



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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MISSION AT THE HEART OF THE ORDER

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CIRCULAR LETTER TO ALL THE BROTHERS OF THE ORDER ON MISSION ACTIVITY

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Mission at the heart of the Order

I. A GLORIOUS TALE TO TELL

1.1 – ON THE WINGS OF A DREAM -“I want to go away, far away!” The young farm hand rested on his spade and gazed into the distance, beyond the horizon of his own fields. His father watched him for a while and asked him what was wrong. Back came the reply: “We have big fields and a large, united family. But I feel this isn’t enough for me. One day I’ll go away. I want to be a missionary”.¹

Once he had accepted his vocation, the young Lorenzo left home to join the Capuchins, who gave him the name William. Later he met Pope Gregory XVI, who indicated the Oromo people in far-off Ethiopia, as a people to whom he could devote his energies. He lived among them for 35 years, facing all kinds of trials and adversities. This is why we can say that the parable Jesus told his disciples was fulfilled in his life: “There is no-one who has left house, brothers, sisters, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not be repaid a hundred times over... not without persecutions, now in this present time, and in the world to come, eternal life”. (Mk 10, 29-30).

200 years have passed since the birth of the Capuchin missionary Cardinal William Massaja, and this anniversary suggests a question for us: “How strong in me is the longing to go away, beyond my own fields, like the young Massaja? How strong in my/our Capuchin fraternity is the desire to be a missionary? What am I, what are we, ready to give to strengthen our mission in the world?”.

¹ EGIDIO PICUCCI, *Abuna Messias, Epopea etiopica del Cardinale Guglielmo Massaja*, Centro Studi Massajani. Editrice Alzani, Pinerolo (TO), 1988, p.11.

1.2 - REMEMBER THE PAST, PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE – 2009 is also the centenary of the death of Br. Bernard Christen of Andermatt, General Minister of the Order from 1884 to 1908, who was almost a second founder of the Order. He committed himself totally to the renewal of our missions. In the wake of Br. Anastasius Hartmann, who 150 years ago (1858) was appointed as the first Procurator of the Order's Missions, Br. Bernard Christen broke new ground with his idea of "One Province - One Mission", bringing the missionary commitment of the Capuchins to the attention of the whole Order. Thanks to him, "mission" once again became an essential element of our fraternity and the Order experienced a new bloom.

1.3 - TO BE A CAPUCHIN IS TO BE A MISSIONARY – Along with these happy anniversaries we should not forget that eight centuries ago Francis of Assisi wrote his first Rule. Saint Francis was the first Founder of an Order to place "mission" in his Rule, and the first Capuchins incorporated his words almost literally into the Constitutions of Saint Euphemia (1536)².

Our Order had to wait until 1574 before obtaining permission to cross the Alps and leave Italy³ in order to go "inter haereticos, schismaticos et paganos"⁴, i.e. to Protestant areas⁵, to Orthodox countries⁶ and among non-Christians⁷. This "going" has continued ever since.

Today the Order is present in 103 countries of the world! Recently, in 2005, we opened new presences in Iceland and in Ghana. In 2006 the Seychelles, Bolivia and Haiti were added to the list, while in 2009 we have accepted responsibility for Kuwait and have a small presence in Nepal.

1.4 - CONDITIONS HAVE CHANGED, BUT THE TASK REMAINS – For a long time Br. Bernhard Christen's principle of "One Province – One Mission" proved to be a stroke of genius: it was facilitated by the fact that very often the Capuchins were

² Cf. *Costituzioni 1536* in *Frati Cappuccini. Documenti e testimonianze del primo secolo*, a cura di COSTANZO CARGNONI, Perugia, 1988, 450.

³ GREGORY XIII, *Ex nostro pastoralis officii debito*, 1574.

⁴ Cf. MELCHIOR A POBLADURA, *Historia Generalis Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Capuccinorum*, Vol I-III, Romae 1947.

⁵ Lawrence of Brindisi, Fidelis of Sigmaringen.

⁶ Towards the end of the XVI century there were some "unofficial" contacts with "Schismatics" in the Near East. It will suffice to quote the name of Br. Joseph of Leonessa.

⁷ During the XVII century missionary work began "overseas": in Brazil, Central America, India and especially in Africa in the "Missio Antiqua" of the Congo. The first Capuchin had reached Africa already in 1535 in the wake of Charles V's troops. The Emperor himself convinced the Pope to grant permission to the Capuchins to cross the Alps and so begin their mission in the Protestant regions.

the only ones present in the territory assigned to them by *Propaganda Fide* and the local Church had not yet been born. And so the Province enjoyed the necessary autonomy to structure and carry out the mission it had been entrusted with.

Today these conditions have changed radically, not only in the Church and the Order but also in the political and economic fields. Just think of the concept of “globalisation”, which can mean everything or nothing, unless you consider that the economic and social policies of one country have always had an impact on the economic and political systems of the others. None of the parties involved is responsible for itself alone, but is at the same time responsible for the whole. This is true not just of the negative impact, but also the positive. If we are aware of this we ought to realise that we Capuchins also have something valuable to put forward, being the trustees of a charism that is able to transform the world.

Strengthened by Christ’s promise: “Know that I am with you always, yes, to the end of time” (Mt 28, 20), we should not hold back from facing new challenges which at first sight may seem difficult, even impossible. The first Capuchins expressed their unconditional trust in God by embracing insecurity, moving from place to place, living far from the cities in order to immerse themselves in prayer and contemplation. This was, and can be again today, the source of a readiness to leave the hermitage in order to meet the needs of people, whether those needs are material or shown in a person’s search for God.

Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* stated that “the presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is a duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved.” (EN 5). Mission is therefore “the deepest identity” of the Church (EN 14). Highlighting the qualitative dimension of evangelisation, he goes on to say: “It is not only a question of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.” (EN 19).

1.5 - MISSION CREATES UNITY - In 1967, the then Fr. Joseph Ratzinger showed that the concept of mission in the conciliar Constitution on the Church emerged at the moment when Catholicism was becoming known as the “new people of God”. This is what he wrote: “The one God created man and wanted humanity to be in unity...Mission enacts the fundamental salvific dynamic of unification, countering the divisions arising from sin, and is thus the actual accomplishment of the direction in which salvation history is moving”⁸. This task is based on the commandment to “Go and baptise all nations” (Mt 28, 19), “so that all may be one: as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17, 21). “Being one” clearly implies new relationships, transformed by the encounter with Christ. Our Capuchin Franciscan fraternity, with its inborn tendency towards universal brotherhood, is called by its very nature to witness to a transformed life as an expression of “redeemed relationships” (PCO VII , 46).

1.6 - REDEEMED RELATIONSHIPS: FROM FRANCIS TO THE CAPUCHINS - Francis of Assisi was not only a totally “evangelical” man, he was also “catholic”, i.e. universal, with and in the Church. By inserting into the Rule instructions on how to “go among the Saracens”, he wanted to show first of all the relationship dimension, even before that of martyrdom. Without hiding his identity as a Christian, the Poverello’s first aim was to meet the other person and to see him as a brother. The encounter with the Sultan expresses this in a surprising way.

In this sense our missionary activity should not be understood primarily in terms of how widely the Order is spread in the world, but rather as a way of making the charism of Saint Francis present in cultures where it is still unknown. Our presence is intended to have an impact on the surrounding reality in order to enrich it. In this it will not fail to be a support to the Christian community. If we are to be present in this way we must first be clear about our vocation as lesser brothers; this comes before both intellectual preparation and the desire to “go on the missions”.

1.7 - “TO GO”: A SIGN OF BEING SENT - The “going” is clearly part of the definition of mission. Our Constitutions define missionary service as a proclamation of the Good News of salvation to those who do not believe in Christ, and as a service to the “young churches”. (Const 174, 5-6). However, in

⁸ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Konzilsaussagen über die Mission außerhalb des Missionsdekrets*, in JOHANNES SCHÜTTE, *Mission nach dem Konzil*, Mainz 1967, 22.

our day the “young churches” have matured and have assumed a purely local appearance. In the same way our fraternities have been enriched by brothers from these local Christian communities. In the current process of revising the Constitutions it will be necessary to keep these changes in mind and to update the Constitutions accordingly.

Today, being a missionary means being someone who brings the Gospel, working so that the Kingdom finds fertile ground in which to grow. The missionary perspective includes those who have forgotten or abandoned the Gospel, as well as those who have never known it. A missionary in the strict sense is one who sets out for another country, embraces its culture and commits himself to learning the language. By serving the cause of the Kingdom in this way, the missionary makes the universality of the Church visible and reveals the innovative force of Christ’s Gospel, which as such knows no frontiers.

If the mission imperative is to go out to those who do not know or who have abandoned the Gospel, for the Capuchin lesser brother this involves going where no-one else is willing to go! Along with this goes a readiness to take on the fatigue of long, uncomfortable journeys, often living in very precarious conditions. To do this one needs a heart on fire with love for God and people...

1.8 – BEYOND THE FRONTIERS OF ONE’S OWN PLANS – The power of mission is rooted in love and becomes even stronger if one learns to look beyond personal plans and desires and humbly places oneself at the service of Him who has called us. We have been freed by Christ, and he meant us to remain free (cf. Gal 5,1), serving others as best we can and thereby giving back to God what we have received from Him. I am more than convinced that our missionaries have achieved a great deal; many of them have given their last breath. Despite this, much remains to be done. We need to grow in the dimension of acting jointly and making sure that “my projects” as against “the others’ projects” become “our projects” in word and in fact.

1.9 – ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE: MOVING BEYOND WHAT WE DO AND HAVE ALWAYS DONE – In Circular Letter n. 4 “Let us fan the Flame of our Charism!” I pointed to a decline in the missionary spirit, citing a lack of readiness to be sent on a mission of first evangelisation to places marked by various difficulties and then only for a very limited time, after which a reward is expected (n.1.1,6-7).

These observations of mine brought mixed reactions: some approved, some felt hurt because their commitment is serious and faithful, but others simply said: "We've done our part, now it's someone else's turn!" I am quite sure that mission is for all ages and every culture, because it is part of the very essence of the Church. To use an image, I would say that it is a thermometer that shows how fresh and mature the faith of its members really is. What does the thermometer show as far as our Capuchin zeal for mission is concerned?

1.10 - HOW FAR HAVE WE COME? - In the last few years the Order has spread, has widened its borders. We have seen our fraternity grow considerably in Asia, Africa and Latin America, especially in Brazil, as well as the constant decline of fraternities in Europe and North America. There are regional variations which at times indicate a very rapid process of decline, but also the steady hold of our presences in Eastern Europe. Alongside this finding, which refers to what is immediately visible, there are less visible problems which have a direct impact on mission or on our way of being missionaries.

I will try to mention a few:

- entrusting young jurisdictions with the responsibility of a first evangelisation mission, and with it the *implantatio Ordinis*;
- the new solidarity, a movement of brothers from the southern hemisphere, where fraternities are numerous and flourishing, to the north, where the presence of the charism is in decline;
- in territories where our apostolate is not always freely allowed our presence faces new challenges and requires renewed attention and energy.

Today the central government of the Order certainly needs to continue its economic efforts, but I would say it needs most of all to accompany the new missionary realities, so that they avoid taking the easier option, or simply choose what is new or what favours the realisation of personal projects.

II. THE HISTORY CONTINUES.

2.1 – RETRIEVING THE ORDER’S MISSIONARY TASK – At this point I think a few more historical references won’t do any harm! Historically, the new impulse Br. Bernard Christen gave to the Order’s missionary commitment happened as part of the reawakening of missionary awareness that permeated the whole Church in the 19th century. In France and Germany the so-called missionary societies had arisen, of which, in Germany, the famous “Hilfswerk Missio Aachen” was one.⁹ New missionary Congregations were springing up everywhere.

In addition to the politically troubled times, the Capuchins’ internal structures were no longer adequate to the new needs. It is true that the Order was one of the main supporters of *Propaganda Fide*¹⁰, but this meant that the brothers “no longer belonged to the Province” and received their orders direct from the Congregation. The large distances and the lack of means of communication led to a loss of contact between the Order and the friars involved in missionary work.

Br. Anastasius Hartmann, Bishop of Patna and Bombay, had asked the Order for help, but the few missionaries he was sent in no way measured up to the task that faced them. “Most of them made no real effort to learn languages or genuinely devote themselves to the ministry”¹¹. The basic problem was that the Order released its missionaries to the Congregation of *Propaganda* and after that did not feel directly involved in the mission. The missionary friars themselves felt like “goods without an owner and deserters who had been disowned by the Order¹²”.

Br. Anastasius Hartmann then worked out a wide-ranging reform of the Order’s missionary activity, at the centre of which stood the Mission Procurator. His task was to maintain close contact with the Provinces, encourage the sending of missionaries and build relationships which would promote missionary activity. *Propaganda Fide* accepted the proposal, but it did not give charge of it to the General Minister of the Order, but to itself. It was Br. Bernhard Christen who

⁹ While in 1832 the medical doctor Heinrich Hahn started the Franziskus-Xaverius-Verein at Aachen, King Louis I of Bavaria founded the Ludwig-Missionsverein there in 1838.

¹⁰ Saint Fidelis of Sigmaringen was the first martyr of *Propaganda Fide*. Nearly 400 friars belonging to all the Provinces of the Order volunteered for the Congo mission. See WALBERT BÜHLMANN, *La Congregazione di Propaganda Fide e l’Ordine Cappuccino*, in: *Vita Minorum* (1/1972) 47.

¹¹ WALBERT BÜHLMANN, *Aus dem Leben etwas machen. Anastasius Hartmann – ein Modell*, Mainz 2000, 135 ss.

¹² Cf. *Ibidem*, 168.

fully implemented Br. Anastasius Hartmann's plan, restoring the mission to the Order.

2.2 - THE WHOLE ORDER IS A MISSIONARY FORCE - In the changed conditions it seems that, even today, we are in a position where the Order, as one Fraternity, needs to reclaim its responsibility for mission. Missionary commitment is a serious thing. Then, as now, the argument that there is so much to do at home does not stand up. That is not the issue! What Br. Anastasius Hartmann wrote with reference to superiors could today be applied generally to all the friars: "The main reason why provincial and local superiors hold the missions in low esteem is their fear of losing the best members of the Order, whom they consider indispensable to the Province. Therefore anyone who shows a desire to go on the missions is presented with a picture of the needy situation of the province, painted in the most vivid colours. An appeal is made to conscience, in an attempt to shake the holy intention by every means... Prejudice against the missions is unfortunately so deeply rooted that anyone who wants to be a missionary is considered a deserter and loses his good name... They describe the situation at home, saying that our own country is teeming with infidels so anyone can put his apostolic zeal to good use here, and does not need to cross an ocean to do it"¹³.

2.3 - WHERE SHALL WE GO? - There is certainly some truth in all of this, but something has also changed. Many friars, even today, respond to the missionary call. They set out for places never before reached by the Gospel and the Capuchin fraternity. New support structures have been created for them. And yet the question remains: "Is all this sufficient to achieve our mission fully?". Maybe we need to ask: "Why do we do it? For what purpose? Is it because we want a constant supply of new Capuchins? Where are we going? What is our goal?".

Until we answer these questions, we will be able to offer little more than activism on a large scale. Even if we continue to walk alongside people to support their faith and to do good through a multitude of social works - and they would make a long list - it seems to me absolutely necessary that we stop and realise that by working together - there are over 10,500 of us friars - we will trigger a real change of mentality in ourselves, so that we bring the renewed

¹³ *Ibidem*, 176.

gospel message to society, to the life of the Church, and to the actual places where we live (and elsewhere)!

2.4 – MISSION IS FOR EVERYONE – Dear Brothers: at the beginning of this letter I recalled the many jubilees we are celebrating this year and this moves me to look at our mission and to ask what it is that drives us to fulfil it. “Why leave for the Missions”? It is time to reflect, but also time for action.

If PCO III at Mattli stated: “Missionary work should be close to the heart of the Province, wherever and however it is exercised” (PCO III, 34c), today we have to say: “Mission should be at the heart of the Order”. This is why in 2009 the General Definitory decided to strengthen the General Secretariat for Missionary Animation so that it could take on the task of helping the brothers to feel a sense of responsibility towards our mission, whatever part of the Order they belong to. As was said at Mattli, we are all missionaries: “The missionary task does not of itself imply a special vocation different from that shared by all the friars ...” (PCO III, 11). Mission is intrinsic to the very vocation and calling to be a Capuchin lesser brother.

We cannot fail to recall the episode when Cardinal Hugolino of Ostia rebuked Francis for sending brothers outside Italy “Why did you send your brothers so far away to die of hunger and endure so many trials?” In great fervour and in the spirit of prophecy Blessed Francis answered him: “Lord, do you think that the Lord sent the brothers only for these regions? But I tell you in truth that the Lord chose and sent the brothers for the benefit and salvation of the souls of all people in this world. They should be received not only in the land of believers, but also in that of non-believers, and they will win over many souls” The Lord Bishop of Ostia marvelled at his words, and admitted that he spoke the truth” (*Mirror of Perfection*, 65).

2.5 – MISSION BELONGS TO EVERYONE - Our Constitutions speak of “divine inspiration” calling a person to mission work. This call can make itself heard also through the superiors (Const 176, 1) and not infrequently through a conversation with missionaries. The Rule says that superiors should not oppose such a call, except in cases where the brothers are really not suited for it (Rb, XII), and our Constitutions point out that lack of personnel in a province is not a sufficient reason for refusing a friar permission to go on the missions. (Const 176,3).

Granted that not all the brothers are called to actually leave their own country to do mission work, as sons of Saint Francis we are all called to be missionaries (PCO III 10). The Capuchin lesser brother cannot opt out of this commitment. A missionary obedience is not fulfilled only by leaving the country, but also by supporting the brother who does leave, by accompanying him in prayer, by offering concrete help and co-operation, and by encouraging other friars or lay people to assume responsibility for mission.

2.6 - THINGS TO DO -

- **Mission secretariats:**

It is the task of the General Definitory, through the General Secretariat for Missionary Animation, to encourage each Province and Vice-Province to have its own Mission Secretariat and to collaborate actively with the General Secretariat. (Const 178,3).

- **Collaboration:**

It is important that the structures concerned with the animation of the Order - the General Secretariat for Formation, the General Secretariat for Missionary Animation and the JPE Office - should work together closely, so that the gospel message “and the coming Kingdom of God transform man himself and create a new world that is just and full of peace. Thus the Church grows daily and becomes ever more perfect” (Const 174,3).

- **Coordination of projects:**

Ten years¹⁴ after the creation of the Office for Economic Solidarity, a body set up to foster co-operation in the area of economic resources, it is necessary to think again about ways of ensuring greater co-ordination of projects, especially in the light of the changed economic conditions. We need to take steps to ensure a stronger sense of solidarity, so that we move from thinking that our own project has priority, to a spirit of sharing, where we see the complexity of the Order’s needs and, more specifically, the actual need of my brother.

- **Franciscan formation for missionaries:**

¹⁴ The members of the new structures were appointed on March 23 1999.

The preparation of missionaries must be carefully organised. The Inter-Franciscan Course in Brussels is a start, but it must be made available in other languages apart from English and French. Also there is a need for a few brothers to accompany the (future) missionaries.

- **General Secretary for Mission Animation:**

A visible sign that the Order is serious about mission lies in the fact that the General Secretariat for Mission Animation has been strengthened with the appointment of a brother working full-time in this task. He will be supported in his work by the Promoter of Solidarity. The aim is to give better care and animation in the missionary field, throughout the Order, with particular attention to co-operation or creating links between the different areas of the Order. As with any secretariat, the service will be carried out in close liaison with the General Minister and his Definitory.

III. Conclusion

3.1 - BUILDING THE FUTURE ON THE PRESENT – I realise that whatever we say about mission can turn out to be rather complex, and some might be struck by the fact that not everything is rosy in this particular garden. It is true that there is a shadow side too, but what I wanted to do more than anything else was to share a heartfelt concern of mine: to reawaken our interest in mission and our commitment to it, and to repeat that the missionary calling lies at the heart of our vocation as Capuchin lesser brothers.

How could we fail to remember also the beautiful things that are done in the field of missionary activity, and to encourage the brothers to keep going, and perhaps to do even more? Let's see if we can mention one or two. First of all, there are Capuchins from every continent living in countries and cultural contexts very different from their own. This shows that the Order has moved, it has gone out to proclaim the gospel, it is close to the poor and helps them in their need. Many are the new Provinces or jurisdictions which, having received the charism of Capuchin brotherhood, have in turn become bearers of the charism to other parts of the world. These are missionary realities!

Wherever I go I find brothers who sacrifice themselves for the mission, and for those whom they meet as gifts of God along the way. Very often they have to bear their own share of hardship and sickness, but this does not stop them. In fact it happens that, at the end of a Sunday spent celebrating the Eucharist six or seven times for the Christian communities, a brother will feel tired, of course, but profoundly content. I have met friars who, having travelled all night by bus over rough roads to attend a meeting with their brothers, were laughing and smiling for the sheer joy of meeting one another! Or there is the brother who never has a moment to himself from morning to night, because of some urgent need: someone asking for clothing or food, someone who feels isolated because of AIDS and needs care and comfort, some gesture of humanity in a world so marked by endless violence – in this case, too, I have met brothers who are actually happy. I have also seen that the roots of it all are to be found in a living faith in the God who is One and Three. If ever we forgot to praise Him and bless Him, our activity would end up like salt that has lost its taste; it could no longer be called a “mission”.

3.2 – NEVER STOP IN THE PRESENT BECAUSE TOMORROW WILL SOON BE THE PAST – We shouldn't forget that in our Order economic solidarity is also part of our mission. Solidarity is in itself a proclamation of the gospel, and enables us to evangelise jointly, as a body.

Without conversion of heart, no growth or development will help us reach the goal. Even if we had all the money in the world, and could build structures to ensure justice for all, giving everyone the same living conditions, this would not necessarily mean we had reached our goal. Only by emphasising and living those redeemed relationships of which our fraternity is the bearer, will we contribute to the building of a better society, to making all things new – even if it means doing so with fewer resources at our disposal.

During the International Chapter of Mats, Br. Raniero Cantalamessa used an image that struck home. He said: “We Catholics, because of our past, are more ready to be “pastors” than “fishers of men”. I mean we are better placed to shepherd the people who have remained faithful to the Church, than to bring in new people, or to “fish back” those who have drifted away”¹⁵.

The young Lorenzo left his fields behind; farm-hand though he was, he was not afraid to embark on a journey that would teach him to fish. He was content, as St Francis had taught him, to proclaim to people, in poverty and prayer, the mystery of God who is communion and who calls all creation to brotherhood. Brothers, may this mission be not only in the heart of the Order, but let it be the very heart of the Order.

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General Minister OFMCap

Rome, 29 November 2009
Feast of All Saints of the Seraphic Order

¹⁵ RANIERO CANTALAMESSA, *Osserviamo la Regola che abbiamo promessa*, in *La maturità evangelica di Francesco* (a cura di Enzo Fortunato), Padova 2009, 116-117.

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