

TO LIVE AND FOLLOW

Letter of the Franciscan Ministers General

REGULA NON BULLATA
1221 - 2021



To all the Friars of the First Order

on the happy occasion of the eight hundredth anniversary of the *Earlier Rule*; we Ministers General send this letter:

To remember with gratitude;

To renew, with passion, our following of the Lord Jesus, as Friars Minor, in the form of life of Brother Francis, for the Church and the world;

*In praise of God who is “every good, the true and supreme good”
(Earlier Rule 23, 9).*

INTRODUCTION

Another anniversary...Don't let it be like a mandatory visit to a museum!

The year 1221 saw the conclusion of one of those many “stories” which, according to Christian tradition, culminate in the production of a text known as a “rule”. What “literary genre” is in play here? To us, the word “rule” most likely arouses an inner shudder of self-defense, because it makes us recall, consciously or not, something fixed, schematic, and perhaps even sterile. However, on closer inspection, this is not the case. In fact, when reading the *Earlier Rule*, one has the sensation of widening horizons, of opportunities that free the soul and refresh the heart, even after 800 years!

Yes, we are passing the 800-year mark and the celebration of an “anniversary” is inevitable. And here too, another sudden impulse surges through us, perhaps this time one of resistance: “Another anniversary! What’s the point?” Let’s try something without rushing to answer “What’s the point?” Let’s leave that in the background. Instead, let’s avoid celebrating this commemoration with the attitude of those who visit a museum without caring, those who have a tourist’s vague curiosity, without the slightest desire to be fully engaged; who only visit because “they must” or because “that museum is famous.” Instead, let us be “serious tourists” who enter the museum knowing that we will leave with a different impression of the masterpieces we contemplate there than when we first arrived. Thus, here we are, standing before a work of art called the

Earlier Rule; a work, alas, without a date or an author!

CONTINUOUSLY LISTENING...

Life Transitions According to the Gospel in the *Earlier Rule*

Made in the moment, undated and without an author

That’s right! We are talking about a work that is not precisely dated; or rather: we could mention several dates, different dates for different pieces of the text. 1221 is when the writing process stopped, the “last date”, so to speak. Moreover, is St. Francis the author? Certainly, it is Francis who makes the heart of the *Rule* beat, who injects the lifeblood of the Spirit into its compositional tissue. However, it would be better to say that it is a “general rule”; a work conceived and written down in dialogue with the *friars* and with the *facts*. Ahead of his time, Francis of Assisi was one of those who were able to give voice to one of Pope Francis’ most effective principles: “realities are greater than ideas” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 231-233). Indeed, we do not have in hand some legislative text written at a desk, but something that was born in dialogue with life. It is, first of all, a “piece of life” more than a “piece of paper”. In fact, its written words try to answer questions that were generated by continuously listening to concrete reality. What’s more, we recognize in the *Earlier Rule* the genius of those who have been able to intercept real questions “in the moment” and offer effective answers. Yes, genius often consists in having the ability

to grasp central questions, not abstract ones, but the most burning ones, the ones felt personally or dealt with firsthand; in order to respond to those questions with answers capable of convincing. They are “convincing” responses not just because they were right at the time, but because they convinced others and appealed to them on the same wavelength, over the span of centuries. After eight hundred years we are still here, trying to respond in tune with those intuitions, because we are “convinced” that it is worth it!

What is most striking about this work of art, the *Earlier Rule*, is its passionate nature. Reading it, we can immediately see that it does not provide simple rules for *doing things*; rather, it tries to outline points for *living relationships*. It is not a text for *scribes*, but for *disciples* (cf. Mt 13:52). Moreover, our greatest relationship, the one that radiates the most life-giving energy, is our relationship with the Lord Jesus. It is a relationship that we can truly savor as a treasure in our own lives. Truly savor! Body and soul! We can be sure of this: the beginning of the *Earlier Rule* states, in no uncertain terms, that the rule and life of the Friars Minor is “to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Earlier Rule* 1, 1) and to live the Gospel. Chapter after chapter provides a whole series of guidelines - sometimes practical, sometimes expressed directly from the heart - so that the Gospel may be lived. To live it, St. Francis invites us, in many ways, to give everything away, to get rid of what blocks us. Indeed, but only by experiencing the wonder and consolation of the Lord Jesus present in our lives does it make sense to live “without anything of

their own” (*Earlier Rule* 1, 1); otherwise, it is just unhappy poverty. “Therefore, let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Savior, the only true God, Who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good, Who alone is good” (*Earlier Rule* 23,9). St. Francis and his early friars might tell us that we would surely be unhappy if we wanted to “sell everything” without first having been conquered by the joy of that certain treasure, the treasure that exceeds all our expectations, the treasure that is Jesus, the treasure of the immensely compassionate gaze which the Son of God always casts upon us, calling us to communion.

Spirituality and non-spiritualism

The Spirit of the Lord...strives for humility and patience, the pure, simple and true peace of the spirit (Earlier Rule 17, 14-15).

Among the most fascinating “colors” and “shades” of this text is undoubtedly its simplicity. Note: we are not talking about the banality of an overly easy simplification, but the cutting intelligence of someone who has bound the text with a thematic thread that provides effective stimulus and keeps everything together. Thus, what holds the body of the *Earlier Rule* together seems to be the unitary centrality of life in the Spirit. What does that mean? Here too, it first means “dialogue with life!” Francis of Assisi does not have advance knowledge of the nature of the Holy Spirit and how He acts. Rather, it is the hard ground of daily life that teaches him to recognize the sound of the Spirit’s voice. The Spirit’s voice has its own unmistakable and delicate timbre,

which St. Francis learned to hear with the utmost attention of faith! Moreover, he made sure that the *Rule* would preserve and provide optimal paths for everyone to live that way, to have the Spirit of the Lord. In this way it offers productive guidelines for us, too, even after eight centuries; guidelines that are non-spiritualistic, that is, not ideologically established before existence; yet spiritual, because they were “captured” from the vibrations of the Spirit’s breath in the air that He breathed living among humans. What are these spiritual guidelines—at least the most valuable ones? They could perhaps be summarized around some key points:

- *Ordinary concreteness*: The *Earlier Rule* sinks its fingers into the bread dough of existence, a dough whose yeast can sometimes be promising and sometimes not. In any case, the Rule does not lose itself defining aseptic norms. Its greatest concern is taking care of life, in all its forms. It cares about the journey of life! Not the stubborn preservation of structures. Moreover, here we might also add that the Rule is concerned with initiating processes rather than possessing spaces! (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 223)
- *Not craving applause*: St. Francis exhorts us in a thousand ways to be mindful of leading meaningful lives, yes; but not to fall prey to a meaningfulness that is exhibitionism. He almost seems to be on his knees when he speaks about this. Our Saint well understood how subtle and devious the boundary is: We can delude ourselves into thinking “we are living the Gospel” because we are followed and applauded or have lots of “likes” or followers on our social networks.

Therefore, we need to be humbly vigilant, because “the spirit of the flesh very much desires and strives to have the words but cares little for the activity; it does not seek a religion and holiness in an interior spirit, but wants and desires to have a religion and a holiness outwardly apparent to people” (*Earlier Rule* 17, 11-12). Sometimes, perhaps, we risk calling something “prophecy” which is just a shiny showcase. However, St. Francis knew this: prophecy is not a stage show. Moreover, it demands a lot of humility and much trepidation—if only because prophets generally come to a bad end.

- *A great waste of time*: The *Earlier Rule* presents a profusion of words to ensure that the friars do not stint on spending time in prayer: “Therefore, all my brothers, let us be very much on our guard that, under the guise of some reward or assistance, we do not lose or take our mind away from God. But, in the holy love which is God, I beg all my brothers, both the ministers and the others, after overcoming every impediment and putting aside every care and anxiety, to serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind in whatever way they are best able to do so, for that is what He wants above all else. Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him” (22, 25-27). This is a truly spiritual invitation: an invitation to give freely of oneself, an invitation to the generosity of living in seemingly sterile times but which, in reality, nourish the spiritual life. Without this resolution to be faithful to prayer, St. Francis risked everything becoming a farce, or, at best, a joyless effort of the will.

Opposing the “anti-Francis”. Only as brothers!

Keep watch over your soul, therefore, and those of your brothers.

Let all the brothers not have power or control in this instance, especially among themselves (Earlier Rule 5,1,9)

Just as there is an “antichrist” (cf. 1 Jn 2:18), so there is an “anti-Francis”. Is it the attention we pay to the quality of our fraternal life that makes the difference? Of course, it is not the fraternal life by itself that makes the difference, but the care we take to live it, or our disinterest in living it. The *Earlier Rule* makes every appeal to live the following of Jesus as brothers. There is a sort of dogma, a distillation that appears between the lines which could be read like this: nothing is as “anti-Franciscan” (or even anti-Christian) as a lifestyle that takes root outside of our devotion to the bonds of fraternity, the life and soul of which must be protected!

Francis seems intent on giving us a healthy horror of any form of indifference towards the other; and he outlines many admonitions, taken from real life, so that we hold on to the conviction that the other is always a “obligation” for us, a voice that calls out to us, someone to whom we must pay attention. Francis gives us many ways of doing this! Some of them, after centuries, are still as brightly charming as ever:

- *Friendship without counterfeit*: we must fight against being sour-faced, against being stubbornly closed off or engaging in pretentiously humble (yet tedious and oppressive) posturing! “Let them be careful not to appear outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites but show themselves

joyful, cheerful and consistently gracious in the Lord” (*Earlier Rule* 7, 16). So now we have to smile all the time? That’s not the point! It is not about being experts at putting on smiles everywhere we go. However, it is essential that we not let ourselves be tyrannized by the heaviness of our feelings, which are always changeable and restless. We can express what might make our hearts sad, of course, but without being overbearingly grumpy.

- *Anesthesia against being “too sensitive”*: many times there are “lepers” we have to meet in rough neighborhoods that are hard to visit. The *Earlier Rule* warns us about this and invites us to “anesthetize”, to silence those inner voices that would prompt us to escape or distance ourselves. Quite the opposite, The Rule invites the friars, to “rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” (*Earlier Rule* 9, 2). The task is certainly more difficult when the brother we should not flee from is a poor person. His voice interrupts our plans, his outstretched hand forces us to devise new ways of communicating, his sores, unbearable to look at, invite us not to anesthetize ourselves this time, but to take on a new sensitivity: that of the compassionate heart of Jesus.
- *Recovering one’s boldness; learning from suffering*: The fact that fraternal life is not a simple and romantic path is something of which the Rule is well-aware. What is striking, speaking of fraternal life, is that the sometimes painful difficulties we might encounter were something that

Francis welcomed as an opportunity; he would even say “a grace”! The challenge facing us (and these days it really is!) is to let ourselves be touched by the people we fear the most or who annoy us the most, without always having to run away from them. Perhaps we might learn something new, or at least experience a little of the freedom that we enjoy when, maybe only haltingly, we manage to “die in order to rise again.”

Being lesser than those who matter least. Discussing “minority”

*Let no one be called “prior,” but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother.
(Earlier Rule 6, 3)*

“Friars Minor”- this was the baptismal name that St. Francis wanted to give those who chose to trust and observe this Rule. “Minority”! It is a word with a thousand meanings and countless facets. Is it possible to find one concise formula that encompasses them all? Many effective attempts have been to achieve this synthesis. However, without claiming to be exhaustive, one might hypothesize that “minority” is the choice to be *lesser than those who matter least.* This prophetic witness! This core idea is almost impossible to live, but it still retains its ability to warn us against any risk of grandiosity or ownership. Is it a virtue?

- More aptly, perhaps it should be said that minority is more than a solitary ascetic attitude, that is, a set of behavioral choices that pose the risk of being humiliating and reductive; a series of individual decisions, made as though one were searching for “inner

personal perfection”. Rather, minority is a way of being in life; and in this sense, it is a way of being in relationship: with people, with creation and with God. The lesser brother is someone who never tires of avowing, at the top of his lungs, that everything comes from God, and therefore, he cannot help but live in a “state of gratitude”.

- Synodality and community discernment: These are perhaps among the most common expressions in the church today. We know that when we talk a lot about something it is probably because we feel a need about it, an urgency; or it is because we are afraid to be truly synodal; we fear the fact that, in doing discernment together, we must always lose something of ourselves. These are modern expressions; St. Francis did not know or use them, and yet, in the *Earlier Rule*, he sets his very frequent references to the various forms of obedience against a background of mutual listening and service: “through the charity of the Spirit, let them serve and obey one another voluntarily” (*Earlier Rule 5, 14*). Minority is also this: it is not we who create the “truth” for ourselves; rather, it is always given to us “from outside” by listening to each other “through the charity of the Spirit”
- A vital and effective synthesis of minority should perhaps be recognized in the rationale of being divested of possessions. The *Earlier Rule* presents this rationale according to multiple and complementary perspectives-paying back, giving away, handing over, praising, thanking and blessing-all of which is used to qualify the attitude of a person

who keeps nothing for himself (*Earlier Rule* 23).

In holy extroversion. Going out into the world.

Let them proclaim the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord
(*Earlier Rule* 16, 7)

“Wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Earlier Rule* 16, 10). Giving oneself to the Lord, or rather, surrendering oneself entirely to Him, is an indispensable element in the life of the Minors. The friars are called to rejoice in their belonging to the Lord, not just as individuals, or seeking spiritual communion only within a single community (always precarious), but by following the Lord’s invitation to be missionaries, to travel the roads of the world proclaiming the Word of God. Not much is written in the *Earlier Rule* to explain what preaching consists of; there are no analytical instructions on “things” to say. We can be sure, however, that St. Francis intentionally wants to foster preaching based on works; first, by renouncing any form of claim over those among whom we are placed. The explicit proclamation of the word of God remains important, but we are to be aware of our responsibility not to betray the Gospel that we verbally proclaim through the style of our personal relationships.

To be even more radical, perhaps we will be closer to the truth if we highlight a liberating and surprising fact found in the *Earlier Rule*: Many times the Gospel can be proclaimed without saying or doing

anything, apart from accepting, without bitterness, our condition as poor men; that all of us are first called to have the humility to be open to receive. The message of salvation is proclaimed by showing, through our own selves, the radical condition of limitation and our constant need for mercy:

“Because all of us, wretches and sinners, are not worthy to pronounce Your name, we humbly ask our Lord Jesus Christ, Your *beloved Son, in Whom You were well pleased*, together with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, to give You thanks” (*Earlier Rule* 23, 5).

IN CONCLUSION

Not affixed with a seal

Non Bullata: This expression makes it clear that we are dealing with a text which, for many reasons, never received the official seal of approval of a Papal Bull. It might be worthwhile for us to further examine this lack of a bull, not only to remind ourselves of this formal and legal fact, but also to enhance its existential significance. That is, rather than giving thanks to the Lord for the text, we want to thank Him for the gift of its testimony, which remains “boundless”, still open and “generative”. The *non-bullata Earlier Rule* cannot be followed on paper alone, instead, it can also be found in the living fabric of those who accept, by “divine inspiration” (*Earlier Rule* 2, 1), the invitation to live their faith in tune with the genius of St. Francis.

In the midst of the many troubles of our times, sharing in the anguish of so

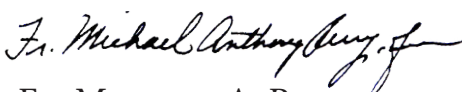
many men and women everywhere in the world, we nevertheless wish to keep the optimistic flame of Christian hope alive and wholeheartedly welcome St. Francis' impetus to be grateful. Amidst the miseries of the world, he never gave up blessing the Lord, "Who alone is good, merciful, gentle, delightful, and sweet, Who alone is holy, just, true, holy, and upright, Who alone is kind, innocent, clean, from Whom, through Whom and in Whom is all pardon, all grace, all glory" (*Earlier Rule* 23, 9).


We invite all the members of the Franciscan family to join us in commemorating the invitation of St. Francis, clearly expressed in the *Earlier Rule*, to live a life guided by the Spirit of God, rooted in human experience and open to the amazing love and closeness that God offers to those who are willing to let Him be at the center of all life.

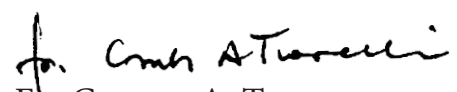
All-powerful, most holy, Almighty and supreme God,
 Holy and just Father,
 Lord King of heaven and earth,
 we thank You for Yourself.
 (*Earlier Rule* 23, 1)

Rome, October 4, 2020

Solemnity of St. Francis of Assisi


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*I ask all my brothers to learn and frequently call to mind
 the tenor and sense of what has been written in this life
 for the salvation of our souls.
 (Earlier Rule 24, 1)*