



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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LITURGICAL PRAYER

Circular Letter 19

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Circular Letter 19
LITURGICAL PRAYER
(Part two of a series)

“It is good for us to be here” (Mk 9:5)

Prot. n. 00001/02

To the brothers and sisters of the Order

Dear brothers and sisters:

I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to you for the responses I received to the previous letter in this series on prayer. It heartens me that “the spirit of holy prayer and devotion” is so active in your midst, as evidenced by the tenor of your comments and the sincerity of your responses.

1.2 I recall how someone drew my attention to a newspaper article on religion in the former Soviet Union. The article, written in the 1960s, related the story of a young Russian woman who attended the Holy Saturday liturgy. After the service she approached an Orthodox priest and asked to be baptized. The priest found that she was ignorant of most of the articles of the Creed and scarcely even believed in God. Somewhat puzzled, the priest asked her why she wanted to join the church. She replied: “I want *that*”^B indicating the liturgy from which she had just come. This woman had experienced the power of the risen Christ in the Christian community at worship. The Easter mystery had touched her.

1.3 I invite you to join me in a meditation on liturgy in our Capuchin lives, asking that the Lord make our liturgies a genuine witness to his care and love “in such a way that all may see and sense in our faces and in the life of our fraternities the goodness and kindness of God present in the world” (Const. 45:8)

***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your strength, and with all your mind;
and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27)***

2.1 This is the great commandment, the compendium of the Lord’s teachings. It is found in all three synoptic gospels (see Mt 22:34-40, Mk 12:28-34, Lk 10:25-28). In Luke, however, Jesus gives an extended commentary (see Lk 10:25-41). The splendid parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the second part of the commandment: “[you shall love] your neighbor as yourself.” One is struck by the constant use of action words: “when he saw him ... he was moved with pity ... he bandaged his wounds ... having poured oil and wine on them ...he put him on his own animal ... brought him to an inn ... and took care of him ... he took out two denarii” (Lk 10:33-35). Love for one’s neighbor is more than a sentiment, an emotion; it is a commitment to engage, to interact \mathbb{B} with love, concretely and decisively.

2.2 While visiting Martha and Mary, Jesus underscored how living the first part of the commandment (“you shall love the Lord your God...”) necessarily involves a concrete engagement of heart, mind and life: “Mary, ... sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying” (Lk 10:39). Jesus concludes: “Mary has chosen the better part” (Lk10:42). Our love for God needs to be more than a theological conviction. Just as God’s love for us was tangibly embodied in Jesus \mathbb{B} living, dying and rising for us \mathbb{B} so must our loving response \mathbb{B} our embrace of discipleship \mathbb{B} be concretely lived out in our daily lives. Francis understood this intuitively. His faithful embrace of the great commandment to love God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind was publicly manifested when he declared: “From now on I will say freely: >Our Father who art in heaven’, and not >My father, Pietro di Bernardone.” (2C VII, 12). With that declaration Francis embraced discipleship and committed himself to living in his own life the identical relationship which Jesus lived with his Father. Francis “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.”

2.3 Following so closely on the heels of the parable of the Good Samaritan, one cannot help but be surprised at Jesus’ response to Martha. After all, Martha’s request was a plea that her sister Mary’s hospitality be marked by the same

love-in-action that characterized the good Samaritan. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things ... Mary has chosen the better part” (Lk 10:41-42). If our lives are not rooted in discipleship and marked by contemplation, our acts of love towards others can remain at the level of a simple humanistic, civilized response, sapped of their prophetic power to reveal the hand of God. For this reason, contemplation and service are intimately linked in our Constitutions:

...let us offer people a witness of authentic prayer in such a way that they may see and sense in our faces and in the life of our fraternities the goodness and kindness of God present in the world (45:8).

Our Constitutions make this a concrete objective. Noting the fact that “the sacred liturgy, ...is ...the summit of the church’s activity, and the source of all Christian life” (47:1), the Constitutions immediately go on to assert:

...we should have the greatest respect for the mystery of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, which St. Francis wished to shape the entire life of the brotherhood (47:2)

***“...for this reason he [God] has sent you into the whole world:
that you may bear witness ...
that there is no one who is all-powerful except him”***

(LtOrd 9)

3.1 The seventh chapter of the book of the prophet Micah was written in the post-exile period of Israel’s history, a confusing and turbulent time when, inspired by their great preacher-prophets, the Jewish people were attempting to restore the nation of Israel. Divided into three distinct parts, Chapter Seven reflects an attempt to call to conversion a community which was deaf to the word of God.

3.2 The chapter opens with a critical analysis of the social and religious life of the Jewish settlers in the ravaged land of Israel:

The faithful have disappeared from the land ... they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. ...the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; ...the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother... (Mic 7:2.3.6).

The prophet prays that God’s judgment might bring about a conversion in his own heart, and through a vision of faith, he re-imagines the social and religious reality of his people:

Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock that belongs to you, ...let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, show us marvellous things (Mic 7:14.15).

The prophet ends with a hymn of praise:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity... He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. ...You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old (Mic 7:18.20).

3.3 “This kind can come out only through prayer” (Mk 9:29). The contemplative prayer of individual brothers will form within the fraternity a vision of faith. “In the [local] chapter ...the creativity of everyone is fostered, and personal gifts

contribute to the good of all” (Const. 142:2 [revised to Const. 84:2 by General Chapter 2000]). When lived in its contemplative dimension, the local chapter finds within the fraternity the gifts and creativity necessary to pierce the indifference of our age. But something more is needed. Faced with the most difficult task of creating unity among a dispirited and divided people, the prophet-preacher Micah called the people together to praise the faithfulness of the God of their history. Micah knew *what* the Jews had to do, but he did not see *how* they could humanly accomplish that task, and so he called them together in common praise of the God who *made things happen* throughout their history! Should not our regular praying of the divine office in common fulfil the same purpose for us? Psalm 150 clearly brings out the connection between what God does and our response of praise. Ten times the psalmist cries out: “*Praise God!*” or “*Praise him!*”, paralleling - some would say - the 10 times in Genesis when God’s creative acts are preceded by the words: “*and God said....*”

3.4 Francis, our Constitutions, and indeed the broader gamut of church teaching echo this inspiration of Micah. For example, when Francis was ill and almost blind, he composed the marvelous *Canticle of the Creatures*. When interpersonal relationships in Assisi were strained due to antagonism between the mayor and the bishop, Francis added the verse in praise of those who forgive. As his own death was approaching, Francis added his praise of Sister Death. And towards the end of his *Earlier Rule*, Francis raised the minds and hearts of his brothers in a magnificent hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity (see ER XXIII). This same reality is reflected in our Constitutions which conclude with a powerful Christological hymn of praise (see 186:5-6). After laying before us a program of gospel life, both Francis and our Constitutions - in imitation of the prophet Micah - raise the minds and hearts of the brothers in common praise of the triune God who alone can make things happen! The Liturgy of the Hours play the same role for us on a daily basis: “In the Liturgy of the Hours we speak to God with his words taken from Scripture and God himself comes to meet us in his word and speaks to us” (Const. 51:1). It is for that reason that the Constitutions specify: “...let the entire fraternity gather together each day in the name of Christ to celebrate in common the Liturgy of the Hours. Where this cannot be done in its entirety, at least Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer should be celebrated in common” (50:2). I am pleased to be able to say that the fraternities of the Order are faithful to the Liturgy of the Hours. In addition, a number of fraternities have taken to heart the Constitutions’ recommendation that, “according to the circumstances of the

place, the Liturgy of the Hours should be celebrated with the faithful” (50:3).

3.5 The general definitory recently met with the ministers and representatives of the Capuchin Conference of the Andes (CCA) in Lima, Peru. During those days, a group of young brothers and postulants generously offered their services. While passing the kitchen after dinner, I noticed two young brothers washing dishes with the postulants. They were praying the rosary together. The example of these brothers brought to mind another recommendation of the Constitutions: “It is recommended ...that the brothers do the same [i.e., pray the Liturgy of the Hours together] wherever they may be or meet one another” (50:3). If we were to follow the recommendation of the Constitutions, would not our faith and our hope find new strength?

3.6 I would also like you to know that another direction given by our Constitutions is being increasingly implemented throughout the Order, namely, “...let the Liturgy of the Hours be living and vibrant, with praiseworthy intervals of silence ...In imitation of Saint Francis who frequently expressed his feelings with song and music, let the liturgy be celebrated with song” (51:2-3). I have experienced many creative moments of prayer in which the Liturgy of the Hours is celebrated in a truly *living* and *vibrant* manner. Some smaller fraternities, while lacking musical talent, enrich the liturgical celebration by listening meditatively to recorded hymns or music. It is important to note that a mere mechanical or routine fidelity to the Liturgy of the Hours is not sufficient. More important and indispensable is the faith and love we bring to the celebration. As his spiritual life grew, so did Francis’ appreciation of the liturgy, as evidenced in Francis’ Letter to the Entire Order. Written towards the end of his life, the letter allows us to enter into the mind of the saint. He candidly confesses his sins with regard to the Liturgy of the Hours, committed “either out of negligence or by reason of my weakness or because I am ignorant and stupid” (LtOrd 39). His counsel to us regarding the Liturgy of the Hours is brief, but effective. **Purity of heart** is the key to a fruitful and fitting recitation of the liturgy (LtOrd 42), so that “the voice may be in harmony with the mind, and the mind truly in harmony with God” (LtOrd 41). Periods of reflective silence and musical expression are urged by our Constitutions so that “the word of God may penetrate our hearts more profoundly and form our entire life more effectively” (51:2). Brothers who contribute their musical and liturgical skills to the enrichment of the prayer life of the fraternities make an invaluable contribution to the life of our Order.

“If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well” (*Mk 5:28*)

4.1 Through the contemplative gaze of Jesus, the word of God penetrated human hearts. Suffering humanity found in Jesus the healing power of God. People were healed and reconciled with God simply by touching and being touched by Jesus:

“There was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ...she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well” (*Mk 5:25.28*).

Humanity yearns to touch the living body of Christ and through that encounter find healing. Look to the millions of pilgrims who flock to the tomb of Bl. Pio and to our friary at San Giovanni Rotondo. In touching and being touched by the local fraternities of our brotherhood, humanity seeks an experience of healing. Pope John Paul II voiced that desire when he described the Capuchin fraternity as “a warmly human and welcoming point of reference for the poor and for those who sincerely search for God” (see *AOFMCap* 112 [1996] 566, n. 3). Our Constitutions remind us that the Eucharist has the potential to transform each of our fraternities into such a healing presence. More recently, Pope John Paul II struck a cord that goes to the heart of the followers of Francis and Clare. Writing about the benefits to be gained from Jubilee Year 2000, he remarked:

...if we ask what is the core of the great legacy it leaves us, I would not hesitate to describe it as the *contemplation of the face of Christ*: Christ considered in his historical features and in his mystery, Christ known through his manifold presence in the church and in the world, and confessed as the meaning of history and the light of life’s journey (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 15).

Devoted to this practice on a daily basis, we become capable of entering more deeply into the celebration of the liturgy, while at the same time learning how to look upon others with the mind and heart of Christ.

4.2 “In the breaking of the Eucharistic bread we are lifted up to communion with Christ and with one another” (*Const.* 48:2). It was in the breaking of the bread that the risen Christ reconciled the two travellers to a discipleship transformed in the cross. As through a new transfiguration, the disciples of Emmaus saw the glory of God shining on the face of Christ in the breaking of the bread. Eucharist opened the eyes of their hope, restored them to unity with the community of the

church, and turned their steps back toward Jerusalem to embrace the struggle for meaning in a shattered world (see Lk 24:30-35) Eucharist transformed dispirited and divided disciples into a **community of hope**, a source of unity and healing for others. In the Eucharist Jesus feeds us and restores our hope when, like the disciples, we have fished all night with no results in a world inattentive to the word of God. As on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus invites us to try again and to cast the net on the other side (see Jn 21:3-6). Like those disciples, we are transformed from disunity and defeat into hope and healing through the power of Eucharist.

4.3 “...In the Eucharistic sacrifice we celebrate the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ until he comes” (Const. 48:1). Jesus takes the bread and says, “This is my body that is for you...;” he passes to us the cup saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:24-25). Let us not forget that in offering the Eucharistic sacrifice we become involved in the most powerful prayer of intercession. The Eucharistic Prayer is addressed in its totality to the Father. We say in effect, “Father, we see what is in our hands, the hands of the poor. It is the sacrificial love of your beloved Son, his body and blood poured out for us, the price he paid for being truly human in our midst.” Under the appearances of bread and wine we have in our hands the sacrificial death of Jesus. The Father received this “acceptable sacrifice.” That is how the Eucharist makes present and effective among us the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. In the Eucharistic event the power of the cross lives in our midst to heal our divisions and make us ambassadors of his reconciliation (see Eph 2:14; 2 Cor 5:18, 20). A fraternity formed by the Eucharist becomes the body of Christ which radiates the same healing power which responded to the woman’s prayerful desire, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well” (Mk 5:28).

4.4 Behold, each day he humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the Virgin’s womb; each day he himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day he comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of a priest (Adm I, 16-18).

At the Last Supper, Jesus gave the paramount example of how the experience of church is to be one of profound service to one another. In the Eucharistic celebration, Jesus rises daily from the table to wash the feet of his disciples (see Jn 13:1-14). For this reason, the Constitutions, quoting Saint Francis (see LOrd

29), urge us to hold “back nothing of ourselves so that he who gives himself totally to us might receive us totally” (48:1). The Eucharistic celebration is the vital center of a fraternity of lesser brothers intent on making Jesus present and active in a world that desperately needs his saving power.

The liturgy must shape the entire life of the brotherhood

5.1 “The sacred liturgy [is] ...the summit of all the church’s activity and the source of all Christian life” (Const. 47:1). For that reason, St. Francis wanted the mystery of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours to “shape the entire life of the brotherhood” (Const. 47:2) and our Constitutions direct that “each day a community Mass should be celebrated in our fraternities” (48:2).

5.2 Much remains to be done to renew the life of the Eucharist in our provinces and fraternities. Speaking to us in his *Testament*, St. Francis was insistent, “I want to have these most holy mysteries honored and venerated above all things and I want to reserve them in precious places” (11). Our worship space and places of Eucharistic reservation are already dignified and beautiful. Today St. Francis would see greater need to insist upon the proper preparation of the Eucharistic celebrations in our friaries and churches. The proclamation of the Word of God and the homilies which expound that Word, respect for a proper distinction of liturgical roles and their execution, the careful selection of music, the use of proper vestments by celebrants and concelebrants all speak of our reverence before the “most holy mysteries.” Referring to celebrations in the parochial setting, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States asserted, “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith, poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it” (*Music in Catholic Worship*, 6). The principle applies equally to our fraternities. The seriousness of our faith in the Eucharist should be mirrored in the serious manner in which each celebration is prepared.

5.3 Our Constitutions prescribe that “each day a **community Mass** should be celebrated in our fraternities ...Where this cannot be done each day, it should at least be celebrated periodically and **participated in by all the brothers**” (48:2). Work, study, or the ministerial duties often undermine the primacy and centrality of Eucharist in our local fraternities. In many provinces of the Order, there are some fraternities in which the brothers rarely gather around the same altar at the same time to celebrate Eucharist. We must ask the question: “Is it possible to speak of a Capuchin fraternity where the brothers rarely or almost never celebrate Eucharist **together?**” The Eucharist must be more than an expression of our pastoral and ministerial care for other people. The Eucharist is the vital center of our own fraternities. The primacy of the Eucharist for

Capuchin life demands that “at least periodically” a community Mass be celebrated with the participation of “all the brothers.” The Constitutions invite us to reassess our pastoral practices. For example, in our churches and parishes where there are multiple Masses each day, could not one day each week (obviously not Sunday!) be set aside on which there would be only one Eucharistic celebration in which everyone - all the brothers and the faithful - would be united at the one Table of the Lord? In our friaries where ordained brothers serve a variety of chaplaincies each morning, could not one day be set aside each week on which the people they serve would either come to the friary church, seek a substitute chaplain, or celebrate a word and communion service? In this manner, the Capuchins, as well as the religious communities they serve, would be united around the one Table of the Lord.

5.4 In Eucharistic worship the early church experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit. The gifts of all collaborated in bringing the word of God to their world:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen ... and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3).

The Holy Spirit has endowed our brotherhood with the gifts necessary to help our world hear the saving word of God. Our local fraternities have their brothers Barnabas, Lucius, Manaen and Saul, each endowed with gifts of the Spirit. In the Eucharist, the same risen Lord opens our hearts to offer these gifts for the service of the church and the world.

***“God ...gives life to the dead
and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17)***

6.1 Paul exalts the power of faith in God who “calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Through Abraham’s faith, God “called into existence” the nation of Israel, and through Paul’s faith, the church in Rome. In the same way, through Francis’ faith, God called into existence a new way of gospel life (see Test 14-15). When we begin with the conviction that our world can experience communion only through the power of the “God [who] gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist,” only then do we discover the crucial importance of the prayer of our local fraternities. Our prayer gives focus to the work we do in the world as an expression of our faith. For that reason, our prayer environment in each fraternity must be created with care and purpose.

6.2 In an article entitled, “Eucharistic Praxis in Ecological Perspective: Prayer Patterns for Capuchins,” Br. Edward Foley, OFMCap., extends the interrelatedness of the ecosystems of our world into the realm of the prayer life of the brothers. He asserts that “according to our Constitutions, there is a foundational triad for any authentic Capuchin liturgical ecosystem: Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, and contemplation.” He goes on to say:

No one liturgical element in a community’s liturgical ecosystem can be modified or eliminated without the other liturgical elements in the life of a faith community being affected. ...All of the elements of a community’s prayer life are interrelated and must be respected as such (*Review for Religious*, 60:4, pp. 342-364).¹

6.3 The commitment of our local fraternities to the evangelization of our world is incomplete and unfocused without a serious reflection on fidelity to prayer

¹The article, “Eucharistic Praxis in Ecological Perspective: Prayer Patterns for Capuchins”, by Edward Foley, OFMCap. (see *Review for Religious* 60:4, pp. 342-364) looks at the place of the Eucharist in the larger life of the church and in the context of other liturgical celebrations in the local fraternity. Br. Edward makes use of an ecological metaphor to study our liturgical praxis and proposes a “Capuchin ecology of liturgy.” It is a thought-provoking approach which our liturgical commissions, at all levels, might usefully investigate. This article has been published in Italian: “La prassi eucaristica in prospettiva ecologica: Modelli di preghiera per i Cappuccini,” in *Italia Francescana* LXXVI, n. 2, maggio-agosto 2001, pp 67-96), and in Spanish: “La praxis eucaristica en perspectiva ecológica,” in *Estudios Franciscanos*, Septiembre-Diciembre 2001, vol. 102, pp 497-522).

and the quality of its liturgical expression. Fidelity to quality prayer is an unfailing barometer of the seriousness and concreteness of our faith.

Conclusion

7.1 With a new edition of the Roman sacramentary about to be published in vernacular languages around the world, accompanied by a revised General Instruction (already published in Latin), the time is right for a thorough reappraisal of the manner in which we plan liturgies in our friaries. A friar once told me of a visit to Taizé by a group of postgraduate students of liturgy. A monk of the Taizé community met with them for a friendly dialogue. One of the visitors asked the monk how the community of Taizé succeeded in making the liturgy so relevant to young people in particular, but to many others as well. The monk replied that they never try to be “relevant”. They focus all their energies on celebrating the worship of God, and this - of itself - creates a powerful attraction for all who join them for worship. It is my hope that we would all learn from Francis and Clare the proper way of celebrating liturgy in our fraternities, so that our liturgies might draw us and other people ever closer to the Lord to receive his saving power!

7.2 The fishing net (see Jn 21:6-14) is an image of the church that speaks to our brotherhood: “So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn” (Jn 21:11). The 153 fish stand as an image of humankind and the universality of Christ’s gift of salvation. The implantation of our Order in 95 nations, among hundreds of diverse peoples, indicates that the Holy Spirit has entrusted to us a special responsibility in this mission. The integral net which holds us in unity is comprised of the bonds of gospel brotherhood which describe our unique incarnation of the communion of the church. This is the fabric of the Capuchin “net”:

A fraternity of lesser brothers C servants to the world; a contemplative fraternity; a poor and austere fraternity; a fraternity inserted among the poor; a fraternity dedicated to justice, peace, and respect for nature; a fraternity filled with human warmth (*Circular Letter 11*, paragraph 1.3).

May a renewal of the spirit of personal and liturgical prayer throughout the Order release our multiple gifts to bring the saving word to a world yearning for God.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau,
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Rome, January 6, 2002
Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

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