



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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THE IMAGE OF THE GODHEAD

CIRCULAR LETTER 27

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**CIRCULAR LETTER 27
THE IMAGE OF THE GODHEAD**

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"...transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself..."

(III Letter to Agnes of Prague).

"Those who draw near to God do not withdraw from people, but rather become truly close to them" (Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 42).

To the Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters,

1.1 The *International Meeting of the Presidents of the Federations of Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters* was held in Mexico City at our Monastery of St. Veronica Giuliani, 15 - 23 May 2006. With this letter I also send you the summary of the discussions and the resolutions adopted at the conclusion of the meeting. I am grateful for this occasion to express my deep appreciation and admiration for the witness to prayer, simplicity and sisterhood which I experienced in Mexico City and in the many monasteries which I have visited during the past twelve years. At the same time, I wish to reflect with you on the challenge of living our common Franciscan charism in the world today.

Living as brothers and sisters

A LIFE PATTERNED ON THE HOLY TRINITY

2.1 The writings of St. Francis are filled with the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The *Earlier Rule* (Rnb) begins “*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (ER, Prologue, 1) and ends, “*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit*” (ER, XXIV, 5). Announcing his purpose in writing the *Letter to the Faithful*, St. Francis says:

“I decided to offer you ... the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Word of the Father, and the words of the Holy Spirit, which are spirit and life” (2LtF,3).

His writings overflow with praise for the Holy Trinity:

“Let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glory and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Savior of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him, Who without beginning and end, is unchangeable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, praiseworthy, glorious, exalted, sublime, most high, gentle, loveable, delightful, and totally desirable above all else and forever”(ER, XXIII, 11).

2.2 Francis experienced the Holy Trinity as “Relationship of Unspeakable Love” revealed to us in the mystery of the incarnation:

*“The most high Father made known from heaven through his holy angel Gabriel **this Word of the Father**...in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb he **received the flesh of our humanity and frailty**.”* (2LtF, 4)

We have been drawn into this “Relationship of Unspeakable Love”:

“O how glorious and holy and great to have a Father in heaven! O how holy, consoling, beautiful and wonderful to have such a Spouse! O how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, worthy of love, and above all things desirable it is to have such a Brother and such a Son: Our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2LtF, 54 - 56).

2.3 Francis understood with amazing intuition the words of Jesus, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me*” (John 14:6). He

set out to follow Jesus, not only in what He did, but, especially, in the relationship which Jesus has with His Father. Francis understood that in Jesus, we are all sons and daughters of the Father. Imitating His relationship with the Father, we too are drawn into the “Relationship of Unspeakable Love.” Clare understood this with equal clarity and tells Agnes: “*Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse*” (II Letter to Agnes of Prague).

2.4 The same spiritual clarity caused Francis to establish his Order as a fraternity. The Seventh Plenary Council states: “*fraternal evangelical life draws us into the intimate relationship of the Trinity*” (CPOVII, 1c). Francis chose fraternity, a life in relationship as brothers and sisters, because our Trinitarian God is relational by nature. “*God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*” (Gen. 1:27) We were not created in the image of a solitary, isolated and autonomous God, but a personal, relational and Trinitarian God, who is Father, Son and Spirit. Therefore, we image God only insofar as we live in relationship. Fraternity was the foundational experience of his conversion: “*After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do...*” (Test.14). Fraternity also became his mission:

“Francis embraced the plan of God for his creatures as a family of sisters and brothers: brother Sun, sister moon, etc. (see *CtC*). He never referred to himself simply as “Francis” but always as “Brother Francis.” “Brother” revealed the relationship with every creature to which God called him. “Brother” also revealed his mission to heal relationships through submissive humility” (CPOVII, 1 c).

In fact, Francis uses the title “brother” more often (306 times) than any other title except “Lord” (410 times).

2.5 Fraternity was his gift to the Church, his response to the invitation of the Crucified, “*Go repair my church ...*.” The Vatican Council gives the explanation telling us that the Most Holy Trinity is the “fraternity” which creates Church: “The universal church is seen to be a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (LG 4). Francis purified the Church by inviting all to live as sisters and brothers. This is also our mission today. Every monastery must form the church by imaging Trinitarian relationship.

Redeemed relationships

LIVING ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN OF THE HOLY GOSPEL

3.1 The Seventh Plenary Council helps us to understand the essential link which Francis perceived between “living as brothers and sisters” and “living according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (Test. 14).

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home in them” (Jn 14:23). Zeal to keep the word of Jesus inspired Francis to make the Gospel the very foundation of fraternal life (RnB I 1; RB I 1). *Established on fidelity to the Gospel, fraternal evangelical life draws us into the intimate relationship of the Trinity.*”

(CPOVII, 1c)

“Living according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (Test. 14), purifies, “redeems”, our relationships and creates on earth relationships patterned on the Holy Trinity, without domination, without subordination ... a unity of love. St. Francis indicates this at the end of the Letter to All the Faithful, “*I ... beg and implore you in **the love that is God**, to receive, to put into practice, and to observe, as you should, these words and the others of our Lord Jesus Christ with humility and love*” (2LtF, 87).

3.2 Francis discovered the “marrow”, the substance of the gospel in the poverty and the humility of God. In his “Praises of God” Francis exclaims, “*You are humility!*” (PrsG, 4). The turning of the Father toward the Son is the Father’s humility. Francis had a deep appreciation of this mystery: The “**Word of the Father... received the flesh of our humanity and frailty.** (2LtF, 4) Humility is not a quality of God, it is the essence of God as love. According to St. Bonaventure, the one and same embrace of the Father which reaches out to the Son, reaches out to us as well. He tells us that in the Incarnation, “God humbly bends down to lift the dust of our nature into unity with his own person”. God bends low to embrace all of creation in humility. In the Franciscan view, the incarnation occurred not because of sin, but because of the overflowing, abundant and humble love of God.

3.3 Humility reaches out to embrace the other. 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. To be humble is to love like God.

3.4 To live in fraternity after the manner of the Holy Gospel is held in common by all Franciscans. This manner of living makes us present among men and women to serve them in humility. This causes us to place at the heart of everything we do the contemplation of Him, the Lord Jesus, who out of love for humanity came among us and made His home among us, in order to create a new way of living together.

POVERTY AND CONTEMPLATION

4.1 *“Look, I say, at the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. O marvellous humility, o astonishing poverty! The King of Angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger”* (IV Letter to Agnes of Prague).

St. Clare saw the vital connection between poverty and prayer/contemplation. Clare stands in amazement at God’s action in making Himself poor and humble enough to lie in a stable, but even more so at the humility of the *Word made flesh*. She invites her sisters to throw open the horizon of their prayer, simply and purely, with love as their only motive. Once again, she writes to Agnes of Prague:

*“Most noble queen, gaze, consider, **contemplate** your Spouse*

who, though more beautiful than the children of men,

became, for your salvation, the lowest of men,

was despised, struck and scourged untold times

throughout his entire body

and then died amid the suffering of the cross.

Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse”

(II Letter to Agnes of Prague).

“Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate ...”. These words express the “how” of prayer, which is not just asking God for something or begging Him or praising Him; it means seeing things with the very eyes of God. Contemplative prayer places us in the same space as God and drives us out to do as God did! When Francis contemplated Jesus, he set out to imitate the relationship which Jesus had with His Father. He set out to imitate in humility the relationship of service which Jesus had with His brothers and sisters. Contemplate Him in the mystery of the cross! In the cross, Humble Love reaches out to embrace us even in the depths of our sinfulness, alienation and broken relationships. The cross is the infallible sign planted in history which indicates that no expression of our humanity is alien to or separated from God’s redeeming love.

4.2 How does God see and contemplate? How does God act? How (to follow Francis and Clare) does He who is Most High, All-powerful, glorious, Most Holy and supreme God, look at mankind and His creation? By bending low to embrace us in the **poverty of the Incarnation**, in the flesh of Jesus Christ. God enters man’s space, the space of the finite, so that what is Infinite might become accessible, visible and enjoyable. This is a Love that is not given as reward, or in exchange for something else, but is a free gift:

“Were a man to offer all his family wealth to buy love, contempt is all that he would gain” (Song of Songs, 8,7)

How do we see and contemplate:

“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!

Place your soul in the brilliance of glory!

Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance,

and, through contemplation,

transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself...

May you totally love Him, who gave Himself totally for your love” (III Letter to Agnes of Prague).

4.3 In her following of Francis, Clare intuits that in order to see Love at work, to recognise what God does for all people, it is necessary to live in poverty. **God has made Himself poor!** Entering into God-space, seeing as He sees, means

entering into the poverty assumed by Christ, and leads to new relationships marked by a single interest, namely, the good of the other.

Pope Benedict XVI affirms in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas est*: “Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me”. Prayer alone, or action alone, do not create God-space, the space where the God of Jesus Christ dwells. In prayer I understand what love of others is, and in action for others I understand more deeply the love of God for me.

4.4 We can see the reciprocity between the contemplation of Christ and the contemplation of the poor in the privilege of poverty which Pope Gregory IX granted Clare and her sisters in written form on 17 September, 1228. The poverty of the Poor Clares means *living with nothing of one's own*. It implies having no free disposal even over one's own life, except in the firm decision to follow Christ, to imitate Him in His obedience and in His poverty, expressed in the mysteries of the Incarnation, the Cross and the Eucharist.

4.5 The privilege of poverty also changed, in a radical manner, the relationship of the Poor Clares with the people around their monastery. Just as Francis contemplated the Crucified One in the broken body of the leper, so Clare and her sisters contemplated the image of the poor and humble Christ in the poor surrounding their monastery. Clare and her sisters insisted on the “privilege of poverty” that excluded the sisters from any domination over tenants and servants who were an essential part of the economy of every other medieval monastery of women. Not only that, Clare made her sisters very survival dependent on the same poor people. Unlike the brothers who followed Francis, the sisters who followed Clare could not exit from their cloister to beg. Their total dependence on Divine Providence was expressed in a total dependence on the poor! This radical choice was at the heart of her long spiritual struggle with Cardinal Ugolino.

4.6 Clare discovered the poverty of a God who had no power, not even a place in which to be born. She discovered a God who died outside the city wall, on a high place, a vantage point that enabled him to see and be seen and to embrace all in humble forgiving love. She discovered a God whose only power is love, and who changes the way in which people relate.

THE POOR CLARE GIFT TO THE ORDER AND THE WORLD

5.1 During the meeting in Mexico City, attention was drawn to the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* which the Holy Father wrote at the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of 2000. NMI had as its purpose to launch a reflection throughout the Church on “what the Spirit has been saying to the People of God...from the Second Vatican Council to the Great Jubilee,” and to offer “the contribution of [his] Petrine ministry, so that the Church may shine ever more brightly in the variety of her gifts” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 3). It was noted that for our Order, the newness of *Novo Millennio Ineunte* is found in the Pope’s discussion of a ***spirituality of communion***:

We need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed. ...A spirituality of communion indicates, above all, the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us” (NMI, 43).

The Pope saw this “spirituality of communion” as the essential link between the identity of the Church as a communion of love, and the mission of the Church as “sign and instrument...of the unity of the human family.”

5.2 The traditional Capuchin spirituality of both the First and Second Order is an ***ascetical*** spirituality, a spirituality of personal perfection. The austere simplicity of our poverty, our spirit of penance, dedication to meditation are essential if we wish to configure our lives on the poor and humble Christ. However, Pope John Paul II indicates that this alone does not suffice. Our poverty, humility and contemplative prayer must redeem and purify our human relationships as well: “the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us (NMI, 43). The Sixth and Seventh Plenary Councils have opened our eyes to the power of evangelical poverty and minority to transform and redeem relationships among ourselves, within the church and in the world. It is important that the Second Order make its unique contribution to this Franciscan spirituality of communion.

5.3 The secular world in which we live believes that its own technologies contain within themselves all that is necessary for human progress and liberation. It proclaims that own technologies, products of our human genius, contain within

themselves all that is necessary for a complete human life. We ourselves are omnipotent, we do not need God. There is an element of truth in the omnipotence of our human technologies because they obviously can do much. However, these technologies fail in the face of human greed and domination. The technologies are used for the benefit of the few against the good of the many. Technologies can multiply the loaves and fishes, but they cannot touch the heart of the young boy who made the miracle possible by offering all he had (cf. John 6:9)! Our secular world has become a world of alienation, isolation and broken relationships.

Every Poor Clare Monastery is an eloquent reminder to our world that poverty and contemplation transform relationships:

“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!

Place your soul in the brilliance of glory!

Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance,

and, through contemplation,

transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself...

May you totally love Him, who gave Himself totally for your love. (III Letter to Agnes of Prague).

Such a monastery is a haven of healing and peace.

5.4 The witness of the Poor Clares is important to the brothers of the First Order. In the Sixth and Seventh Plenary Councils we have discovered that poverty and minority build communion in the Church and in the world. The writings of Sister Clare carry a vital warning to the brothers: *“Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse ...”*. When “imitate” is cut off from gaze ... consider ... contemplate, it is reduced to social activism. The Sixth Plenary Council (prop. 17) warned against such activism. Activism is more than an excessive dedication to work. Activism causes us to live in such a superficial and frantic manner that it renders us incapable of reflection and equally incapable of experiencing the depth of our own humanity. Unless the reflections of the Sixth and Seventh Plenary Councils are rooted in contemplation, they will lose their force to renew relationships and to build the Church. The Poor Clare dedication

to prayer stands as a constant reminder to the brothers that one cannot truly imitate unless one also is dedicated to gaze, consider and contemplate!

5.5 Quoting Pope Benedict once more, we can say of Clare, too, that “Those who draw near to God do not withdraw from people, but rather become truly close to them” (Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 42). The spiritual vitality of Clare reached beyond the cloister walls of San Damiano to touch the life of Agnes and her sisters in Prague and to transform the relationship of her sisters with the poor of Umbria. St. Clare, enclosed in the God-space of her cloister, attracted men and women who recognised that her prayer had but a single power, that of love, the only power that creates life. May the meeting in Mexico City serve to inaugurate a prayerful reflection in your monasteries and your federations which will allow the spirit of St. Clare to give new life to her charism in your monasteries so that you, in turn, may give new life to the Church.

Your brother,
br. John Corriveau
General Minister, OFM Cap.

11 August 2006
Feast of St. Clare

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