

Circular Letter of the Minister General

John Corriveau OFMCap

The grace of working

Circular Letter n. 17

3 March 2000

Reflections on VI PCO: Part Four and last in a series

THE GRACE OF WORKING

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working may work faithfully and devotedly ...”

(Later Rule V, 1)

1.1 In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution – with its unprecedented advance of technology – and the philosophy of work espoused by Marx, the twentieth century has spawned new insights into the theology of work. Sources for our own appreciation of a theology of work include Chapter Five of our *Constitutions* (which draws upon our Franciscan sources), the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, as well as the more developed theology of work found in the social encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, especially *Laborem exercens* (September 14, 1981).

1.2 The Sixth Plenary Council of the Order helps us to reflect on the vital link between *Living Poverty in Brotherhood* and minority on the one hand, and work on the other. “Manual work as the ordinary means of support and help to others” was among the “courageous choices of poverty” made by Francis and his early companions (see PROPOSAL 6). The same proposal indicates that “commitment to work” and “a life rooted in the experience of the people” are necessary options if we are to remain “faithful to the profound intentions of St. Francis.”

Work as Grace

2.1 With amazing spiritual intuition and genius, St. Francis summarized his theology of work in one simple phrase: ***“the grace of working”*** (see *Later Rule V, 1*). Three words express an entire theology! This theology flows directly from *“that height of most exalted poverty”*:

It was in the incarnation and the cross that Francis saw the pattern of Jesus’ radical attitude, which was *“to keep nothing of himself for himself”* (see *LOrd 29*). This means first of all recognizing that ***all the good that is in us and is accomplished through us is a gift of God***, and that therefore we must return it to God in praise and thanksgiving (PROPOSAL 2).

2.2 Br. Lázaro Iriarte noted that “both he [i.e., Francis] and Clare ... opened their gospel fraternity to candidates of every kind: nobles and commoners, educated and uneducated, clergy and laity, rich and poor” (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 2, in *Analecta OFM Cap* 114 (1998), p.644). Francis admitted no distinctions or hierarchy among them. All were equal in dignity. Our Constitutions describe the heart of this gospel fraternity: “As brothers given to each other by the Lord and endowed with different gifts, let us accept one another with a grateful spirit” (84, 1).

Since all were equally “gift of God,” the giftedness of each was equally valued. Just as Francis admitted no hierarchy or distinction among his brothers, in the same way he saw no hierarchy of dignity among the various labors of his brothers, all were expressions of the gift of God. Br. Lázaro affirmed: “All shared the same equal status in poverty and work” (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 2, p. 644).

Recognizing work as “grace,” Francis welcomed and encouraged a multitude of gifts in his brothers. No gift of work should be abandoned “*provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly*” (Earlier Rule VII, 3). Therefore, he allowed all such gifts to flourish: “*Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise that trade they have learned*” (Earlier Rule VII, 3). This attitude was entirely revolutionary. Francis’ age considered manual labor inferior, of lesser value than intellectual pursuits. Lázaro pointed out that not even St. Bonaventure appreciated Francis’ intuition (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n.2.2.1, p. 649).

2.3 The Sixth Plenary Council repeatedly stresses the importance of valuing all the gifts the brothers have. “We should value all kinds of work: apostolic, charitable, intellectual and manual” (PROPOSAL 15). “Our brothers should have equality of opportunity in training for their work” (PROPOSAL 14). “We wish to ... underline the widespread need today for specialization in particular jobs, with equal opportunities and access for lay and cleric brothers alike” (PROPOSAL 15). The evident respect that we have for each brother’s differing work is itself a witness to our neighbors and hence, a form of evangelization.

The Dignity and Value of Work

2.4 “Evangelical poverty, as a way of following Christ, restores the dignity of work in a world where it has been reduced to a mere commodity” (PROPOSAL 14). To the global economy, human work is to be bought and sold like any other commodity. Its value is to be determined simply by the law of supply and demand. Thus, the work of the captains of industry or technology is often valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars per hour. The work of a mother caring for her two children in the slums of one of our modern cities has no economic value. The work of the poor does not “fulfil the individual” (see PROPOSAL 14), rather it demeans and oppresses. By rediscovering “*the grace of working*,” we have the opportunity to proclaim the value of the gift which each individual brings to work.

Work as Service

3.1 Since work is a grace, it is also a service. We see this from the title of Chapter Seven of the Earlier Rule, “The Manner of Serving and Working.” The work of the brothers is a primary expression of their identity as lesser brothers, an identity expressed in service:

None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others. They may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve ... Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to

all in the same house

(*Earlier Rule VII, 1-2*).

3.2 There is an obvious concern in the Plenary Council's proposals that work in our Order protect and conserve our identity as lesser brothers. In a global economy one's work is considered a private possession which the individual markets to others, selling it to the highest bidder. This rather common attitude cannot fail to have its influence on us and on our fraternal life and witness. The words of the Rule speak directly to this point: "*Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all*" (*Later Rule VI, 1*) Thus, PROPOSAL 15 enjoins:

There should always be a communal sharing and discernment of the activities chosen by individuals (see Const. 76, 2; 77, 4). This will also help to avoid the danger that a brother's work becomes his private property and makes him impossible to transfer, and insensitive to the needs of the local and provincial fraternity.

Lay employees

3.3 "*They may not be in charge in the houses in which they serve ... Let them, instead, be the lesser ones and be subject to all in the same house*" (*Earlier Rule VII, 1-2*). When friars worked in the houses of other people, Francis wanted them to avoid being placed in positions of power.

How much more ought we to avoid wielding power when we take on the role of employer and lay people come to our houses to work for us! With regard to our being employers, the Plenary Council draws three concrete conclusions flowing from our minority: (a) that we abide by all pertinent laws, (b) that we be careful not to adopt such a solution automatically as a matter of course, and (c) that we avoid creating in ourselves a "boss mentality" (see PROPOSAL 16). Civil societies have enacted laws to protect workers against the more oppressive consequences of the global economy. As Capuchins we should not stand accused before such laws; our treatment of workers should, instead, be a witness to others. We must give scrupulous care to extend maximum protection to our workers. In hundreds of fraternities throughout the world brothers cook for each other in turn, clean their own friaries, and care for the other needs of the fraternity. Care must be taken to ensure that the decision to hire lay employees is not simply an economic decision. In my travels to friaries throughout the world, I have met dozens of cooks, secretaries, and other lay personnel who have embraced service in the friary as a vocation, and not as mere employment. They nourish us by their prayer, and serve our needs. Their dignity and commitment in faith prod us to avoid the "boss mentality." More importantly, we ought to imbue our employees with the gospel vision, spirituality, and charism which ideally inspire us.

Work as Solidarity

4.1 Lay employment must also be seen in light of our wider vision of work viewed as solidarity in mutual relationships:

Solidarity is not primarily about giving things to others. It is, rather, mutual interdependence and brotherhood. The culture of solidarity [and interdependence] creates new ways of understanding and living relationships with others

(PROPOSAL 22).

The Franciscan fraternal spirit has always been colored and textured by the direct service which brother renders to brother: *“Let no one be called ‘prior,’ but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother Let one wash the feet of the other”* (Earlier Rule VI, 3). For this reason, the Plenary Council states: “The active collaboration of all the brothers in the ordinary, daily up keep of the fraternity ... fosters the growth of a sense of fraternity, equality, and reciprocal dependence or assistance.” The proposal goes onto describe a wide range of such fraternal services: “It takes not only the form of manual work, but ... jobs [that] range from gardening to computing, and each brother can make available his practical skills or intellectual abilities” (PROPOSAL 16).

The interdependence created by such fraternal services is so essential to Franciscan brotherhood that the Plenary Council asserts that “whoever does not share in domestic work weakens the fraternity” (PROPOSAL 16, see also IV PCO, 19). Conversely, each one of us has witnessed how brothers serving brothers is a gift that builds fraternity. I recall Br. Henri who took upon himself the task of getting up early every day to brave the freezing pre-dawn Canadian Winter to purchase new papers for the fraternity.

I remember a senior brother in France who, unable to bend down to work the garden soil, tilled it with love on his knees. I recall Br. Anacleto and Br. Fermo at the General Curia who, due to their advanced age were unable to perform other tasks, but lovingly cared for the wine cellar and the refectory. Without doubt, you could add to this list from your own experience! It is this living tradition which we must make every effort to conserve.

4.2 The Plenary Council’s proposals underscore another important aspect: “Domestic work also makes us share in the lifestyle of ordinary people” (PROPOSAL 16). In an excellent article entitled, *“I Cappuccini: Frati del Popolo”* (see Il Focolare, monthly newsletter of the Capuchin Province of Siracusa, May/ August 1995 [insert]), Br. Dino Dozzi examines the foundations of this deferential title given the Capuchins by the author Vincenzo Gioberti, inspired by Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*. Brothers cleaning their own friaries, cooking their own meals, working the land within their own gardens, and questing for themselves and the poor: this witness fixed the identity of the Capuchins as “brothers of the people.” Our reflections on the Sixth Plenary Council of the Order draw us back to this tradition.

4.3 PROPOSAL 18 points to still another important aspect of work as solidarity, “work fraternities.” The “worker priest movement” which originated in France was inspired by, among others, the famous former-friar, Abbé Pierre, and evoked a response also from within our Order. “These ventures were motivated by a concern to be present or ‘incarnated’ in the world of labor, especially as wage-earning, working people.” The proposal goes on, “the motives behind such fraternities can still justify the choice of being a paid worker, not necessarily in a factory, but in humble occupations that are burdensome and involve dependence. This is our way of sharing in the conditions of life affecting so much of human kind, it is a gospel witness to others, and formative for ourselves.” The contemporary spiritual contribution to these experiences is underscored in the last sentence of PROPOSAL 18: “The fraternity always retains its crucial role (Const. 77, 3; 79, 1-2) as the place where one lives and receives challenge and support.”

Do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion
*Those brothers ... may work faithfully and devotedly so that,
while avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not*

extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute (Later Rule V, 1) .

5.1 Br. Lázaro Iriarte made an interesting point when he noted that in the spirituality of religious life prior to Francis, manual labor was valued almost exclusively for its ascetical value - a monk worked in order to avoid idleness. As already indicated, Francis saw a much richer value in manual labor. Idleness was not something unheard of in the early Franciscan fraternity [we have only to recall the incident of “Brother Fly” (see *Legend of Perugia*, 62)]. And while not stressed in the proposals, it must be said that idleness is not something entirely unheard of in the Order today.

5.2 Br. Lázaro, however, rightly pointed out a far greater danger for this day and age: “chaotic and time-wasting activity, nervous activism that leaves no room for reflection and robs life of its harmony” (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 4.2.2., p. 659). PROPOSAL 17 needs no commentary; it possesses its own eloquence:

We live in a fast-moving society, under stress from commitments, deadlines, and modern communications media. Our fraternities do not escape these pressures, and so, besides avoiding idleness we need to avoid excessive **activism**, even in the apostolate. Confronted with this tendency, we must take care that our work does not eventually damage fraternal life by eliminating times for reflection, study, and interaction with our brothers. Above all, we must ensure that it does not compromise our “prayer and devotion,” thereby unbalancing our life.

5.3 The professional status of the brothers and the stability required by certain works threaten the Franciscan tradition of itinerancy which calls us to be “*pilgrims and strangers*” in this world (see *Testament 24*). The social doctrine of the church and modern social legislation protect the right of workers to their employment. This forms part of most contracts between labor and management. It is also consistent with the philosophy that views work as private property. These realities of modern work also influence the way we think. We often regard our work not as a grace, but as a “tenured right.” This engenders a sense of possession which also undermines itinerancy. The suggestions of the Sixth Plenary Council are very modest and minimal:

- we should often calmly discuss this issue, both in community and with the superiors; and
- from time to time we should evaluate our readiness to change assignments or to remain, basing our decisions on the good of the community and that of the People of God toward whom we have responsibilities (PROPOSAL 19).

5.4 Society has depersonalized and dehumanized work. A rediscovery of soul, the human soul, is needed. The friar minor is one who brings soul to whatever task he does. Notice how much of the *Later Rule* is concerned with interior qualities of soul and how relatively little there is of the external! With a lightness of touch characteristic of a sensitive musician, Francis touches those keys which allow us to hear the music of the soul, e.g. “let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble” (*Later Rule III, 11*) and “let them be ware of all pride, vainglory, envy and greed” (*Later Rule X, 7*). It is clear that the friar minor, by living his religious consecration, is constantly doing “soul work,” that is, tilling the ground

of his own soul. And such soul work will impress itself on whatever gift of service he brings to the fraternity, to the church, to humanity. PROPOSAL 17 speaks to all of us:

The prevalence of activity may lead us to place too much trust in what we do and to put ourselves first, **as if the Reign of God were not the work of the Holy Spirit, and as if listening, hospitality, and silence before God were meaningless.**

Should not this reflection be posted under the exit sign of every friary and in a prominent location at every Capuchin workstation?

“By working we must earn our daily bread ...”
(Opening phrase of *Laborem exercens*)

6.1 The excellent study which Br. Lázaro Iriarte prepared for the Sixth Plenary Council established that it was the original intuition and project of Francis that the brothers live off the work of their own hands. This original intention was too revolutionary for the church, for the Order, and for the society of his day and was quickly abandoned. Because of modern social developments and a new theology of work, the Order today is better able to appreciate and embrace the original intention of St. Francis. In fact, beginning with the *Constitutions of 1968* work is conceived as the primary source of support of our brotherhood (see Iriarte, “*Living Off Our Own Work*,” n. 4-4.2.8, pp 657-661). Living off the fruits of our own labor, we create a yardstick or measure for our poverty. This is also a visible identification with the experience of most of humanity.

6.2 In the *Earlier Rule* Francis made a strict connection between the brothers’ work and meeting their needs: “*Let the brothers who know how to work do so ... For the prophet says: ‘You shall eat the fruit of your labors’ ...*” (*Earlier Rule* VII, 3-4). At the same time, it is extremely important to realize that, in the mind of Francis, there is no *quid pro quo* between “stipend” and “work.” Rather, “*whoever does not wish to work shall not eat*” is the essential connection with “work” (*Earlier Rule* VII, 5).

Francis treats our work as a form of interdependence (see Circular Letter 15, “Solidarity and Mutual Dependence,” in *Analecta OFM Cap*, 115 (1999), n. 3.1, p. 252). The brothers freely and generously give their services to others. To Francis, it would be incomprehensible to place a monetary value on a gift of God! At the same time, our work provides the occasion for our neighbors to freely offer us wages to meet our needs. Therefore, Franciscan state with serenity, “*And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord*” (*Testament* 22). One who has worked can justly ask that his needs be met.

Once again we have a Franciscan logic which is diametrically opposed to the marketing of work. Therefore the Plenary Council sensed a need to reinforce the gratuitous nature of Franciscan service:

In order to keep alive in us the sense of gratuitous giving, each community should keep a proper balance between paid work - necessary for the support of the fraternity - and volunteer work [i.e., done without payment] (PROPOSAL 15).

6.3 The early Franciscan economy was built upon two pillars: work and the quest. Developments within our Order and in the global economy during the past 50 years

necessitate that we confront questions never before encountered by our Franciscan spirituality. With that in mind, the Sixth Plenary Council attempted to extend the “Franciscan economy” beyond work and the quest, and into the complex world formed by modern, global economics.

In what might be viewed as a series of concentric circles, the Sixth Plenary Council constructed principles for a Franciscan, fraternal economy:

- At the center of the circle is the work of the brothers: “For us Franciscans, work is a primary source of support” (PROPOSAL 14).
- The first concentric circle includes the alms of our own people. When their work does not suffice, the brothers can turn to the *table of the Lord*: “No province has the right to ask of another that which the labors of its own brothers and the alms of its own people can provide” (PROPOSAL 24D).
- We now arrive at the second concentric circle. When the “table of the Lord” does not suffice, we turn to international solidarity: “Equity requires that each province have the capacity to respond to the needs of its brothers and ministries in ways that are tailor-made to its own culture and people” (PROPOSAL 24C).
- We arrive at the outer concentric circle: extraordinary means such as financial reserves or investments. The Sixth Plenary Council indicated that recourse to such means can be justified only *in cases of manifest need* (see PROPOSAL 29).

The further one moves from the center, the more vigorous the criteria for judgment (see PROPOSAL 29). The Sixth Plenary Council did not propose definitive solutions to these new and, at times, vexing questions. However, it did open an important dialogue and reflection within the provinces, and in the Order as a whole. It is hoped that the upcoming general chapter will give further reflection and direction to this important discussion.

Principles for a fraternal administration of the fruits of our work

7.1 Since the central objective of the global economy is the increase of wealth, the goal of **administration** within that economy is the conservation of wealth. The Capuchin Order exists as a communion, at the service of building the communion of the church, or as Pope John Paul II has said: “a warmly human and welcoming point of reference for the poor and those who search for God.” In keeping with this identity, the goal of **fraternal administration** is growth in communion. PROPOSALS 29 through 45 offer principles for such a fraternal administration: transparency, participation, and equity.

7.2 Transparency builds trust, which in turn fosters communion:

Fraternal life also requires **transparency** in local, provincial, and general administration. Such transparency begins with the individual friar, continues in the local fraternity, and finds its completion in the circumscription to which the fraternity belongs. Transparency expresses and facilitates brotherhood and solidarity among all the constituent parts of the Order (PROPOSAL 30).

7.3 Where the conservation of wealth is the objective, economic decisions are tightly controlled by the smallest possible number of persons. On the other hand, where communion is the objective of administration, there is an effort to share economic

decisions and goals in the widest manner possible. Therefore, for example, PROPOSAL 31 states that:

Local chapters are the ideal occasion for preparing the fraternity budget and monitoring how money is spent. Our administration of money is one of the ways in which brotherhood is expressed, and the local chapter is the proper place to examine whether it conforms to gospel values, minority, etc.

Participation was one of the important criteria in the restructuring of our International Commission for Economic Solidarity in the Order. It should also restructure the administration of provinces and of local fraternities.

7.4 The principle of equity, enunciated to guide international solidarity, is valid at every level of administration in the Order (see PROPOSAL 24C), Equity does not require a universal and identical Capuchin model. It seeks to ensure that the varying and differing needs of each brother and of each fraternity will be met with equal concern. Communion cannot survive where there is privilege.

7.5 The Sixth Plenary Council challenges us to examine the function and administration of the goods of our fraternities. Franciscan spirituality must direct and permeate even our administrative structures.

Conclusion

8. Joseph, the husband of Mary, provides both inspiration and encouragement in acknowledging the “grace of work” in our lives. St. Matthew says only one thing about the person of Joseph, namely, that he was “a just man.” In these few, short words, he says everything, for it is the highest compliment that could be paid to a Jewish man. The hands which held the infant Jesus in a tender embrace were the hands of a craftsman, someone who worked with his hands. When we observe in St. Francis that eagerness to hold the infant Jesus in his arms at Greccio, and hear him express those words, “I worked with my hands and I still desire to work” (*Testament* 20), do we not sense here the spirit and dispositions of Joseph! In his presence let us ponder together the grace of working. I notice a curious thing in the liturgy regarding Joseph, namely, his title “husband of Mary.” In the western world hardly anyone wants to be defined in terms of a relationship! Nobody wants to be defined in terms of being someone else husband or wife. Joseph reminds us that belonging to another in love is the highest fulfilment of our humanity. And from that belonging to one another in love, the grace of working flows as its sign and expression. I have often been astonished at the spiritual power of our Capuchin Constitutions. In few and simple words, sublime truths are expressed. One example of this is found in 54, 4: “In the same way, let us venerate, according to ancient tradition, Joseph her spouse.” How better could we honor St. Joseph than by making every effort to “work faithfully and devotedly” as he did, and receive through his intercession a renewed appreciation of the grace of working?

Br. John Corriveau,
OFM Cap. General Minister

Rome March 3, 2000