



Letter of the General Minister
fra Mauro Jöhri OFMCap

THE GRACE OF WORKING

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THE GRACE OF WORKING

LETTER OF BR. MAURO JÖHRI, GENERAL MINISTER OF THE FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN TO CALL THE VIII PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE ORDER

Prot. N. 00860/13

**TO ALL THE FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN
TO THE CAPUCHIN POOR CLARES
TO THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE O.F.S.**

1. THE VIII PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE ORDER

Dear brothers and sisters,

In the programmatic letter that I sent to you on February 2 of this year, I announced that, together with the brother Definitors, we had decided to convene a Plenary Council of the Order on the theme of “the grace of working.” On that occasion I mentioned briefly the motivations that gave rise to the calling of this event. Writing now, I wish to propose the theme more deeply and I will do so by sharing with you some of the situations and facts that belong to my personal story. Before long I will thank to the Lord for the 50th anniversary of belonging to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin and during this time I have witnessed many changes. I have lived most of my life in Europe and it is obvious that the eyes with which I look at facts and events are those of a European. I can affirm, however, that the knowledge of the Order gained in seven years of service as General Minister confirms that the many changes seen in Europe, because of the process of globalization, are expanding progressively to all the continents. I would also emphasize that the next PCO should trace a line of continuity with the two immediately preceding that helped us to reflect of the themes of “Living Poverty in Brotherhood” and “Our Fraternal Life in Minority.”

Reflection on work places before us the sources of our material support and the work we carry out must keep two central values of our life in mind: fraternity and minority. These aspects will be examined and developed during the preparation for the event, which I wish to be lived as an opportunity for dialogue and formation for the friars.

Dear brothers, with joy and living hope I convoke the VIII Plenary Council of the Order, with the theme *The Grace of Working*, at Assisi, at our friary “Cristo Risorto” from 26 October to 21 November, 2015.

2. LISTENING TO ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working 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. In payment for their work they may receive whatever is necessary for the bodily support of themselves and their brothers, excepting coin or money, and let them do this humbly as is becoming for servants of God and followers of most holy poverty. (Later Rule, V)

And I worked with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I earnestly desire all brothers to give themselves to honest work. Let those who do not know how to work learn, not from desire to receive wages, but for example and to avoid idleness. (Test.)

And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door. (Test.)

These simple and strong words that St. Francis has handed on to us in the Rule and Testament have accompanied whole generations of friars through the centuries and they continue to be a source of reflection and healthy challenge also for us. The words of our Seraphic Father come to us in a time and in a society where radical changes are taking place in the area of work, with consequences that demand a serious evaluation regarding our way of supporting ourselves. The processes of globalization and secularization have created a new way of conceiving the human being and his activity, and to this is added a progressive detachment from the Church and from what she announces on matters spiritual, ethical, and social. Of course these changes do not reach all the countries of the world with same intensity, but we must recognize that the change is very large and we can confirm its influences and consequences even in the religious life. These brief and concise reflections are the beginning of the proposal for experiencing a moment of strong reflection that I have placed within the theme of the Grace of Working. In this letter, knowing that I am neither a historian nor a sociologist, I will try to examine the considerations described above. I have chosen to share and narrate what I myself have lived and observed during the years of my life as a Capuchin friar.

3. PASTORAL WORK IS DIMINISHING

At the end of my report to the General Chapter of 2012, I observed: *“We Capuchins, especially in countries of the southern world, are very involved in the pastoral apostolate. There are circumscriptions where the majority of the brothers are involved in parish work. Here and there, bishops are beginning to ask us to hand back the parishes which at one time were entrusted to the friars because they now have a good number of diocesan priests. Let this be an opportunity to diversify our service to the Church and to the People of God, opening ourselves to new forms of evangelizing presence and paying particular attention to those forms that promote peace and dialogue among different groups and peoples.”* (382)

This statement could seem to contradict the requests of some European and North American bishops who ask for the presence of our friars from the young circumscriptions rich with vocations in order to face the scarcity of priests in their dioceses. I am not against the friars of the young circumscriptions taking on pastoral commitments beyond the borders of the countries, but I honestly make them aware of the phenomenon of secularization which is eroding religious practice in a significant and rapid way. In the same way we can also see that the way people live in the northern hemisphere of the world is profoundly changed. Traditional pastoral action, centered principally on reaching as many people as possible with the sacraments, has undergone significant changes and each cultural and social setting presents its own characteristics that demand adaptations and innovations. Friars from the new circumscriptions who do not understand the changes taking place and who want to reproduce the pastoral action of their countries of origin risk, sooner or later, abandoning pastoral work and returning to the circumscriptions that they had left. Furthermore, the number of persons who renounce their belonging to the Church either tacitly or by public declaration is increasing constantly in the countries where until recently there was a very robust Catholic presence. I refer in a particular way to Northern Europe, but this is also valid for French-speaking Canada and also for other countries. We are aware that a major effort of new evangelization awaits us, but at the same time we note the steady decline of pastoral work. I refer in a particular way to that of the traditional sort for which we normally receive an offering. The possibilities for new pastoral activity are not lacking, but for many of these we cannot expect any compensation.

To continue the analysis, I present a situation that has been with the life of our Order for years: the diminishment of contributions to the central funds of the economic solidarity. The consequence of this decrease is the difficulty, ever more evident, in contributing to the numerous requests for subsidy presented by the young Circumscriptions, those of Africa and Asia in particular. Many Provinces that in the past had generously shared with other circumscriptions of the Order a part of the offerings received and the proceeds from the work of the friars, today are not able to do so or are able to do so only in a very reduced way. What has happened? What are the reasons for this decrease?

Everyone affirms, and it is true, that the principal cause can be attributed to the economic crisis that has struck Europe and the other continents. We confirm that offerings are falling drastically and that also the revenue coming from the work of individual friars has undergone a significant reduction. We attribute this phenomenon also to the decrease in vocations affecting many Provinces and to the unprecedented downsizing of our presences. The average age of our centuries-old Provinces is constantly increasing; often the larger part of the income

of the fraternity comes from the proceeds of retirement pensions and this money has to be used in large part for the care of the older friars. It is right that this is so, but in this way that excess of Providence—at one time shared with our friars living in very poor contexts where the people are not able to contribute economically for the work and ministry offered—comes to be lacking.

4. "PRAY FOR US!"

Beyond what is described above, I maintain that the reasons for the crisis are even more profound and can be attributed to certain changes in mentality taking place in our society. I want to give some examples, drawing on my experiences as a Capuchin friar. A few weeks after being invested with the Capuchin habit in the novitiate of Arco di Trento, I was sent with the other brother novices into the surrounding countryside to go questing for grapes. This allowed us to make good wine at no cost. During the course of the year it was up to the lay brothers of the fraternity above all to go out questing for oil, for potatoes, for firewood, and for other products. A brother went to town each day questing for bread. The large garden of the friary provided us with fruits and vegetables in abundance. Note that I'm not telling stories from the beginning of the 1800s; these go back to 1964, 50 years ago!

Returning to Switzerland to study theology, in spring and fall the studies were suspended for a week and we all left for questing in the surrounding villages. Normally the people gave us money and, with the rare exception, we were received with great cordiality. Why were the people generous with us instead of slamming the door in our face? I think I can say that between the people who gave and us friars there existed an agreement that was unwritten but respected with fidelity and forcefulness. Let me explain: in the hearts and minds of the people we friars were perceived as those who had chosen to give their lives to God and who had a particular task: prayer and intercession for all the people who, with their offerings and their gifts, manifested the Providence of the Lord. Our life of prayer and renunciation completed and fulfilled that aspect of devotion that the majority of the faithful were not able to live, but which they felt was good and necessary. Stated in a succinct way, the reasoning was this: *"You friars pray and lead an austere life and the fruits of such a way of life before God will return also to our advantage. You fill up the measure of what we also are called to do, but for many passing reasons are not able to do, and thus you have the right to knock on our doors and ask for a contribution for your support. You pray for us and we are prepared to support you!"* In the eyes of the people our presence had a strong symbolic value. It carried something of reassurance and intercession in the relationship of each individual with God. We were considered men able to present persons and the situations they lived to the Lord and this intercession was honored with great generosity. How many times we heard it said: "Pray for me!" with the person saying it putting money in our hands. Many people continued to give us offerings even after the friars no longer went out questing. After the middle of the 60s, even though the standard of living in Europe and in North America was much improved, the Capuchin friars, because of their simple lifestyle and abundant missionary work, continued to enjoy the help of many people. There was a willingness to help, to share; to trust in us, sure that the offering would certainly arrive at the destination and would serve something good and useful.

5. THE CHANGE

The social-religious context and the fabric of relationships that I have described so far and in which I have lived no longer exist, or better we find them in a marginal way. This tacit agreement between the people and the friars has become progressively fractured. Not infrequently it happened that, knocking on some door, the question was put to us: "Sir, for what organization or work are you collecting funds?" The weakening of our bond with the people finds its explanation both in relation to the transition from the peasant world to one that is industrial and then technological and in the strong influence that the process of secularization exercises on our way of living the Gospel and on the religious life. One of the consequences of this change is that our support no longer enjoys the sources that fed it in the past. This finding makes it urgent to reflect on our work, that we may make choices that help us to look forward with confidence in Him from whom we ask *our daily bread*.

The new generations of friars both in Europe and in other areas of the world have not known questing but surely they too have benefited from the generosity of the people toward us and thanks to the agreement described above. We have shared what we have received and a part of the fruit of our labor as well because we are aware of our belonging to one international fraternity. Sharing was made possible because the friars have tried to live without compromise what is affirmed in our Constitutions: "All that the friars receive as remuneration for their work belongs to the fraternity and must therefore be handed over in full to the superior." Each individual house passed ordinary surplus to the Province and the Province in turn transferred the money to the General Curia, which sought to meet the needs of those Circumscriptions that were not able to be self-sustaining.

In the Church the Capuchins belong to the mendicant Orders. This classification, which continues to appear on the pages of the *Annuario Pontificio*, expresses the willingness to be itinerant, to live a poor and simple life that makes us owners of nothing. As poor people we are called to live from our work, knowing that the same pastoral ministry is undergoing a powerful change. One of the last signs of the agreement between us and the people that continues to exist, even if in a form ever more reduced, is the offerings that we receive for the celebration of Holy Mass; but also in this case the diminishment seems to be irreversible.

In the face of these changes we cannot remain passive with idle hands; in every part of the world we are called to ask ourselves how we intend to support ourselves. The fundamental criterion that must guide our reflection and that I wish to affirm here with force and clarity is this: the work of the individual friar must be in harmony with the primacy of the fraternal life. Will the inevitable specialization demanded by an occupation be able to safeguard this principle? What then follows from the choices we are called to make and to foster? And what sort of fraternal life do we intend to foster in a profoundly changed context?

6. WHAT KIND OF FRATERNITY?

Let us reflect now on another transformation that has taken place in our midst and that strongly affects our way of life. I refer to the personnel that we have taken on as our employees for various services internal to the fraternity. There are those that take care of the kitchen, who do the cleaning, who wash and iron our clothes, who answer the telephone and open the door to guests, who take care of our sick friars. Most of these people receive a salary for what they do. I reaffirm the moral duty of every one of our fraternities toward employed personnel: to act always with justice, in full respect for the applicable laws of various countries, observing all the norms of remuneration and insurance. We take on people who serve us, and this is not an irrelevant fact, but I daresay that this practice has progressively changed the face and even the identity of our fraternities. The presence of paid staff has allowed us to be more free for pastoral work, it has dispensed us from doing work, such as domestic work, that we don't consider to be very gratifying, or not gratifying at all. In many cases the presence of employees has allowed us to procrastinate for a long time about the closure of certain houses, maintaining a very reduced number of friars in the place. These considerations highlight how the fraternal life has come to be conceived and structured principally as a function of pastoral activity. Our houses risk resembling more those of canons than friaries of brothers who live minority and poverty! This way of conceiving and living the fraternal life has greatly weakened its symbolic value and the consequences are the ease with which we descend to compromise: we dispense ourselves from common prayer, from meals taken in common, from recreation and from the celebration of local chapters. We have delegated the larger part of the manual work to third parties and now, because of diminishing income, we are forced to revise our practices and our choices.

Dear brothers, let us ask ourselves a question to open a reflection on our personal and fraternal experience: are we willing to make of the economic crisis, with all its relative consequences mentioned above, an opportunity to evaluate what quality of fraternal life we wish to live? The reaction that I often observe in the face of economic problems is that of running for cover in haste, evaluating the situations only from the technical or economic point of view. We are called to downsize and rethink our lifestyle. Is it so impossible that we take on ourselves and distribute among ourselves the various tasks and services proper to the fraternal life, proposing strongly this value from the very beginning of initial formation? (Const. 30,3) Are we willing to do this with great honesty, seeing in it a unique opportunity to verify the quality of our relationships in which we can experience the beauty and the joy of serving one another? It isn't just about reappropriating manual labor for ourselves, but about reappropriating certain original and living values of our fraternal life. In the future we will be called to diversify, in a significant way, what we do for work and we must do so privileging the principles that guide the fraternal-evangelical life. Is it so unthinkable for us to live like many brothers and sisters or many families that can't afford to have domestic servants or other employees and that have to maintain a sober and simple standard of living in order to make it to the end of the month? To the extent that each friar grows in the sense of belonging to the fraternity, this will help to eliminate the comparisons and the differences which are often the cause of suffering and misunderstanding: both the friar who has a well-paid ministry or profession and the one dedicated for the most part to domestic work or to social service without some compensation contribute in equal measure to the good of the one fraternity. Let

us ask that this awareness be strengthened more and more as a precious patrimony of our relationships.

7. THE VALUE OF WORK FOR THE INDIVIDUAL FRIAR

Work does not have value just as a means of support, but provides for a person a sense of his own life, contributing to the realization of his proper humanity. We witness with dismay the drama of those who remain out of work for a long time and we see the negative consequences that unemployment produces at the psychological, relational, and familial level. These situations, at times tragic, help us to understand why it makes sense to use the term *Grace* when we speak of work. Each of us would like to have a job that is as gratifying and creative as possible, that permits each individual to fully develop his skills and therefore realize himself according to his own aspirations. This is a legitimate desire but it can enter into conflict with the demands of fraternal life and mutual service. The choices involved in the ministerial and professional preparation offered to each individual friar cannot be made without keeping in mind the needs of the common good. It must be done while taking into account both the aptitudes of each and the needs of the fraternity, in particular those of the Province. Implementing this criterion can lead to the experience of moments of tension and sometimes the need to ask a friar to accept a proposal that doesn't correspond to his expectations. Thank you, brothers, for all the times you have accepted and will accept something *not completely pleasing to you*, grounding your *yes* on the Evangelical Counsel of obedience and on service to the fraternity. It is necessary that we ask the Lord for the Grace to make concrete and visible what we affirm and preach with regard to obedience, sacrifice, and willingness to serve even to the giving of one's own life for the growth and advancement of others. To accept a proposal of a work or a fraternal service calls upon the same dimension of our faith and requires continual learning in free self-giving.

I now share a situation that puzzles and raises questions for me. A good number of friars have had the opportunity for studies, completing them and thus obtaining the license or the doctorate. Unfortunately, I find that a good number of these friars do not put the knowledge acquired to service, sometimes because they are assigned to do something else, other times because they refuse to pass on what they have received. How is it that so many of our graduates, once the studies are finished, completely desert the paths of research and simply content themselves to keep repeating the same things?

8. ABLE TO SAY 'THANK YOU'

Sometimes I have the impression that a sense of gratitude is lacking among us. One isn't able to say 'thank you.' When I visit the Provinces what often comes at me is an endless series of demands: We want more computers, more means of transportation and other instruments that make us feel comfortable and trendy. On few occasions have I heard words of gratitude for all that we have, that in almost of all circumscriptions our standard of living is certainly superior to the average level of the people. The Order permits us to dedicate ourselves to full-time study, freeing us from preoccupation with money and from the obligations that so many citizens must observe (taxes, insurance, etc.). Gratitude is manifested in making fruitful what we have acquired over years of study, working in the fields of teaching and cultural animation. Thanks also become concrete in washing the dishes and in cleaning the toilets. Placing the fruit of our work in common allows us to live in a dignified way, even with a little, and to share with others a part of what Providence has put into our hands. This is a fundamental dimension of our life; its realization depends strongly on the sense of belonging to the Order and to the fraternity which we develop along the way of initial formation and that we cultivate with care throughout all of our existence.

Our Constitutions permit the friars to "invest whatever money is really necessary for them in banks and similar institutions, even at a moderate rate of interest." (66,3) In the Order there are Circumscriptions that have rented their land or buildings to others and receive a regular income for them. Other Circumscriptions of recent foundation exert themselves to realize projects in view of self-support with the intent of producing a regular income. Up to what point can we go in this direction? The realization of projects, especially those linked to the agricultural exploitation of land, have proved extremely difficult and far from profitable. I believe that we cannot in any way think to finance ourselves only in this way. It would be against the vow of poverty and it distances us from the people that the Constitutions call "of modest means" (66,3). I believe it makes sense that a modest income produced from investments or from rented property could be used to finance in the first place the work of our friars committed to social works for the poor for which they do not receive a salary. But even these cases must not detract from the duty of charity and solidarity shared among us internally, which I summarize and hand over to the responsibility that each of us has before God and the brothers: *I have received the grace of working and knowing the everything is gift I turn over my salary or the money I receive under the title of offering to my fraternity, happy to support the needs of my brothers, or to support the work of the one who works with the poor and least of the earth.*

9. CONCLUSION

Dear brothers, the purpose of this letter is to initiate the reflection on our work and on the Grace that it represents. I wanted to point out certain situations without pretending to be exhaustive. We will work together in the various phase that will precede, accompany, and follow the celebration of the Plenary Council of the Order and now I have already asked your willingness to offer your generous cooperation. I wish to highlight above all that we are at a turning point regarding both fraternity and the individual friar and for this I want to get some of the friars started in preparing a contribution that touches on our history and our sources. It is necessary to pray, to reflect, to seek new paths, and to make innovative choices. For this reason it is important that the whole Order, that is all of you, let yourselves get involved in this type of reflection and communicate it to others.

To prepare the PCO we have set up a working group to further develop what I have drafted in this letter and to prepare a tool for reflection to be sent to all the friars. Your contributions will then allow the friars gathered for a month in Assisi to develop a series of propositions to be sent to the whole Order for the purpose of practical guidance on our way.

The brothers of the preparatory commission are:

Br. Štefan Kožuh, General Vicar, president

Br. Hugo Mejía Morales, General Definitor, vice president

Br. Francisco Lopes (PR Ceara Piauí, Brazil)

Members: Br. Giovanni Battista Urso (PR Calabria, Italy)

Br. Mark Joseph Costello (PR Calvary, United States)

Br. Moses Njoroge Mwangi (VG Kenya, Africa)

Br. Nithiya Sagayam (PR Tamil Nadu North, India)

Dear brothers, I carry in my heart the happy certainty that the Spirit of the Lord is already helping us to make essential, simple, and incisive choices and I desire that this beauty be recounted and made known among us. Let us support one another and remind one another that the Grace of the Lord supports and accompanies our life and our work. May each of us, with our gaze turned to Christ and to Francis, do his own part.

I want this letter to reach the hands of every friar of our Order, and so I ask the Provincial and Viceprovincial Ministers, the Custodes and the Delegates to make sure this happens as quickly as possible. Thank you.

I greet each of you with fraternal affection.

Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister

Rome, November 1st, 2013
Solemnity of All Saints

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