



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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**That excessive love**

*Circular Letter n. 21*

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**Circular Letter n. 21**  
**“That excessive love”**  
**A reflection on Francis’ experience of the Crucified**  
*(Part one of a series)*

Prot. 00391/03

**“...that I may feel in my heart, ...that excessive love with which you, O Son of God,  
were inflamed in willingly enduring such suffering for us sinners.”<sup>1</sup>**

**To all the brothers and sisters of the Order**

*Dear brothers and sisters:*

1.1 In March of 2004, we will celebrate the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order focusing on *Our fraternal life in minority: as pilgrims and strangers in this world serving the Lord in poverty and humility*. Franciscan minority flows directly from the spiritual experience of St. Francis. I begin this series of letters leading to the plenary council with a reflection on Francis’ experience of the Crucified.

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<sup>1</sup> Lfl, The Third Consideration on the Stigmata, see *St. Francis of Assisi Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* [henceforth *Omnibus*], ed. Marion A. Habig, Chicago, Franciscan Herald Press, 1973, p. 1448.

## “YOU ARE HUMILITY”

2.1 In his acclamation, “You are humility,”<sup>2</sup> Francis establishes the theological foundation of minority. Francis chose humility as the chief characteristic of his brotherhood because humility characterizes the self-revelation of God:

Though he [Christ Jesus] was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Phil 2:6-7).

Francis saw with great spiritual clarity that the Feast of the Annunciation is not primarily about the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Incarnation is not primarily about Jesus, but both celebrate the humble love of God our Father:

The most high Father made known from heaven through his holy angel Gabriel **this Word of the Father**...in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb he **received the flesh of our humanity and frailty**.<sup>3</sup>

2.2 The self-emptying (*kenosis*) of God reaches its fulfilment in the cross:

...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death B even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8).

Embracing the cross, Jesus mirrors the self-giving love of the Father:

His Father’s will was such that his blessed and glorious Son, whom he gave to us and who was born for us, should offer himself through his own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross.<sup>4</sup>

2.3 In the humility of the Crucified we find our salvation. “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; ... he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross...; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pt 2:23-24). Jesus justified us by a love which is both humble and gratuitous.

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<sup>2</sup> PrsG, 4; see *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, in three volumes [henceforth Armstrong], ed. Regis J. Armstrong, New York, New City Press, 1999, I, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> 2LtF, 4 (Armstrong, I, p. 46).

<sup>4</sup> 2LtF, 11 (Armstrong, I, p. 46).

## “THAT EXCESSIVE LOVE”

3.1 Compassion can be described as a spiritual consciousness of the personal tragedy of another accompanied by a selfless tenderness directed toward it.<sup>5</sup> On the cross, Jesus assumes the personal tragedy of our sins: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus forgives and does not judge: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). They do not know how much they are cherished by the humble love of the Father. Jesus resists the temptation to dominate: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (Lk 23:37). His love is a selfless tenderness, “Today, you will be with me in paradise!” (Lk 23:43), which identifies with the other: “Woman, here is your son; ...here is your mother” (Jn 19:26-27). The cross of Jesus molded the life of Francis from the first moments of his conversion to his descent from La Verna until he became a living icon of the Crucified. He lived the words of St. Paul, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

3.2 Francis was changed by the compassion of the Crucified. At La Verna he prayed, “That I may feel in my heart...**that excessive love** with which you, O Son of God, were inflamed in willingly enduring such suffering for us sinners.”<sup>6</sup> **That excessive love** drove Francis into the embrace of the leper and changed forever his manner of relating to others: “When I had left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.”<sup>7</sup> **That excessive love** of the Crucified of San Damiano transformed Francis’ manner of being: “He discovered that he was different from when he had entered...He felt this mysterious change in himself, but he could not describe it.”<sup>8</sup> These experiences changed the heart of Francis. Referring to lepers, Francis states: “The Lord himself led me among them and I showed **mercy** to them.”<sup>9</sup> Speaking of San Damiano, Celano says: “From that time on, **compassion** for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul.”<sup>10</sup>

3.3 Pope John Paul II states that in order to understand the message of the cross

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<sup>5</sup> See *Circular Letter 12*, at 4.3.1.

<sup>6</sup> The Third Consideration on the Stigmata, *Omnibus*, p. 1448.

<sup>7</sup> Test, 3 (Armstrong, I, p. 124).

<sup>8</sup> 2C, VI, 10 (Armstrong, II, p. 249).

<sup>9</sup> Test, 2 (Armstrong, I, p. 124).

<sup>10</sup> 2C, VI, 10 (Armstrong, II, p. 249).

“we are greatly helped not only by theological investigation but also by that great heritage which is the >lived theology’ of the saints.”<sup>11</sup> The pope reminds us that the “prophetic” is essential to the life of the church. St. Paul tells us:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the **apostles and prophets**, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:19-22).

The pope encourages us to see the life of St. Francis and other saintly brothers and sisters, such as St. Veronica Giuliani and St. Pio of Pietrelcina, as exemplifying in their flesh what the apostles received from the Lord and passed on to others. In the “lived theology” of the life of Francis, the redemptive power of the cross is revealed as compassion.

## “THE LORD RULED FROM A TREE”

4.1 The humility of the cross leads directly to the exaltation of the Crucified:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

In the Acts of the Apostles, the exaltation of Jesus occurs in the resurrection and ascension. On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem: “...let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Like St. John, Francis saw the cross itself as the moment of exaltation: “Let the whole earth tremble before his face, tell among the nations that the Lord has ruled from a tree.”<sup>12</sup> In the Crucified we see our human condition transformed through union with the triune God of infinite love. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). The Crucified reveals who God is for us B compassionate love freely

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<sup>11</sup> John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001, n. 27.

<sup>12</sup> OfP, Vespers, 9 (Armstrong, I, p. 147.)



given to others. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”(Jn 14:9). Jesus crucified reveals as well the potential which lies within our humanity when it is transformed by perfect love. Our humanity, restored by self-giving love, is the image of God on earth. Having witnessed a life poured out in compassionate love, the centurion exclaims: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mk 15:39).

4.2 The presentation of the resurrection at the end of the gospel of Mark has a particular message for those who embrace minority. In Mark there are no post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, only an empty tomb and some frightened women who run away! Those who come to believe in the resurrection are the ones who see it “from the inside,” that is, from inside the tomb, inside the experience of Jesus. These are the ones who truly listen to Jesus when he says to Peter, “Get behind me!” It is only those who fall in line with Jesus by following the way of the cross, the humble love of the Father; only they are capable of “seeing” the risen Christ. This was the great secret of the life of Francis, a secret freely revealed to those who ask, to those who seek it. That was the grace Francis implored and received at San Damiano and at La Verna. He invites us to the same: “Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him!”<sup>13</sup>

4.3 Bonaventure sees Francis, transformed by compassionate love, as the image and icon of a redeemed humanity. He uses poetic images to describe the effect on Francis: “After true love of Christ transformed the lover into his image.”<sup>14</sup> He uses the imagery of Mount Sinai to present Francis’ transformed humanity as a new revelation of God:

...the angelic man Francis came down from the mountain, bearing with him the likeness of the Crucified, depicted not on tablets of stone or on panels of wood carved by hand, but engraved on parts of his flesh by the finger of the living God.<sup>15</sup>

4.4 “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). By introducing his splendid Christological hymn with these words, Paul indicates that “the obedience of the cross” was not only the mission of Jesus, but is the

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<sup>13</sup> LtOrd, 28 (Armstrong, I, p. 118).

<sup>14</sup> LMj, XIII, 5 (Armstrong, II, p. 634).

<sup>15</sup> LMj, XIII, 5 (Armstrong, II, p. 634).

destiny and fulfilment of every Christian soul. We are called to be vessels of compassionate love. This is the message of the “lived theology” of Francis of Assisi. The “likeness of the Crucified” of which Bonaventure spoke, was more than just the external marks Francis bore in his body. Francis bore in his heart the compassionate love of the Crucified:

Now fixed with Christ to the cross, in both body and spirit, Francis not only burned with a seraphic love into God but also thirsted with Christ crucified for the multitude of those to be saved. ... He burned with a desire to return to the humility he practiced at the beginning; to nurse the lepers as he did at the outset.<sup>16</sup>

### **“UNLESS A GRAIN OF WHEAT FALLS INTO THE EARTH”**

5.1 On La Verna Francis prayed that “I may feel **in my soul and in my body**...that pain which you...sustained in the hour of your most bitter passion.”<sup>17</sup> Francis came to share that pain in his body during the last two years of his life, but his soul had been marked with the cross from the beginning of his conversion when the compassionate love of the Crucified enabled Francis to embrace the humility of the cross. **“Blessed Francis...was raised from his earliest youth to be arrogant.** He became a man of business and used up his time with vain living until he was twenty-five years of age.”<sup>18</sup> There was a price to be paid for his conversion from arrogance to humility, from captain of commerce to humble servant of lepers. His biographer recounts that “the devil...made Francis think of a horribly hunchbacked woman who lived in town and whose looks scared everyone. The devil threatened that he would become like her if he did not turn back sensibly from what he had begun.”<sup>19</sup> Continuing, Celano stresses that “among all the awful miseries of this world Francis had a natural horror of lepers.” Francis was probably in the midst of these struggles when he prayed before the cross of San Damiano. Celano indicates that, in the compassionate gaze of the Crucified, Francis found the grace to embrace the humility of the cross: “We honestly believe the wounds of the sacred passion

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<sup>16</sup> LMj, XIV, 1 (Armstrong, II, p. 640).

<sup>17</sup> The Third Consideration on the Stigmata (*Omnibus*, p. 1448).

<sup>18</sup> LCh, I, 2 (Armstrong, I, p. 319).

<sup>19</sup> 2C, V, 9 (Armstrong, II, p. 248).

were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh!"<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the encounter before the bishop of Assisi reveals that more had changed in Francis than just his relationship to his biological father, Pietro di Bernardone. Francis had made a definitive break with a whole manner of living and being. Francis visibly and publicly abandoned his social position. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). The privileged child of Pietro di Bernardone died in order that a man of peace could be born.

### **"HE IS OUR PEACE"**

6.1 The humility of the cross and the compassionate love of the Crucified made Francis a man of peace. Bonaventure tells us that "his flesh was in remarkable harmony with his spirit and his spirit with God."<sup>21</sup> The image Celano uses to describe Francis is that of a person emotionally and spiritually integrated, a symbol of inner freedom:

Friendly in behavior, serene in nature, affable in speech, generous in encouragement, faithful in commitment, prudent in advice .... Firm in intention, consistent in virtue, persevering in grace, .... Swift to forgive, slow to grow angry, free in nature, remarkable in memory, subtle in discussing, careful in choices, .... Strict with himself, kind with others. ... Free of laziness and arrogance.<sup>22</sup>

6.2 Francis' inner peace radiated outward to creation with an extraordinary sensitivity toward beauty:

In beautiful things he contemplated Beauty itself and through the footprints impressed in things he followed his beloved everywhere, out of them all making for himself a ladder through which he could climb up to lay hold of him who is utterly desirable.<sup>23</sup>

In *The Canticle of the Creatures*, Francis made himself the voice of creation in praise of the goodness and beauty of God.

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<sup>20</sup> 2C, VI, 10 (Armstrong, II, p. 249).

<sup>21</sup> LMj, V, 9 (Armstrong, II, p. 567).

<sup>22</sup> 1C, XXIX, 83 (Armstrong, I, p. 252-253).

<sup>23</sup> LMj, IX, 1 (Armstrong, II, p. 596).

6.3 For his contemporaries Francis became an embodiment of the words of Ephesians: “He is our peace; ...he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph. 2:14). Describing Francis’ preaching Celano remarks:

His word was like a blazing fire, reaching the deepest parts of the heart, and filling the souls of all with wonder. ...In all of his preaching...he prayed for peace saying, “May the Lord give you peace.” He always proclaimed this to men and women, to those he met and to those who met him. Accordingly, many who hated peace along with salvation, with the Lord’s help wholeheartedly embraced peace.<sup>24</sup>

### **“YOUR EYES WILL BE OPENED, AND YOU WILL BE LIKE GOD” (Gen. 3:5)**

7.1 “Peace on earth B which man throughout the ages has so longed for and sought after B.”<sup>25</sup> The encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, issued by Pope John XXIII on April 11, 1963, touched the deepest hopes and aspirations of a generation. *Pacem in Terris* outlined those basic human rights, the pursuit of which have inspired and transformed our world. At the same time, the autonomous pursuit of these rights has been the temptation of our world. “Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). The temptation of the serpent in Genesis was so enthralling because it was so close to the truth, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them” (Gen 1:27). The autonomous pursuit of rights has caused humanity not only to hunger and die for peace but even, to kill for peace! When individuals pursue their economic rights autonomously, the environment is destroyed and the poor are pushed aside. When one pursues sexual identity and sexual expression autonomously, relationship and family are destroyed. When any nation pursues its rights autonomously, war inevitably results. The absolute self recognizes nothing beyond its own fulfilment. Arrogant and tyrannical, it refuses to acknowledge or receive that “humble love of the Father” which characterizes the life of St. Francis.

### **7.2 The autonomous pursuit of rights and identity gives birth to arrogance**

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<sup>24</sup> 1C, X, 23 (Armstrong, I, p. 202-203).

<sup>25</sup> Incipit [opening words] of *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity, and liberty, April 11, 1963.

which touches the root of sin in each of us. Promoting oneself at the expense of others is the spontaneous reaction of our sinfulness. The arrogant self is closed to the humble approach of divine love. “Francis...was raised...to be arrogant...”<sup>26</sup> Change the name “Francis”, and supply your own name. Does it not ring true? The fear of abandoning advantage was at the heart of Francis’ struggle. We likewise fear to abandon those advantages which place us above others. We have been raised to be arrogant. The embrace of the humility of the cross is as abhorrent to us as it was to Francis: “The devil threatened that he would become like her if he did not turn back sensibly from what he had begun.”<sup>27</sup> We equate our self-identity with autonomous control and, often, our human freedom with the control and domination of others. Yet, paradoxically, the humility which Francis embraced became the means through which he would embrace his own identity, developing the human potential and creativity native to his own person without the advantages of birth and social station. This was the foundation of his incredible inner freedom. This, in turn, gave life to the attitudes of mind and heart which would give birth to a brotherhood of equals, among whom there would exist no structural divisions. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). The humility of the cross demanded of Francis a definitive break with the false values of his society. It demands no less of us.

7.3 “The heights of humility are discovered not only in the recognition of our lowliness, but in its embrace.”<sup>28</sup> Padre Pio has been given to us as a witness to that humility which loves the lowliness which comes from the cross. St. Francis received the gift of the stigmata at the end of his life. The stigmata was recognized by his contemporaries as a divine “seal of approval” on a life lived in union with the Crucified. Padre Pio received the gift of the stigmata at the beginning of his Franciscan life. He bore the external signs of the stigmata for more than fifty years. The stigmata was a source of controversy and became the school of the cross through which Padre Pio learned humility, embraced obedience and achieved sanctity.

War is the ultimate act of human arrogance wherein physical force and death are

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<sup>26</sup> LCh, I, 2 (Armstrong, I, p. 319).

<sup>27</sup> 2C, V, 9 (Armstrong, II, p. 248).

<sup>28</sup> Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, *Epistolario*, (ed. Melchiorre da Pobladora and Alessandro da Ripabottoni), Vol. III: Corrispondenza con le figlie spirituali (1915-1923). San Giovanni Rotondo, Ed. APadre Pio da Pietrelcina®, 1977, p. 566: A...il grado sublime dellumità è il non solamente riconoscere la propria abbiezione, ma amarla.®

used to impose the will of one people upon another. It is noteworthy that God “branded” this unknown and obscure friar with the external signs of the Crucified in 1918 - as the “war to end all wars” was coming to a close. It is also significant that Padre Pio founded his prayer groups as the Second World War was about to begin.

Padre Pio died in 1968, the year identified with the great social revolutions of our modern age, an age marked by the insistent demand for self-fulfilment and self-realization. Throughout the entire span of his life as a Capuchin and as a priest, Padre Pio held no position of authority over others. The only title he bore was that of confessor, and for three years even his free exercise of that ministry was impeded. He rarely, if ever, preached, yet thousands flocked to participate in the Eucharist which he celebrated in the tiny sanctuary of Santa Maria delle Grazie. The humility of Padre Pio opened to the pilgrims Francis’ experience of the Eucharist:

O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread!<sup>29</sup>

In the thousands they poured out their hearts to Padre Pio. Pope John Paul II summarized the impact of the humility of the saint: “By his life given wholly to prayer and to listening to his brothers and sisters, this humble Capuchin friar astonished the world.”<sup>30</sup>

## A CULTURE OF PEACE

8.1 Peace is not essentially about *structures* but about *people*. Certain structures...are of course necessary...but they have been derived from nothing other than the accumulated wisdom and experience of *innumerable gestures of peace* made by men and women....<sup>31</sup>

The upcoming plenary council concerns ***Our fraternal life in minority***. The pope’s injunction reminds us that Franciscan minority demands more than a reform of the structures of our Order. Minority was born in Francis’ personal

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<sup>29</sup> LtOrd, 27 (Armstrong, I, p. 118).

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, Homily at the Beatification of Padre Pio, May 2, 1999, n. 1.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2003, n. 9.



conversion to compassion which he learned and experienced in the love of the Crucified and which in turn, enabled him to embrace the humility of the cross.”*Gestures of peace* spring from the lives of people who *foster peace first of all in their own hearts.*”<sup>32</sup> The plenary council is not essentially about structures, but about brothers who embrace the same conversion. The pope continues,”*Gestures of peace* are possible when people *appreciate fully the community dimension of their lives.*”<sup>33</sup> This year of reflection on minority offers us a graced opportunity, individually and in our local chapters, to reflect on our immersion in the”culture of arrogance” of our world. “*Gestures of peace create a tradition and a culture of peace.*”<sup>34</sup> Brothers individually converted from arrogance to compassion will coalesce to make each of our friaries throughout the world a focal point for such a culture of peace.

8.2 Social analysis will not by itself lead us to such a conversion. In the midst of his struggles Francis made his way to the chapel of San Damiano where the compassionate gaze of the Crucified touched his heart and enabled him to embrace the conversion to minority. The Seventh Plenary Council is an invitation for each of us to make the same pilgrimage daily to the hundreds of chapels throughout the Order so that our hearts may also be transformed by the compassionate gaze of the Crucified.

8.3 Dear brothers and sisters, you have persevered so far in your reading of my reflections, and I thank you for your attention. May I now dare ask you to read it again, paying particular attention to the Word of the Lord, the words of Francis, Celano and Bonaventure, rather than to my commentary . This time read the letter more with your heart, as you would *lectio divina*: “It is especially necessary that listening to the Word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living Word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.”<sup>35</sup> I pray that this second reading may be an experience of Heart speaking to heart B “cor ad cor loquitur,”in the words of Cardinal Newman. “t that point I am happy to disappear and vanish in the presence of the Holy Spirit who binds us together as “lesser brothers.” I look forward to the Seventh Plenary Council, entrusting our

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<sup>32</sup> idem.

<sup>33</sup> idem.

<sup>34</sup> idem.

<sup>35</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 39.

preparations to our own Saint Pio, humble model of minority for us and for the people of our time.

Fraternally,  
Br. John Corriveau,  
OFM Cap. General Minister

April 18, 2003  
Solemn Commemoration of the Lord's Passion



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