



Letter of the General Minister
fra Mauro Jöhri OFMCap

“HOW MANY LOAVES DO YOU HAVE?”

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“HOW MANY LOAVES DO YOU HAVE?”

CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE GENERAL MINISTER FOLLOWING THE MEETING CALLED AT FRASCATI¹ ON MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN EUROPE

Prot. N. 01060/15

1. THE QUESTION OF JESUS

“How many loaves do you have?”² Jesus turns to his disciples with this question after they expressed how they were at a loss and powerless before a hungry and tired crowd. There were truly very many; five thousand men without counting the women and children, and what could be found was only some loaves and a few small fish.

Our own gaze, equally at a loss, goes out to the uncountable number of migrants and refugees that try to enter Europe after having passed through Lebanon, Turkey, and other countries. We realize that the situation is tragic. It isn't just Europe that is involved in this flow of migrants; think also of that mass of people that, looking for a better future, try to cross the borders between Mexico and the United States, and of those from various African countries that take on the Mediterranean Sea. As I write, the press is publishing the news of a shipwreck along the coast of Turkey in which six children died. In this moment our attention is brought above all to Europe, but it would be wrong to think that this is only a European question.

The people fleeing are many, a great many, many more than those five thousand that Jesus embraced with his gaze. They instill fear and in some places walls have been built to impede their way; there are also those who would chase them back to where they came from. Those who are ready to welcome ask themselves what can be done to face such a great emergency. It is almost to hear the same question of the disciples of Jesus: “Where are we to get bread enough in the desert to feed so great a crowd?”

2. HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST: COMPASSION

Brothers, I have recalled to you the gospel passage of the multiplication of the loaves so that how we look at the tragic events of the migrants might be illuminated by the faith, that this might lift up the mind of Jesus: “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” Jesus experiences ‘compassion’; he lets himself be touched by their

¹ “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mt 25:35) Prot. N. 00761/15

² Mt 15:34. See also Mt 14: 22-33; 15: 29-39; Mk 6: 30-44; 8: 1-10; Lk 9: 10-17; Jn 6: 1-15.

empty stomach, by their suffering, to the point that he calls the disciples to himself: something must be done! We think of St. Francis who let himself be touched by the suffering of the lepers and then “showed mercy” to them.

Dear Capuchin brothers, in whatever part of the world we find ourselves, let us not pretend to not see, to pass by on the other side, to build walls of fear and of conformist hypocrisy. May the suffering experienced by these people, the desperation that is written on their faces, truly move us to compassion and seek our charity and our minority. Let us not fall into the common places that generate indifference, or that bring to our lips expressions like, “Why don’t they just stay home?” Our vocation of the following of Jesus Christ, supported by the charism of Francis of Assisi, asks us to identify ourselves with the compassionate heart of Jesus. He, the Lord, would ask us today as then: “How many loaves do you have?” The question made current for today could be, “How many places and how many unused spaces do you have? How many means and how much money can you make available?” Our response will not be very different from that of the disciples: “We have an empty friary and we have some unused spaces in the house where we live now, but what is this for such a big emergency? We are already involved in many activities and now there arrives also this urgency to deal with!” Jesus would have said: “Have them sit down,” “Have them enter!” Sharing will work a miracle once again!

Our stance of faith, our desire to do something, often has to deal with the norms and laws of the authorities of individual countries. So it can happen that because of a simple structural defect, for example, because of electrical sockets placed too low on a wall, the authorities in charge of the receiving of migrants refuse the offer of a friary that has all the essential qualities for welcome. Despite the unexpected and bureaucratic surprises, I think it deeply evangelical to dare with insistence, making signs and using every opportunity available to us to create a welcoming mentality towards the migrants and refugees.

3. THE MEETING IN FRASCATI

All that I have described so far moved me to call a meeting in Frascati to discuss, share, and think about choices for the future. The meeting was held on this past October 15-16 and united 35 friars from 17 countries, especially from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The friars present were introduced to the topic by experts from *Caritas Internationalis*, from *Jesuit Refugee Services*, and by two sisters of the UISG who are working in this area.

We listened to particularly touching experiences that are already going on in the Order, especially in the places most involved like Lebanon, Malta, Greece, and Italy. Br. Abdallah of the Custody of Lebanon noted that his country has welcomed 1.2 million Syrian refugees, who now make up 25% of the population of the country. This certainly brings significant challenges for the country, both of an economic type such as the shortage of food, as of a social type such as the competition to guarantee a place of work at any cost. Our friars, thanks also to contributions from the General Curia, have begun to welcome some families, providing for the education of Christian children and guaranteeing medical support.

Br. Gianfranco Palmisani, Provincial Minister of the Roman Province, told us how his Province has made available to refugees more than one empty friary and that they have done this in close collaboration with the competent authorities. Br. Gianfranco also spoke of the case he

dealt with in which the offering of a property was refused by the competent authorities because the concentration of refugees in a certain area was too high.

4. WHAT CAN WE DO?

The emergency continues and our commitment cannot be lacking. The agencies of communications denounce that not a few countries have made great proclamations of welcome, but, for reasons of convenience and political opportunity, delay in making them concrete. It is our task to be close to the migrants and refugees; to the smoke of big words and declarations it is necessary to respond with the evangelical concreteness that is able to develop projects of solidarity. Beyond this, let us use our energies to spread a mentality that is respectful of the dignity of every person, independent of religions and race. Let us encourage initiatives and places where the residents of the individual countries can know the refugees, in order to create relationships of friendship and support.

If we have structures at our disposal that are unused and in good condition, let us not fear to offer them to the competent authorities for a service of welcome. Why not welcome individual persons or families into unused friaries?

One proposal that emerged during our meeting in Frascati was that of establishing international fraternities that would serve the refugees in the places of greatest movement, such as Lampedusa, Greece, and Austria, just to name a few. This proposal is demanding and very valid, but must be studied and developed further.

If after having studied, thought, and made the necessary discernment, we reach the conclusion that we cannot give anything at the level of structures or of concrete welcome, there still remains the possibility of making a monetary contribution to the Emergency Fund of the Economic Solidarity of our Order or to other organizations committed in this area. When Jesus asked the disciples how many loaves they had, he invited them to share not only the surplus, but also what seemed to be strictly necessary and indispensable for their life. The Lord is knocking with the same insistence at our door as well! Let us do our part and He will know how to do His. I ask you to read, with a welcoming and compassionate heart, chapter 25 of the gospel of Matthew, beginning with verse 31, which is our handbook for making plans of solidarity; and let us never forget, and I mean never, the words of Jesus: “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40)

5. JOURNEYING WITH OUR POVERTY

Dear brothers, let us walk toward the Nativity of the Lord; let us do so with each carrying the poverty of a few loaves and fish, but giving them to Him. I have to do it, I who serve among you as General Minister, do it you who are Provincial Minister or Custos, you do it too dear brother in whatever part of the world you are in, and where, in this holy year of mercy, you will preach and witness to the Love of God for every person. Let us do it together, brothers, announcing that our fraternity, begun by St. Francis, is able to generate signs of hope, of welcome, of generosity, just as Christ has done in giving his life for us. Let us do it together in witness that we have not only received the grace of going where nobody wants to go, but of welcoming those that many reject. Not a few will insult us, will tell us that we are bringing

dangers, that we have to do defend national pride, that these people steal our jobs and still other things. The response to all this is written in the gospel.

I confess to you that I carry in my heart the desire to read soon your responses to this, my appeal. I ask that this letter reach every friar of the Order.

I wish you a time full of mercy given and received. To all a good and holy Christmas and a year 2016 that brings you the vigor and courage that come from the faith!

Faternally

Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister OFM Cap.

Given in Rome, on December 8, 2015
The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary,
Patron of our Order

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