

## **CIRCULAR LETTER 7**

### **SHRINES AND POPULAR DEVOTION IN OUR CAPUCHIN TRADITION**

Dear sisters and brothers,

1.1 On 12 December 1994, Pope John Paul II inaugurated the 7<sup>th</sup> centenary of the Shrine of Loreto, presiding at a solemn eucharistic celebration where he was joined by the cardinals and bishops of the entire nation of Italy. The President of Italy and numerous civil dignitaries were in attendance. The 30 or more Capuchin brothers who minister to the 3.5 million annual visitors and pilgrims were scattered among the people they have served so well.

1.2 The hidden presence of the Capuchins was entirely consistent with their history at the shrine. From the earliest days of the Capuchin Reform, the friars engaged in tasks of service, assisting the poor and sick pilgrims and seeing to the cleaning and maintenance of the Holy House and the basilica, the provision of altar breads and washing of liturgical linen. Ancient chronicles tell of our brothers, after Vespers, cleaning the Holy House on their knees (Monumental History of the Capuchins, XIV, 424, 427-429).

1.3 The shrine also had an important influence on the early Capuchin fraternity. Colpetrazzo wrote that the first friars used to build their churches on the model of the Holy House of Loreto in order to imitate its poverty and to relive its climate of lofty contemplation (MHOC, IV, 23). The friars settled permanently at Loreto at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, first in two successive hospices, and finally in a friary built for them behind the shrine by Cardinal Antonio Barberini, brother of Pope Urban VIII. In 1934, Pope Pius XI entrusted the shrine of Loreto to the friars together with all its varied pastoral, liturgical, promotional and cultural activities.

1.4 Our Order cannot allow this important centenary to pass without expressing warm gratitude to the Province of the Marches and the many brothers of other provinces for the devotion and sacrifice with which they have served and continue to serve the Shrine of the Incarnation, its visitors and pilgrims.

1.5 At the same time, the centenary of this major Marian shrine offers an opportunity to reflect upon our presence and ministry at the many shrines entrusted to our Order.

2.1 Throughout its long history, the charism of our Order has often been nourished by isolated churches in the countryside or in the mountains. These later developed into sanctuaries or shrines, oases of peace, islands of prayer, stimuli for a renewed sense of faith and religion among the people. Usually they were small places, far from the city centers, frequented by relatively small numbers of people. In general, the large,

important shrines – such as Loreto, Altoetting, or more recently, San Giovanni Rotondo – are exceptions.

2.2 By far, the greatest number of shrines are dedicated to Mary, most often venerated under a local title. In 1750, the friars were entrusted with the care of the Shrine of Tirano (Valtellina, Italy), which had been built as a bulwark of Catholicism against the “encroachments” of Protestantism (*Lexicon Cap.*, 1710). There are also shrines dedicated to various mysteries of the life and person of Jesus such as the “Jesus de Medinaceli” in Madrid. The Celle of Cortona and the Hermitage of Montecasale are living links with the foundation of the Franciscan Order. St. Francis Shrine at Caninde-Ceara (Brazil) is dedicated to the Stigmata of St. Francis. Many shrines are dedicated to St. Anthony: Cuatro Carrinos in Madrid, Lac Bouchette (Québec), Zaragoza (Aragon), etc. Often the shrine contains the body of a Capuchin or Franciscan saint or blessed and attracts crowds of devotees: Brother Joseph Thampy Ashram in Andhra Pradesh (India) contains the body of that holy, itinerant SFO hermit; St. Bonaventure Friary-Chapel in Detroit (USA) contains the body of Venerable Solanus Casey; the shrine of St. Joseph of Leonissa is home for that saint’s remains.

3.1 The documents of the church, our Constitutions and documents of the various plenary councils of the Order summon us to examine our presence and ministries in these many and diverse sanctuaries.

3.2 The First Plenary Council (Quito) – nearly a quarter of a century ago (1971) – was concerned for our communal witness to poverty. It was held at a period of conciliar renewal which placed little value on popular devotion and piety and such things as novenas, blessings, processions and the cult of the saints. Quito made a rather negative and restrictive recommendation:

*Concerning shrines, the real need for our presence there should be verified; if such a need is lacking, the shrine should be given up. In the future we should not build any shrines or accept any that are offered to us, since they occupy too many religious who could give their service especially to the missions and to the poor. We should avoid ways of raising money unbecoming to our spirit of poverty. Also, our apostolate should be integrated with the pastoral program of the local church*

(I PCO, 58).

Even if we see some of Quito’s recommendations in a new light, it still has a valid message for today. In particular, we continue to appreciate Quito’s strong call to poverty and detachment from the desire for money, our service to the poor, and our insertion into the local church.

3.3 The Latin American church rediscovered popular religious sentiment as the concrete historical synthesis of the people’s faith and culture. The Medellin Document of 1968 and especially the Puebla Document of 1979, stressed the place of the people as a

"*locus theologicus*", so that popular religion and devotion becomes a sign of the times in the church today.

3.4 The Puebla Document declared that popular religious piety has given Latin American culture its identity and spiritual unity, imbued with faith and often possessing its own appropriate forms of popular catechesis (n. 412). The people, formed by this piety, possess a wisdom with contemplative features manifested in a unique, lived relationship of the poor with nature and with other people. This gives a character to work, service, festivals, friendship and family ties, the dignity of which is not lessened by the poverty and simplicity of their lives (n. 413). Therefore, Puebla maintains that popular religious sentiment is not only the object of evangelization but, in so far as it contains an embodiment of the Word of God, it is an active form by which the people continually evangelize themselves (n. 450).

3.5 Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* saw in popular piety a concrete expression of evangelization embodied in local cultures, and he listed its gifts:

*It reveals a thirst for God which only the simple and the poor can experience; when we speak of faith witness, it renders one capable of generosity and often heroic sacrifice; popular piety has an acute sense of the profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, a constant and loving presence, it gives birth to interior gifts in a measure rarely observed elsewhere: patience, a sense of the cross in one's daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion (n. 48).*

Pope John Paul II loses no opportunity to reaffirm the importance of this religious sentiment as a cultural incarnation of faith and as a safeguard of Christian culture. He has personally visited the two most famous Marian shrines entrusted to the pastoral care of our Order: Altoetting and Loreto.

3.6 The Code of Canon Law directs shrines to proclaim the Word of God, to celebrate the liturgical and sacramental life of the church, and to foster approved forms of popular devotion (c. 1234.1). The Fifth Plenary Council gave the following criteria: the fundamental values of our fraternal life, sensitivity to human values and the pastoral plans of the province and local church (n. 53). The Constitutions direct that shrines of our Order be "*centers of evangelization and of sound devotion*" (151.4).

4.1 Pilgrims come in ever increasing numbers to Assisi, the central shrine of the Franciscan family. They come to encounter Francis as universal brother, friend of the poor, man of the gospel, sign of peace and reconciliation, and God's voice of praise in the midst of creation. Were these not the fundamental motives for which 10 years ago the most prominent of all pilgrims, Pope John Paul II, chose to accompany 100 religious leaders from around the world to this shrine of St. Francis? Is it not remarkable that popular devotion so well defines the essential charism of the Franciscan movement? Popular devotion spontaneously seeks to experience and assimilate in Francis and Clare the gospel values which can transform the life of a world in search of its new common

destiny. This speaks eloquently to all Franciscan shrines. The “spirit of Assisi” can be consciously created in other shrines, each according to its own special charism, whether these have international, national or local significance.

4.2 Shrines “of the people” – of popular devotion – should contain friars who are “men of the people,” ready to welcome and serve pilgrims like the early friars of Loreto. It is this tradition which the Constitutions stress:

*... let us joyfully live among the poor; the powerless and the weak, sharing their life, and let us maintain our special approach to people (4.4).*

We are challenged to make pilgrims sense that they are our brothers and sisters rather than our clients. Pilgrims must experience Franciscan hospitality: *Pax et Bonum* and all that this rich greeting implies.

A visit to a shrine, when guided by one competent in the history and spirituality of the shrine and sensitive to the needs of contemporary people, can itself be an excellent instrument of practical catechesis.

Toward the end of his life, Br. Antoine-Marie de Likochine, a Capuchin of Russian origin and member of the Province of Savoy, enjoyed spending several months each year at Montecasale. He guided pilgrims and visitors to the sanctuary with a great spirit of faith and depth of humanity. He was remembered for years with great affection by both foreign and Italian pilgrims.

4.3 Many who come to our shrines are moved by that popular religious sentiment described by Puebla as containing an embodiment of the Word of God and, therefore, being itself a form of evangelization. This popular piety prepares them to hear the Word of God on a new and deeper level. The recent provincial chapter of the Province of Foggia approved a plan to develop a program of evangelization and Franciscan spirituality at the Shrine of San Giovanni Rotondo. Such efforts to develop programs of evangelization which depart from and build upon the popular religious sentiment which attracts people to the particular shrine can only have the most positive effects for the spread of the gospel.

The Province of Portugal founded and continues to direct the biblical movement in that country. Many people are introduced to the reading of the Word of God by means of programs which run for two hours each evening on five consecutive nights. It is an approach which combines many features of the popular mission with the widespread diffusion of the Word of God. As a result of such work, 3,000 or more biblical prayer and reflection groups have been established in Portugal. Such a program could add a strong evangelization thrust to many of our shrines, especially those of local or diocesan nature.

In 1510, Maria Lorenza Longo visited the House of Loreto, felt miraculously cured of paralysis, underwent a conversion and decided to devote her life to God and the care of

the sick. In 1535, she founded the first Poor Clare Monastery of the Capuchin Reform in Naples. People of faith make pilgrimages not only when they are in need of favors, but also in response to a call from God to discern a fuller response to the mystery of his love. For this reason, those shrines which attract large numbers of youth are also places where vocational guidance programs should be established to help channel the generosity of youth to the service and life of the holy gospel.

4.4 *"We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us..."* (Rom 8:26). A thirst for God and a desire to discover the meaning of life draws many men and women, adults, youth and children to our shrines. They come to the shrine as to a "holy place"- "sacred ground" - where they enter into a place privileged by God.

This thirst for God is a gift of the Spirit and requires a place of silence and prayer where the pilgrims can again find themselves, rediscover the basic values of their lives by experiencing are collected, silent contact with God within their own hearts.

This thirst for God is deepened by a joyful and liturgically updated celebration of the eucharist, the sacrament of reconciliation, and the liturgy of the hours, the preaching of the Word of God, courses of spiritual exercises, retreats, conventions and days of recollection.

The brothers at the Celle of Cortona (Italy), as well as at several fraternities of the Province of South France and the Vice Province of Savoia, have established "Schools of Prayer." Br. Ignacio Larranaga of the Province of Chile has developed a similar program with his Talleres de Oracio'n. Building on the tradition of the earliest Capuchins, these many and varied programs teach people the art of prayer (see Constitutions 53.6).

The Poor Clare Sisters of Grenoble (France), supported by all the other branches of the Franciscan family, have made their monastery a center of guided, prayer experience for all: pre-school children, youth and adults. Building on their own charism of prayer and adoration, the Sisters share this charism with others in a very unique way.

4.5 The first Capuchin ministry at Loreto was a service to the poor and sick pilgrims who came to the house of Mary seeking her maternal love. The welcome we offer to pilgrims should be evident, especially in the tender love we exhibit toward the poor. In recent days I received a greeting from an association entitled: "Ramo d'amore Oasi Padre Pio da Pietrelcina" dedicated to the care of the sick. At the end of September I attended a celebration wherein an early medieval confraternity of the city of Seville (Spain), dedicated to the service of the poor, was formally affiliated to the Capuchin Order. The reason? Two hundred years ago, our Capuchin brother, Blessed Diego José of Cadiz was a member of that confraternity and gave it a strong orientation toward the poor. Our shrines should be homes for the poor not only by the charity which they inspire, but especially by reason of the message and coherent vision of justice which they proclaim.

4.6 We are *"ambassadors for Christ ... We implore you in Christ's name: be reconciled to God!"* (2 Cor 5: 20). Shrines attract many who seek peace of heart. The ministry of the

sacrament of reconciliation remains an indispensable part of the ministry of our shrines. We are facilitated in this by the esteem and trust of the people. The advice of Brother Francis to a minister is given to all confessors as well: *"There should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may have possibly sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy ... "* (Letter to a Minister, 9).

During a recent visit to France, the Bishop of Carcassonne made a special effort to visit me in order to express the gratitude of the local church for the presence of the brothers in the diocese. The bishop gave this reason: *"When we visit the friary, we sense that we are among men of God!"* People visit our shrines to encounter "men of God," men of prayer who have encountered the Spirit in the depths of their own hearts (see Constitutions

45.1-2), and are thus able to recognize the movement of the Spirit in the hearts of their neighbors. They come to encounter "men of God" ready to listen to the story of their lives, to help them see the hand of a loving God in the tragedies and joys of their lives, and to assist them in recognizing the signs of the Spirit of God guiding their future. Not only should our shrines be places to encounter compassionate confessors, they should also include persons trained and experienced in spiritual direction which is a felt need of many religious and laity today.

4.7 Popular devotion as well as the personal intervention of our Holy Father Pope John Paul II have made the shrines and the city of Assisi an instrument of peace in the world. Each of our shrines can be a catalyst of peace. One of our friaries in Ireland is in a small city where the local church is deeply divided over the bishop's decision to renovate the cathedral. A friar wisely remarked: "We must avoid taking sides. When the decisions are finalized and the work is completed, there will be a residue of bitterness and division. That will be our moment of grace!" Last year I received a letter from a lady in Switzerland speaking of her home village in Italy where a Capuchin shrine had existed for hundreds of years. She gave eloquent testimony not of individual friars, but of the Capuchin fraternity as a bond of unity among local parish communities divided by misunderstandings and petty rivalries. Each and every shrine of our Order can foster such civic and ecclesiastical harmony.

5. Each shrine of our Order is a privileged focus of the popular devotion of our people searching for true human brotherhood, reconciliation and peace of heart. Each shrine of our Order is a privileged encounter with hearts open and thirsting for the experience of God. This gives each of our fraternities at the various shrines entrusted to our Order an opportunity to develop its unique incarnation of "the spirit of Assisi." Brothers, we rejoice with the friars of the Province of the Marches as they join the entire Christian community of Italy in the celebration of the 7<sup>th</sup> centenary of the Shrine of Loreto. May the Virgin of the Incarnation bless us as we attempt to give new birth to the Word of God in our world and in the hearts of the men and women whom Providence sends to our doors.

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*Shrine of the Incarnation - Loreto, 30 October 1995*