

# STUDY RESOURCES FOR THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS MINOR

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## CHAPTER ONE OF THE CONSTITUTIONS THE LIFE OF THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS MINOR

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Chapter one of our Capuchin Constitutions mirrors chapter one of the later Rule of 1223, approved by Pope Honorius III. This means that it lays the foundations, as it were, for all that follows. In fact, by stating that the Rule and Life of the lesser brothers is *to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of our own and in chastity*, it is announcing the foundation on which we are to build our lives as Capuchin brothers. The chapters that follow are nothing other than a practical unfolding of this initial statement, namely, that we are to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Immediately after stating that he wished to make the Gospel his form of life, Saint Francis promised obedience and reverence to the Pope. “Confirmation by the Church that the way followed by Francis and his men is in conformity with the Gospel means, and guarantees, that in their life too, as in that of the Church, the Gospel is alive. Only the Church can give that guarantee.”<sup>1</sup>

Starting from these two initial clauses of the Rule, the first chapter of our Constitutions has been sub-divided into two articles:

- Our life in accordance with the Gospel
- Our life in the Church.

In this sense the first chapter of the Constitutions lays the foundations for the basic orientations of the life of the Capuchin lesser brothers and proclaims them: it announces our charism. It should be noted that here we are standing on the bedrock of our Constitutions as they were reformulated in the

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<sup>1</sup> DINO DOZZI, *La Regola per la life*, in: *La Regola di frate Francis. Eredità e sfida* / a cura di PIETRO MARANESI, FELICE ACCROCCA, Padova 2012, 189 – 228, 222. Per il tutto vedi in particolare: FRANCIS POLLIANI, *Le nuove Constitutions dei Frati Minori Cappuccini, Analisi e commento*, Milano 2016.

wake of Vatican II, in 1968. Various adjustments of the text followed, the latest being in 2012, but these latest redraftings remain indebted to the turning point that occurred in 1968, which was a watershed of no mean significance. In fact, until that date, although the Constitutions had been updated many times previously, those revisions remained profoundly and essentially indebted to those formulated during the Chapter of the Order held in those far-off days at the friary of Saintt'Eufemia in Rome in 1536. Whereas at that time the stress was laid fairly and squarely on the penitential aspect and on regular observance, the 1968 Constitutions shifted the entire structure, redirecting attention to living in brotherhood and to the dimension of minority. It will be important to notice the relationship of continuity and discontinuity between these two settings of our life project. Among the reasons that influenced this change, one must mention not only the second Vatican Council, but I believe we must also take into account the changes that occurred within the Order, especially since the generalate of Br. Bernard Christen of Andermatt (1884 – 1908) and the practice he introduced of assigning a mission territory to each province. But we will return to this point later.

### **Our life according to the Gospel**

The primordial and indispensable statement by Saint Francis remains: *This is the Rule and life of the lesser brothers, namely, to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of our own and in chastity.* Starting from this central declaration, we can and must ask ourselves a number of questions:

- What does it mean to say that the *Gospel is a "Rule and life"* Why couple the two words together?
- What exactly is meant by "*Gospel*"?
- Why the choice of the verb "*to observe*", and what consequences has that choice had in the life of the Order?

But even before we enter into the merit of these questions, it is fundamentally important to remember something that Francis himself states in his Testament: *And after the Lord had given me brothers, no-one showed me what I ought to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live after the manner of the holy Gospel.* There is in Francis an awareness that he has received a gift from on high, and at the same time, he realises the binding nature of that gift.

The coupling together of *Rule* and *Life* certainly indicates two things: to begin with, a reference to the source containing the precepts according to which I direct my life (a rule) and secondly, the necessity that whatever one tries to apply in practice should not merely be the result of wilfully performed actions, but should permeate the entire life of the individual brother, so much so that it becomes an obvious fact, an unmistakable feature of his daily journey.

By *Gospel* we may understand in a broad sense the good news of the kingdom of God which has come close, the God who gazes mercifully on his creatures. Also, the Gospel can be seen as the sayings (teachings) spoken by Jesus and contained in the four Gospels, aimed at those who wish to follow him more closely. Looking at the first chapter of the Rule of 1221 we run into three commandments that are essential for anyone wishing to live according to the *form of the holy Gospel*:

- *If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.*
- *If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*
- *If anyone wants to come to me without hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even life itself, he cannot be my disciple.* <sup>2</sup>

All of which means that the true lesser brother is called to get rid of his earthly goods in order to align his life with the world which is his but is still to come. This involves a radical choice to live without anything of one's own, in a type of poverty that is capable of rendering a person fully free, on condition that he lives it cheerfully, because in that case he will be free both of greed and avarice.<sup>3</sup> In addition, detachment from material goods, to be complete, also requires challenging oneself (self-denial), an intense working on self. Thirdly, the choice to live according to the holy Gospel calls for a radical questioning of one's own affections and the consequent review of ties to one's family and to oneself <sup>4</sup>.

In the first chapter of the Later Rule, alongside the verb *observe* we also find the verb *to obey* and the noun *obedience*. We might be led to think that the Seraphic Father wants to stress more than anything else the moment of the external application or adherence to the gospel precepts. However, if we keep in mind that, a few lines previously, he has just spoken about the *Rule and Life*, then we know that he is asking us to move from external observance to an ever-closer configuration to the very life of Christ. This is why the life of the brothers can be considered as a life in obedience, where the acceptance of the precept given to us by the Lord leads to the creation of a relationship of closeness and of ever-deeper identification with Him, so that the Lord becomes the very life of our life.<sup>5</sup>

Now, it is interesting to see that reference is made to the Gospel in chapter one of our Constitutions. There, they speak of the need to *make continuous progress in understanding the Gospel* (1,4); of *fidelity to the Gospel* (5,2; 6,2), of *gospel freedom* (7,5), of *evangelical experience* (8,2), of *our gospel calling* (15,1). The reason for all this lies in the fact that *the Rule flows from the Gospel* (7,1), that the Gospel represents *the highest law* (1,5), that it *contains the teaching of Christ* (10,2) and *the gospel counsels* (2,3). All of which passes through the prism of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis, who *embarked upon the gospel life* (3,1), *to live according to the form of the holy Gospel* (4,1) and of whom we can say that he was gifted with *gospel insights* (5,1). From this flows the call to *proclaim the Gospel* (5,5), to keep in mind the *gospel intentions of the first Capuchins* (7,2), in full awareness that *our life as brothers* represents the *leaven of the Gospel* (13,4).

## N. 1

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<sup>2</sup> FF 4

<sup>3</sup> FF 177

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. PIETRO MARANESI, *Il sogno di Francesco. Rilettura storica della Regola dei frati minori alla ricerca of the sua attualità*. Assisi 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. DINO DOZZI, *La Regola per la vita*, in *La Regola di Frate Francesco, Eredità e sfida*, a cura di PIETRO MARANESI e FELICE ACCROCCA, Padova 2012, 191-228.

Our Constitutions begin by affirming that the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is, in every age, the *wellspring* of the Church's entire life. Let us linger over the image of a spring or *fountain*! It evokes freshness, gift, gratuity. A fountain must be sought after and frequented. As soon as we do, we cup the palms of our hands together to carry the cool water to our lips. Jesus Himself is this living water and the Gospels are like the path that leads us to Him; they are the way that gives us access to Him, so that we may know Him and enjoy His presence.

It is important to grasp these various nuances because they tell us about the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that means His whole message, the revelation of a Father who looks lovingly on His creatures. At the same time we cannot forget that Jesus Himself is the Good News, inasmuch as He is the gift the Father gives to humanity, because by knowing the Son we shall know the Father. The Gospel also means the four gospels, which testify to the earthly journey of the only-begotten Son of the Father made man, and record His teachings. In practice, "it is a matter of following Christ, His words, His teaching, His example, His will, His footsteps, His humility and poverty".<sup>6</sup>

Saint Francis made the Gospel the reason for his life and activity. For him, to observe the Gospel meant living in an attitude of attentive listening to it, in harmony with it. And when he invites his brothers and all the faithful to live poverty, he does so because he sees how it was lived by our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy Mother.<sup>7</sup>

We are still only at the first number of the Constitutions, and we are invited to place ourselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, because He alone is able to lead us into a full knowledge of the depths of the mystery of Christ. With reference to what is reported in Luke's infancy narratives, the Virgin Mary is pointed out as an example for us to imitate in her profound pondering and constant meditation on the Gospel. By allowing our lives to be shaped by the Gospel, we shall grow towards Christ in everything.

## N. 2

In this second number, the reference is mainly to Saint Francis, who has taught us joyfully to follow in the footsteps of Christ, even as we follow Him in His distinctive poverty, humility and death on a cross. The ultimate end of the journey, the goal to be reached, is the Father through the Holy Spirit.

The second paragraph of this number takes up a theme that is very dear to Franciscan spirituality, namely *conformity to Christ*. It states that the primordial place of this transformation is given to us in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thanks to it, we become sharers in the paschal mystery. The topic of the Eucharist is taken up again later on in the text of the Constitutions when it underlines the importance and the necessity of daily celebration in every single fraternity. The fact that it is mentioned already, in this second number, means that we have before us an absolutely central aspect of our life. In order to be introduced into the mystery of Christ, and to live it in practice, we are called to live the gospel counsels with a generous, faithful heart: obedience, poverty and chastity. We will only be able to do this if, from the outset and constantly thereafter, we are captivated by the gift that

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<sup>6</sup> D. DOZZI, *ibid.* 219

<sup>7</sup> FF 31, 140

Christ has made of Himself unto death on a cross, and which He continues to make present in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

### N. 3

Faithful to the Testament, the third number reminds us that Francis' new life of penance began as soon as he started to serve the lepers. Then follows a reference to the encounter with the Crucified One of San Damiano. Fidelity to what Francis recounts in the Testament is the one source we should draw from if we want to understand the choices he made, while being wary of any kind of mystification. The radical change in the life of the young Francis occurred thanks to his encounter with the lepers, which he attributes to the intervention of the Lord Himself.<sup>8</sup> From this arises the transformation of the lover into the image of the beloved. Francis has given us the example of his life, and remains a reminder of what we are called to live, day by day. The fact that our Constitutions speak first about the encounter with the leper, and only secondly about the Crucifix of San Damiano, indicates something that is very valuable for any formative journey, and also for the Capuchin Franciscan life: there can be no keeping company with Christ in prayer unless it is buttressed by standing alongside the leper in an attitude of service.<sup>9</sup>

### N. 4

The formulation of this number is representative of the overall structure given to our Constitutions ever since they were rewritten in the wake of Vatican II. In fact, in two distinct paragraphs, the centrality of *brotherhood* and *minority* in our life is proclaimed. The first paragraph reminds us that Saint Francis attributes living in brotherhood to a divine revelation. Brotherhood not in the sense of something abstract, but rather in the shape of actual brothers called to make communion of life a reality. This is the absolutely indispensable prerequisite which must always be present if there is to be authentic witness given to the Reign of God and powerful preaching of penance and peace.

The second paragraph wastes no time in placing alongside brotherhood the aspect of minority. Both, it states, are original dimensions of the charism given to us by the Spirit. Both the contemplative dimension of our life and the apostolic must always necessarily be sustained and marked by the two aspects mentioned above, namely brotherhood and minority. They are the premise that cannot and must not be missing, otherwise our charism is betrayed. The commitment to live as brothers in minority corresponds to the fulfilment of the gospel ideal.

**Excursus:** How did we reach the point of proposing life in brotherhood as the central element of our charism?

It is appropriate to recall and to underline here the importance (by no means negligible) of this number of the Constitutions, because it orients in a new and in some sense surprising way the entire structure of the constitutional text, and consequently of our charism as Capuchin lesser brothers. There will of course be no lack of references to the life of penance and poverty, but now it is clear

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. PIETRO MARANESI, *Facere misericordiam. La conversione di Francesco d'Assisi: confronto critico tra il Testamento e le Biografie, Assisi 2007*

<sup>9</sup> *Ratio Formationis Generalis OFM Cap, II/2: The leper*

that both must always take account of the two aspects of brotherhood and minority. For example, a penitential practice exercised in isolation from or in opposition to the fraternity would make no sense. It is good to remember here that we are facing a turning point, in the true and proper sense of the word, in the structure of our life, in an aspect that could hardly be more demanding.

In fact, “fraternal life, when it is lived intensely and faithfully, is more demanding even than the choice of poverty itself. Let me explain: if poverty consists mainly in removing as many things from life as possible, and reducing my and our requirements to what is essential, living as brothers demands a continuous dynamic of self-giving, and this commits us to make the quality of our daily relationships more authentic. At times it will be a matter of knowing how to forgive, again and again; at others, I will need to step back to give space to someone else, so that his gifts can flourish and bear fruit. Life in brotherhood, created by the Holy Spirit, grows when the quality of our relationships has the flavour of welcome, forgiveness, of mercy and charity, which the Lord Jesus put before us as beatitudes for us to live.”<sup>10</sup>

On the basis of this choice, our Order has recognised the need to go into the question in greater depth, and to study the many ways in which it can be applied in various fields, such as the economy, minority and work. The new awareness of the centrality of fraternal life has been taken up by various plenary councils of the Order in recent decades. Let us recall in particular PCO VI: *Living Poverty in Brotherhood* (1998), PCO VII: *Our fraternal life in minority* (2004); PCO VIII: *The grace of working* (2015). This shows how far the turning point, which matured during the years of Vatican II, has left its mark on the journey of our Order.

*In our life in accordance with our identity as lesser brothers, we recognise the foundation of our entire apostolate. Lesser brotherhood is the primary form of gospel-based mission. It enables us to give an effective witness of complete communion in the diversity of charisms and ministries lived in our fraternities. Let all the brothers be encouraged to live out the primacy of the life of brotherhood in minority as the first form of our apostolate..<sup>11</sup>*

Why and how did we arrive at this turning point? I believe there are many reasons, and it would be out of place to mention them all here. First of all it must be said that various forms of penance (the discipline, the hair-shirt, the chapter of faults) were by then practiced only by novices, without much understanding of the spirit behind them. Regular observance itself, which for centuries had marked the rhythm of life of the brothers, had declined into an empty formality. To say it in a simple, direct formula: the need was felt to move from the so-called *common life* to *communion of life*. It sounds like a play on words, but hidden behind it lies the desire to pass from a way of living together that was steeped in a certain formalism, where what counted above all was the fact that everyone performed, together and in the correct way, the acts prescribed by the Constitutions and the customs of each province, to a way of living marked by less formal relationships, and giving more space to new life choices that better responded to the life lived by ordinary people.

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<sup>10</sup> *Identità e appartenenza cappuccina. Lettera del ministro generale Mauro Jöhri, Ottobre 2017*

<sup>11</sup> CPO 7

Also, once our Order began to grow in numbers, especially in the southern hemisphere of the planet, not least as a consequence of the presence and work of Capuchin missionaries, this undoubtedly contributed to this change of direction. In fact, brothers who had left for the missions first noticed the urgency of tackling the need for evangelisation, and of creating services that met the most urgent needs of the people entrusted to their care, such as schools, clinics, social centres, etc. Initially they tried to combine faithfulness to the regular life with the new needs they found on the local scene, but within a few decades the urgent needs of the mission prevailed. Priority was given to building the local Church, endowed with suitable structures adapted to the locality. As a result, churches were no longer built according to our traditional model: friaries built around the central four-sided cloister gave way to functional structures adapted to local needs. Also, the practice of begging as a source of support fell into disuse, and it was necessary to acquire large plots of land to cultivate the necessities of life. Today, over half the brothers of our Order have never lived in a traditional type of friary, with the choir situated behind the high altar or in the place of the *cantoria* or choir loft, as in southern Italy, and the other typical rooms found in our friaries. This is a matter of fact that has to be kept in mind. Like it or not, once each province was given its own mission territory in the generalate of Br. Bernard Christen of Andermatt and steps were gradually taken to implant the Order there, the face of our Order changed. We can calmly state that it has become enriched and more varied. I maintain that our Constitutions, from Vatican II onwards, have taken this new reality into account, placing the accent precisely on brotherhood and minority in the first place, without thereby denying the penitential dimension of our life. Some of our options, and I refer for example to the dropping of the practice of the three Lents, show that not only have we emptied out the bathwater, we have lost the baby as well... Not that references to a life of austerity and penance are lacking in our Constitutions, and this we shall see later as we go forward with our reading, but they steer clear of concrete details. This is certainly also due to the realisation that we are faced with a plurality of cultures that must be considered and integrated into our way of life, which makes it extremely difficult to give specific indications. All of this appears as an enrichment, but at the same time it represents a considerable challenge from the point of view of the one single brotherhood to which we all belong. How are we to promote it? What are the concrete and also visible elements that are characteristic of Capuchins everywhere? In this sense, I hinted above at the difficult relationship of continuity and discontinuity between the Constitutions before and after Vatican II. It is not surprising that in the years immediately after the Council there were various groups of friars who left the Order in order to continue living like the Capuchins of yesteryear.

The second central aspect of our life is minority. We know that it was Francis himself who wanted his brothers to be called *lesser brothers*. This signalled a deliberate choice of focus that led his brothers to be subject to every human creature for God's sake.<sup>12</sup> Minority is first of all an attitude which translates as putting into practice the invitation addressed to the brothers: "*They should 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.*"<sup>13</sup> Minority leads us to seek the lowest place, and ought to preserve us from the evil of clericalism<sup>14</sup>! Yet the ultimate foundation of minority is to be found in the choice made by the eternal Son of God, "*who, though he was in the*

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<sup>12</sup> FF 43

<sup>13</sup> FF 30. It is appropriate here to recall the text of PCO VII, devoted entirely to issues of minority and itinerancy.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Papa Francis, *La forza of the vocazione*. Conversazione con Fernando Prado, Bologna 2018

*form of God, did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are”* <sup>15</sup>

## N. 5

This number is made up of no less than five different paragraphs and deals with some very divergent topics. In fact, it begins with an invitation to know our history and the life project promoted by Saint Francis and taken up by the first Capuchin brothers. This knowledge must bring us to conversion of heart. It then goes on to restate the importance of some central aspects of our life, such as prayer, especially contemplative prayer, austerity and penance, living as brothers among ourselves but also close to the poor, and the apostolate. In a certain sense, this number tries to strike a balance between the spirit that inspired the first Constitutions and that which predominates in the ones we have today. In fact, the dimensions of the *contemplative life, austerity and joyful penance* are mentioned, but immediately afterwards comes a restatement of what was said in the previous number: that our relationships should be marked by fraternal spontaneity, and that we are called to share in the life of the poor and the sick, and finally, to be close to the people.<sup>16</sup>

Let us go back and take a closer look at each of these statements! It starts by affirming that our charism has come down to us thanks to the brothers who preceded us, and who in their turn were inspired by Saint Francis. We are preceded by a long line of brothers, and they are the originators of a tradition in the true and proper sense. This means that we cannot behave as if we ourselves were the first to set out in the footsteps of Francis. To speak of a tradition always implies a reference to *persons*, actual people with their own history, people who deserve respect and recognition.

From this fact comes the need to know our history, and to grasp the nature, that is, the heart and intention behind the life project that has been handed down to us. Faithfulness to the Gospel today is shown by way of a *creative fidelity* to the tradition that has gone before us. It is not a question of imitating or repeating down to the last detail what was done by those who came before us, but of drawing inspiration from that tradition. In general we have a rather approximate knowledge of Saint Francis and are ignorant of practically all that the first Capuchins did, and of the motives that led them to make choices so different from those that were usual at the time. For creative fidelity to exist, it is necessary to know the past while at the same time living fully in the present. This living relationship with the past has as its lofty aim the renewal of the life of our Order today. It is therefore not simply a matter of conducting an exercise of historical erudition, even if a detailed knowledge of the times remains indispensable. Rather, it is a question of finding continuity with the gospel insights of our founder and of the first Capuchins.

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<sup>15</sup> Phil, 2, 6 – 7.

<sup>16</sup> I remember that Pope Francis, at an audience at the end of the 85th General Chapter, insisted on this subject: *I was thinking about you this morning. There is a word that you, Br. Roberto Genuin, said in your address: the Capuchins are before anything else, “brothers of the people”. This is one of your characteristics: closeness to people. Close to the People of God, close. And closeness gives us that down-to-earth knowledge, that wisdom – it’s more than knowledge, it’s wisdom. Closeness to all, but especially to the least ones, those who are most rejected, most desperate. And also close to those who are furthest away. I’m thinking of Fra Cristoforo [of the Betrothed], of “your” fra’ Cristoforo. Closeness: I would like that word to stay in you, like a programme. Closeness to the people. . Because the people have great respect for the Franciscan habit. Cardinal Quarracino once told me that in Argentina, some anti-clerical might swear at a priest, but never, never was the Franciscan habit insulted, because it is a grace. And you Capuchins have that closeness: stay with it. Always be close to the people, because you are the brothers of the people.*

The text continues with a heartfelt invitation to give priority to the life of prayer, especially contemplative prayer. It then goes on to recall various characteristic aspects of the Franciscan charism: *to live in this world as pilgrims and strangers, practising poverty in a radical manner*, and reminding us of the need to do this both *individually* and *communally*. Given that the risk remains of considering poverty solely from an external point of view as deprivation of goods, the text mentions the *spirit of minority* as a concrete way of living a life of poverty. By living in this way, Capuchin brothers will combine in exemplary fashion a life that is austere and joyfully penitential with a love for the cross of the Lord Jesus. This third paragraph certainly intends to recapture the dimensions that permeated and structured the first Constitutions.

There follows a paragraph which once again takes up the aspects of brotherhood and minority, specifying them further. In this sense it insists on the “how” of our internal brotherly relationships, which have to be marked by *fraternal spontaneity*; next, we are invited to be *happy to live among those who are poor, weak and sick*. This invitation could not be more concrete and challenging, because who among us would freely choose to share the life of the poor, the weak or the sick? It is one thing to make an effort to live a sober life with material things reduced to essentials; it is quite another to share the life of the people mentioned above. This cannot fail to have some very practical consequences for the way we build our houses, the places we go to live in, and the way in which we choose to structure our life. A life of withdrawal inside a friary is called into serious question. The crucial question therefore is this: are we ready to take all the steps necessary to make this closeness real?

Since we are still considering the broad themes that will be taken up again later and expanded, the last paragraph of this number mentions the *apostolic dimension of our life*, with specific reference to the proclamation *of the Gospel and other forms in harmony with our charism*, without further specification. The paragraph ends with a reference to the way in which all of this is to be accomplished: *the spirit of minority and service* must at all costs be maintained.

## **N. 6**

This number again takes up what was said and the beginning of the previous number, specifying it further: the need to know, protect and develop the spiritual heritage of our brotherhood. This is an indispensable condition if we are to live our fidelity to our charism creatively. Since it is a *spiritual heritage* in the real sense, it is obvious that we are called to know it and to embody it in our day, but also to publicise it and propose it to others. We are called to live our life in the awareness that we have received an inheritance that must be shared with others.

In addition to knowing the life and writings of Saint Francis, the Franciscan sources and the Capuchin tradition, there is now a specific mention of *our brothers renowned for their holiness, apostolic work, and erudition*. Who better than the countless ranks of our canonised and beatified brothers can point out the paths for us to follow so that we live a genuinely Capuchin life?

After inviting us to deepen our knowledge of our past, the text quickly underlines the need to translate (*find suitable ways*) all of this into the conditions of life in which we find ourselves, and to

do it in ways that are respectful of the different regions and cultures. To guarantee that the process of adaptation goes ahead in appropriate ways, they need the approval of the lawful superiors.<sup>17</sup>

These initial numbers, which mention the principles that should inspire our life, are notable for their density and conciseness, but sometimes one wonders whether they don't pack in too many points one after the other, giving the reader little chance to form a clear opinion of what is a priority and what is less so. It will be important and interesting, as the process of reading and studying the text goes forward, to check the aspect of continuity and discontinuity between the text of the present Constitutions and those prior to Vatican II. To put it another way: if brotherhood and minority are the weight-bearing aspects of our life, how far does the current text of the Constitutions develop this point consistently? Does the constitutional text really turn it into a new paradigm, or are there some compromises here and there? In what way does the text guarantee continuity with the past, without thereby betraying the new direction that the General Chapters since 1968 decided to give to the life of our Order? I believe these questions can be useful, almost as an interpretative key to the reading of the text, as we continue to deepen our understanding of its contents.

The next three numbers deal separately with the major reference documents for our life as Capuchin lesser brothers: the Rule, the Testament and the Constitutions.

## **N. 7**

The Rule of Saint Francis is presented on the basis of its original source, which is the Gospel, and as the appropriate tool for living the gospel life. Next, the text becomes very concrete, and invites the brothers to know and appreciate it, so that they then go on to apply it in the actual circumstances of our life. There is a reference to the approach taken by the first Capuchins, by the holy tradition of the Order and by our saints.

It will be mainly the task of the ministers and guardians to promote the knowledge and observance of the Rule.

There follows a paragraph that tries to take account of the fact that our Order is now spread over the various continents and in cultures that differ greatly from one another. In consequence, while always safeguarding the unity of the Order, it is also necessary to adapt the way of living the Rule, in accordance with different cultures, needs and places.

Having stated the principle of pluriformity, the following paragraph strongly reaffirms that this principle must never be applied at the expense of unity and fraternal communion. Our concern for cultural and contextual differences ought to go well beyond these few lines. This is because on the one hand one almost has the impression that the encounter between the charism of our Order and the diverse cultures has not given rise to ways of living that are really close to the life of the people. On the other hand, it seems that we often appeal to culture in defence of questionable positions. It is true that we are moving towards a plurality of cultural interpretations of our charism. However, dialogue between the various cultural approaches is only just beginning.

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<sup>17</sup> Cfr. *Ratio Formationis Ordinis OFM Cap*, Allegato 1 : Unità carismatica nella diversità culturale

## N. 8

It is impossible to know Saint Francis in any depth without taking to heart what he has left us in his *Testament*. In it, he *puts forward once again his experience of the Gospel*, and forcefully underscores the way in which he wishes the Rule to be observed. We are reminded here of how we Capuchins have welcomed *the Testament as the first spiritual exposition of the Rule*, a decision which distances us from the controversies that arose immediately after the death of Francis, when the friars in 1230 appealed to the Pope for clarification about whether it was obligatory or not to observe the Testament. Gregory XI in the Bull *Quo elongati* reassured the friars at that time that they were not bound to do so.<sup>18</sup>

## N. 9

The last number of the first article reminds us of the importance of the Constitutions, and that they are intended as an aid for us to fulfil what is written in the Rule. Their purpose is to guide our life so that it becomes, in virtue of religious profession, a total and unconditional gift to God. In this number too, which seems eminently juridical in tone, we sense the unique style of our Constitutions, which are never content to give us merely juridical instructions, but constantly put forward the spiritual motivation behind everything. For this reason, we are not just invited to an exterior observance; rather, we are reminded that in observing them we are not to have the attitude of slaves, *but of sons yearning to love God above all else, heeding the voice of the Holy Spirit who teaches us, and dedicating ourselves to the glory of God and the salvation of our neighbour*.

At the end of this number, paragraph 5 rightly reminds us that we are obliged to know and observe all the other norms of our particular law. It may be useful to recall here that the work of renewing these Constitutions went hand in hand with the removal of various norms of a practical nature from the constitutional text. These were transferred to the *Ordinances of the General Chapters of the Capuchin Friars Minor*. While any changes or dispensations regarding the Constitutions require the approval of the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, the text of the *Ordinances of the General Chapters* can be modified by the General Chapter of our Order.

## Our life in the Church

## N. 10

This number opens with a crescendo of theological statements, describing in symbolic terms the mystery of the Church. Furthermore, it seems appropriate to stress that here the Church is not seen as an end in itself, but rather in terms of its mission to prepare for and collaborate in the establishment of the kingdom of God.

For its own holiness and mission, the Church has the experience of being gifted with many gifts of the Holy Spirit. Among these, the text mentions in particular the consecrated life, with a particular mention here of the Franciscan family. Having received the approval of the Church, it

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. PIETRO MARANESI, L'eredità di frate Francesco. Lettura storico-critica del Testamento, Assisi 2009, in particolare 327 – 335.

continues to enjoy her solicitous protection. The whole text aims to keep alive and present *the image of Christ, poor, humble, and devoted to the service of people, especially the poor.*

Furthermore, we are reminded that the Capuchins, too, received the approval of Mother Church by means of the Bull *Religionis Zelus* of Pope Clement VII on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1528. Consequently we owe much to the Church and are called to love her as our mother.

In a final step we are reminded that the Church is a blend of diverse traditions, in particular the Eastern and the Western traditions. This is a reference to the *sui juris* Churches with their liturgical and pastoral traditions. This paragraph was introduced into the text of the Constitutions as a reminder that we Capuchins are members of a single brotherhood, while belonging to different ritual families.

#### **N. 11**

Without a doubt, love for the Church is part of the inheritance left to us by Saint Francis, who deliberately chose to submit his own insights, and his intention to live according to the holy Gospel, to the institutional Church. He did this the first time when with a first group of companions he made his way to Rome to see Pope Innocent III, and a second time when he asked for approval of the Rule in 1223. Not for nothing did he ask to have a Cardinal to exercise the role of governing, protecting and correcting our brotherhood.<sup>19</sup> From this it follows that we owe obedience to the Pope and that we are obliged to collaborate for the good of the local churches, in accordance with our charism, under the guidance of the diocesan bishop. This number ends with an explicit reference to the respect due to priests and to our duty to work together with them<sup>20</sup>.

#### **N. 12**

This number continues to list the authorities we as friars are called to recognise and follow faithfully. Thus, the authority to which we refer directly is the General Minister of the Order, in his two-fold mandate as successor of Saint Francis and as the bond that binds us to the authority of the Church. It further specifies that we are bound to love and obey the various ministers and those in charge of the fraternities, both provincial and local, without ever losing sight of our intention to carry out our service within the mission of the Church.

#### **N. 13**

Having indicated the authorities to which we as friars principally refer, this and the following numbers return to the specific contribution we intend to make in the Church and in the world. First of all, we wish to be brothers, and as such to generate and promote brotherhood everywhere. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Saint Francis drew all of these things from the heavenly Father, their source and origin. Here we find a number of affirmations that help us to grasp, well beyond what was said in the preceding numbers, (nr. 4) the significance of the centrality of fraternal life as the central charism of our Order. Our first and principal vocation consists:

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<sup>19</sup> Rb XII / FF108

<sup>20</sup> Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had as much wisdom as Solomon and found priests of this world impoverished, I would not preach in their parishes against their will.

- in feeling ourselves to be brothers of all without any distinction whatsoever;
- in fostering a sense of brotherhood throughout the Order;
- in cultivating fraternal relationships within the rest of the Franciscan family.

We cannot limit ourselves to cultivating a brotherly spirit only among ourselves as friars. Rather, it is a question of acting like a gospel leaven, promoting genuinely fraternal relations among all people and nations. In other words, we are told that our task is to promote peace everywhere, and that this is no less important than other forms of pastoral work.

#### **N. 14**

If in the preceding number the call to promote fraternal life had its source in the contemplation of the Father, *the highest Good*, this number is eminently christological. First, it reminds us that Christ's choice to become a servant is actualised daily in the sacrament of the Eucharist. It then points out that Francis' decision to make himself "lesser" came from contemplating God's humility in Christ. Our own commitment to those who are poor and marginalised must be drawn from and nourished by the same source. Consequently we should establish our fraternities among the poor, developing a type of solidarity with them aimed at promoting a life that is genuinely human and Christian. This is also the starting point for our work in the area of justice and peace.

#### **N. 15**

This last number reminds us that brotherhood and minority must be lived by spending alternate periods of time in the hermitage and in the apostolic life. The text reminds us that both Jesus and His disciples, and Saint Francis, practised a lifestyle that gave sufficient time to both dimensions. The same holds true for the Capuchin tradition, but it is obvious that it is not sufficient to appeal, however strongly and insistently, for us to rediscover the ability to alternate contemplation and apostolic activity in equal measure, inspired by the Gospel. Here our Order in all its component parts finds itself facing a challenge that is far from negligible. To tackle it requires conversion, individual and communal, of the most radical proportions! The danger of proclaiming some very beautiful and true principles which then remain a dead letter in our actual lives is unfortunately a reality to a very large extent.

The first chapter of our Constitutions lays the foundations for what will be developed in the later chapters. It will be important to keep it in mind as a sort of compass to guide us on our journey of reading the text, and to check how far the principles announced in chapter one are organically and consistently developed in the later ones.