

Two Faces of the Same Charism

Circular Letter of the General Minister To the Capuchin Poor Clares

(Prot. N. 00268/17)



Rome, March 25, 2017
Solemnity of the
Annunciation of the Lord

Dear Sisters,

May the Lord give you his peace!

This letter is addressed first of all to you, Sisters, because it concerns your life. I would like to begin by giving thanks to God for your presence and contemplative witness, which speaks to us of a seeking of the Lord's face that is total and profound. By your life you are a gift for the whole Church and especially for our Capuchin family. What would our mission be without the constant help of your faithful prayer, without your discreet and priceless presence at our side?

I wish, then, to offer for your reflection some thoughts, aware that this is a particular moment of grace for you following the Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere* and the beginning of the demanding work on your basic legislation that you have now been able to begin.

1. Two faces of the same charism

*“The Son of God has become for us the Way
that our blessed father Francis,
His true lover and imitator,
has shown and taught
us by word and example.”
(St. Clare, Testament, 2)*

1.1. St. Clare gave particular emphasis to considering St. Francis as the founder and because of this ensured that the Church would recognize the Poor Ladies as part of the same family as the Friars Minor. Certainly St. Francis was a rather peculiar founder. He did not leave precise norms, but only opened a space for fraternity and pointed out a spiritual path (cf. St. Francis, *The Form of Life given to St. Clare; The Form of Life of St. Clare*, VI, 3-4). St. Francis did not act like a patriarch who draws up rules for his spiritual daughters, but acted only as a brother who accompanies, leaving his sisters free and autonomous, trusting in their maturity and in their ability to be open to the Holy Spirit.

1.2. The relationship between Francis and Clare is fundamentally one of communion, aware that it expresses two faces of the same charism. This original relationship sets up the relationship between our Orders. The promise of the founder to have care and fraternal solicitude, as for his brothers, remains today the motivation for our closeness. What really matters is not our juridical association, nor even pastoral care nor the priestly service of chaplains and confessors. What matters the most between us is the relationship of fraternity.

1.3. Our Capuchin reform had the strong intention of returning to the original intentions of St. Francis. In its first moments,

the reform did not want to take on the care of monasteries of nuns, for such was believed to be a stable, fixed, and delicate work and thus contrary to poverty and itinerancy. Thus this was forbidden absolutely in our first Constitutions (cf. Capuchin Constitutions of 1536, cap. XI). Venerable Lorenza Longo worked a true ‘miracle’ in obtaining in 1538 the recognition of her monastery in Naples – already approved in 1535 – in its living under the first rule of St. Clare and being aggregated to the Capuchins (cf. *motu proprio Cum monasterium*, December 10, 1538). The inspiration and the passion of Mother Lorenza allowed the Capuchin reform to acquire anew the original way of expressing the two faces of the same charism.

1.4. Today, after almost five hundred years, we can ask ourselves if our relationship is centered on fraternity, or if it is more important for us to look for juridical dependence, priestly service, or formation. Do we value a certain free and easy relationship between us? Do we make ourselves equals? Are we able to share our experiences? Do we serve one another in a mutual way? Why is it so difficult to be with one another and call ourselves brother or sister and not father or mother? Are we basing ourselves on our original identity?



2. A reflection of divine communion

“Through contemplation, transform your entire
being in the image of the Godhead Itself”
(St. Clare, *Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 13)



2.1. Vatican II has brought back the theology and spirituality of communion to the center of the life and mission of the Church. As an image of the mutual communion of love that is the life of the Most Holy Trinity, the Church is called to be a mirror of unity in diversity by means of the communion of fraternal love (cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 43). Unity does not mean uniformity. “[Our model is] the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 236).

2.2. The reality of cultural transformation in our time, with its widespread process of increasing secularization, brings with it a series of anthropological changes that put into question the fundamental facts of humanity itself: the source of human dignity, sexuality, the family, and social roles. The ideology of gender, spreading in many areas of society, puts the traditional way of thinking of life in crisis. Along with this dominant culture, at least in many nations, a certain cultural diversity has become a plain and lived reality in the city streets because of the process of migration. For this reason, intercultural dialogue has become an urgent necessity if the danger of the formation of ghettos is to be avoided.

2.3. We too can run the risk of becoming a ‘ghetto’, a closed culture in the midst of a world that ‘speaks another language’, if we do not have a human and spiritual capacity for

dialogue. Today dialogue is the indispensable means by which real paths of communion are put into practice.

2.4. We are called to study well the challenges of the current culture, taking as our starting point the intercultural experiences already happening in the Order. Our charism of fraternity can offer a beautiful witness of how communion can be made real in the world of today. A communion that is the fruit of a dialogue born in silence and in listening, the fruit of a spiritual life centered in divine Love.

2.5. This brings us to asking ourselves: Do we know how to value the cultures of others or do we judge everything from a presumed cultural superiority? Are we ready to learn from other cultures where the charism has developed and is lived? Are we frightened of diversity? Can we make an effort at dialogue, beginning at the level of the local community? Can we take the time necessary for a mutual listening, looking together to foster unity in diversity?

2.6 Dialogue is an indispensable tool in this changing world. At the spiritual level too, peaceful and deep dialogue is the clearest sign of the quality of a contemplative life and its transformative power which makes us the reflection of God.

3. A journey toward revitalizing the charism

*“Always be mindful of your commitment ...
What you hold, may you hold,
what you do, may you do and not stop.
But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet,
so that even your steps stir up no dust,
may you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly,
on the path of prudent happiness.”*

(St. Clare, *Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 11-13)

- 3.1. The international meeting of Capuchin Poor Clares in 2016, in Mexico City, was a true and living expression of our Order in communion, committed to the intercultural dialogue that makes unity in diversity grow. The presidents, the assistants, and the other participants, all of us, worked very hard in listening, in dialogue, in participation, and in discussion in order to arrive at the clear orientation that will guide the way in the coming years, with special attention to the work of the revision of your Constitutions.
- 3.2. It was proposed to “bring vitality back to the ways of living the charism by means of the revision of the Constitutions, keeping the structure of the text, but with particular attention to those points that, based on our experience, demand a fitting reformulation” (*Agreements of the II International Meeting of the Capuchin Poor Clares*, Agreement 1, General Objective, Mexico 2016).
- 3.3. The II International Meeting revealed the maturity of all the sisters. We gave thanks for the way in which the Federations have taken up many paths since Vatican II, paths of renewal and of collaboration among monasteries, of formation and of communion. The fruits of

formation in recent years, and especially of the sisters who have studied in Rome, are very visible and have demonstrated themselves in their skilled contributions. Nevertheless, what is most important is to feel the desire to revitalize the ways of expressing the charism.

- 3.4. The Church today asks of you: “Be beacons to those near to you and, above all, to those far away. Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time. Be sentinels of the morning (cf. Is 21:11-12), heralding the dawn (cf. Lk 1:78). By your transfigured life, and with simple words pondered in silence, shows us the One who is the way, and the truth and the life (cf. Jn 14:6), the Lord who alone brings us fulfillment and bestows life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). Cry out to us, as Andrew did to Simon: ‘We have found the Lord’ (cf. Jn 1:40). Like Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, announce to us: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ (Jn 20:18). Cherish the prophetic value of your lives of self-sacrifice. Do not be afraid to live fully the joy of evangelical life, in accordance with your charism” (Pope Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 6).
- 3.5. After Pope Francis’s great gift of an apostolic constitution on contemplative life, it is time to move ahead with the first task developed during the International meeting: the project of the revision of the Constitutions. We now have more clarity and can trace out the path to take more securely. Unfortunately, we are still waiting for the Instruction from the Congregation for Consecrated Life on putting *Vultum Dei quaerere* into practice. Nevertheless, we are able to take up the first stage in this process of revision. Even though it is not yet the time to concentrate on the drafting of the text, you are called to focus on the points of your experience that merit particular attention and to identify the ‘tensions’ that need study and on which you will reflect in a particular way.

3.6. A preparatory commission, or pre-commission, made up of eight sisters representing the various regions of the world, has worked in order to offer you a guide. They are developing an *Instrumentum laboris* in view of presenting to you a series of questions on which it will be very important to take your time and reflect upon both personally and in common.

3.7. We are called to involve all the sisters and all the monasteries. Every sister and every abbess is responsible for the revision. The Federations have the important task of animation and accompaniment in this process. The *Instrumentum laboris* is flexible and each Federation will be able, according to its circumstances, to find its own right way to work on the reflections and questions. Monasteries that are not yet in federation are also invited to give their contribution, and the commission shall have a special solicitude for them.

3.8 What hopes does this project awaken in you? What fears or preoccupations? With what attitude will you take up the journey? Casting your gaze on deeds of St. Clare and the Capuchin Poor Clares, you are invited to move ahead with trusting steps, letting yourselves be guided by the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity.



4. The path of peace and good

“It is a slow and arduous effort calling for a desire for integration and a willingness to achieve this through the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter.”
(Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 220)

4.1. The revision of your Constitutions is a common path of ongoing formation, a true seeking of the common good of the Order and the building of communion. The goal that we intend to reach is not the only important thing, but no less the way in which we want to make the journey. It would be good to do this in a formative way, with recourse to personal reflection, sharing in common, as well as written input, thus looking to stimulate and awaken the flame of the charism.

4.2. Pope Francis wisely points out *four principles* for building communion on the path of social peace and in seeking the common good (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 217-237) as a basis for a culture of encounter. We can allow ourselves to be guided by these principles as we reflect and ask ourselves questions in working with the *Instrumentum laboris*.

4.2.1. *Time is greater than space.* This principle reminds us of the need to take our time in the process such that it can be developed well, without worrying about immediate results. Giving a correct answer is not what is important, but rather asking the fitting question, thinking together, comparing these with our experience, and reaching an understanding. (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 222-225)

4.2.2. *Unity prevails over conflict.* Differences are inevitable, and many times they are the cause of conflicts that must be accepted, endured, and managed, such that they can be transformed

into a process of peace and communion. Even a diversity in thinking and sensibilities should be expressed peacefully, and can be reconciled in a unity that is always greater. (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 226-230)

4.2.3. *Realities are more important than ideas.* Ideas are only tools for gathering up, understanding, and guiding reality. It can be dangerous to live in an ideological world, one of just words and rhetoric, that does not keep in mind what is going on practically speaking. In the responses and proposals let us not forget to ‘keep our feet on the ground.’ (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 231-233)

4.2.4. *The whole is greater than the part.* This final principle points out the necessity of thinking of the particular in reference to the whole, the local beside the universal, our particular experiences in relation to the challenges of the whole Church, for example the tension between

inculturation and a healthy globalization. The life of the community passes between practical concerns and the sense of being an international Order present in different continents. (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 234-237)

4.3. Are we willing to accept and give time to reflection, dialogue, and to encounter? Do we truly wish to foster a mutual listening, an environment of trust in which we can express ourselves? Are we able to manage conflict? Shall we look for a reconciled unity? Are we aware that this is the way of doing penance in our time, a true demand of conversion, an ascetical path for getting out of ourselves?

4.4. If we take up the path with these four principles, our *peace and good* could become more than a traditional Franciscan greeting, but a choice of a life, a concrete contribution to a more peaceful world.

5. Conclusion

I am certain that your contemplative wisdom will make you faithful to the charism in the healthiest tradition of the Order, opening you up to the newness and needs of today. Our great challenge is not to lose our identity, but to live it in a constant reform. I am convinced, dear sisters, that personal reflection and open and sincere dialogue made in mutual respect and in a contemplative attitude will bring out the richness you have in common, the diversity that makes different expressions beautiful, and the authentic witness of communion lived in God. In this way, the responses that you will send to the Preparatory Commission will bring about a lively renewal.

All this being said, there remains only to entrust thoughts and intentions to the Mother of God, that she may help you to discern the best for your life, in truth and charity, according to the spirit of the Gospel.

I invoke upon each of you and upon each community the gift of discernment, a mature fruit of the divine Spirit in us, for “you have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit” (St. Francis, *Form of Life given to St. Clare*, 1), certain that your Spouse will be with you!

Fraternally,

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General Minister OFM Cap.

