



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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**FOLLOW HIS STAR**

*Circular Letter 25*

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## **Circular Letter 25 FOLLOW HIS STAR**

**“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?**

**For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him  
homage” (Mt 2:2)**

(Part Five of a series)

Prot. n. 00019/06

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

*Dear brothers and sisters,*

### **Life on the Periphery**

1.1 In describing his prophetic vocation, Isaiah does not speak of those he opposes, but of those he embraces: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; ...[he] has anointed me; ...[and] sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Is 61:1). In compassion, the prophet reaches out to those who had been abandoned by their ruler – “Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion” (Is 61:7). He reaches out in hope to those untouched by the priest – “You [yourselves] shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God” (Is 61:6).

In the Gospel of Luke (see 4:17ff), Jesus uses this text from Isaiah to describe his

own prophetic vocation. Immediately after his baptism by John in the River Jordan, and his call to ministry, Jesus enters the desert where he emphatically rejects a ministry founded on the power that lords it over others. He begins his public ministry in Galilee, a region abandoned by its political rulers, among a people scorned by the religious elite of Jerusalem as compromised by paganism. Among his closest collaborators were fishermen, a tax collector, and a Zealot. Jesus' mission was to those on the periphery of society in its social as well as its religious expression:

- “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Lk 5:30);
- “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner” (Lk 7:39); and
- “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Lk 14:13).

Jesus embraced those outside the reach of the religious and political institutions of his time.

1.2 People on the periphery – those on the fringe of society – were a significant focus of the Seventh Plenary Council. Very often the Plenary Council calls us to identify with those at the margins of our civil societies (see Proposals 6, 25, 30, 46, 48 and 49). In this way, the Seventh Plenary Council echoes the calls of the Fifth and Sixth Plenary Councils to identify with the poor. Of equal importance, however, are those who stand at the periphery of the Church, that is, those whom the Church does not adequately reach. These people were the emphasis of the recent Synod of Bishops. The working document of the Synod (*The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church*) cited the following statistics which underscore the need to rediscover our prophetic call to those stand at the periphery and in the margins of the Church:

- Catholics make up 16.89% of the population of Africa and only 2.93% of the population of Asia. The large majority of Africans and the overwhelming majority of Asians are untouched by our gospel message of salvation. While the percentage of Catholics in America remains quite high (62.46%), the life of the Church suffers greatly due to the scourges of social injustice and religious sects

which exploit the poverty of the people.<sup>1</sup>

- In the wealthier societies of North America, Western Europe and Australia there is a rapidly growing percentage of unchurched persons and attendance at Sunday Eucharist is reduced to as low as 5% in some local churches.

In other significant areas of the life of our world, the Church has minimal impact. Consider, for example, the following:

- The idea of globalization gives the illusion of a united human race...[yet] globalization and technological progress have not lead to peace and greater justice...;
- Acts of violence, terrorism and war...continue in various parts of the world;
- Many brothers and sisters...fall victim to...AIDS, which brings devastation to entire sectors of populations, especially in poorer countries; and
- In the years 1999 to 2001, 842 million people were undernourished in the world, 789 million of them in developing countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

These facts and figures are difficult to absorb from a printed page, but they paint a picture which the Church and our Order cannot ignore. Pause and allow these realities to enter into your imagination. Contemplate the reality presented by this picture and you will be changed.

1.3 In the early 1800s, the Order – and consecrated life in general – was emerging from a period of crisis and decline triggered by the Enlightenment and the suppression of religious life in large portions of Europe. The revival was marked by a new missionary energy and zeal which was not limited to just a few missionaries, but which focused and mobilized the entire Church. This new energy enlivened the Church for more than 100 years until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. This missionary zeal concentrated on the extension of the structures of the Church throughout the world. Among Institutes of Consecrated Life, clerical Congregations of Apostolic Life came to characterize the new age. In order to participate fully in this great missionary endeavor of the Church, the Capuchin Order took on many of the characteristics of Congregations of Apostolic Life. For the first time, we began to assume institutional commitments within the Church.

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<sup>1</sup>See *Synod of Bishops: The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church, Instrumentum laboris*, at n. 4.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, n. 5.

The Order accepted its first parish in the USA during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. By the end of the century, by means of the *ius commissionis*, we were assuming responsibility for entire prefectures and vicariates. The result was quite spectacular. The Order founded dozens of local churches throughout the world. This missionary outreach also revitalized the Order, growing from slightly more than 4,000 members at the beginning of the 1800s to almost 15,000 just 150 years later.

1.4 The missionary zeal of the past 150 years carved out an **institutional** role for our Order within the Church. By contrast, today's new evangelization is aimed at people who stand at the periphery of the Church, those whom the institution no longer effectively reaches. The new evangelization compels us to give renewed emphasis to the charismatic and prophetic aspects of Franciscan life. The Plenary Council establishes principles to redefine our minority within the Church so that we may "gradually (i.e., by taking small steps) make a 'significant' shift toward the periphery...where we wish to pitch our tents among the lowly ones of today, as Jesus, Francis and the first Capuchins did in their day" (VII PCO, 3).



**“Small steps...toward the periphery...”**

(VII PCO, 3)

2.1 The Plenary Council invites us to evaluate and reduce our institutional commitments within the Church. “Our Order does not seek the episcopacy or other high ecclesiastical offices for its members” (VII PCO, 41). Since the time of St. Bonaventure, popes have called our brothers to serve the wider Church as bishops. These brothers responded to the call of the Holy Father in a spirit of obedience to the Church. Nonetheless, the Order **does not seek** such offices. This is not disrespectful of episcopal offices, but rather an indication that our mission as an Order lies elsewhere. In the immediate pre-Vatican II period, the Order assumed responsibilities for prefectures and vicariates. This involved the Order directly in the episcopal charism of the Church. Today, the needs of the Church call us to review such commitments. In the same vein, the Plenary Council advises that “commitments such as parishes, diocesan services and other responsibilities that induce stability should only be taken on for a limited time” (VII PCO, 39). The same proposal expresses the preference that “the service of evangelization and pastoral ministry should be undertaken more in a sense of collaboration with the local diocese, while always avoiding a sense of power and appropriation.” The Order seeks to *lessen* its institutional commitments in order to express more freely its **charismatic role** to and within the Church. The Order seeks this transformation, not because it is opposed to these commitments, but in order to better serve the needs of the Church. For this reason, while counseling a decrease in parish and other diocesan commitments, the proposal adds the balancing note, “taking account of the circumstances.” Our aim is to build the Church, not to destroy it!

2.2 Two other proposals seek to redirect us toward those on the periphery of the Church. Proposal 38 exhorts us to “remain sincerely available to serve the local and universal Church, working in harmony with its pastors.” Nonetheless, the same proposal seeks to redirect the apostolic zeal of the brothers by encouraging us to assume “pastoral commitments **on the boundaries**, especially ministries that are least sought after in the Church, where we can more easily manifest compassion and closeness to people, whether in out-of-town parishes, hospital chaplaincies and ministries to the sick or marginalized

who suffer poverty in forms old and new.” Proposal 37 makes two important additions. First, the proposal stresses the need to expand our vision of evangelization: “When choosing activities and services, circumscriptions should include ministries that do not require priestly ordination.” Those on the periphery of the Church [see 1.2 above] do not interact with the institutional structures of the Church. They remain untouched by the sacramental ministry of the Church. Therefore, the Order must release not only the diverse charism of our lay brothers, but we must also give wider expression to the non-sacramental ministries of our ordained brothers. Furthermore, the proposal states that “the mission of our Order must express the fraternal nature of our charism.” Fraternity – the living gospel – is an essential dimension of our move toward those on the periphery. The Order must build gospel fraternities among those on the edge, in the margins, on the boundaries!

2.3 Rooting itself in the Testament of Siena, the Plenary Council affirms: “We recognize as an essential expression of our minority heartfelt, co-responsible obedience to the Church and her ministers” (VII PCO, 38). This is important throughout the Church, however it bears particular importance in the older churches where diocesan structures are often weighed down by the age and scarcity of the clergy, commitments are more suitable to another age, and cynicism borne of scandal abounds. When we focus on the sins, divisions and weaknesses of others, we always feel full of insight and correct in our judgment, because we can always see the sins of others better than our own! However, it is only when we begin to concentrate on what unites that we find Christ, the heart of our communion. We should apply this principle to our local churches. If we look for what is good, we will find it. We will discover aspects of the local church with which we can collaborate. Our attempt to move toward the periphery is not in opposition to the local church, but rather, it is an effort to serve that church ever more faithfully.

2.4 Although directed mainly toward new locales where we go to implant the Order and help form the local Church, Proposal 40 has very concrete suggestions which apply equally to those places where we seek to re-establish the Order and re-evangelize the local Church:

- avoid all signs of power and social status in our way of living, evangelizing and giving assistance;

- work preferably with local methods and resources;
- promote the various projects in the name of the Capuchin fraternity, not in a personal capacity;
- follow the principles of a fraternal economy proposed by the Sixth Plenary Council; and
- favor local churches that do not expect great pastoral or social structures from us, but rather Franciscan witness (VII PCO, 40).

## **Pitching our Tents among the Lowly Ones of Today**

3.1 The prophetic mission of Jesus was not about what he abandoned, but about **whom he embraced!** The Plenary Council provides impetus and challenge to embrace in our pastoral concern those whom the wider institutional Church no longer reaches [see 1.2 above]. The Plenary Council establishes principles consistent with our Capuchin Franciscan tradition which can assist us as we reevaluate our commitments within the Church and society. However, the Plenary Council is lacking in specifics! How can we reach out to those on the periphery of our world? Can we begin to discern those “small steps” which will cause us to “gradually...make a ‘significant’ shift toward the periphery...where we wish to pitch our tents among the lowly ones of today, as Jesus, Francis and the first Capuchins did in their day” (VII PCO, 3)?

3.2 At a recent meeting of the Capuchin Conference of Major Superiors in India (CCMSI), the provincial ministers discussed a pastoral strategy for this important conference of our Order. Each province agreed to assume a three-fold missionary commitment. One such commitment will be in a region of India where the Order does not yet exist, and where the presence of the Church remains weak. Many such regions exist, especially in the northeast. These are regions of primary evangelization. Each province will assume a commitment in another country, either in Asia or Africa. Finally, each province will assume a commitment to assist the older provinces of Europe and America as they struggle with aging and declining membership. Should these provinces, and particularly the younger brothers of these provinces, assume such commitments with courage and enthusiasm, it will represent a considerable shift toward the periphery.

3.3 The Vice Province of South Africa has given birth to a new pastoral outreach called, “The Damietta Initiative.” Inspired by the encounter between St. Francis and the Sultan, the South African brothers are attempting to build “dialogue cells” of Christians and Muslims aimed at creating greater peace and understanding in Africa. The dialogue they seek is not theological but spiritual and existential. They seek to unite Christians and Muslims living in the same neighborhoods in bonds of friendship and mutual esteem. The Conference of the Franciscan Family which brings together the general ministers of the First

Order, the Third Order Regular, the Secular Franciscan Order, and the President of CFI-TOR, has agreed to sponsor and support this new initiative. The South African brothers have an ambitious goal, namely, to create a Christian-Muslim dialogue cell alongside every Franciscan fraternity in Africa! When we consider the violence which recently erupted on the periphery of the cities of France and the equal potential for such violence among underemployed and disaffected Muslim youth in other major cities across Europe and America, we understand only too well that the Damietta Initiative would be valuable beyond Africa. The Damietta Initiative is a creative and concrete expression of VII PCO: “We wish to live among the poor without distinction of religion, to dialogue with cultures, religions and denominations and inculturate the gospel” (Proposal 47).

3.4 “Our preaching of the Kingdom consists not only of verbal proclamation of the Word, but also of involvement in society for its transformation” (VII PCO, 48). In March of 2006, 55 delegates from every region of our Order will gather at Porto Alegre, Brazil, for the third in a series of initiatives being undertaken by the International Justice, Peace and Ecology Commission. Throughout the Order, but especially in Latin America, identification with the poor has inspired generations of Capuchins. The Seventh Plenary Council provides principles which can renew this movement within the Order: “Works of social development/transformation should aim to build the structures of a fraternal economy within society” (Proposal 51). This is precisely the goal of the Porto Alegre Congress. “Works of direct aid to poor people should aim to connect people in need with people of means in a fraternal economy” (Proposal 51). The solidarity we create is more important than the money we provide! Can this conviction become a transforming principle for our structured ministries among the poor along with our disaster relief efforts such as those born in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami?

3.5 “As lesser brothers, being poor and having opted for the poor, we need to be more actively involved in the social and spiritual development of the poor and marginalized” (VII PCO, 48). Our Order does not have the resources to eliminate world hunger or to care for the millions of people infected with the HIV/AIDS virus. However, just as the Damietta Initiative seeks to create a Christian-Muslim dialogue group with each Franciscan fraternity in Africa, could not each province of our Order have at least one fraternity in which the brothers, with their own hands, serve the hungry or those with HIV/AIDS? This could give “meaning to

our solidarity with society's 'little ones,' whose deprivation degrades their humanity to a point where their moral sense is often compromised" (VII PCO, 48).

3.6 No single gesture will enable our Order to bring the transforming power of the gospel to the periphery of society. In its wisdom, the Plenary Council talks of "small steps." When more than 11,000 brothers in 103 countries begin to contemplate such "small steps," they can – cumulatively – effect a "significant shift" toward that periphery.

## **Christ, the head, who bows low**

(see VII PCO, 35)

4.1 The Seventh Plenary Council identifies building the Kingdom with building sister-/ brotherhood: “Poverty, minority and itinerancy...are means to our end, i.e., to **building the kingdom of God** or, in Franciscan language, **building brotherhood** wherever and whenever we can” (VII PCO, 4). In sister-/brotherhood our identity and our mission become one! Perhaps this explains Plenary Council’s particular understanding of the priesthood within our Order.

4.2 “The priest-Franciscan lives his ministry by respecting above all the primacy of belonging to the fraternity” (VII PCO, 36). This statement takes new meaning when we read it in the context of Hebrews 5:1: “Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.” The author of Hebrews does not speak directly of the ministerial priesthood, rather, he speaks of the priesthood of Jesus Christ and the priesthood of the Church. The Church applies this passage to the ministerial priesthood. This is important because all priests share in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ, but it is a priesthood which comes to them through his Body, the Church. The universal Church does not exist in the abstract. It exists as a communion of communions. Therefore, the priesthood comes to us through each local church. The priesthood takes on the characteristics of the local church through which we have received this priesthood. When we made profession, the provincial minister who received our vows said these words: “In the name of the Church and of our brotherhood, I accept your vows.” By recognizing our profession in the Capuchin Order, the Church gives specificity to our living of the mystery of the Church. By ordaining priests within the Capuchin Order, the Church mandates a Capuchin Franciscan expression of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

4.3 Fraternal evangelical life is our manner of incarnating the Church. Franciscans create church by drawing people into the experience of sister-/brotherhood. To be brother is the chief characteristic of the Franciscan, and of the Franciscan priest. Capuchins must reveal the fraternal face of priesthood to the world because we are called to be “frati del popolo” – “brothers to ordinary people.”

4.4 “The priest-Franciscan lives his ministry by respecting above all the primacy of belonging to the fraternity.” There is still another dimension of this principle. Fraternal evangelical life is my expression of being church. If the priest-brother is not involved in the ecclesial community which is his local fraternity, can he be an adequate minister to his people? This is illustrated in Acts 18 where we meet the mysterious figure of Apollos. Apollos has come to faith in Jesus by reading the Scriptures. He is a man of culture, well-versed in Greek philosophy. He is articulate, a preacher more gifted than Paul. In Acts 18, he preaches at Ephesus and creates a great stir. But the Scriptures tell us that two simple Christians, Priscilla and Aquila, hear him, take him aside and explain the way of God to him “more accurately” (Acts 18:26). It was not the learned Apollos who instructed Priscilla and Aquila, it was they who instructed him. It was not sufficient to be well-versed in theology and philosophy. Apollos had to have live contact with the Church. Do we not have “Apollos” in our midst, brothers, well-versed in theology, philosophy, the sciences, marvelously articulate? Can they really impart faith if they are not in vital contact with the lived experience of church in their local fraternities?

4.5 The washing of feet in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John is the favorite image quoted by Francis when he describes how the brothers should serve one another. This was the scripture passage which he requested be read when he lay naked on Mother Earth, preparing himself to meet Sister Death. The first 12 chapters of John’s Gospel highlight two important images: life and light. From Chapter 13 onward, love dominates. Two symbols bring love alive: the cross and the washing of feet. Commentaries tell us that these symbols are really one. In the washing of feet, John is teaching the Church how to bring the saving power of the cross to the world. The cross is saving power. By washing feet, the Church releases this saving power to the world. The meaning is all the more clear as Peter says to Jesus: “You will never wash my feet,” to which Jesus replies: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (Jn 13:8). If the Church does not wash the feet of the world, the world will never understand the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross is understood through service. If that is true of the Church in general, how much more must it be true of the Franciscan Order. We are called to be the humble face of the Church and, in a particular way, priest-brothers have a special role in that revelation.



Proposal 35 states that “the priest acts in the name of Christ, the Head, during the assembly’s Eucharist.” It reminds us that the Gospel of John (13:13) presents Jesus as the Head, “the Lord and Master,” who bends low to wash the feet of others. As Jesus himself indicates in the Gospel of John, he was never more head of the Church than when he was washing feet. In John’s Gospel, imagery is very important. Jesus rises from table and takes off his outer robe. This act symbolizes the stripping away of all signs of privilege and dominating power. In the same way, we must strip ourselves of every vestige of clerical privilege and domination in order to present the face of priestly service to the world. This was precisely the choice of the early priest-companions of Francis. They freely renounced all exercise of priestly ministry which was not compatible with their call to be minors. Why? Because they were the servant face of the priesthood. They saw themselves as priests who had a special vocation to wash the feet of lepers.

Priest-brother and priest-servant – these two essential dimensions of Franciscan priestly ministry were the focus of our brother and bishop, Sean O’Malley, when he was installed as Archbishop of Boston. On that occasion he remarked: “Being a Franciscan brother is still the great joy of my life. ...As your archbishop, I am your shepherd; as a friar, I am your brother; and I have come to serve you, to wash your feet as Jesus says, and to repeat the great commandment: Love one another as Christ loves us.”

## Conclusion

5.1 “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage” (Mt 2:2). The Magi were moved by the conviction that God was creating a new kind of presence in our world with new power to save. They set out to discover this new revelation. In one of his homilies for World Youth Day at Cologne, Pope Benedict XVI stressed that the journey of the Magi was also a journey to a new understanding of the power of God. This power is described by St. Paul: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). The Magi first directed their journey to the center of Jewish civil and religious power in Jerusalem. Their quest finished on the periphery, discovering God’s new power to save in the Divine Child resting in the manger of Bethlehem. The Seventh Plenary Council reminds us that Francis had the same experience:

His encounter with this human being [i.e., the leper], abandoned and excluded by the society and system of his day, made Francis “leave the world” and change his social status and residence, moving out from the center to the periphery of Rivo Torto and Our Lady of the Angels (VII PCO, 3).

Like the Magi before him, the journey of Francis from the center to the periphery was a voyage in which he discovered Christ: “Francis discovered the foundation of minority in the crucified God-Man, the Christ of San Damiano, but by way of the leper (VII PCO, 3). In the process, Francis’ life became infused with the power of God made present in Jesus Christ.

The Order’s modern pilgrimage to those on the periphery must be inspired by the faith of Magi. We must have the conviction that God is breaking into our world with new power to save. Like the Magi, we must “**follow his star,**” searching for his presence among those whom the Church does not reach. Like Francis before us, may this quest transform our lives with the indwelling Spirit of Jesus so that, in turn, our Order may transform our world through the power of his loving kindness.

Fraternally,  
Br. John Corriveau,  
OFM Cap., General Minister  
6 January 2006  
Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord

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