and to share his spiritual wealth with all people.

The Gospel, conceived in this way, also marks the effective beginning of the Franciscan brotherhood. The Constitutions, recalling how Francis, having listened to the gospel account of the sending of the disciples, inspired by the Spirit, gathers together a group of followers and shares his own experiences with his first companions, teaching them how to live in a similar way. Capuchins wish to follow the Saint's directions, recognising the Gospel as their highest law in every circumstance of life and as the Word of salvation, which they are to ponder in their hearts and embody on the highways of everyday life, as the Blessed Virgin Mary did. (cf. C 2012: 1,5).

The Constitutions state: "Saint Francis, a true disciple of Christ and an outstanding example of Christian living, taught His brothers to walk joyfully in the footprints of Christ poor, humble, and crucified, so that through Him, in the Holy Spirit, they might be led to the Father." (C 2012: 2,1). The intention of the Capuchins is not to perform one virtue or another, or to devote themselves to this particular activity, but to conform themselves wholly to Christ the Lord and to follow with all realism his life as we know it from the Gospel, thanks to the assistance of the Spirit, so as to unite themselves to God the Father. In the phrase quoted above we find a fine reflection of the Trinitarian formula of Saint Francis (cf. EpOrd 50-52) which enriches the Christ-centered quality of the new Constitutions, encompassing all the fullness of Revelation.

The Capuchin brother, imitating Saint Francis, who in Jesus contemplates the way of abandonment, the *kenosis*, will have to follow the Lord, first of all in the mystery of his self-abasement in the Incarnation, the passion and death on the cross, in order to truly participate in the paschal mystery, "as a foretaste of the glory of His Resurrection while awaiting His coming" (C 2012: 2,2). This is the Christ we are to follow with joy.

The Constitutions consider Francis not only as a founder and legislator, but also decidedly as a model to be imitated, when they state: "In order to take on the features of a true disciple of Jesus Christ, so wonderfully evident in Francis, we commit ourselves to imitating him, or, rather, Christ in him" (C 2012: 3,2). This imitation is not a stand-alone ascetical exercise, but a pathway to evangelical holiness, where the Capuchin, having once fixed his eyes on Christ Jesus, encounters Saint Francis going ahead of him and showing him how to direct his footsteps, since he has already followed in the footprints of the Crucified One, not in word, not *de iure*, but above all in the reality of his own life. From this derives the generosity to "observe the gospel counsels with a generous and faithful heart, especially those we have promised: loving obedience, poverty — which is for us the special way of salvation, and chastity consecrated to God" (C 2012: 2,3). These, if we live them with dedication and commitment, require a real sacrifice, they are a heavy cross, but at the same time a yoke which is light (cf. Mt 11,30).

Francis wrote the Rule because he wanted to help his brothers in the difficult task of conforming themselves totally to Christ. According to the Constitutions: "The *Rule* of Saint Francis, which flows from the Gospel, spurs us on to live the gospel life." (C 2012: 7,1). Here the ancient parallelism is recalled, ever-present in the fundamental legislation of the Capuchins, which intimately unites the Gospel with the Rule, and the person of Christ with the person of Saint Francis (cf. C 1536, 2.6 in *I cappuccini* 152.156). The link between these two realities and these two persons establishes the secure highway for the Capuchin brothers.

Saint Francis wanted his companions to observe the Rule in a way that was holy, simple, without explanations or commentaries. (cf. Test 34). The Constitutions say the same, and advise us to refer constantly to the spirit and evangelical intentions of the Saint, and to the saintly example of the first Capuchins (cf. C 2012: 7,2). Discernment of the true meaning of the Rule can

only come about through the person of the author. Our predecessors in the Capuchin life indicate how we are to observe the Rule by returning to the life and Rule of Saint Francis, through conversion of heart. This is the kernel of the primitive inspiration behind the Capuchin reform. (cf. C 2012: 5,2).

The Testament, which the Seraphic Father, marked with the sacred stigmata and filled with the Holy Spirit, dictated when he was close to death, expresses his ardent desire to contribute to the salvation of the brothers. This is his most deep-seated aim. Francis' last will remains a timeless aid for us, so that, day by day, we may observe the Rule we have professed ever more perfectly according to the mind of the Church, as our way of following Christ. (cf. C 2012: 8,1.3). This is why the document is considered by the Constitutions as a precious inheritance of the spirit of Francis. They confirm that it is the primary spiritual expression of the Rule, and recognise it as an outstanding source of inspiration for Capuchin life. In this way they strive to accept it into the ambit of the Order's legislation, following the Saint's intention (cf. C 2012: 8,2.4).

The Constitutions themselves are no more and no less than an encouragement and a help to us to observe the Rule and example of the Saint with greater commitment and perfection in the changed conditions of life. Understood and practised in this way, they become a sure means of living our total consecration to God as Capuchins, in other words, in our unremitting effort to be conformed totally to Christ in imitation of Francis' example (cf. C 2012: 9,1-2).

We find a splendid appeal to the genuine tradition of the Order, rooted in the characteristic attitude of Saint Francis about the observance of the letter of positive laws, in this exhortation: "Let us observe these *Constitutions*, to which we are bound by virtue of our religious profession, not as slaves but as sons yearning to love God above all else, heeding the voice of the Holy Spirit who teaches us, and dedicating ourselves to the glory of God and the salvation of our neighbour." (C 2012: 9,3). The choice we have made to follow Francis in order to identify with Christ, under the guidance of the Spirit, always remains a personal act, open and free.

So that this may truly happen, "Let us lovingly devote ourselves to the personal and communal study of the *Rule*, the *Testament* and the *Constitutions* so that we absorb their spirit" (C 2012: 9,4). In this way, the decisions taken by the brothers and the fraternities will be ever closer to the founder's intentions. This effort to be faithful is entrusted by the Constitutions to Mary, Mother of God and our Mother – seen also in a Trinitarian context as "daughter and handmaid of the Father, Mother of the Son and Spouse of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin become Church" – since she is "the companion of her Son in His poverty and sufferings and, as experience shows, the way to the spirit of Christ poor and crucified." (C 2012: 52,6).

• *Summary*. Saint Francis, who is frequently mentioned in the Constitutions of 2012, shows his brothers the ways in which they can follow Christ. First and foremost, we see the prominence given to the Holy Spirit in the practical precriptions of the current Constitutions. This was already clear in those of 1536, and it shows that the brothers have attained a degree of sensitivity to Francis. The quality of the imitation of the Lord which a Capuchin should aim for is firmly linked to the Spirit-filled teachings and attitudes of the Saint himself. On the brother's side, every action of his, even the smallest, should be performed in the spirit of the Gospel in order to identify with Christ. Complete conformity with the Lord Jesus, after the example of Saint Francis, remains the spiritual core and fabric of our current Constitutions.

SUBJECT 3: CAPUCHIN PRAYER

According to the Capuchin Constitutions, the purpose of Christian prayer is achieved when, in response to God speaking to us, we find completeness in so far as we free ourselves from self-love and, in communion with God and with people, we are transformed in Christ the Man-God, because he himself is our life, our prayer and our activity. True conversation with the Father occurs only when we are living Christ and praying in his Spirit who calls out in our hearts: Abba, Father (cf. C 2012: 45,3-5).

Francis of Assisi drew spiritual strength to follow the Lord from deep daily contact with him. Therefore, Capuchins, consecrated to the service of God through the profession of the evangelical counsels, should strive in freedom of spirit to live a faithful and constant life of prayer (cf. C 2012: 45,6).

The Constitutions exhort the brothers to cultivate with the greatest care the spirit of holy prayer, which all other temporal things must serve, so as to become true followers of Saint Francis, who seemed to be someone who not only prayed, but had himself become a prayer. Therefore, it is not enough just to establish prayer times and keep to them; but a state of prayer must be created, so that it is the Holy Spirit who impels every brother to undertake external commitments, to proclaim salvation to people (cf. C 2012: 45,7).

The expression “all other temporal things” is so broad and generous that it can easily become a beautiful euphemism that says nothing. This is why the Constitutions encourage the brothers to make sure that their prayer does not become detached from reality, but, following the example of St. Francis, who saw the Lord in the leper, becomes embodied more and more in real life, in the events of history, in the religiosity of the people and in the culture of each region. (Cf. C 2012: 50,3-4).

This example from our own founder encourages Capuchins to live prayer as a characteristic expression of their calling as lesser brothers. We begin to pray “as brothers” when we love one another and gather together in the name of Christ, so that the Lord may truly be in our midst. We pray “as lesser brothers” on the other hand, when we live with the poor and humble Christ, offering the Lord the cry of the poor and effectively sharing their conditions of life (Cf. C 2012: 46,1-3). These two characteristics, highlighted by the Constitutions, are intimately complementary in Capuchin prayer when it is embodied in real-life situations, because if prayer is authentic, it always gives us God as gift and makes each of us a gift to others.

Saint Francis was very aware that if our search for God did not lead to communion with the brothers, a true encounter with God would not be possible either. And vice versa, the more intimate our conversation with the Lord, the more we will be genuinely open to our neighbour. “In this way, prayer and activity, far from being in opposition, complement each other as they are inspired by one and the same Spirit of the Lord” (C 2012: 46,5).

Capuchins are invited to desire above all else the Spirit of the Lord, and his holy operation, and always to pray to God with a pure heart. In this way we bring to everyone the witness of genuine prayer, so that they may see in our faces, and in the life of the fraternities, God’s goodness and kindness present in the world (C 2012: 45,8).

The spiritual force of Francis' person, who was so docile to the action of grace, should mold our prayer as Capuchins in the free and spontaneous outpouring of divine inspiration. This prayer, as Francis lived it, leads to contemplation through love which unites us perfectly with God, as long as we pay the price of renouncing our own ego. Therefore, the Constitutions state: "Franciscan prayer is affective, that is, prayer of the heart, because it brings us to an intimate experience of God" (C 2012: 46,6). From this contemplative experience, untrammelled by any particular technique but simply with our hearts open to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, gratitude, admiration and adoration will burst from the heart of each brother.

Francis' prayer was usually praise and thanksgiving because he knew that dialogue in prayer is initiated by the Spirit and is a free gift from him. Every Capuchin is invited to follow this attitude of the Saint, that is, to honour and praise God gratefully, letting his heart burst forth with sincerity, simply, confidently and with total abandonment.

Saint Francis wanted the whole life of the fraternity to be shaped by the mystery of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, so the Constitutions urge the brothers to celebrate both Liturgies with the greatest veneration and practical preparation (cf. C 2012: 47,2-3).

The breaking of the Eucharistic bread is the main cause and sign of communion with Christ and among the brothers, as well as the expression of divine praise. To make it more evident in our fraternities, a community Mass should be celebrated every day, which in some way recalls the will of Francis himself. The brothers, following the example of the Seraphic Father, should venerate, in an altogether special way, Jesus who is constantly present in the Eucharist, because he himself is the living centre of the fraternity (cf. C 2012: 48,2-4).

Another moment when we are privileged to associate ourselves with the praise, supplication and thanksgiving of the Church is the Liturgy of the Hours. Therefore, every Capuchin fraternity should gather together every day in the name of Christ to give thanks to God by commemorating the mysteries of salvation in the Liturgy of the Hours, as was the practice of Saint Francis with his first companions from the beginning. When this cannot be done in its entirety, at least Lauds and Vespers should be celebrated in common (cf. C 2012: 49,3).

It is interesting to note the recommendation to do this wherever they live or may happen to be. This means that the Office is not tied to a conventual choir, but is a strong expression of living brotherhood. For the same reason, it is important that brothers prevented from praying together remember to unite spiritually with the whole Church and, in particular, with the brothers who recite the Liturgy of the Hours privately. Those who say the Office of the Our Fathers according to the Rule should pray with the same profound intention. The Constitutions also recommend that the Liturgy of the Hours be celebrated with the faithful, according to local circumstances. The norm derives directly from the spirit of the liturgical reform of Vatican II, but it also recalls the attitude of Francis and his first companions, who willingly prayed in the churches (cf. C 2012: 49,4,6).

The saint loved to praise the Lord continually, so the timetable of the Capuchin fraternity should also be planned in such a way that the entire day, with all its internal and external activities, is consecrated to the praise of God, as we see in the example of the first Capuchins (cf. C 2012: 49,5).

The contemplative spirit, shining forth in the life of Saint Francis and in the first Capuchins, urges the brothers to give more space to mental prayer. The Constitutions refer to Francis' intimate experience when they report the classic expression, present in Capuchin

legislation ever since 1536, stating: "Mental prayer is the spiritual teacher of the brothers who, if they are true and spiritual lesser brothers, pray interiorly at all times". (C 2012: 54,2). This prayer, if authentic, intimately unites us to Christ and increases the effectiveness of the liturgy in the spiritual life.

The description of Capuchin prayer in the following sentence again reminds us of the Constitutions of 1536, which said: "To pray, in fact, is nothing other than to speak to God with the heart; in truth, whoever speaks to God with his lips alone does not pray at all". (C 2012: 54,2). For a lesser brother, the imitation of Christ presupposes that he wishes to honour the heavenly Father in spirit and truth, through an act of interior worship, in order to acquire knowledge of him through faith and love. In this way it is possible to cling to the person of the Lord. The mental prayer of the Capuchin, understood in this way in the Constitutions, corresponds exactly with the affective method practised by Saint Francis.

The document confirms that the spirit of interior prayer was, from the beginning, a charism of the Capuchin fraternity and, as history testifies, the seedground of genuine renewal. Therefore, "The fraternities and the individual brothers, wherever they may be, must make the primacy of the spirit and life of prayer a reality as required by the words and example of Saint Francis and by genuine Capuchin tradition" (C 2012: 55,1). Primacy clearly does not mean that we give up any activity other than prayer. It means that a preferential choice has to be made daily by each fraternity and each individual brother, so that their whole life may truly be filled with the Spirit of the Lord.

When the Constitutions, referring to the express intention of Saint Francis, speak about the work of the brothers, they strongly encourage them: "Let us take care not to make work itself our final goal, nor to become inordinately attached to it, so as "not to extinguish in ourselves the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, to which all time-bound things must contribute" (C 2012: 80,1). Effective words and works can only come from the overflowing fullness of the Spirit, as Saint Francis experienced.

Next, the utmost importance of individual prayer is reaffirmed. For true sons of the Poverello this therefore implies not only an obligation to pray because common life requires it, but most of all, the personal need to devote a certain amount of time exclusively to the Lord. For this reason, "every brother, wherever he may be, should make enough time each day for mental prayer, for example a whole hour" (C 2012: 55,2). The duty to pray, which in the previous drafts referred rather to the friary timetable, in the present Constitutions becomes a personal precept according to which everyone should want to make his choice daily in all external circumstances, even when this is objectively difficult and contrary to recollection, because only an effort rooted in a heartfelt desire makes the practice of prayer possible and fruitful.

Saint Francis, recognizing the richness and variety of the vocations of his brothers, wrote the Rule for hermitages, intended for brothers who want to spend particularly intense periods of contemplative life. He also foresaw that those who were sent to evangelize the world could suffer spiritual weariness and exhaustion because of a total dedication to the work of the apostolate, as he himself experienced. The Saint frequently withdrew from active life trying to regain intimacy with the Lord. In these cases he remained for a long time in solitude, silence and prayer. In this way he left us a practical example of how to be filled again with divine grace and apostolic energy.

At the time of the Saint of Assisi the existence of secluded places of prayer did not surprise anyone because it was considered a natural complement of the apostolic life. The Constitutions of 2012, referring to those of 1536, say that every fraternity must truly be a praying fraternity, but nevertheless “It would be beneficial to establish fraternities of recollection and of contemplation for one or several circumscriptions. Let these fraternities of recollection be open to all other brothers who periodically wish to spend time there to devote themselves more intensely to the spirit and life of prayer, as God inspires them” (C 2012: 57,2-3).

In the centuries-old Capuchin legislation, fraternities of recollection appear for the first time during the time of renewal following Vatican II. They are an attempt to respond to the changed dynamic of Capuchin life and activity in the spirit of Saint Francis, who knew how to balance action and contemplation in the best possible way. The aim of the houses of prayer is not to create a reality remote from the life of the province or circumscription, but quite the opposite. They wish to respect and foster the vocation of some brothers called to an experience of more intense contemplation, and also serve the needs of those brothers who are intensely involved in various apostolic works and activities, so that they can be refreshed in spirit, thanks to a more dedicated time of prayer as Francis prescribed it in the Rule for hermitages.

Summary. The Constitutions of 2012 present a picture of prayer life rooted in the person of Saint Francis and makes clear references to the early experience of the Capuchins in the Constitutions of 1536, with full awareness of the variety of living conditions in the current situation of the Order. We discover the Saint in the way the constitutional prescriptions referring to prayer are drafted. These show that, above all else, the life of prayer is an integral whole involving the whole person of the friar and moulding entire fraternities in their daily activities, since the reality of the Capuchin vocation, even today, is based on a single principle inherited from Francis: the ultimate aim of this way of life is conformity to Jesus Christ and to him every brother must strive to transform himself fully, striving realistically to address to him all his intentions and desires, with all the force of love.

SUBJECT 4: POVERTY AND MINORITY

Capuchins commit themselves to poverty because they propose to follow Jesus Christ, who was rich and made himself poor for us by becoming as human beings are. Therefore, true poverty, if it is genuine, requires us to be radical in renouncing wealth in order to be available to love God and neighbour. This was how it was lived by Saint Francis himself. (Cf. C 2012: 61.1-3).

The person of the Saint of Assisi embodies the ideal of evangelical poverty realized in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. Knowing the role of poverty in Francis' life, one understands why Capuchins take it as a great commitment in life. A Capuchin lives poverty as a participation in Christ's filial attitude towards the Father and in his condition as a brother and servant among people.

Poverty, as Saint Francis understood it, is not something abstract, but becomes concrete in the depths of the person. A truly poor person renounces not only things, but first of all himself. In this way he becomes able to recognize God's transcendence, to open himself to Him and accept Him in his personal life, which necessarily leads to charity towards his neighbour.

The Saint chose poverty because he found in it the only effective means of fighting his old nature and conforming himself to Christ. Therefore, at the origin of his poverty lies the love of Christ, which drives him to strip himself of everything in order to accept entirely the will of the Lord concerning him. The Capuchin Constitutions fully accept his way of conceiving poverty and apply it fully in their prescriptions.

Throughout his life Saint Francis always wanted to experience poverty first, and only then to proclaim it to others. The Constitutions, interpreting this attitude of his, show that the quality of Capuchin life, both individual and communal, must be such that it needs no explanation or interpretation (cf. C 2012: 62,1).

The authenticity of Capuchin poverty presupposes first of all a certain spiritual attitude, but one that is necessarily linked to a visible face which, by becoming an objective sign, makes it recognisable. The Capuchin brother, enriched with gifts of nature and grace, as a true follower of Francis, does not consider them his property, but makes them available to all, recognizing himself small in the sight of God and already praising him in his need for God (Cf. C 2012: 61,4-5).

Poverty of spirit, lived in this way, necessarily leads to a life of external poverty, and finds its core motivation in the spirit. This is why the Constitutions maintain that poverty requires a sober and simple standard of living in clothing, food and dwellings, and the renunciation of all social, political or ecclesiastical prestige, with the clear awareness that we cannot be poor while lacking nothing. (cf. C 2012: 62,4; 77,2).

The brothers are invited to use temporal goods with gratitude to God, giving an example of the right use of things to those who are greedy for them. This aspect is perhaps particularly important today, when practical materialism and consumerism are now advancing all over the planet, beyond the various political and social systems.

Saint Francis understood very well that we can proclaim God's presence among the poor only if we share in their condition. This is why Capuchin poverty, if it is to be a powerful evangelising force, requires three well-known characteristics from the brothers: it must make them sharers in Christ's relationship of a son to his Father, and in his condition as a brother and servant among people, and must also lead them to solidarity with the little ones of this world (cf. C 2012: 61,2).

The goal of gospel poverty can never be fully achieved, so the life of individual brothers and fraternities must continually strive towards this ideal in the concrete circumstances of life. The Constitutions insist on continuous assessment of our way of observing poverty, because if we ever thought we had achieved it, we would be in danger of turning it into something of our own. The question of poverty should never find a definitive answer. Capuchins must ask themselves how and to what extent poverty can be practised today. We must always seek ways of achieving it in a manner appropriate to the changing times and to the diversity of the places where we live, with the profound conviction that we are never truly poor and therefore always ready to question ourselves until the moment of death, as Francis himself testifies.

The search for tangible forms is indispensable, because without concrete expression true Franciscan poverty does not exist. The material face of poverty is flexible. Sometimes it will have to be changed or adapted, but there must be definite qualities, at the level of circumscriptions and houses, which indicate in concrete terms how we are to observe poverty in a way that is ever more faithful to Saint Francis (cf. C 2012: 65,1).

The Constitutions recall the Saint's wish when they urge the brothers not to appropriate anything, neither house, nor place, nor anything else. Wishing to follow the founder faithfully, Capuchins must be able to put aside, for reasons of faith, all their concerns, commending themselves in all things to divine Providence (Cf. C 2012: 67,1).

The community helps us, in a decisive way, to live out this difficult legacy in practice. For this reason, the Constitutions exhort the fraternity to lead a perfect common life in terms of food, clothing and other necessities. Everyone should share with others what is given to them personally, according to the practice of the early fraternity of Saint Francis (cf. C 2012: 64,1-2).

Capuchins should use temporal goods for the necessities of life, the apostolate and charity, but no excessive provisions should be made, not even of necessities. Rather, they should obtain all the means of support they need through the work of the brothers themselves, (Cf. C 2012: 66,2; 67,3).

Saint Francis considered work as a grace; he worked with his hands and wanted the brothers to apply themselves to work because it is honest, and in the case of lack of practical skills his advice was crystal clear: "Those who do not know how to work, should learn" (Test 21). The Constitutions of 2012, shifting the accent from questing, traditionally considered an expression of poverty, give more attention to work as a reality that befits the condition of the poor.

For Capuchins, their own work is the fundamental means of sustenance for each brother and fraternity. We do not wish to consider any work less worthy than others, but we do consider our choice of activities, choosing only those that most clearly manifest poverty, humility and brotherhood. Work, besides being the primary source of necessary things, according to the Constitutions, is also the main way of exercising charity towards others, especially when we share the fruits of our work with the poor (cf. C 2012: 79,1-2).

Should this not suffice, according to Saint Francis in the Earlier Rule (cf. RnB 9,3), the Constitutions encourage us to have recourse with confidence to the table of the Lord, [...] in such a way, however, that while we ask people for alms, we give them a witness to poverty, brotherhood and Franciscan joy. This circumstance is yet another opportunity to evangelize, perhaps all the more effectively when it is done with a humble and simple attitude (cf. C 2012: 67,4).

Bearing in mind the goals of Capuchin life, the brothers must always beware of making work their main objective, or of becoming inordinately attached to it. Work must always remain a means, a function of poverty and minority, contributing to the growth of love for God and neighbour (Cf. C 2012: 80,1-2).

Saint Francis did not want the brothers to use money, because he wanted them to remain poor and lowly in the Church. In order to respect his intention in this regard, given the changing conditions of the times, Capuchins do use money, but only as an ordinary means of exchange and social life necessary even for the poor, fully aware that this use always involves, even for the brothers, the danger of avarice and can easily become an instrument of power and dominion over others (cf. C 2012: 68,1-2).

The Constitutions, while admitting the possibility of the brothers having recourse to insurance or other forms of social security, and of using banks to deposit the money that is truly necessary, as ordinary people do, never forget Francis' concern, and they lay down one condition: it must be clear and obvious that the brothers are free from greed, the root of all evils, and not

anxious about tomorrow, avoiding any kind of capitalisation or speculation (cf. C 2012: 70,2-3; 71,2),

By accumulating unnecessary goods, Capuchins could become degenerate sons of Saint Francis. Therefore, the Constitutions invite the fraternities to hand over superfluous goods to the major superiors for the needs of the circumscriptions or to the poor for social development. They then go on to envisage a decidedly radical step forward, encouraging the local fraternities and provinces to be ready to share among themselves and with others even their necessary resources (cf. C 2012: 71,4). We should often reflect on this matter in our local chapters, keeping in mind a concrete and practical principle proposed by the Constitutions: “the minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed” (C 2012: 71,3).

This principle reflects a subject that was closest to the heart of Saint Francis, and introduces a yardstick that each brother can apply to himself to avoid the formalism of having a large number of rules on the matter. Stated in this way the norm is convincing and concrete, but it requires profound maturity and sincerity to define this “minimum” in a spirit of faith, as radically as the Saint intended.

Because of historical circumstances the Order is obliged to accept the possession and administration of goods. Therefore, the Constitutions provide detailed and stringent norms to ensure the highest degree of transparency in this matter, through the office of the bursar, economic commissions and by entrusting the administration of goods to lay people, precisely in order to guarantee the genuine observance of poverty and minority (cf. C 2012: 75-76).

The Constitutions pay special attention to poverty in order to ensure the protection of this precious gospel virtue entrusted by Saint Francis to his brothers. They invite everyone not to “be numbered among the false poor, who love to be poor as long as they lack nothing”. (C 2012: 77,2). Capuchins are encouraged to accustom themselves to suffering deprivation, following the example of Christ and mindful of Saint Francis, who wanted to be so poor as to entrust himself, stripped of everything and free of sentimental attachments, to the Father who cares for us. And because true evangelical poverty consists primarily in complete availability to God and to people, there is no need for us to cling to earthly goods with disordered affection, but we should use them as though not using them (cf. C 2012: 77,1.4).

Poverty, as an attitude of charity and availability, is lived by Capuchins in humility and simplicity of heart. There is no other way to follow the poor and humble Christ, after the example of Saint Francis, except that of minority. These two values clearly complement one another. The Constitutions are unmistakable on this point: “Saint Francis chose to become “lesser” among the little ones. Following his example, and desiring to be conformed to Christ, we too strive to become truly minors, never presuming to become greater. Inspired by this spirit, let us generously dedicate ourselves to the service of all, especially those who suffer want and hardship, even of those who persecute us” (C 2012: 14,2). The purpose of this attitude of submission is not to cause trouble in the lives of the poor brothers, but to help them to devote themselves willingly to the poor, lovingly sharing in their trials, living as far as possible in their humble condition. In this way they demonstrate the spirit of our brotherhood and become a leaven of justice, unity and peace in the name of Christ.

This humble condition, if it is truly heartfelt, is also expressed externally in the way we behave, in how we speak, and in the habit of the Order which the Constitutions recommend us to wear as a sign of our consecration and as a witness of poverty, minority and brotherhood, so that

everything in us speaks of God and serves the salvation of mankind. Certainly these external features we present, which are precious to the people and useful to the Capuchins themselves, are worth almost nothing and do little for the salvation of souls if the brothers themselves are not animated by the spirit of humility. This is only expressed if there is a mutual correspondence between spirit and form. Therefore, the Constitutions exhort us to follow the example of Saint Francis and commit ourselves, with all our strength, to become good, and not only to appear so; to be consistent in what we say and do, inside and out. The brothers, considering themselves, as the Rule admonishes us, to be lowly and subject to all, should be the first to show honour to others (cf. C 2012: 35,4-5).

According to the present Constitutions, to be poor and lowly means much more than merely acting out of a formal duty; it is an expression of charity that is always ready to serve, without continually referring to one's own ego.

Saint Francis puts forward the message of minority as an invitation to us not to want to exercise our rights over others, but to feel that we are truly the least of all. From him the Constitutions draw a lowly demeanor which should not be associated solely with the vow of poverty or obedience but pervades all aspects of a Capuchin brother's life who, being clothed in Christ, wishes to be lowly in fact, and not just appear to be so, in heart, word and deed. Looking at the Constitutions, we find it mentioned everywhere: referring to our habit, our dwellings, to prayer, work and study, recreation and holidays, sickness and the offices we hold, and to the hearing of confessions and pastoral service in the parish. Precisely for this reason, "remembering that the world listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers, let us live close to the people in simplicity of heart, conducting ourselves as true lesser brothers in our lifestyle and manner of speaking" (C 2012: 149,7). Certainly, the witness of the brothers who live with simplicity of heart as poor lesser brothers close to the people will be more easily understood and accepted.

One who possesses nothing, like Francis, and renounces self-love does not boast of his rights. He becomes grateful for everything, because he receives everything as a free gift, totally undeserved. This gratitude to God and to people becomes a preeminent sign of a poor and lesser brother.

• *Summary.* Saint Francis inspires the present Constitutions when they present Christian discipleship to the brothers, as a specific task of the Capuchin community, the following of Christ in his condition as a poor brother and servant of all. Here the Constitutions are returning to a characteristic feature of his personality, in which poverty and minority do not ascetical duties, but rather the result of conversion of the heart, expressed in charitable works. The insistence on this aspect of charity stands out in the present Constitutions as the way by which the sons of Francis attain the fullness of poverty and minority, also in the social dimension through works of justice and peace. By conforming to the poor and crucified Christ and sharing in the condition of the poor, the presence of God among them can really be proclaimed to all.

SUBJECT 5: LOVING OBEDIENCE

Chapter ten of the Constitutions reminds the brothers: "Saint Francis taught us that the life of the lesser brothers is to obey Jesus Christ present in the Gospel and in the sacraments".

He gave himself to Christ totally, keeping back nothing of himself for himself. He recognised obedience as the fullest expression of living “with nothing of his own”, and saw in it the foundation of communion with God, with the Church, with his brothers, with all men and women, and with every creature” (C 2012: 158,4).

Saint Francis sees and lives obedience as the most complete way of divesting himself from innate self-centredness in order to participate in the redemptive obedience of Christ. The Spirit of the Lord, who animates poverty lived in minority, freeing a person even from his own ego, enables the followers of Saint Francis to discover the Father’s will with greater certainty.

The obedience Francis puts forward presupposes brotherhood, in which the freedom of the children of God matures through a shared commitment to conform themselves to Christ, and becomes a willingness to serve the brothers and sisters out of charity, whatever offices may be entrusted to them. The Constitutions invite the brothers, both ministers and others, to grow in familiarity among themselves as they advance along the way of truth and sincerity of heart, willingly serving and obeying one another in a spirit of charity. Love of God should always be the motive for the ministers’ service and their subjects’ obedience, so that at all times they do what is pleasing to Him (Cf. C 2012: 158,7).

Conforming themselves to Christ, who came to serve, and following Saint Francis as his faithful imitator, the ministers, who are servants of the brothers entrusted to them and for whom they will be accountable to God, should humbly serve them, remembering that they themselves must obey God and the brothers (Cf. C 2012: 159,3). The tone of the exhortation makes it clear that this is not a mere declaration or a rhetorical ornament. The Constitutions really do want to create a robust climate of service.

The Saint conceived office in the fraternity not as a personal honour or a sign of privilege, but rather as a greater commitment to provide for the material and, especially, the spiritual good of the brothers, and for this the ministers will be accountable to God. True service demands humility and charity from the ministers, as it does from anyone who serves for God's sake. All should be aware, however, that, by virtue of their office, the final decision rests with the superiors (cf. C 2012: 160,3).

The primary task of the ministers is to guide the brothers to a life of greater evangelical commitment, outshining everyone in the availability for service and interior renewal, according to the consistent example of Francis himself. Therefore, the minister’s duty is not to arbitrarily resolve all the doubts and questions of the brothers, but rather to animate the whole fraternity in its search for concrete ways of realizing God's will. The Constitutions suggest that in this regard, intense prayer and spontaneous dialogue with the brothers, both in common and in private, can be very effective. (cf. C 2012: 160,2-3).

That being said, it does not mean that the superior can abdicate his own rights, even when it may be easier to do so. On the contrary, by virtue of his office he should consciously assume responsibility for taking the final decisions, as Saint Francis wanted in the Rule. In this way the forces of all can be coordinated, especially those in the house who carry out specific duties, for the good of the entire fraternity and of the Church (cf. C 2012: 160,4-5).

Above all, it should be the desire of the ministers that every single brother responds to the plan of the Lord, who calls him out of love, by actively and responsibly carrying out the Lord’s will. Therefore, they should guide the brothers entrusted to them as children of God, respecting

their human personality, so that they obey of their own free will. Consequently, according to the mind of Francis, they may command in virtue of the vow of obedience only when charity and necessity demand it, and then with great prudence (cf. C 2012: 162,1-3).

The Constitutions exhort the superiors to carry out their task of admonishing, encouraging and correcting, which is their duty under the Rule, with firmness, gentleness and charity. Charity is another virtue which, together with humility, should be a feature of their daily ministry. The faults of the brothers, if they occur, are to be corrected privately in a brotherly conversation, taking into account the person and circumstances, with all the delicacy that Francis typically showed to his companions. Superiors should deal with the shortcomings and defects of the fraternity with the brothers themselves, especially at the local chapter, and all together seek and apply effective remedies. The brothers, for their part, should willingly accept the correction of the superior for the benefit of their soul (cf. C 2012: 163,2-4), remembering the beatitudes bequeathed to us by Saint Francis (cf. Adm 13).

Referring to the teaching of Francis, the Constitutions mention the special need for charity which the ministers exercise towards the sick brothers and those who, after having committed a sin, ask for forgiveness or, possibly, may not have the will or the courage to ask for it (cf. C 2012: 92,1; 116,1-5).

Humility, therefore, allows the ministers to approach their brothers with the greatest mercy and even gratitude, while charity helps them to understand their subjects better and guide them with such conviction, even when correcting them if necessary, that they yearn for and strive for gospel perfection.

Saint Francis on the one hand, was afraid that superiors would exercise authority in an authoritarian and uncontrolled manner, and tried to make suitable provision for this possibility. On the other hand, he demanded from the brothers total obedience, which has as its foundation the imitation of Christ. He expressed his intentions in an unequivocal way: “And the brothers who are subjects shall remember that for God's sake they have renounced their own will” (RB 10,2). The Constitutions exhort the brothers to offer their own will to God as a sacrifice of themselves, in the spirit in which they have willingly promised the evangelical counsels, and to obey the superiors in an active and responsible manner, with faith and love towards God's will (Cf. C 2012: 165,1-3).

The Constitutions encourage the Capuchins to put forward their own judgments and initiatives for the common good, while being ready to obey the superiors in a spirit of faith. They propose generous, ready and responsible obedience in a joyful spirit, and indicate the local chapter as a clear manifestation of this concept of obedience, which is a particular feature of Capuchin brotherhood (cf. C 2012: 141,2). Saint Francis indicates this mode of obedience as a characteristic expression of those who freely renew their self-giving to God. Each brother can propose, on his own initiative, the best way to serve the Lord and the brothers; but the last word and the decision on what is to be done, after proper discussion and evaluation of the whole matter, rests with the superiors (cf. C 2012: 166,1).

The teaching of the Saint of Assisi finds direct application in the norm of the Constitutions, according to which: “Whatever good a brother may do with a right intention and on his own initiative is also true obedience, when he knows that this is not contrary to the will of the superior or detrimental to brotherly unity” (C 2012: 166,2). This prescription indicates that

the superior is not the sole overseer of the fraternity and the individual brothers, but that each friar must assume responsibility for his own choices before God.

It may happen that in the end a divergence of opinion remains between superior and subject. In this case, faithful to Francis' direction, the Constitutions invite a brother who "sees something better and more useful than what the minister commands, [to] willingly sacrifice his ideas to God and do his best to carry out what the minister has decided. This, in fact, is the true and loving obedience, that satisfies God and neighbour" (C 2012: 166,3).

Francis envisages only one limit to this obedience, that is, when an order goes against one's conscience, but even in this case he urges the brother not to abandon the superior and the fraternity, even at the cost of persecution. In this way the brother truly remains in perfect obedience (cf. NM 3).

The Constitutions accept that there can be situations which make it impossible to observe the Rule. According to the prescriptions of the Rule itself, those who for personal reasons or on account of external conditions cannot observe it spiritually may, and indeed must, confidently approach the minister for advice, encouragement and resolution. The minister should welcome them and help them with fraternal charity and concern (cf. C 2012: 167,1-2).

The question raised by Francis and reintroduced by the Constitutions is of primary importance because the impossibility of observing the Rule here and now, in specific situations or conditions at the time, cannot be considered a betrayal of the primitive ideal. Any such situation should mobilise the brother all the more to search for new ways in which the Rule can be observed, in full fidelity to its spirit, which must be preserved in all cases.

Saint Francis' insight regarding recourse to the minister is fully taken up by the Constitutions. An attempt is made to apply it in the formulation of the new norms, in the hope that the essential importance of an inner understanding of the spirit of the Rule becomes a part of our own conscience, so that we are aware that only in this way can a true spiritual observance of the Rule be put into practice, as desired by Francis.

Genuine conformity to Christ requires the Capuchins, following the example of the Poor Man who was totally Catholic and apostolic, to become involved in the saving mission of the Church and to offer faithful obedience to the Spirit of Christ who lives in the Church. This humble submission is due in the first place to the Supreme Pontiff, whom the religious, also by virtue of their vow of obedience, are obliged to consider as their highest superior, and to the College of Bishops which, in union with the Pope, is a visible sign of the unity and apostolicity of the Church. The Constitutions also call for esteem and ready collaboration with the diocesan bishops and their priests, which clearly echoes the insistent intention of Saint Francis (cf. Test 7-9) and the firm conviction of the first Capuchins (cf. C 2012: 11,1-4).

• *Summary.* The approach to obedience in the present Constitutions arises from the practice and teaching of Saint Francis on true and charitable obedience which is pleasing to God and neighbour. Consequently, there is a visible shift of emphasis from vertical-hierarchical obedience to horizontal-mutual obedience, by which we search for and fulfil the Lord's will in the full freedom of the children of God but renouncing our own will. By fulfilling the vow of obedience in this way, each brother, together with the fraternity, discovers the will of God with greater certainty and breathes new life into brotherly unity. The Constitutions place the question of obedience in

the calm and familiar atmosphere of the early brotherhood of the Saint of Assisi when they invite everyone, the ministers and the other brothers, to walk in truth and sincerity of heart, to have a great familiarity and esteem for one another, and to serve and obey one another in charity of spirit. In this way the Capuchins will be able to fulfil Francis' desire by becoming in the world, which must be consecrated to God, a sign of that perfect charity which comes to full bloom in the Kingdom of heaven. One's own personal holiness and the salvation of others are two fruits of Saint Francis' loving obedience.

SUBJECT 6: PENANCE

Saint Francis began his penitential journey by showing mercy towards the lepers and forsaking the world. His whole life was a ceaseless effort to reshape his heart according to the evangelical beatitudes, and he preached penance with a passion. He particularly wanted his brothers to be men of penance. In his Testament we see how clearly Francis distinguishes the two periods of his life: the time he was in sin and the time of doing penance (cf. Test 1-3). According to the religious mentality and culture of his time, by the word “penance” he wanted to express above all everything that was meant by mortification, austerity, deprivation, the cross, etc., but in reality what he lived was authentic *metanoia*, the profound change of heart that frees a person from the dictatorship of his own ego and makes him totally amenable to the will of God.

This is why the Constitutions exhort us: “Moved by the same spirit and recognizing sin in ourselves and in human society, let us work unceasingly at our own conversion and that of others, so that we may be moulded into the likeness of the crucified and risen Christ” (C 2012: 109,7). The Capuchin, standing before God with sincerity, recognizes God’s greatness and perceives his own smallness and wretchedness. He becomes aware of a fundamental truth regarding his vocation, which Saint Francis deeply experienced, namely that the lesser brother can only achieve his life’s goal by following in the Lord's footsteps.

Here we find an important and clear statement: “A spirit of penance in an austere life is a particular characteristic of our Order; for, following the example of Christ and Saint Francis, we have chosen in fact the narrow way of the Gospel”. (C 2012: 109,6). This spirit must shine through the whole of Capuchin life. And since life is a continuous process, the penance that accompanies it must also be a living reality, a continuous journey in the footsteps Christ, who in his Spirit leads to the Father. Poverty and humility are an excellent support and, at the same time, the expression of penance conceived as conversion of heart, which brings us ever closer to full conformity with Christ in the footsteps of Saint Francis (cf. C 2012: 110,4-5).

Before any external form of penance, what counts is the transformation of the spirit. Only the attitude of a heart open to divine grace, that initial effort to come out of selfishness, will lead the brothers to embrace a narrow path, by which to complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (cf. Col 1:24).

The Saint of Assisi, with his journey of conversion, reminds us of an essential rule of the interior life reported by the Constitutions: “Penance, being an exodus and a conversion, is a propensity of the heart that demands in everyday life external manifestations, matched by a true interior transformation” (C 2012: 110,1). In fact, human beings are made up of spirit and flesh, therefore no penance can be exclusively spiritual. True conversion always finds a tangible expression in life. If this reference to actual daily life were lacking, we would have to consider it

as false conversion. The above-mentioned consideration of the Constitutions is significant in the life of penance of individual brothers and fraternities.

The outstanding feature of Saint Francis' penance was its concreteness, expressed in the close link between interior and exterior attitudes. The present Capuchin Constitutions, on account of pluriformity, omit traditional external forms of penance. However, concrete practical forms should be enacted in the circumscriptions of the Order, according to the diversity of places and cultures. Otherwise, we would be at risk of remaining tied to a theoretical and dematerialised concept of penance, which has nothing in common with that of our Saint, because the mere reference to the sublime values of the Capuchin vocation does not cause any change in real life. At most, we limit ourselves to general verbal declarations and exhortations, which we approve in principle.

As true penitents Capuchins must always be distinguished by tactful and affectionate charity and joy, like the saints of the Order who, following the example of Saint Francis, were "strict with themselves but full of goodness and respect towards others" (C 2012: 110,2). Filled with the spirit of conversion and renewal, the brothers can devote themselves to various works of penance according to the Rule and the Constitutions and as God inspires them, remembering that the consecrated life itself, lived faithfully, is an excellent form of penance (Cf. C 2012: 110,3-4). With this suggestion the Constitutions assume great maturity in the brothers, which is necessary in order to choose the concrete forms of real penance.

Daily life provides the fundamental basis for conversion, but there are also particular periods. The Constitutions remind us that Saint Francis, burning with desire to imitate the Lord, often lived in fasting and prayer, and so we are urged to consider times of more intense penance: Advent and, above all, the Lent before Easter, and also every Friday. The "Blessed" Lent, and the vigils of Saint Francis and the Immaculate Conception, are also recommended. These periods and days encourage the brothers to be more committed to works of penance, both individual and communal. At those times, prayer, recollection, listening to the Word of God, mortification, and fasting in fraternity are especially recommended. As a result, we will share the fruits of our fasting with the poor and be more eager to practise other works of charity (cf. C 2012: 111,2-6). In fact, if we intend to follow Saint Francis effectively on his way of conversion, we must reach out in a special way to those who are on the edge of society today and deprived of all help.

The brothers, remembering the passion of Jesus and following the example of Saint Francis and the other holy friars who came before them, should lead a simple, austere and sober life, willingly limiting themselves in food and drink, shows and other entertainments. But the superiors, when providing for the needs of the brothers, especially the sick, should always keep in mind the commandment of charity and the example of Saint Francis (cf. C 2012: 112,1-3).

Francis points out that external works of penance, in order not to become devoid of spiritual effect, should always be inspired by interior repentance and the desire for sincere conversion. Therefore, the Constitutions exhort that acts of penance, in traditional and new forms, be carried out with sorrow in our hearts for our own sins and those of others, and with the desire to walk in newness of life (cf. C 2012: 113,1).

The Constitutions, inspired by the teaching and practice of the Saint, particularly recommend the fraternal correction advocated by Jesus, the review of one's life in the light of the

Gospel and other forms of evangelical penance, especially those performed in common. The brothers can effectively help one another in the work of enlightening their conscience and strengthening their will to move forward in the difficult process of conversion (Cf. C 2012: 113,2-3).

The sacrament of penance, firmly enjoined by Saint Francis in the case of sin, is a particularly privileged place of reconciliation with God and with the brothers in the Church. Therefore, the Constitutions encourage Capuchins to value highly the frequent confession of sins, daily examination of conscience and spiritual direction. Individual brothers, and entire fraternities, purified and renewed by the sacraments of the Church, will be enabled to live their Capuchin life better from day to day (cf. C 2012: 114,1-5).

Confessors, for their part, are invited to remember the recommendation of the Saint of Assisi not to be angry or disturbed by the sin of anyone, but to treat the penitent with all goodness in the Lord (Cf. C 2012: 115,3-4). Only in this way is he truly helped to resume the gospel journey.

If any of the brothers should sin, the others are not to judge him, following the example of Francis, but safeguarding his good name, let them be quick to love him and help him, remembering that each of us would fare worse if the Lord in his goodness did not preserve us. Likewise, the superiors should be close to the brothers who sin or are in danger, and show them fatherly mercy, offering them appropriate and effective help as God inspires them. (cf. C 2012: 116,1-2). And even if the ministers were persuaded that they must intervene decisively, they should try not to impose penalties, especially canonical ones, unless compelled by manifest necessity and always with all prudence and charity (cf. C 2012: 116,4). Superiors are also encouraged, in so far as the situation allows and they are able to do so, to be equally caring towards persons or communities who may have been damaged by the sins of the brothers (cf. C 2012: 116,3).

All these prescriptions are a good reflection of a typical attitude of Saint Francis who, out of pity, was always ready to bow down to lift up the one who had fallen. The Constitutions take up the whole of the precious legacy of Saint Francis' teaching in this regard by expressly mentioning his Letter to a Minister (Cf. C 2012: 116,5).

• *Summary* The Constitutions present a vision of gospel penance, conceived and inspired by Saint Francis as conversion of heart. This approach deeply reflects the penitential spirit of the Saint who, until the end of his life, ardently desired his own conversion, and was always ready to make a new start. In the Constitutions, this proposal to embrace unceasing penance takes the form of an effort to constantly renew and reform individual and community life in such a way that a balance is always maintained between the ideal of evangelical life and the realities of everyday life. On the other hand, our document is rather less detailed about how sobriety and severity are to be exercised. These were more prominent in the previous Constitutions, and both equally inspired by the example of Francis, but were perhaps already too formalised and schematic, without the impetus that animated the bodily penances of the Friar of Assisi. The spirit of penance in an austere and demanding life remains equally desired by the Constitutions as a characteristic feature of the Capuchin Order, to encourage the brothers to dedicate themselves continually to the works of conversion and renewal, according to the Rule and the Constitutions and as God inspires them, so that the Paschal Mystery of Christ may be ever more active and effective in them all.

SUBJECT 7: THE APOSTOLATE

Jesus Christ was sent to proclaim the Good News of salvation to all people. His mission continues in the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit raised up Saint Francis, with his fraternity, so that with all his might he would assist the mission of the Church according to the most urgent needs of his time, especially to those who suffer most from not having the Gospel proclaimed to them.

The Capuchin brotherhood, according to the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation, wants to fulfil its duty of service to all by bringing them the Gospel message in word and deed. In order to make this gospel vocation a reality in the Church and in the world, the Capuchins, inspired by their founder, are committed to choosing a form of life that in itself intimately unites prayer and the proclamation of the message of salvation, wisely alternating times of contemplation and apostolic commitment (cf. C 2012: 15,3).

The Saint of Assisi, sent by the Spirit to spread the newness of evangelical life among people, while he was no longer of the world, nevertheless remained in the world and wanted his fraternity to live and work among people, in order to bear witness to the message of evangelical conversion through work and word. Capuchins share in this mission.

They should therefore live in the midst of the world as a gospel leaven so that people, seeing their brotherly life conformed to the spirit of the Beatitudes, may recognize that the Kingdom of God has already begun in their midst (cf. C 2012: 106,1-3).

Saint Francis did not choose any specific field of apostolate. His spiritual purpose throughout his life was conformity to Christ. Anything else, even external apostolic activity, had to be subordinated to that supreme end. The Constitutions therefore urge that “In our apostolic activity let us express the characteristics of our charism in forms best suited to the conditions of time and place. The first apostolate of a lesser brother is to live the gospel life in the world in truth, simplicity, and joy” (C 2012: 147,1-2). This threefold witness of life should become the point of reference and the basis of everything the Capuchin brother says and does.

According to Francis, the spiritual portrait of the brother and the fraternity plays a decisive role in the evangelizing mission. As a result, the limits of Capuchin apostolic activity are very wide: a friar knows no other restrictions than those that arise from fidelity to his own charism. According to the Constitutions, we should willingly accept various ministries and apostolic activities on condition, however, that they are consistent with our form of life and meet the needs of the Church. In this way Capuchins can proclaim the Gospel everywhere, in ways adapted to different times and conditions, while always preserving the characteristics of their vocation (Cf. C 2012: 147.6-7; 148.2-3).

The Constitutions point to brotherhood and to the person of the actual brother as the most effective instruments of this evangelization. They make it clear that the compatibility of these adapted forms with the Capuchin way of life is of crucial importance. Therefore, when discussing specific options, they encourage the brothers to generously tackle those ministries that are considered very difficult, thus fully putting into practice their awareness of being minors. Capuchins, following Christ after the example of Saint Francis, can never forget that the

effectiveness of evangelization requires a person who is ready to face the cross and persecution, to the point of martyrdom, for the faith and for the salvation of his brothers and sisters (cf. C 2012: 147,7-8).

Saint Francis acquired and lived the wisdom of Christ through constant reading and meditation on the Holy Scriptures. For this to happen in the life of the Capuchins, all the brothers should be constantly growing in their knowledge and love of the Word of God, seeking to live it daily. Before beginning any apostolic work, Capuchins should first of all spare no effort to imprint in their hearts the Word of God who is Christ, and to entrust themselves, with all their strength, to his possession, so that the words they speak are an overflow of his love. In this way they will preach Christ himself by their life, their work and their words. This order of precedence, was always taught and followed by Saint Francis, and makes all that we say and do authentic (cf. C 2012: 150,4).

Individual and community prayer, when truly practised by men who are brothers and minors, becomes a true witness and spreads the Gospel powerfully, because people discover in the attitude of the Capuchins and in the life of their fraternities that the goodness and kindness of God is present in the world. Prayer and action, inspired by one and the same Spirit of the Lord, instead of being in opposition, complement one another in this life if lived with integrity drawn from the person of Francis. (cf. C 2012: 46,5).

This was how the Saint of Assisi expected his brothers to conduct themselves among the people, so that whoever listened to them or saw them would be led to glorify and praise our heavenly Father. The Constitutions take up this motivation of the Poor Man, reminding the Capuchins that all services rendered to people must be based on a life shaped by the Gospel, because it is easier to understand and accept the witness of brothers who live as true lesser brothers, close to the people in simplicity of heart, both in their lifestyle and manner of speaking (cf. C 2012: 149,7).

Brothers dedicated to any kind of apostolic activity must always remember this, and this is exactly why the Constitutions insist on making the point: “In all our apostolates, let us always make sure that our life and work are in harmony as we practise love for God and for people, for love is the soul of every apostolate”. (C 2012: 157,1).

The concern of the Capuchins for the Kingdom of God is inspired first of all by the example of Jesus and his apostles, who alternated prayer and the service of the Word. Saint Francis, although he preferred solitary places, following in the footsteps of the Lord and the apostles, chose a kind of life that united prayer and the proclamation of salvation. Contemplation and action are indispensable if we wish to be genuine in the way we live out our vocation as Capuchin lesser brothers, with its essential link to the proclamation of the Good News. The Constitutions draw a necessary conclusion from this: “May we therefore persevere in praising God and meditating on His word, desiring ever more ardently that our work too may draw people to the joyful love of God” (C 2012: 15,5).

The various apostolic initiatives, in keeping with the nature of a true fraternity of Saint Francis, must be promoted and coordinated in such a way that they become the expression of the whole fraternity, local or provincial, as a response to the requirements of evangelization and the needs of the people. This calls for correct discernment of which traditional forms of the apostolate should be continued and promoted, and newer ones that are yet to be created and undertaken.

This is why the Constitutions exhort the brothers to become accustomed to reading the signs of the times, in which God's plan is discovered through the eyes of faith (cf. C 2012: 149,1).

The usual works of the Capuchin apostolate, such as popular missions, spiritual exercises, sacramental confession of the faithful, spiritual direction, spiritual care of religious women, especially Franciscans, assistance to the sick and prisoners, are a good reflection of the options indicated by the example of the Saint of Assisi. And yet, when looking for new forms, his own teaching shows us the kind of choices we need to make: devoting ourselves with special concern to people who are deprived of ordinary pastoral care on account of their living conditions. The example of Christ, incarnated in Saint Francis, indicates to Capuchins the apostolate among the poor as their preferential choice (cf. C 2012: 147.5; 149.3).

This is why the Constitutions invite Capuchins to preserve one very characteristic feature of the Poor Man, when they say: “Gathered together in Christ as a single distinctive family, we develop among ourselves relationships that are fraternally spontaneous, and gladly live among those who are poor, weak and infirm, sharing in their lives and maintaining our characteristic closeness to people. We promote the apostolic dimension of our life by proclaiming the Gospel and in other various ways that are in harmony with our charism, while always preserving a spirit of minority and service” (C 2012: 5,4-5). A simple lifestyle, close to ordinary people, a friendly way of approaching people and conversing with them, facilitates the apostolic action of the Capuchin brother. This capacity for contact with the people, especially the poor and the simple, must always be preserved, because it is part of the Capuchin charism and is a grace which God uses to evangelise the people.

The text of the Constitutions presents some forms of the apostolate that specifically refer to the Saint's own example. First among these is the preaching of the Word. The Friar of Assisi sowed the seed of the Gospel everywhere as he moved from town to town, announcing the mystery of Christ to the people in few and simple words. Following his example and the tradition of the Order, Capuchins are to preach the word of God in clear and understandable language, always adhering faithfully to sacred Scripture. But first, the Word must be imprinted on their hearts. (cf. C 2012: 150,3; 150,4).

Certain intellectual and moral gifts are necessary if this office is to be exercised with dignity, but Capuchins must first of all preach Christ by their lives; He must shine through their own person. Francis always began his preaching by meditating on the Word, so that he obtained true knowledge of the message of salvation. In order for this invitation of the Constitutions to be realised, Capuchins wish to grow constantly in the wisdom of Christ, which is acquired most of all through lived experience, especially through the careful reading, meditation and study of sacred Scripture (cf. C 2012: 150,5).

The Saint grieved deeply on account of the condemnation reserved for sinners, and sought to help them in this danger by exhorting them to penance. Capuchins want to be his faithful followers in bringing God's infinite mercy to all. The priests of the Order especially can proclaim the remission of sins in the sacrament of reconciliation, all the more so since this ministry “is particularly appropriate to us as lesser brothers and frequently brings us close to those who most experience the misery of sin” (C 2012: 152,1).

The attitude of Saint Francis, the spokesman of the forgiveness that God offers to people, inspires the invitation addressed to Capuchin confessors that they will allow zeal for God's holiness

and mercy, respect for the dignity of the human person, charity, patience and prudence, to shine brightly in them (C 2012: 152,2).

Francis' conversion visibly begins at the moment of meeting the leper. This is the event that caused him to be particularly sensitive towards the sick. In accordance the Order's constant tradition, the Constitutions recommend that we willingly take spiritual and even bodily care of the sick and infirm. Superiors should foster this ministry because it is an excellent and valuable work of charity and the apostolate, and is fitting for Capuchins who, as lesser ones, wish to unite themselves with people of every condition, especially the poor and the afflicted (cf. C 2012: 153,1-2).

One reference to the intentions and attitudes of Francis, who wanted to be humble and subject to the representatives of the Church, is found in the prescription which subjects the exercise of any apostolate to the authority of the diocesan bishop from whom the brothers receive the necessary faculties, after they have been approved by their ministers. The Constitutions encourage the ministers to be willing to meet the requests of the bishops when they invite them to serve the people of God and to save souls, but on condition that the charism of Capuchin life is always respected (cf. C 2012: 147,1.6).

The Saint of Assisi expected his brothers to be available for the service of the particular Churches, and this also became the constant tradition of the Capuchin Order. The Constitutions invite the brothers to be ready to help out in diocesan parishes and also allow them, with the proviso that the faithful must be in urgent need, to prudently take care of parishes. However, the ultimate criterion remains our duty to preserve our conformity with our vocation, so that the people of God can benefit from the Capuchin charism. This motivation means that ordinarily we will give preference to parishes where we can more easily give witness to minority and can live and work in brotherhood (cf. C 2012: 154,2-3).

Francis valued the vocation proper to the laity and recognized the role they could play in the work of evangelization. Capuchins are invited to support associations of the faithful who are committed to living and proclaiming the Word of God, and to changing the world from within (Cf. C 2012: 155,1). Among these, they should particularly take to heart the Secular Franciscan Order, which is necessary for the fullness of the Franciscan charism, so that Secular Franciscans and their fraternities may progress as communities of faith endowed with particular effectiveness in evangelization. Special attention and care will also be given to the sisters of the Second Order who, by professing the contemplative life, offer each day the sacrifice of praise, and united with God in solitude and silence enable the Church to spread with hidden apostolic fruitfulness (cf. C 2012: 101,3; 102,1).

Saint Francis wanted us to learn to work if we did not know how. And because it is not possible to carry out an apostolate or any other other activity properly without first acquiring special and suitable formation, the Constitutions want each individual brother, according to his gifts, to be prepared for the tasks he will have to carry out. With attention to the necessary practical instruction or studies, Capuchins, if they really want to serve the Lord in minority, should remember that above everything else they must desire to have the Spirit of the Lord and His holy operation. Any kind of studies, even those that serve the apostolate, must be enlightened and enlivened by the love of Christ, and be absolutely in keeping with the nature of Capuchin life (Cf. C 2012: 37,4-5; 38,1.4).

The fourteenth century in Europe saw the flourishing of the missionary spirit in the Church. A significant factor in this event can be found in the example of Saint Francis' life and in his idea of an extended apostolate without frontiers, as set out in his Rule. The Capuchin family participates in the task of evangelization by bringing the good news of salvation to those who do not believe in Christ (cf. C 2012: 177,1-2).

Those brothers who, by divine inspiration, feel called to missionary activity, according to Francis' intention expressed in his Rule, should make their proposal to the provincial minister, and the minister shall not refuse to send those who are suitable on account of the shortage of personnel in the province. He may also encourage and call other suitable brothers. All the brothers may fulfil their missionary duty, each according to his own condition and capacity, even temporarily, since Francis had laid the duty on the whole fraternity. Therefore, the ministers should promote in the brothers a love for the missions and a spirit of collaboration with them, raising the awareness of the Christian people as well (Cf. C 2012: 178,1-6). However, the Constitutions are insistent when reminding the brothers “that we cannot pursue our mission unless we are continually renewed in fidelity to our own vocation” (C 2012: 157,2).

- *Summary.* The proclamation of the Gospel in the Capuchin Constitutions, seen in the light of Saint Francis' personal vocation, is above all the witness of a life on which the words and deeds of the brother are based. The person of the brother and the spiritual face of the fraternity are two substantial means of the Capuchin apostolate. Various methods are acceptable, both classic and new, but always measured by the yardstick of brotherhood, poverty and minority, to highlight the apostolic importance of the life of the brothers, shaped by the following of Christ after the example of Francis. This apostolate of witness and word is carried out through the presence of the Capuchins among people, which is more widespread and immediate compared to the Constitutions of 1536, so as to meet the needs of times, places and cultures. This direct and friendly contact with the people makes it even more necessary that there be a genuine and clear sign in the life of men who are living as true sons of Francis of Assisi, to guarantee the effectiveness of the evangelizing mission.

SUBJECT 8: BROTHERHOOD

“Saint Francis, by divine inspiration, initiated a form of gospel life which he called a brotherhood”, say the Constitutions (C 2012: 88,6). The text aims to underline the novelty of this *life-project*, which consists of uniting around Christ as brothers to overcome the selfishness of the flesh so that we may live the Gospel fully, docile to the Spirit. Gathered together in the same vocation, Capuchins accept this approach to gospel living as their own charism and it is the recurring theme running through the present Constitutions which focuses in a particular way on the entire life of the brothers.

By undertaking the gospel life, Capuchins, united in the same vocation by the Holy Spirit, constitute a universal community of brothers, that is, a group in which the brothers who are resolved to follow Jesus Christ contribute, through their various offices and ministries, to building up the Church in charity. The Constitutions recognize that the particular face of the Capuchin community derives from the personal charism received by Saint Francis in the Church through the Spirit (cf. C 2012: 13,1-2; 88,6).

The present Constitutions - compared to those before 1968 - represent a considerable change from the point of view of content, devoting the sixth chapter entirely to fraternal life. This

approach represents a clear innovation in the history of Capuchin legislation. Its introduction reflects the great sensitivity of the Capuchin family to one of the most original and significant aspects of Francis of Assisi's project of gospel life. Chapter six is divided into two articles, visibly different in length. The first is longer and sketches a picture of fraternal life as an evangelical commitment. The other details the brothers' presence in the world, which constitutes a particular dimension of fraternal life.

The Capuchin fraternity is gathered into one by Christ himself and, precisely because of this, it becomes a special gift, a grace of the Spirit in the life of the brothers. Its only explanation and justification is found in the faith from which communion of life arises. This grace of faith represents the essential aspect of brotherhood, which each brother must accept as a free choice, as his response to the specific personal call to continue his growth in evangelical perfection after the example of the Friar of Assisi. When the Constitutions invite us all to love one another united by faith, they imply a continuous growth of the brothers in the grace of faith, because only in this way can one live as brothers of Saint Francis (Cf. C 2012: 88,8).

Francis considered each brother as a gift from the Lord. The Constitutions take up this insight when they declare: "Every brother given by God to the brotherhood brings it joy, and at the same time is an incentive for us to renew ourselves in the spirit of our vocation" (C 2012: 28,1). And it is true that the brothers do not choose or elect themselves as members of an exclusive type of club or organization, but it is God who sends them to the community. Consequently, fraternal life can often be marked by the cross as well as by joy, and this is part of the Paschal Mystery. Real brotherhood is built up only by experiencing oneself as a son, sharing at least a small part of Christ's pains, in order to better conform to His suffering. This requires a painstaking, constant and patient commitment, founded on faith.

The Constitutions exhort every brother to be profoundly committed to mutual hospitality, welcoming one another with a grateful heart, and conversing with respect and sincere understanding, always ready to bear one another's burdens and faults. Capuchin life should be marked by the concern to walk worthily and to excel more and more in the vocation to which they have been called, mindful that God never revokes his gifts, not even the gift of vocation. His grace will not fail us in overcoming difficulties on the narrow path that leads to life (cf. C 2012: 89,2; 184,2).

We have mentioned above our intention that this proposal should not remain on the level of fine words or as a beautiful rhetorical figure. While difficult to put into practice on a daily basis, it is conceived as a plan or task to be carried out in the communities by actual and often very imperfect brothers. Its implementation must be accompanied by the continuous battle to overcome our own passions and evil inclinations, which is part of the conversion of heart that Francis lived with his companions (cf. C 2012: 89,2)

The constitutional text mentions some of the practical dimensions of life. The same vocation, shared with Francis of Assisi, makes the brothers all equal and, as the Saint wished in the Rule and Testament, and according to the primitive custom of the Capuchins, all should call themselves brothers without distinction. The precedence which is necessary for the good service of the fraternity, depends only on the tasks and offices that are actually exercised there. Every office and responsibility must be open to all the brothers, except for actions that require sacred Orders. (cf. C 2012: 90,1-3).

The brothers, according to the gifts each has received, should work as Saint Francis wished. And in order to make the grace of work more fruitful, they should seek to preserve the communal nature of their various activities, readily helping one another even in duties that must be carried out daily in our houses, working together and growing thereby in conversion of heart. In accepting different commitments, without appropriating them, Capuchins should always take into account the needs of the whole community, so that the work of individuals becomes the expression of the whole fraternity (cf. C 2012: 79,3-4).

Age differences, which establish natural intervals within the fraternity, should foster harmony and complementarity, because Francis did not want to divide his brothers into categories but to live brotherhood indiscriminately with everyone. Young people, therefore, by showing recognition, care and gratitude to the older brothers, can benefit from their experience. Older brothers, on the other hand, who are generous, open and confident, can benefit from accepting new and healthy forms of life and activity. And let them enrich one another by sharing their gifts, helping one another to grow in their vocation (Cf. C 2012: 91.1-3).

When a brother falls sick, the first responsibility lies with the guardian who, following the example and teaching of Saint Francis, must immediately provide for his bodily and spiritual needs with brotherly charity, and entrust him to the care of a suitable brother and, if necessary, a doctor. This does not dispense the other brothers from caring for their brother. On the contrary, considering that the suffering Christ is present in the sick person, each one should sincerely reflect on how he would like to be treated in case of sickness, remembering realistically what Saint Francis wrote in the Rule, namely, that no mother is as caring for her son as each of us ought to be for his spiritual brother (cf. C 2012: 92,1-2)

The sick person, for his part, has to learn to recognize his infirmity as the true condition of a lesser brother and to imitate Saint Francis, who praised the Lord for those who patiently endure infirmity and trials according to his most holy will. He cannot forget that, in reality, sickness is part of his own vocation and enables him, through suffering and pain, to experience in himself a tiny part of Christ's sufferings, so that he can be fully conformed to him. The Capuchin must live his illness in a spirit of faith, leaving his care to the doctor and to those who look after him, so as not to violate holy poverty to the detriment of his soul, and giving thanks to the Creator for everything (Cf. C 2012: 93,2-3).

Francis knew that brotherhood is not built up once and for all, but must be continually promoted, and all the brothers are its true architects. The main responsibility lies with the superiors, who, when forming the fraternities, must keep in mind the personalities of the brothers and the needs of life and the apostolate (Cf. C 2012: 94,1-2).

The climate that comes from living together day by day and fosters family intimacy is protected, not only by the people themselves, but by some external and not insignificant elements, such as silence and the enclosure. Saint Francis paid great attention to these two aspects of the brothers' life in creating the atmosphere of the first house of the Order at Santa Maria della Porziuncola.

Silence, the faithful guardian of the interior life required by charity in community, fosters a life of prayer, study and recollection, and is to be held in great esteem in all our fraternities. Therefore, the brothers, putting aside every obstacle and anxiety, should resolve to praise the Lord God with a pure heart and a recollected mind (Cf. C 2012: 58,1-2; 59,1).

The prescription of the enclosure in the versions prior to 1968 was always linked to chastity. In the current text it has been inserted into the chapter on fraternal life, in an attempt to approach the question of contacts with outsiders in the context of the protection of fraternal life. The formation of a certain family-like intimacy in Capuchin houses must be specifically addressed. Every brother can and should contribute to it, because otherwise our houses take on the atmosphere of a public service area where everyone is just passing through (cf. C 2012: 95,1-2).

Brotherhood is a natural context where the evangelical counsels we profess are actually lived, but in a particular way it fosters the observance of chastity. The Constitutions show this aspect of Capuchin life positively, and remind us that a characteristic of Francis of Assisi was his wealth of emotions and his ability to express them, so that he truly became the friend and brother of all (Cf. C 2012: 173,1).

Saint Francis conceived chastity as preferential love for God and for all people, and for him it is rooted in poverty of spirit. The fundamental reason for the chaste life is that it is a search for the greatest possible freedom of heart, by which a person strives to cling to God with undivided love and becomes totally available in charity. Recognizing Francis' integral way of conceiving of chastity, the Constitutions exhort the brothers to follow his example and, leaving aside all care and anxiety, to adore the Lord God in all creatures with a pure heart, a chaste body and with holy activity (Cf. C 2012: 174,1-2).

The teaching that Francis has bequeathed to his brothers concerning women is resolute and sober. It is enough to recall the three precepts included in chapter eleven of the Rule. The Saint, remembering the words of the Gospel (cf. Mt 5:28), wants his brothers to avoid not only the occasions or dangers of sin, but also ambiguous situations that could become a cause of scandal for someone. Here we see all his emotional sensitivity and down-to-earth realism at work. Therefore, the Constitutions urge that the conduct of the brothers towards women "be conspicuous for its courtesy, respect and a sense of justice" (C 2012: 173,4).

The Constitutions also call for recognition and acceptance of the renunciations that chastity inevitably entails. While admiring the beauty of the very ideal of chastity, one should not forget the cross and the sacrifice it necessarily brings to those who wish to live it fully. Drawing on Francis' experience, the document indicates the natural and supernatural means that make it possible to balance the affective life of the celibate friar, enabling him to avoid undue compensations. The mutual love that members of one family express in their shared life together and in fraternal service, accompanied by custody of the senses and the heart, are recognised as a special support of chastity (cf. C 2012: 171.1-4).

Saint Francis intuitively knew that a true fraternity, serene and open to others, facilitates the natural emotional development of each person because, as the Constitutions point out, fraternal commitment requires us to renounce self-love and dedicate ourselves to others. Thanks to this attitude, the brothers can help one another to advance along the way of gospel perfection (Cf. C 2012: 172,6). Friendship is also a great gift in this regard, inasmuch as it fosters human and spiritual growth. The Constitutions invite every Capuchin to understand the proper meaning of friendship, which is an incentive to self-giving and thereby builds brotherhood. Relationships with one's own family can also assist affective growth, but we cannot forget that our new family is the brotherhood of the Saint of Assisi (cf. C 2012: 173.5-6).

The benefit accruing from fraternal life is so precious for the sons of Saint Francis that the Constitutions want to ensure that each brother can avail of it. Those who travel, who are sent to another province for study or formation, or who live for a time outside a house of the Order with the permission of the superiors, all of them must always be received into our houses with fraternal charity and a joyful welcome (cf. C 2012: 98,1-3). It is also recommended that we show fairness and gospel charity towards brothers who abandon Capuchin life (Cf. C 2012: 103,3).

The Constitutions remind the Capuchins that the Little Poor Man felt a fraternal bond not only with people, but also with all creatures, contemplating God himself in them. The beauty of creation brought him closer to the Creator and filled his heart with praise. Inspired by his attitudes towards creatures, the brothers should admire them and protect them in their integrity, using natural resources with respect (cf. C 2012: 105,1-2).

Based on this consideration, the Constitutions encourage the brothers to appreciate the true value of creatures, and to have high esteem for all that human intelligence has drawn from created things, especially in the works of culture and art in which God's gifts are revealed to us. But above all, the world of mankind, which God so loved that he gave his only begotten Son, must be seen in the light of the mystery of Christ because it provides the living stones for the building of that dwelling place of God which is the Church (cf. C 2012: 105,3-5).

The Friar of Assisi with his message has inspired a great variety of forms of religious life. Numerous brothers and sisters of the First, Second and Third Orders have spread that foundational charism throughout the Church. The Constitutions therefore invite us to live in the same spirit of fraternal communion, working together to promote various common ventures of Franciscan life and activity (cf. C 2012: 101.1-3;102.5).

Number 4 of the Constitutions specifies the place and task of Franciscan brotherhood in the Church and in the world. Saint Francis, after hearing the words about the sending of the disciples, initiated the brotherhood of the Order of Minors. Its task is to bear witness to the Kingdom of God through the example of its life and word (cf. C 2012: 4,1). At its deepest core, the purpose of the Capuchin fraternity in the Church and in the world is identical, namely, to make God's presence tangible and perceptible among people by proclaiming it through the witness of its example and its words.

• *Summary.* - It is significant to note that the Constitutions wish to restore in the context of our life of brotherhood the genuine inspiration of Saint Francis, namely that brotherhood, beyond its objective existence before God and the Church, has to be lived and experienced by human persons. Starting from this vision and practice of the Saint, the Constitutions seek to assign an important role to the real-life, personal aspect of fraternal relationships, somewhat in contrast to the previous concept, which rather focussed on the ontological and legal dimensions. Here, the stress is placed on the fact that each brother is responsible for his personal growth and for the continuous development of his vocation, in a spirit of faith, which grounds the whole fraternity in love and charity and makes it more mature. The breadth of Chapter Six of the Constitutions already in itself attests to the importance of the question: how fraternal is our way of life? But this is not only dealt with in this chapter. Every core value of Capuchin life, such as prayer, poverty and minority, obedience, penance, chastity and the apostolate, finds a direct reference in some area of fraternal relationships. The entire text of the document breathes this reality of the Capuchin charism as a way of living as brothers. It would be difficult to find any important aspect

of Capuchin life, either in itself or in relation to the outside world, apart from this substantial context.

CONCLUSIONS

In the mind of Saint Francis, the Rule was created to point out and to encourage the path of Christian discipleship. This following of Christ, undertaken in a spirit of mature and joy-filled freedom, constitutes the starting point of all the entire reasoning underlying the Constitutions. Juridical norms exist in the document only as a subsidiary means, and are inserted for a definite purpose, namely, so that the form of life designated in the Rule may be put into practice on the charismatic path of the Capuchin vocation.

The Capuchin fraternity, in the course of the updating in the wake of Vatican II, wanted a radical return to the original inspiration of the reform, that is, to the life, doctrine and examples of Saint Francis, as a practical principle for the renewal of the constitutional norms. The intention of the first Capuchins to be absolutely faithful to the Rule, according to the intentions of the Saint, has been fully reinstated and reinforced by the present Capuchin Constitutions.

The Constitutions of 2012 present a more complete and more authentic vision of Saint Francis than previous drafts, thanks to a broad and deep knowledge of his writings and of the earliest Franciscan sources, which have been critically verified. In proposing a return to Saint Francis in the context of renewal, the Constitutions do not intend to reactivate any particular fixed forms, or to emphasise external behaviour as such, but rather to rediscover his ways of reacting to the values of the Gospel.

In these pages we find Saint Francis not so much as an heirloom to be admired, or as a model of all the virtues, but rather a set of attitudes which we are encouraged to imprint on our minds and hearts, which in turn will condition the choices we make. His person inspired the changes in existing laws and prompted the search for new formulae in the recent process of renewal of the Constitutions (2000-2012), making him a substantial reference point in all matters. We needed the genuine spirit of Francis in all the work on the document, to stimulate the practice of the charism, while adapting some unusual ways to more suitable ways of being faithful to the Gospel in changing times.

The present Constitutions point to the person of Saint Francis to illustrate all the authentic qualities of a Capuchin: contemplative prayer, poverty and minority, charitable obedience, penance and austerity, the apostolate of the word and charity, and fraternal communion. These realities, already present in the Constitutions of 1536, now purified and strengthened by our more accurate knowledge of the Saint, are proposed to the brotherhood of the Order, but without indicating specific forms in detail. This should encourage us to move from the danger of a certain literal formalism to creativity in the search for new forms.

Some features of the spiritual face of Saint Francis are particularly dear to Capuchins. Most of all, his deep desire to conform himself totally to Christ the Lord. We have been able to see how logical it is that the present Constitutions relate the choices of Capuchin life to Jesus, seen in the light of Francis' example.

The person of the Saint injects into the Constitutions a good balance between prayer and apostolic action, since both constitute one and the same charism of evangelical life which we have inherited from the Saint of Assisi. The Constitutions present these two realities as complepeopleptary, and therefore indispensable to each other in the life of a Capuchin and a fraternity.

Poverty, implemented in the spirit of minority, is referred to in the Constitutions as a choice made by Brother Francis himself, who considered these two qualities to be two effective means for the realization of evangelical freedom, which leads to undivided love of God and charity towards neighbour.

The concept of charitable obedience, which the Constitutions put forward, gives us all the depth of the teaching left by Francis in his writings, where the only reason to observe that evangelical counsel is the love of the Lord, which every Capuchin friar ought to realize in the full freedom of the Son of God.

In the Constitutions, too, we are challenged by the penitential attitude of Saint Francis to liberate Capuchin penance from certain signs of conventionalism and to bring it back to something entirely original, by clearly taking up the gospel concept of conversion of heart, which must be expressed in fruits of holiness and charitable works.

The proclamation of the Gospel, so fervently desired and lived by Francis, is anchored in the Constitutions in the everyday setting of Capuchin life. The apostolate of presence and witness, and certainly of the word, arises naturally from our purpose of faithfully following Jesus Christ, who came that the whole world might be saved.

Fraternal life, chosen by Saint Francis as his own way of living the Gospel as a lesser brother, occupies a remarkable and significant place in the Constitutions. Not only is an entire chapter dedicated to this subject, but the whole document views every aspect of Capuchin vocation, life and mission from this very standpoint.

In summary, it seems we are right to say that the Constitutions of 2012 show an image of Saint Francis that is both historically proven and of great spiritual depth. This image is rooted in the first Capuchin Constitutions of 1536, which constitute the doctrinal and spiritual path towards Capuchin identity. The person of Francis of Assisi in the present Constitutions is not reduced to a mere object of worship and veneration, but rather becomes a sublime inspiration and a practical model of Capuchin life today.

Francis was often surprising, almost provocative, in his unusual choices and the Constitutions, hoping for a return to him, wish above all to change the mindset of the brothers, by applying a spiritual observance, according to his spirit.

How does our highest legislative document set out to teach such a change of attitude? Essentially it does so by making individual brothers and entire fraternities confront the choices they face in the hierarchy of values of the Capuchin vocation. In this sense, the constitutional norms are dynamic and open to the future, indeed they encourage new “incarnations” of the structural aspects of our charism.

The Constitutions of 2012 propose a methodology, inspired by Francis, which consists in the possibility of changing the “letter” in order to be more faithful to the “spirit”. They want greater fidelity to Saint Francis without recourse to dispensations or legal fictions, but through continual renewal, where the change of form serves as an instrument of fidelity to the Spirit. Traditions and modern circumstances alike are measured from this angle.

Looking at our Constitutional document from this perspective, we must point out what may seem to be a certain weakness in the present Constitutions, namely the danger of changing forms not as an instrument of fidelity, but of comfort.

Francis shaped the life of the brotherhood not by means of theological explanations, but through practical habits rooted in the gospel values, knowing that life is not learned from theory alone, even when glorifying the highest values. He was aware that human beings cannot really live the spirit in an abstract and formless way. He also knew that these good habits, all the more so if they are deeply rooted, can only be achieved through concrete and demanding decisions. The danger lies in the temptation to make decisions that change the forms of Capuchin life, while dispensing oneself from the demanding decisions, which are always more onerous.

The methodology of the Constitutions presumes sufficient maturity in the brothers to recognise the substantial values of the Capuchin vocation and to accept them as a starting point for practical implementation. However, this presumption is not always found in practice, and the Constitutions lack a clear formation process to make up for any lack of maturity. However, it seems that even at the risk of making wrong and immature choices, the basic stance is faithful to our origins, and at the same time able to open up the charismatic canon of Capuchin life to the signs of the times, which continue to evolve today at breakneck speed.

Here we see outline of another delicate question that touches a raw nerve. In accordance with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, it is pluriformity which must stimulate the unity of spirit within the whole Order. The Constitutions, pointing to the evangelical qualities we have to choose, tend to stop at the level of values that are to be respected. Ideals are suggested, but the ways in which they are applied remain undefined at the constitutional level because these are relegated to regional, provincial and local cultural decisions. As a result, because of this proper respect for real life, the forms universally recognised by all the brothers as an expression of the unity of spirit of the Order may sometimes be lacking. This could result in the spirit of unity itself being compromised.

In general terms, the principle of pluriformity, by radically changing the face of the Order, seems to have helped us come closer to the authenticity of the primitive brotherhood of Saint Francis and the genuine inspiration of the Capuchin reform, precisely in that tireless search for ways by which we can be ever more faithful to the call we have received. We recognise this while admitting the risk of spiritual disunity for lack of visible forms, as signs of the universal unity of the Order. This matter needs particular attention.

The present Constitutions, with their spiritual message, could be said to be more Franciscan than the previous ones, even those of 1536, given the great commitment to put into practice in their text all our knowledge of Saint Francis, which is undoubtedly incomparably more complete and profound than it was at that time. However, we must admit that the personality of Francis is sometimes slightly less concrete, less tangible, despite its theoretical consistency and clarity.

Summarising the summaries. The Constitutions of 2012 propose Saint Francis as a firm and clear reference point for our fidelity to the Gospel, as reflected in the Rule. The return to the Saint, seen in the light of his writings and the primitive sources, means first of all that we must discover the spiritual dynamic of his person. This will reveal the necessary ways by which to balance the relationship between the “letter” and the “spirit”, between the institution and the charisma, a relationship that constitutes the living core of any Franciscan community.

Saint Francis teaches us how to discern the spirit of the Rule in order to be more faithful to the Spirit of the Lord. Honest discernment made in a spirit of truth and sincerity sometimes leads to the replacement of laws which have become a dead letter, with new, specially created written norms that correspond better to the spirit of our primitive inspiration in the changed circumstances of today. Consequently, we must admit that in certain situations the adaptation of external forms to the spirit of the Rule appears to be a must, so that they are an honest and faithful expression of it.

This consideration, intuitively applied by the first Capuchins in the Constitutions of 1536, is fully reinstated by the current Constitutions and should be put forward to the Capuchin brothers as a duty that they should put into practice as far as humanly possible. In it we find one of the most creative lessons that Saint Francis offers to the Capuchins of today.

And now, after all the discussions, updates and investigations motivated by the desire to be faithful to the example of the life and teaching of Saint Francis, and at the same time suggested by modern requirements, the time has come for us to put flesh on the bare bones. Therefore, before we can formulate a further and more in-depth judgement on the present Constitutions, we have to give the brothers time to become familiar with them and to see how they work. In other words, to see how effective they are in terms of their most intimate purpose, which is to transmit and spread fidelity to the Rule of Saint Francis, as a mirror of the Gospel, according to the Capuchin charism.

“Therefore, setting aside all negligence and burning with love, let us commit ourselves to acquire the gospel perfection placed before us in the *Rule* itself and in our Order”. (C 2012: 188,1b).

For further reflection

On SUBJECT 2

- When I read the Gospel, do I see it as a fascinating encounter with Jesus Christ, as Saint Francis lived it, or is it still only a practice - appropriate, and good, but boring?
- Do I read the Gospel every day, by chance, or never? Is his word shared in fraternity?
- Are the teachings and beatitudes of Jesus the supreme law for me and the reason for my life and all that I do? Or is it just a database of gospel facts?
- Is the following of Christ an attractive challenge and a life-time task for me, or is Christ just a rhetorical figure?

On SUBJECT 3

- - Do I manage to take on external commitments in such a way that all temporal things serve the spirit of holy prayer, faithfully following the example of the Saint of Assisi?

- - Do I know how to pray in such a way that my prayer does not take me out of reality but is embodied in real life and radiates charity?
- - Am I careful not to be so attached to my work that it becomes my ultimate goal? Do I try to make sure that the spirit of prayer and devotion is not extinguished in me?
- - Do I remember that mental prayer is the spiritual teacher of the brothers? This prayer, if authentic, unites us closely to Christ and also increases the effectiveness of the liturgy in the spiritual life. Do I find enough time, for example a whole hour, to practise it every day?
- - Does my fraternity timetable help me to be committed to liturgical and personal prayer?

On SUBJECT 4

- Do I try to live poverty and minority as a gift from God, renouncing myself first of all, as Saint Francis did?
- A sober and demanding lifestyle is not an end in itself, but must serve to support those in need through the sharing of goods. Do I make my gifts of nature and grace available to others? Can the whole fraternity also share with those in need?
- Do I decide to use goods of any kind according to this precise and practical principle: the minimum necessary and not the maximum allowed? Do I use things and talents with deep gratitude to God?
- Could I perhaps be one of those false poor who love to be poor as long as they lack nothing?
- Isn't my poverty and that of the fraternity so "invisible" that it requires sophisticated explanations?

On SUBJECT 5

- Do I relate my obedience to the obedience of Christ, as practised by Saint Francis, and do I exercise it with trusting faith without worrying about myself?
- Can I take responsibility for my own choices in a spirit of truth and faith?
- Is the obedience I live a sign of my desire to discover God's plans for my life, or is it a formal practice that serves only as a cover for doing my own will?
- When I take a stand on something, does it enhance or break up our life as brothers?
- Am I really at the disposal of my brothers in service to them? Do I want to live the obedience of charity because it pleases God and my neighbour?

On SUBJECT 6

- Does my commitment to penance come from a desire to follow the Saint of Assisi in his purpose of being configured to the crucified and risen Christ, or it, in the end, just a matter of clever words?
- Is penance for me a process of true conversion of heart or a succession of meaningless routine gestures? How could penance be practised in my fraternity?

- Genuine penance, as an exodus and conversion, requires external, visible and tangible manifestations, otherwise it is false. How is it expressed, and what fruits does my conversion bring?
- Is the penance that I try to do tactful, loving and joyful, or does it shut me up in the sad and nostalgic awareness of my own failings?
- What is the role of the Sacrament of Penance, spiritual direction and daily examination of conscience in the process of my conversion?

On SUBJECT 7

- The first apostolate of a Capuchin brother is to live the gospel life in the world in truth, simplicity and joy as the Poverello did. Do I perceive and practise it in this way? Do all my apostolic initiatives always become expressions of the entire local or provincial fraternity, or not?
- If the Capuchin apostolate is based on witness, I cannot fulfil my charismatic mission unless I constantly renew myself in fidelity to my vocation. Is the application of this truth really close to my heart?
- Do I willingly accept various services and ministries on condition that they agree with the Capuchin way of life, or do I pile them up without a thought for their purpose to help me live the charism?
- Before beginning any apostolic work, do I try to impress Christ in my heart so that He Himself acts and speaks in me, or do I prefer to “play a role”?
- Do I remember that effective evangelization requires a soul who is ready to face suffering and the cross? Am I willing to choose the ministries that are difficult and looked down on?

On SUBJECT 8

- The *propositum vitae* of the Capuchins is to unite around Christ as brothers. Can I see the plan of the Lord in my fraternity? Does a spirit of mutual welcome accompany me daily, marked by an intention to serve one another and work together, in my fraternity and outside it, overcoming differences in age, education and culture?
 - Every brother is a gift from God to the fraternity, sometimes welcome, sometimes unwelcome. Can I accept him in a spirit of faith and with a deep fellow-feeling as a follower of Saint Francis?
 - Do I manage to contribute to the atmosphere of the house to foster a life of prayer, study and recollection, in a spirit of brotherly charity, or do I simply pamper my own needs?
 - Is my behaviour towards strangers, especially women, characterised by courtesy, respect and a sense of justice?
 - Since the beauty of creation brought the Poverello closer to admiring the Creator, can I appreciate creatures in their proper value, and use natural resources with respect?

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