



Letter of the General Minister
fra Mauro Jöhri OFMCap

**FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN:
THEIR IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING**

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FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN: THEIR IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING

LETTER OF BR. MAURO JÖHRI, GENERAL MINISTER OF THE FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN

Prot. N. 00710/14

**TO ALL THE BROTHERS OF THE ORDER
TO THE CAPUCHIN POOR CLARE SISTERS**

Dear Brothers,

May the Lord give you peace!

INTRODUCTION “MOVED” BY A QUESTION

In the Programmatic Letter sent at the beginning of the 2012-2018 sexennium, I announced our intention to develop a “*Ratio Formationis*” for the Order, as foreseen in number 25,9 of our Constitutions. We entrusted this venture to the friars in the General Secretariat of Formation and right away these brothers began working with zeal and competence. These same friars then asked me to produce a document on the identity of the Friars Minor Capuchin today. My first reaction was to say to myself: “but aren’t the Rule and the Constitutions enough? It is already described there in a clear and comprehensive way.” Some days later I understood the need to present to the friars of our Order a document that summarizes¹ the foundations and pillars that support our life and sense of belonging. Here I am, therefore, to join in a conversation with each of you in order to share certain convictions that I have developed in the years of my service to the Order.

Who are we Friars Minor Capuchin? The question brought to my mind the interview given to Father Antonio Spadaro of *Civiltà Cattolica*, in which Pope Francis authoritatively affirmed

¹ Clearly this letter is not intended in any way to replace the Constitutions renewed during the General Chapter of 2012 and then approved by the Holy See; in fact I believe that it should be a pressing invitation to read and study them attentively.

that “there is no identity without belonging.”² The Pope’s affirmation is the interpretive key to addressing the question of identity that religious life has been facing, dramatically at times, especially since the Second Vatican Council. Identity without the awareness of belonging runs the risk of remaining abstract, just as belonging without a precise identity risks remaining empty and without orientation. Keeping in mind the interdependence emphasized by Pope Francis, I want to welcome his affirmation as the guideline of this letter. I will present some specific aspects regarding identity, and then highlight some characteristics proper to the sense of belonging.

² *Civiltà Cattolica* 2013 III 459 / 3918 (19 September 2013).

1. OUR IDENTITY

1.1. OUR PATH IN HISTORY

I take up again the question posed above: who are we Friars Minor Capuchin? Despite the simplicity of the question the answer does not come so readily. Why? One of the reasons could be the difference of opinions about our origins: some point to St. Francis as our founder; others, however, emphasize the events of the first half of the 1500s, the century that saw the birth of the Capuchin reform. Personally I prefer to start from the historical-ecclesial situation of the sixteenth century, and then proceed backwards to the charismatic event of St. Francis of Assisi. In fact, I believe that the particular tradition that arose in the 1500s should strongly influence our hermeneutical key for interpreting St. Francis and his heritage.

The history of the Franciscan family has known many reforms and divisions. We Capuchins have passed through five centuries of history without having been incorporated into another group. If with a pinch of “holy boldness” we can claim to have rather strong DNA, on the other hand it is also true that in the years immediately following Vatican II down to today we have witnessed many and rapid changes in our Order. Some of the aspects that made it unique have profoundly changed, while others have entirely disappeared. One of the signs of this evolution has been the frequent revision of our Constitutions, coming precisely in 1968, 1982, and in the last General Chapter celebrated in 2012.

1.2. THE PRIORITY OF FRATERNAL LIFE

The most evident change after the Council was the shift from a strongly penitential understanding of our form of life to one that highlights the priority of fraternal life. By now, the value of fraternal life is an accepted fact, and the formation that the friars of the whole Order have received about this aspect of our charism has been and continues to be significant and substantial. At the same time, we are aware that the temptation and flight toward individualism are spreading in an alarming fashion. If at one time we not very involved with what happened outside the friary, today’s modern means of communication insistently offer us a polished series of messages and lifestyles that foster a typically individualistic mentality, thus making it difficult to orient ourselves and make choices. In the midst of this situation, the fraternity provides us with a valuable point of reference, flowing from the renewal of our Constitutions begun in 1968, which highlighted the force and beauty of the fraternal life as priorities. The individuality of each brother is a precious gift to be respected and supported, but the “I” of each of “us” becomes even more precious and fertile when it is realized within the “us” of fraternal life. Where fraternal life is lived out and cultivated with care, it creates the conditions whereby each individual friar can serenely face the disturbing and difficult situations of our time. 1968 represents a providential turning point. Now we are called to remain faithful to the vision and to adapt it to our rapidly changing world. Each brother has the right to enjoy the gift of the fraternity and, in turn, to feel called to contribute his own energy to the development of this gift in all its irrepressible vitality.

The above-mentioned turning point has its roots in a rereading of the Franciscan Sources. There we clearly see how, by deliberately choosing to describe the movement he began as a

“fraternitas”, Francis of Assisi valued the gift of each individual brother.³ On the basis of this invention of Francis we can confidently affirm that fraternal life lived with intensity and fidelity is even more demanding than the choice of poverty. Let me explain. If poverty consists principally in subtracting as many things as possible from life and reducing my/our needs to the essentials, then living fraternally demands a continual dynamic of giving that commits us to making the nature of our ordinary daily relationships more genuine. At times it means knowing how to forgive and knowing how to do so again and again. At other times it is necessary to step back and make room for another so that his gifts can flourish and bear fruit. Fraternal life, originating from the Holy Spirit, grows when the nature of our relationships has the savor of welcome, pardon, mercy, and the charity that the Lord Jesus has presented to us as Beatitude for our existence. The poverty that so many of our brothers experienced and even now live with joy is not relegated to second place. Rather, in the light of that renewal that keeps charisms ever young, it takes on connotations of solidarity, of the sharing of goods with this world’s lowliest, and of responsibility for the safeguarding of Creation. Fraternity also involves the willingness to overcome the boundaries of the local fraternity, province or custody where we live in order to support circumscriptions in difficulty, or to join an intercultural fraternity where there is more urgent need for personnel. The General Council is studying the possibility of building intercultural fraternities in places where secularization has progressively erased all the signs and the works brought by the Christian faith.

1.3. EXPERIENCE AND SIGNS: THE FEATURES OF OUR IDENTITY

1.3.1. Location

The Friars Minor Capuchin came about through the will of a group of Observant Friars Minor who wanted to lead a more austere and greatly withdrawn life. The first Capuchins chose particularly isolated places and, for centuries afterward, this original inspiration influenced the placement of our friaries, which were built at a certain distance from the urban centers. The choice of location communicated a precise message that, duly updated, expresses a profound value: the friars wanted a withdrawn life in order to affirm the priority of the relationship with God in prayer and in contemplation, while at the same time they did not want to be so distant that they could not hear the voices and cries of those who had need of our presence, who desired to hear the Word of the Gospel, or who, because of their condition, could benefit from the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Think of our friars who gave their lives caring for and consoling plague victims, and of those in many countries even today who are close to this world’s lowliest.

1.3.2. The bare minimum

The dimensions of our houses were another significant element to which particular attention was paid. The common spaces, the areas meant for individual friars, and the objects available to the fraternity were rudimentary and plain. Everything followed a precise pedagogy: essentiality, austerity and sobriety were daily reminders to the friars that they were to be

³ Cf. PIETRO MARANESI, *Il Sogno di Francesco. Rilettura storico-tematica della Regola dei Frati Minori alla ricerca della sua attualità*, Assisi 2011.

“pilgrims and strangers.”⁴ Also the reserves of food had to be sufficient for just a few days, so that trust in Providence was more than just an edifying discourse or beautiful words. Marble and gilding were not to be used in our houses, but only wood and terracotta. The bare necessities, nothing more! For centuries this was the real and true image of the Capuchin friars, and, as we learn from more than one witness, all was lived with Franciscan joy. Why? What was the motivation for all this? By means of poverty, austerity, and trust in Providence, the friars, wanted to announce and witness to the primacy of God as the greatest good and richness of their existence. This witness was eminently eschatological; the friars’ experiences and actions spoke of a homeland and of a fulfillment that exist beyond this life, in full communion with God. Life, things, goods, and places belonged to a transitional state, to a pilgrimage that will have an end.⁵

1.3.3. Rigorous poverty

I am always struck when I read what is written in the old refectory of the convent in San Giovanni Rotondo where St. Pio of Pietrelcina lived: “*Si non est satis, memento paupertatis*” (If it’s not enough, remember poverty!). In our fraternities it could (and did!) happen that food wasn’t abundant or varied. That phrase was a reminder that lamenting was not allowed because a plain and meager meal was in perfect harmony with the evangelical counsel of poverty, and was also a sharing in the situation of the truly poor who did not know how to fill their stomachs. In the face of growing poverty that strikes more and more people and the influx of immigrant men and women who are looking for a more dignified existence, we are called to simplify our lifestyle and to find ways to share the spaces and houses that we are not using.⁶

The way of praying was also reduced to the essentials. The Divine Office was celebrated with simplicity and was rarely sung so that friars could dedicate more time to mental prayer, to that silent resting with the Lord in some dark corner of the church or friary. The liturgical renewal effected in the years after Vatican II has brought new and significant forms of celebration; but at the same time I observe with some disappointment that many friars have abandoned the practice of mental prayer.

1.3.4. Where nobody wants to go

The witness of a poor and austere life produced admiration and edification. The Capuchin friars were sought by bishops and by people of every class, soon meriting the title “friars of the people.” Even the Council of Trent, which was celebrated in the same century as our birth, realized the efficacy of our presence. The hierarchy of the Church, cardinals and bishops, entrusted to us the ministry of preaching in order to spread the spirit and the renewal of the Tridentine council to all the baptized and to refute the assertions of the Protestant reform. One needed to be prepared in order to preach and this required access to a series of manuals for preachers that illustrated ways to announce the Gospel, proposing striking examples were

⁴ Later Rule, Chap. VI (FA:ED I, 103)

⁵ In this regard, see the contribution of GIOVANI POZZI, *L'identità cappuccina e i suoi simboli. Dal Cinquecento al Settecento*, in: *I Cappuccini in Emilia-Romagna. Storia di una presenza*, of G. POZZI and P. PRODI (eds), Bologna 2002, 48 – 77.

⁶ Note our Constitutions at n. 62,2: “Poverty demands a simple and sober style of life. We should therefore strive to reduce to the minimum our material needs in order to live only with what is necessary, decisively rejecting every consumerist mentality and practice.”

taken from the solid theology of the Church Fathers. This was the background to the permission introduced into the Constitutions allowing our friaries to create places where the books necessary for the service of preaching could be kept. From this we can deduce how far from the truth it would be to say that we were opposed to progress!

Even more meaningful was our being “pilgrims and strangers”, which enabled us to live as itinerants. Being sent to a new place or given a new assignment was a “normal” reality deriving from obedience. Supported by this attitude our friars gave life to marvelous pages of evangelization, full of heroism and holiness. Our friars went out and, along with other orders, became the living members that gave birth to the Propaganda Fide. St. Joseph of Leonessa left for Turkey. St. Fidelis of Sigmaringen preached in Raetia. In the 1600s, so many brothers left for the Congo or Angola, or directed their steps towards Georgia! In the next century we arrived at the mountains of Tibet. They went out supported by the zeal of a missionary calling. Many of them died along the way from illness, the assaults of bandits, or persecutions. They went where no one else wanted to go! I pray the Lord that this zealous desire may never wane in our Order.⁷

1.3.5. A multitude of saints

Many friars coming from the Observance followed the reform of the Capuchins, and persons of every rank and social class joined them: from the humble friar Felix of Cantalice, to the noble Ange de Joyeuse,⁸ who commanded the armies of the kingdom of France. In the past centuries we find Capuchins in the midst of poor people and in imperial palaces. Our friars had diplomatic charges (Lawrence of Brindisi) or were in the front lines with the soldiers at such decisive battles as those of Lepanto and Vienna (Mark of Aviano). I ask myself: Why were our friars involved in such diverse situations—from both socio-political and religious points of view? The answer, for me, is that they trusted us because we didn’t have ulterior motives. I think of our preaching brothers who educated and formed the People of God. I fondly remember the formation in Eucharistic devotion that was carried out by the publication of manuals and books of prayer. Our spiritual animation was always intense, and numerous publications popularized and fostered meditation and mental prayer.⁹ Thank heaven this attention has been renewed repeatedly in the bosom of our Order by friars such as the recently-deceased Br. Ignacio Larrañaga, founder of the *“Talleres de Oración y Vida,”* to name just one.¹⁰

How many gestures of charity, love, and benevolence were performed by our questors, who beyond providing what was necessary for the friars and for the poor, carried out an intense “vocation ministry” through their simplicity and the force of attraction? How many offered their lives to comfort plague victims, to console the sick in hospitals, to assist young soldiers in various conflicts? How many hours were spent in administering the sacrament of Reconciliation, an activity that merited us the fame of “good and merciful friars”? Truly the Spirit of the Lord has accompanied our history, raising confreres in whom a luminous sanctity appeared. There are those that we venerate publicly, but I am certain that the number of

⁷ Cf. MAURO JÖHRI, Circular letter to all the Friars of the Order on mission activity, *“Mission at the Heart of the Order”* Rome 2009.

⁸ Cf. the entry *“Angelus de Joyeuse”* in *Lexicon Capuccinum*, Rome 1951, 73s.

⁹ For a brief presentation of this period of our history, cf. MARIANO D’ALATRI, *I Cappuccini. Storia di una famiglia francescana*, Rome 1994, 73 – 76.

¹⁰ To learn more, consult www.tovpil.org.

lesser known confreres who gave their lives for the Lord and for their brothers is very large. All their actions, however, are written in the Book of Life and constitute an invaluable model for all of us.

Beyond these signs of holiness, Capuchins were known for a series of exterior signs. They wore tunics made of coarse material, to which the capuche was attached. On their feet they wore sandals and normally had untrimmed beards. I already recalled above the choice of locations, the simple furnishing of churches, and our way of living. They were signs that communicated a history, an experience. They told of the desire to follow the Lord Jesus accompanied and supported by the beauty of the charism of St. Francis of Assisi. Who are we today? What makes us recognizable?

1.4. AT THE ORIGIN OF IT ALL

1.4.1. Interest in one's own story

At this point more than one brother will say: "Our General Minister is a little nostalgic!" I concede the point, but let me justify what I wrote. Our identity was formed in time; the centuries of our history were inhabited by men who gave a face to our Order by means of their lives and their dedication to Christ and to the Church. We can find our identity described in documents and in texts of every kind produced within the Order, but it appears more clearly and decisively in the human and spiritual experience of the confreres who preceded us. I emphasized certain exterior signs because they reveal a way of being, of perceiving life, and this is important for putting a face on our identity. We have been given a strong and precious spiritual heritage that we, too, must put into practice and live by. This is why knowledge of our history is fundamental: who we are, where we come from. Certain family dynamics come to my mind: grandchildren want to know who their great-grandparents were, or they wish to know more about how their grandmother and grandfather met. There is a desire to reconstruct the family tree, to visit the places where our ancestors lived. This knowledge reinforces the sense of belonging to the family and makes us proud of it. I worry when I meet friars or young people close to perpetual profession who have a very superficial knowledge of the history the Order or of their circumscription. It is still worse when these things are considered unimportant! I believe that our history and tradition must be a source of inspiration for our choices and future directions.

1.4.2. St. Francis of Assisi

St. Francis was the initial reference point for our reform, and it was his experience and his charism that inspired the Order's first Constitutions. These were written within a short time because the friars had a clear idea of how they wanted live, and in those few pages the will to observe the Rule and the Testament of St. Francis more "spiritually," is evident. One could, however, validly replace the term "spiritually" with integrally. For us today, it is quicker and easier to trace everything back to St. Francis, forgetting our history and the events that generated our tradition. It would be a grave historical error to fall into a form of egalitarianism, which smoothes out every difference, merely because one doesn't understand something. Every charism becomes a treasure when it is understood, lived out and proclaimed. This is true also in the great Franciscan family where the source is one, but the

streams of this source have formed various rivers and currents. The Capuchins originally understood that Francis lived an austere life with many privations, and they wanted to imitate him. They saw in him the Saint who alternated the proclamation of the Gospel with long periods alone in prayer in solitary places, and they wanted to imitate him also in this. They recognized in him a man who, richly endowed with a great interior freedom, was at ease with everyone, both crossing the thresholds of the rich and powerful and sharing in every aspect of the lepers' plight. They were fascinated by the Poverello who went among the infidels and they wanted to do the same thing.

Dear brothers, how are we challenged today by the values that constitute our identity? How do we respond to the great challenges of our identity?

- By leading a simple life limited to the minimum necessary and not the maximum allowed.
- By spending prolonged periods in prayer followed by the various forms of service entrusted to us.
- By preserving a heart that is open to every person without distinctions of class, race, or nationality.
- By being willing to go where no one else wants to go.

When all of this is lived in fraternal communion it is the 'savor' that confers value and beauty to our life and work.

We are called to actively participate in our social and ecclesial setting, using all that human talent has produced and will produce, but we must also be on our guard to live these daily realities with the spirit that moved our fathers. Our Order began in the heart of Italy and for several centuries spread mostly throughout Europe. In the 'old continent' we are experiencing a strong decline in vocations, while witnessing a reassuring increase of the Order in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Our charism and identity enter into dialogue with diverse cultures and societies. *The beautiful and holy venture* is to promote among the friars of these younger jurisdictions awareness and knowledge of the events and values that inspired our life and created our identity, starting with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and his servant Francis. This transmission of our life's unique values to younger generations, as well as to the rest of us, must travel a long path. For the Gospel and the charism to reach and penetrate into the concrete realities of life and culture, there needs to be an ongoing dialogue, united to the joyful example of friars who show the next generations that it is possible to become what they hear about and study.

1.4.3. Discovering the face of Christ

Because of our reform, Capuchins have developed a particular way of viewing Francis. At the same time we must recognize that almost 500 years have passed since Br. Matteo da Bascio and his companions began the story of which we are all a part. During the intervening centuries, our knowledge of St. Francis, his charism and his message, which continue to inspire and fascinate, have been enriched by ongoing study so that we enjoy a truly excellent patrimony. Numerous scholars have contributed to compiling this precious treasure, and thanks to their work we have a much more accurate vision of both the Seraphic Father and his time. Beyond an historical knowledge of the sources, it is essential that every friar have an existential approach to the figure of St. Francis and this necessarily means we must go a step

further. This 'further' has a name and a face: Our Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹ From the crib to the cross, from birth to death, Francis traveled the path of all the mysteries of the human life of Jesus.

The Capuchin looks to Francis in all of his originality and beauty, but Francis leads to an encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. The following of Christ does not happen in an abstract way, but rather in desiring with our whole selves to live as Christ did. The most genuine desire, and one that we are called to keep young and vigorous, is still that of "living according to the pattern of the holy Gospel," welcoming the invitation to leave everything, renounce ourselves, and accept the purification of our affections, that we may put Him first. And when He becomes first, everything becomes more genuine and more true, even our capacity to love and to be with people. In Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Virgin Mary, the Father has revealed his great love, has granted us his mercy, and has made known his will to give himself completely to everyone (letter to the General Chapter and to all the friars). Francis contemplated these things and it produced in him a heartfelt and awestricken devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation and of the Eucharist.

¹¹ RANIERO CANTALAMESSA, "That we might observe the Rule we have promised" (Testament, 34, FA:ED I:127, in: *Atti del Capitolo internazionale delle Stuoie. VIII. Centenario delle origini (1209 – 2009)*, Rome 2009, 35 – 52.

2. THE SENSE OF BELONGING

2.1. WITH JESUS CHRIST, IN THE CHURCH

Pope Francis has reaffirmed that the existential category of fraternity refers back immediately to that of belonging. Before continuing my reflection on the characteristics that indicate an individual friar's sense of belonging to the Order, I want to recall the 'mother' of all belonging: we belong to Christ and to his Church. The Grace of our baptism makes us members of the People of God and through this we share in the joy and gratitude for the salvation that God's faithful love offers us through the Lord Jesus. Our lives, the unfolding of our personal and communal stories, happen in the Church. Both St. Francis and the first Capuchins wanted to submit the charism and the consequent form of life to the authority of the Church. PCO VII effectively summarizes the manner of our belonging to the Church and asks us to: *remain sincerely available to serve the local and universal Church, working in harmony with its pastors (Test 8-10). We should give priority to ministries that are more in keeping with our vocation as minors, assuming 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 ministry to the sick or marginalized who suffer poverty in forms old and new.*¹² The pontificate of Pope Francis and his insistence on the announcement of salvation in the peripheries of the world confirms this and, with regard our ministry in the Church, offers us an occasion for conversion.

2.2. A STRONG INTERIOR LIFE

Our belonging needs to be concretely expressed in our daily lives, otherwise it risks being ideological and formal. A Capuchin friar who belongs to a fraternity, and thus to the Order, prays, eats, works, and shares his life with his brothers. He experiences moments of happiness and joy, and he accepts the moments of difficulty and conflict that unfailingly come to visit us. Just as a baby in the first years of life learns many norms of behavior from his father and mother, internalizes them and makes them his own, one who is welcomed into our life must be taught to love and internalize the essential values of our charism. Here I am reminded of an element from Benedictine spirituality stating that a monk in the fields far from the monastery, upon hearing the bell calling them to common prayer—which he cannot attend because of the distance—will suspend his work and unite himself spiritually to the prayer of his community. The awareness of belonging reveals itself above all when I am not seen by anyone and I am called to make choices that are consistent with what I have publicly professed in the Evangelical Counsels. Do I sanctify my day with prayer or do I 'dispense' myself because for some reason I am not with the brothers? Or, still worse, do I theorize that prayer is a personal matter for which I do not have to give an account to anyone? In the long run this type of attitude, if it is not fraternally corrected, generates an individualistic and opportunistic mentality. The sense of belonging, cultivated and nourished by a relationship with God and with the brothers, helps us to experience the beauty of an life offered to God and to humanity and will sustain us in moments of testing.

¹² N. 38.

2.3. SIGNS OF BELONGING

There are certain signs that show us if the sense of belonging is rooted in our existence. I have listed them below and highlighted the ‘*enemies*’ that prevent it from taking root. No one should feel singled out for judgment. Rather let this become, if necessary, a matter for open, honest reflection that will result in a salutary conversion.

2.3.1. *Our treatment of money*

Besides participation in the common life, the way we deal with money provides a sign of our belonging. I remind you of what is written in our Constitutions: *“In virtue of our religious profession we are obliged to hand over to the fraternity all goods, including salaries and pensions, grants and insurance policies, which come to us in any way.”*¹³ I address the brother who has a bank account, or manages money without his minister’s or guardian’s knowledge, the one who does not turn over to the fraternity offerings or the compensation that comes from ministry or work because he is afflicted by worry for ‘what tomorrow will bring,’ when I am old, sick, etc. I also address the friar who decides to use money to improve his standard of living, to grant to himself privileges that have nothing in common with minority or poverty. To these friars I say: convert and rediscover your trust in Providence. Live what you have freely chosen and professed, and entrust yourself to your fraternity! I offer you the words of Pope Francis on August 16, 2014, to men and women religious during his apostolic journey to South Korea: *“The hypocrisy of those consecrated men and women who profess the vow of poverty and nevertheless live like the rich wounds the souls of the faithful and damages the Church. Think also how dangerous is the temptation to adopt a purely functional and worldly mentality, which leads to putting our hope only in human means and destroys the witness to poverty that Our Lord Jesus Christ lived and taught us.”* A serene and responsible relationship with money is also manifested in attentive and constructive participation in the local chapter where the annual budget is developed or the balance sheet is examined.¹⁴

2.3.2. *“I’m doing fine here, why should I have to transfer?”*

I make another appeal to the brother who obstinately refuses every kind of transfer: this attitude is not only a failure in obedience, but exposes a lack of cooperation and willingness regarding the plans and goals set by the fraternity. Let us say, for example, that a provincial chapter decides to start a new fraternity or activity in order to respond better to the values of our charism or to the needs of the local church, and a friar who is considered qualified and suitable for this new presence refuses to go there because he sees himself as indispensable or irreplaceable or because he thinks “I’m doing fine where I am now.” You can draw the conclusion. I ask myself and you: “what does it mean for us to be doing fine?”

2.3.3. *Parallel paths and double belonging*

¹³ N. 64,2

¹⁴ The affirmation of the VI Plenary Council of the Order, *Living Poverty in Brotherhood*, remains current: *“Local chapters are the ideal occasion for preparing the fraternity budget and monitoring how money is spent. Our administration of money is one of the ways in which brotherhood is expressed, and the local chapter is the proper place to examine whether it conforms to gospel values, minority, etc.”* (N. 31)

This is a delicate and controversial subject, but we should discuss it without becoming aggravated, as often happens. Drawing from my own experience, there are many situations, stories, and conversations from my eight years of service to the Order as General Minister that come to mind. I have met brothers who, in his ministry or in response to a request, have come into contact with the spirituality and experience of other ecclesial realities. I am referring particularly to associations, movements, and prayer groups. In some cases, a beneficial dynamic known as “the dialogue between charisms” has occurred, generating richness and reciprocal support to the respective vocations. These friars live their presence with freedom, witnessing to our charism. In other cases, however, the dynamic of identification with the group with which they are involved is so strong that the fraternity is expected to accept everything that the movement or group wants. Psychologically and emotionally these brothers are disconnected from the dynamics of the local and provincial fraternity. They are totally absorbed by the ecclesial reality that they claim to “follow” and to which they have developed a strong sense of belonging. Dialogue between charisms generates richness and welcome, and it is not unusual for this synergy to create new opportunities for faith, charitable works, and human promotion. A double belonging generates conflict and tension, causing the person to lose sight of the originality of his vocation. If a member of a movement asks to become a Capuchin, I would not force him to renounce his past (how could I ask a person to renounce the reality that has allowed him to meet the Lord?). Instead, I ask that he identify himself with the beautiful and holy vocation that comes from the charism of Francis of Assisi and the tradition of our Order, and that he welcome all the means and the dynamics that allow a concrete and real belonging to the fraternity. Given all the various issues revolving around the topic of double belonging, I will not deny that I have at times asked myself a question that I now share with you: “Why do our friars look elsewhere for something *to give meaning to their lives?*”

There are other situations that create division in the individual person and in his relationships with the brothers. I am referring to secret, affective relationships for which one does not seek help and that inevitably lead one’s head and heart outside the fraternity. It can also happen that a friar becomes so identified with his ministry or position, that he reduces his presence and commitment within the fraternity to a minimum. In these cases, the humble search for a guiding hand to lead us in an examination of our sense of belonging can become the occasion of an interior renewal that will allow us to live our vocation with renewed awareness. Brothers, when crises come to visit us in our lives, do not hesitate to ask for help!

2.4. CELEBRATING

We need to keep before our minds the vocation to brotherhood that characterizes our life: this helps us to reinforce our sense of belonging. Provincial ministers, custodes, and guardians have a responsibility to distribute and share the guidelines and proposals that come from the Order, as well as the choices made by provincial chapters and how they came to be formulated. The sense of belonging is nourished by celebrating the important anniversaries in the life of the community and individuals. Normally, there is a lot of criticism, a bit of healthy self-criticism, and too many complaints and lamentations in our provinces and fraternities. Let us try to bless the Lord and be grateful for the good and beautiful things he has worked in and among us. It would be truly sad and worrying if we overlooked them! Do not wait until someone is dead to recount the good that he has done, but let us be grateful to the Lord that this “holy man” belongs to the same Order as I do—that he is one of us!

2.4.1. Initiation into our life

Initiation into our life includes a series of stages that must be gradually introduced. Formators, along with the fraternity, are called to discern and confirm the candidates' suitability. The formation that introduces young men to our way of life also includes formation in that profound and hidden dimension that we call interiority, which I mentioned in paragraph 2.2 of this section. Young people and adults who wish to embrace our form of religious life must experience the Paschal dynamic of death and resurrection by conforming their lives to the path taken by the Lord Jesus and by fully experiencing the beauty of an existence poured out for love. By our conformity to Jesus Christ, by meditating on his life, death, and resurrection, we are progressively led into the mystery of salvation. This path, dear brothers, is not meant only for the young men in initial formation but represents the existential model that must continually inspire us. Contemplation of the Paschal Mystery dwelling within us, keeps the heart young and desirous of the good. It allows us to be courageous and daring, and keeps us from falling into the mindsets of compromise, compensation and discouragement. We must love and protect an intense sacramental life, in which the Eucharist and Reconciliation find places of honor in the life project of individuals and the fraternity. Read some more of what Pope Francis said to the Korean religious: *"Only if our witness is joyous will we be able to attract men and women to Christ; and such joy is a gift that is nourished by a life of prayer, by meditation on the Word of God, by celebration of the Sacraments and by the common life. When these are lacking, there will emerge the weaknesses and the difficulties that will obscure the joy known so intimately at the beginning of our journey."*

Those in formation must be encouraged to leave behind the old man with all of his habits and instead to live as one whom, through the consecrated life, belongs to Christ. Detachment from one's own family and from the habits and places from which we come are the signs of this new belonging. Prolonged periods of prayer and silence, as well as limiting external contacts to the minimum necessary help those who embrace our life to root themselves in friendship with the Lord, who gives a hundredfold to those who love him as the First above all else. The example of formators and the fraternity is indispensable in this formative work.

2.5. UNTIL HE COMES AGAIN

Our belonging to Christ, to the Church, and to the Order reminds us of the eschatological dimension of religious life. A life that is modest, uncluttered and joyously simple places us in an attitude of waiting with trust and joy for the fullness that is not of this world, but that belongs to the fulfillment prepared by God for his children, who will enjoy full communion with Him. How true and profound is this disposition of expectation that makes our days more authentic and concise! Let us nourish, through prolonged periods of prayer and vigilance, our desire to see the Lord's face. Fraternal life, despite all of its struggles and slowness, is truly a witness to the everlasting communion of the World to come.

3. CONCLUSION

Dear brothers thank you for reading this letter. At the beginning of it, I used the word “conversation,” and now that I have reached the end, I realize that I have been neither exhaustive nor systematic. I wanted to communicate to you what I think is essential to our identity and sense of belonging. I hope that each of you can find among these essential elements the doorway that allows you to compare your life with the beauty and freshness of our charism in its fullness. In my mind, our approach should be the same as with the Gospel. It is not necessary to know everything immediately; a word or a passage touches the reader, who wants to understand it better and live it. From this starting point he is then able to enter into the totality and the fullness of the Good News. The reason I dare to insist on fraternal life is this: I am aware that sooner or later, sustained by the Grace of God, the fraternity will become a sign of more genuine human relationships that breathe the clean and life-giving air of the Gospel. The friar whose belonging to the Order is lived joyfully, and who finds his identity in fraternal life will attract others and will be a source of great spiritual fruitfulness.

3.1 DISCUSSION AND DIALOGUE

I ask that the friars “work” on this letter, and I entrust the responsibility of distributing it to the conference presidents, provincial ministers, custodes, and guardians. Gather together, brothers, and talk, dialogue, and discuss the points that I have offered you in this letter. I would gladly welcome letters or e-mail messages from brothers who want to share their own reflections, observations, and criticisms. Our identity and sense of belonging can be a valuable topic for discussion and dialogue in ongoing formation; therefore I propose some questions to guide your gatherings:

1. What, in your opinion, are the constitutive elements of our Capuchin-Franciscan identity that have the greatest priority in the current situation of our Order and in your social-cultural context? What makes you say this?
2. Regarding the sense of belonging, what are the greatest difficulties you experience in the reality in which you live? Attachment to the family of origin? Activism in ministry? Lack of transparency in the use of money? Others?
3. What are the most important things that need to be done in your fraternity, circumscription, and conference to reinforce our identity as Friars Minor Capuchin and the sense of belonging to the Order?

In closing, I repeat the words that Pope Francis addressed to the General Superiors on November 29, 2013. Let us challenge ourselves, without fear, to convert our attitudes, our mentality, and our affections to Him who, by letting us share in the charism of St. Francis, has prepared for us a path of holiness that if traveled, will bring our existence to its fulfillment.

Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological gaze, of the values of the Kingdom incarnate here, on this earth. It is about leaving everything to follow the Lord. You must be true witnesses of a different way of behaving. But in life it is with difficulty that everything becomes clear, precise, and precisely drawn. Life is complex, made of grace and sin. We all err and must recognize our weakness. A religious that recognizes himself as weak and a

sinner does not contradict the witness he is called to give, but rather reinforces it, and this does good for all. What I expect then is witness. I want from religious this special witness.”¹⁵

With fraternal affection in the Lord,

Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister OFM Cap.

Rome, 4 October 2014
Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

¹⁵ ANTONIO SPADARO S.J., « Svegliate il mondo ! » Colloquio di Papa Francesco con i Superiori Generali, in: *Civiltà Cattolica* 2014 I 3 – 17 / 3925 (4 January 2014)

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