



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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**THE COURAGE TO BE MINORS**

*Circular Letter 22*

4 October 2003

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Roma, A.D. 2016

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**Circular Letter 22**  
**THE COURAGE TO BE MINORS**  
*(Part two of a series)*

Prot. n. 000732/03

To all the brothers and sisters of the Order

Dear brothers and sisters:

**“THAT EXCESSIVE LOVE...”**

1.1 Humility opens human hearts to experience relationships. St. Francis rightly says that God *is* humility because our Trinitarian God is, by nature, relational. The Trinity has been described as a “free communion of persons without domination or deprivation”.<sup>1</sup> Through creation we have been drawn into the intimate relationship of the Trinity: “In the beginning was the Word, ... all things came into being through him” (Jn 1:1, 3). This relationship became familial in Jesus Christ: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). In the Incarnation, “God humbly bends down to lift the dust of our nature into unity with his own person”.<sup>2</sup>

1.2 Humility reaches out to embrace the other. It stands in stark contrast to the dominant culture of our age which seeks to exert the untrammelled freedom of the autonomous self. To be humble and powerful is a contradiction to the logic of our age. Yet, when St. Bonaventure speaks about the “humble Savior” lying in the manger or stretched out on the Cross, he speaks not of the lowliness of the humanity of Jesus, but of his ***divinity***! This is, of course, the way divine power operates. Divine causality is more like generosity in sharing power than mechanical efficiency. It is the way a father empowers a son or daughter. That is

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<sup>1</sup>Br. David Couturier, “Minority and Poverty Eradication: The International Dimensions of Christ’s Compassion in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Franciscan Communities”, An address to the provincial chapter of the Society of St. Francis, May 25, 2003 [<http://www.fi-na.org/prov.html>].

<sup>2</sup>St. Bonaventure, “Sermon II on the Nativity of the Lord”, *Opera Omnia*, IX, Ad Claras Aquas, 1901, p. 110.

real power which changes hearts and lives. God does not dominate our humanity. In Jesus, God embraces it. It is this option for relationship which defines the humility of God. There is no contradiction between the power and the humility of God. God's power *is* his humility; God's strength *is* his weakness; God's greatness *is* his lowliness.<sup>3</sup> Humanity was not created in the image of an autocratic, self-assertive and dictatorial God, but in the image of a relational, humble God. "God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27). Humility expresses the relational nature of God. Humility, likewise, expresses the relational nature of our humanity. To be humble is to glory in the fact that we were created in love and redeemed through love in order to have a loving relationship with the Triune God who created and redeemed us and with all creatures with whom we share life. Francis saw with amazing clarity God's plan for his creatures as a family of sisters and brothers. He gloried in the familial intimacy which this plan revealed...brother sun; sister moon; our sister, Mother Earth; brother fire. He never referred to himself simply as "Francis", but always as "brother Francis". In fact, he uses the title "brother" more often (306 times) than any other title except "Lord" (410 times). To Francis, "brother" revealed the relationship which God called him to live with every creature and with all creation.

1.3 At La Verna Francis prayed, "...that I may feel in my heart, ...that excessive love with which you, O Son of God, were inflamed in willingly enduring such suffering for us sinners".<sup>4</sup> The experience of humble, crucified Love thrust him into a more intense relationship with the world around him. Despite his many infirmities, "that excessive love" caused Francis to come away from La Verna with a burning desire to return to his origins and begin serving lepers. "That excessive love" experienced on La Verna inspired Francis to write his *Canticle of the Creatures*. "That excessive love" of the Crucified One purified the heart of Francis and made him a universal brother to the leper; the sun and moon; our sister, Mother Earth, and all of creation.

1.4 The spiritual genius of Francis is found in the manner in which he was able to personify the compassionate humility of the Cross and bequeath it as a characteristic to each of his brothers and, especially, as a fundamental dimension of his fraternity as such. Founded on the renunciation of that power

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<sup>3</sup>see St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, VI, 5

<sup>4</sup>Third Consideration on the Stigmata, *Omnibus of Sources*, p. 1448

which dominates, the embrace of humble service and the identification with those pushed aside by the dominant society of our day, it is that sense of minority which we seek to renew within the Order through the Seventh Plenary Council.

## **“What were you arguing about on the way?” (Mk 9:33)**

### **The renunciation of that power which dominates**

2.1 “What were you arguing about on the way?” (Mk 9:33). The ensuing silence of the apostles was not the silence of embarrassment, it was the silence of intense disagreement. Jesus’ words preceding the argument were outrageous to patriotic Jews: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (Mk 9:31). That type of messiah was incomprehensible to the apostles. In fact, they rejected it. As the messianic journey continues toward Jerusalem, they argue about who will have the greater role in the liberation of the Jewish people. This was not a petty power struggle, it was an argument about commitment. Jesus understood clearly what was at stake and he intervened forcefully: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9:35). His words applied first and foremost to himself! Israel will not be saved by a new Davidic king leading armies of liberation but by a Suffering Servant nailed to a Cross. He drives home his point by placing a child in their midst with the words, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me” (Mk 9:37). The Messiah sent by his Father is as powerless as a child. To radiate upon the world redemptive, compassionate love, Jesus had first to abandon all pretext of that power which dominates.

2.2 Setting himself firmly in the footsteps of Jesus, Francis made an uncompromising demand that the brothers also abandon that power which dominates and controls. His insistence that the brothers abandon domineering power are equally as firm as his insistence that they abandon wealth: “Let all the brothers not have **power** or **control**... especially among themselves” (ER, V, 9). “None of the brothers may be treasurers or overseers in any of those places where they are staying to serve or work among others. ...Let them, instead, be the **lesser ones** and **be subject to all** in the same house” (ER, VII, 1-3). “The brothers... [who] live spiritually among the Saracens and nonbelievers...[are] not to engage in arguments or disputes, but [are] to be **subject to every human creature for God’s sake**...” (ER, XVI, 5-6). Like Jesus before him, Francis recognized that power which controls and dominates is incompatible with compassion. The abandonment of such power is an essential precondition for compassionate redeeming love.



**“Here is my servant whom I have chosen” (Mt. 12:18)**

### **A life dedicated to humble service**

3.1 By means of an escalating series of confrontations between Jesus and the scribes and pharisees, Chapter 12 of the Gospel of Matthew creates a stark contrast between the messianic mission of Jesus and the power-driven model on the part of the religious authority of Israel. In the middle of the chapter, Matthew applies to Jesus the words of deutero-Isaiah: “Here is my servant whom I have chosen...in his name the Gentiles will hope” (Mt 12:18, 21). Matthew proposes a model of change through humble service rather than change imposed by the use of power. The Gospel of John brings the model to completeness: “Jesus...began to wash the disciples’ feet...” (Jn 13:5). Jesus’ exchange with Peter reveals that this is more than a symbolic act, it is redemptive: “ ‘You will never wash my feet!’ ... **‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me!’** ” (Jn 13:8). Redemption breaks upon the world and is imparted to the world in and through humble service.

3.2 Perhaps no other image of Jesus filled Francis with greater enthusiasm than the image of the master washing the feet of his disciples. He adopted this as his model of authority and service for his fraternity: “Let no one be called ‘prior’, but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother. Let one wash the feet of the other” (ER, VI, 3). “Let those who are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers. And if they are more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a money bag to the peril of their soul” (Adm IV, 2-3). Compassion expressed through humble service bears within itself the transforming power of the Cross of Jesus.

**“There was no place for them” (Lk 2:7)**

### **Identifying with those pushed aside by the dominant society**

4.1 “She [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and...laid him in a manger because **there was no place for them** in the inn” (Lk 2:7). From his birth in a humble stable to his death as an outcast on the Cross, Jesus lived as one of those individuals for whom the world makes “no place”. At the dawn of his public ministry Jesus was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness” (Lk 4:1). In this inner struggle of discernment, Jesus is led by the Spirit to decisively reject a ministry driven by power and wealth (see Lk 4:1-12). He emerges in Nazareth to announce his mission: “the Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). In the parables, Jesus proclaims to the citizens of his new kingdom: “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Lk 14:21). His mission took him to all those who found “no place” in the dominant society of his day. In Chapter 12 of the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself with this community of the poor and humble. When Judas objects to the anointing in Bethany, indicating that the value of the precious ointment could better be given to the poor, Jesus indicates that he *is* the poor one and that Mary has anointed him to die as the poor and marginated one (see Jn 12:1-7).

4.2 Like Jesus before him, Francis was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness” (Lk 4:1). It occurred during the long months of his conversion experience when he lived among lepers, the outcasts of his contemporary society. This was his wilderness. The results of his discernment become evident in the encounter before the bishop of Assisi. Francis made a definitive break with a whole manner of living and being. Francis “jumped off” the social ladder. He visibly and publicly abandoned his social position. This choice was inspired by Jesus: “Remember...that our Lord Jesus Christ...was poor and a stranger and lived on alms – he, the blessed Virgin, and his disciples” (ER, IX, 4-5). Henceforth, Francis related to the world as one who had “no place” in the dominant society of his day. He insisted that this be the vantage point of his brothers: “They must 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” (ER, IX, 2). Francis’ embrace of evangelical poverty was a choice of

social relationship rather than an option for ascetical purity. Urging his brothers to be simple in dress, he observes, “Those who wear expensive clothing and live in luxury...are in the houses of kings” (ER, II, 14).

**“They were afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple”**  
(Acts 9:26)

5.1 The Holy Spirit – the bond of unity between Father and Son – draws us into relationship. The Holy Spirit drew creation into the relationship of the Trinity: “the earth was a formless void...a **wind from God** swept over the face of the waters” (Gn 1:2). “God...**breathed** into his nostrils **the breath of life** and man became a living being” (Gn 2:7). The Holy Spirit established that special familial bond between humanity and the Trinity in the Incarnation: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; ...the child...will be called Son of God” (Lk 1:35). The Holy Spirit gave definition to the mission of Jesus. At the dawn of his public ministry, during his baptism by John in the Jordan, “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove” (Lk 3:22). It was in obedience to the Holy Spirit that Jesus decisively rejected a ministry driven by power and wealth, embracing from the beginning the way of humility which would lead to the Cross. It is in obedience to the same Holy Spirit that we become disciples and embrace the way of humility in imitation of Jesus.

5.2 The Holy Spirit, the bond of communion between the Father and the Son, is “the general minister of our Order”. Therefore, “*loving obedience* – a distinctive characteristic of our fraternity by which the brothers serve one another –” (2000 Const. 84.2 [formerly 142.2]), draws us into communion: “Docile to the Holy Spirit, [and] **in a fraternal sharing of life**, let us search for and fulfill God’s will in every event and action” (Const. 155.3). *Loving obedience* seeks to form a “free communion of brothers without domination and without deprivation.”

5.3 *Loving obedience* forms a communion of brothers without domination. It is interesting to discern from our Constitutions the underpinnings of authority in our Order. *Service* is the first and primary source of authority: “Christ did not come to be served but to serve. To show this he washed the feet of the apostles,... Therefore the ministers...[should] serve the other brothers” (Const. 156.1, 2). The second source of authority is *coherence of life*. Ministers must practice what they preach: “Let the ministers preside over their fraternities in charity, becoming an example to them from the heart” (Const. 157.1). Thirdly, a minister receives authority through his capacity to listen to and dialogue with his brothers: “In a gospel spirit, let them [i.e., the ministers] willingly initiate

dialogue with the brothers,...and accept their advice” (Const. 157.4). Finally, when all else fails, a minister finds authority in his office: “...it is the responsibility of the ministers, in virtue of their office, to make the final decision” (Const. 157.4).

5.4 *Loving obedience* forms a communion of brothers without deprivation. St. Bonaventure uses the word *circumincessio* to describe this dimension of the communion of the Trinity. This indicates an ineffable intimacy of life in the Trinity. The Divine Persons “move around one another” in a communion of love. The Greek term *perichoresis* is perhaps even more daring in that it suggests a dancing around one another, a divine choreography. It is this mutually respectful collaboration of gifts which *loving obedience* seeks to form among the brothers for the service of the fraternity, the church and the world. “Whoever envies his brother the good that the Lord says or does in him incurs a sin of blasphemy because he envies the Most High himself who says and does every good thing” (Adm VIII, 3). “Blessed is that servant who no more exalts himself over the good the Lord says or does through him than over what he [the Lord] says or does through another” (Adm XVII, 1). “Blessed is the servant who does not consider himself any better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered worthless, simple, and looked down upon, for what a person is before God, that he is and no more” (Adm XIX, 1-2). In a Pentecost sermon, St. Anthony states that the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and disciples as parted tongues of fire. St. Anthony notes that in the communion of the primitive church these tongues of fire coalesced to form a river of fire which engulfed the world. Reflecting on this sermon, the image came to me of the fireflies which appear during hot Canadian summer nights. Fireflies glow in the dark. The Holy Spirit continues to descend on us as parted tongues of fire, endowing us with a multiplicity of gifts. It often happens that, like the fireflies of a Canadian summer night, these gifts glow for a brief time and disappear equally quickly. *Loving obedience* is respectful of all the gifts of the fraternity. When *loving obedience* guides the gifts of the fraternity toward the growth of communion these gifts coalesce to form a “river of fire” bringing the truth of the gospel to the world.

5.5 The local chapter became part of our Capuchin culture only in the post-Vatican II era. The reason is found in the re-appropriation of our fraternal charism within the Vatican II ecclesiology of communion: “Let us cultivate mutual dialogue, sharing experiences with confidence and manifesting our

needs to one another. Moreover, let the spirit of brotherly understanding and sincere esteem permeate everyone” (Const. 84.2). A fraternity conceived as communion cannot exist without dialogue and mutual esteem. It is exactly within this context that our Constitutions situate the local chapter: “Special attention should be given to the local chapter as a primary means of promoting and expressing our growing together and the quality of our fraternal communion” (2000 Const. 84.2). The same article of the Constitutions goes on to stress that the local chapter is not an exercise in direct democracy, but is, rather, the highest expression of obedience! “In the chapter, loving obedience, a distinctive characteristic of our fraternity...finds its best expression.” *Loving obedience* leads us to listen to each other and to serve one another in love: “In the chapter...the brothers serve one another, ...the creativity of everyone is fostered, and personal gifts contribute to the good of all” (2000 Const. 84.2). This is confirmed again in Chapter 8 of the Constitutions: “It is the responsibility of the local chapter...to strengthen the fraternal spirit, promote an awareness of the common good among all the brothers, establish a dialogue concerning everything that regards fraternal life” (2000 Const. 142.2). While reflecting on the local chapter I happened to read from the Acts of the Apostles: “When he [Paul] had come down to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). Three years after his conversion Paul continued to inspire fear in the Jerusalem community. Paul was no longer arresting Christians, but they still feared in him that power which dominates. There was the fear that Paul had substituted one ideology for another. “They did not believe that he was a disciple.” To gain the trust of the Jerusalem church Paul had to demonstrate that he, too, was subject to obedience! How many local chapters end in disaster because one or more of the brothers arrive with a grocery list of conditions and demands, intent more on instructing and dominating the brothers than listening to them and esteeming them? How does one move from mistrust to trust? As we see from the life of St. Paul, it is a difficult path. Trust cannot be cultivated directly. Trust grows among the brothers when they show respect for one another. Such respect is the foundation of trust and *loving obedience*. Where respect for each other is not cultivated trust will not grow. The tenor of the local chapter is an excellent litmus test of the spirit of minority in the fraternity. “Let all the brothers not have **power** or **control**...especially among themselves” (ER, V, 9). May the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order renew among us the spirit of

*loving obedience* in order that our fraternities can truly become a “free communion of brothers without domination and without deprivation” at the service of one another, the church and the world.

**“Brother Francis promises obedience...” (LR, I, 2)**

6.1 The beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century was marked by a multiplicity of new ecclesial movements aimed at reform and the recovery of gospel simplicity. In the opening words of his Rule, Francis unites the quest for gospel purity with “obedience and reverence” for the authority of the church. “The Rule and life of the lesser brothers is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Immediately thereafter, Francis affirms: “Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to our Lord Pope Honorius...and to the Roman Church” (LR I, 2). This basic principle set the movement initiated by Francis apart from most of the other ecclesial movements of his age. Francis had the intuition that the gospel was inspired and born within the Christian community and finds its proper understanding and fulfillment only in obedience to that same community. Obedience to the authority of the church guaranteed the authenticity of his gospel charism. Francis insisted that the brothers be “truly Catholic” (see LR, II, 2-3, also Test, 31, 34). The same obedience was an essential dimension of the ministry of humility which he exercised within the church in response to the invitation of Jesus to “go, repair my church.” Francis, who instructed his brothers “to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake” (ER, XVI, 6), logically began by being “always submissive and subject at the feet of the same holy church” (LR, XII, 4).

6.2 We find other dimensions of his ministry of humility within the church in his Testament where he commands his brothers “not to dare to ask any letter from the Roman Curia... whether for a church or another place or under the pretext of preaching or the persecution of their bodies” (Test 25). This prescription followed from Francis’ mission within the church. Intent on forming a “free communion of brothers without domination and without deprivation” that would be a source of communion for the church, he declined all positions of authority which could in any way obscure this mission. It was his intention that the brothers be subject to the authority of the church, but not participate in that authority. This was not founded on mistrust of authority in the church, but upon the realization that his brotherhood was called to build the communion of the church in another manner. This insistence was also a reflection of the place Francis intended his brotherhood to occupy within the church. Francis sought to



renew the communion of the church by identifying with those given a privileged place in the kingdom: “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Lk 14:21). Francis was very insistent upon the point: “I strictly command all the brothers through obedience....” not to seek special privileges even within the church (Test 25).

6.3 The Testament includes still another consequence of Francis’ chosen mission in the church: “I desire to respect, love and honor them [i.e., priests] and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them...” (Test 8, 9). Francis was not blind to the sins of the clergy. However, he would not allow the sins of the clergy to interfere with his vision of the living presence of Christ in his church. “I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except his most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others” (Test 10). It is this same fidelity to the living presence of Christ in his church that caused Francis to promise the pope not only obedience, but **reverence**. Furthermore, the exclusion from positions of authority in the church was not imposed on his Order, it was freely chosen. In fact, it was requested of the Holy Father as a precious privilege! It was his chosen path of reform. Therefore, Francis declined to criticize those who accepted that responsibility. It was as if he decided that the stones he gathered for the San Damiano project would be living, creative stones to build a model of communion, not the missiles to be thrown through the windows of others! This, too, became a defining characteristic of the “free communion of brothers without domination and without deprivation.”

6.4 “Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to our Lord Pope Honorius...and to the Roman Church” (LR I, 2). The clarity and the coherence of Francis’ embrace of **minority** within the church challenges the Order to rediscover with freshness that same evangelical value today. In the midst of many calls for change and reform, and in an age of cynicism toward all structures of authority, Francis’ attitude and directives challenge us to renew our spirit of reverence for the offices of authority in the church. At the same time, the Seventh Plenary Council offers a privileged moment for the Order to reflect on the experience of the past century. The Order’s enthusiastic embrace of the missionary expansion of the church has brought many blessings to humanity, the church and the Order. However, it has also involved us intimately in the ministry of authority in the church. How deep can we maintain our

involvement within the institutional ministries of the church without losing our witness of minority?

**“Praised be you, my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love”**

(CtC 10)

7.1 “No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness” (Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace message, January 1, 2002, n. 15). This was the heart of the pope’s message to the representatives of the religions of the world gathered in Assisi to pray for peace on January 24, 2002. It is a message the world does not believe and refuses to accept. First justice, then forgiveness! This is the logic of our age. It is a logic which has produced constant strife. It is a logic which attempts to justify terrorism as an instrument of justice. Relationships cannot be imposed. The pope succinctly proclaimed the logic of the Cross. Justice flows from redeemed and restored relationships. Without renewed and restored relationships there can be no justice. Without forgiveness and reconciliation there are no restored relationships! “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rm 5:8). The Cross is the focal point for the reconciliation of God and humanity: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Furthermore, by the blood of his Cross, Jesus has established historical peace: “He is our peace...[he] has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity” (Eph 2:14-15). In the Cross the church finds her mission: “God...has given us the ministry of reconciliation....We are ambassadors for Christ...be reconciled with God” (2 Cor 5:18, 20). Paul firmly indicates that the result of this reconciliation is historical peace based on justice: “He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Francis understood well the message of the Cross. In the middle of his Canticle of the Creatures he prays, “Praised be you, my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love” (CtC 10). Francis praises God for those who forgive because forgiveness alone can restore the brother/sister relationship which God calls us to live on earth. Brother/sister relationships restore justice. Through his “excessive love” shown on the Cross, Jesus establishes the pattern and provides the divine energy. The “excessive love” of the Crucified One can leap over all obstacles to restore relationships. Restored relationships inaugurate justice. Might it not also happen that redeemed brother/sister relationships will open our hearts to experience “Abba! Father!”

(Rm 8:15), allowing us to embrace and express authority, “fatherhood”, without suspicion or fear? A patriarchal, domineering authority inspires only hatred and fear, vitiating at its very source the communion of life that exists in the Blessed Trinity. A liberating, generous authority, “father”, releases human beings to share love without fear. Such “fatherhood” is sorely needed in our world today.

7.2 The Fifth Plenary Council of the Order, celebrated at Garibaldi, Brazil in 1986, summarized a Franciscan vision for justice, peace and respect for nature with these words:

Francis passed on to us a special charism for peace, justice and respect for nature. The point of view of the poor is the privileged position from which we, his sons, consider and proclaim these values. Reconciliation and respect for creation are the means Francis gives us in order to reach true peace and harmony. This forms an integral part of our Franciscan vocation (V PCO, 86).

Reconciliation is an essential dimension of our work for justice, peace and respect for nature. General Chapter 2000 requested a renewed effort on the part of the Order to give concrete expression to this vision. As a first response to the chapter’s request, a congress will be celebrated at Addis Ababa in February of 2004 focusing on the theme: *Fraternity and Ethnicity*. This will offer an opportunity for us to reflect on how a “free communion of brothers without domination and without deprivation” can become a model and catalyst to restore just and peaceful relationships between peoples of diverse cultures. We pray that the deeper reflection of the Seventh Plenary Council on the ministry of humility in the world will enable the Order to embrace with greater clarity and commitment the hope and vision espoused by the Fifth Plenary Council of the Order.

7.3 Having experienced that “excessive love” of the Crucified One, Francis left La Verna filled with a burning desire to return to his original inspiration, namely, to serve lepers. The Order must constantly do the same, continually striving to re-identify itself with those for whom society provides *no place*. The Sixth Plenary Council provides us with the vision of a *fraternal economy* leading to communion as an alternative to a global economy founded upon competition and the concentration of wealth which leads to division and strife (see Circular Letter 15, 4-6). The operational principles of a fraternal economy are participation, transparency and solidarity. These principles must reform the social ministries

of our Order in such a way as to empower the poor and humble rather than dominate them, unite them in solidarity rather than divide them in competition for our attention! VI PCO, speaking of our ministry to the poor, stated:

Solidarity is not primarily about giving things to others. It is, rather, mutual interdependence and brotherhood. The culture of solidarity creates new ways of understanding and living relationships with others... (from Proposal 22).

These “new ways of understanding and living relationships” with the poor can result when the principles of a fraternal economy – participation, solidarity and transparency – create ministries which empower the poor in relationships “without domination and without deprivation.”

## Conclusion

8.1 “Humanly speaking,” the principle of **minority** “was the least pleasant part of the inheritance bequeathed to the Order by (St. Francis), and the **first to be forgotten**.... The whole complex of problems that grew up...around the theme of poverty...was due to the impossible effort on the part of the sons of Francis ‘to be poor’ without having the courage ‘to be minors’ ” (Br. Lázaro Iriarte, “Vocazione francescana. Sintesi degli ideali di san Francesco e di santa Chiara”, *Laurentianum*, Piemme, Casala M., 1991 (2<sup>a</sup> ed.), 136.

“What were you arguing about on the way?” (Mk 9:33). Br. Lázaro Iriarte asserted that immediately following the death of Francis, the early Franciscan fraternity behaved exactly as the apostles had. Unable to envision change without that power which dominates, they attempted to embrace the poverty of Francis while quietly ignoring minority, what Br. Lázaro termed the “impossible effort...‘to be poor’ without having the courage ‘to be minors’.” Consequently, poverty – which Francis intended to protect minority – became a struggle for power and control. Like the apostles before us, we Franciscans are confounded by the demand that we relinquish all power which dominates, even that power which seems to bear within it the capacity to help people and transform lives.

Like Francis we must discover “**the courage to be minors**,” doing so in small and seemingly insignificant ways. We do not need a grand strategy to change the power structures of the world’s economic and political systems because God rejoices when one repentant sinner returns! This is not very interesting statistically in a world populated by billions of people. However, for God, numbers never seem to matter! To paraphrase Brother Francis, let us begin at least to serve God in humility, for up to now we have done little.

Fraternally,

Br. John Corriveau,  
OFM Cap., General Minister

October 4, 2003  
Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

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