



Letter of the General Minister
fra Mauro Jöhri OFMCap

**THE INDISPENSABLE GIFT
OF LAY BROTHERS FOR OUR ORDER**

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THE INDISPENSABLE GIFT OF LAY BROTHERS FOR OUR ORDER

LETTER OF THE GENERAL MINISTER ON THE OCCASION OF THE V CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF ST. FELIX OF CANTALICE AND OF THE III CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF ST. FELIX OF NICOSIA.

Prot. N. 00329/15

**TO ALL THE BROTHERS OF THE ORDER
TO THE CAPUCHIN POOR CLARES**

1. LET US CELEBRATE HOLINESS

Dear brothers and sisters,

This year gives us two particularly meaningful anniversaries: the fifth centenary of the birth of St. Felix of Cantalice, from a village in the Reatina Valley, and the third centenary of the coming into the world of another friar Felix, that of Nicosia in Sicily. Both lived their vocation as lay brothers and passed the greater part of their lives in the Order exercising the office of questor. The time of their lives was supported by the grace of God to which they responded with zeal and passion, living their questing as an opportunity to announce the gospel in simplicity and humility. The Church, elevating them to sainthood, has pointed them out as models and hopes for the people of God. On the life and holiness of Brother Felix of Cantalice I have already written a letter to the whole Order, recalling the 300th anniversary of his canonization.¹

2. BR. FELIX OF NICOSIA

Ten years ago Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the Capuchin brother Felix of Nicosia a saint: in this letter I will recall in a concise way the fundamental facts and the features that characterized the life of our holy confrere. Felix was born in Nicosia, in Sicily, on November 5,

¹ Circular Letter on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the canonization of St. Felix of Cantalice, *Analecta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Capuccinorum* 128 (2012) 795-799.

1715 and had to wait a good long time before the Capuchins of the time decided to admit him to our life. He was received when he was already twenty-eight years old and for a good forty-three years he exercised the office of brother questor in the city that had given birth to him.

He responded to the call of the Lord, choosing to be the brother of all and to be so according to the Gospel. His continual roaming through the little town of Nicosia brought him to meet everyone; the hardness of the imprisoned and innocence of children, the strength of workers and the weakness of the sick, the bitterness of the humiliated and the audacity of the violent, but with all he used the weapon he kept in his sack: the love of Him who died on the cross for all.² It is said of him that finding a blasphemer before him, first he would get on his knees and recite the *Gloria Patri* three times, then get up and invite the man to mend his ways.

Having embraced poverty; he accepted to strip himself of material things as well as of his own will, and this made him above all a free and happy man. He was a simple man of few words, but nevertheless able to go straight to people's hearts. The life of Brother Felix had become transparent for the presence of God. This is why many men and women of his time gathered up many miracles linked to his life. He died in Nicosia at two in the morning on May 31, 1787.³

3. HOLY LAY BROTHERS

Our 'two Felixes' are part of a great multitude of luminous presences that have ennobled our history. The celebration of the anniversary of their births has raised up in me the wish to honor their holiness by sharing with you, dear brothers and dear sisters, some reflections on our vocation as Capuchin brothers and in particular on that of the lay brothers.⁴ I write with the awareness that there are whole areas of our Order where the presence of lay brothers is about to disappear or is not at all valued. This situation, if it does not undergo a radical change, will have pernicious consequences on the originality and integrity of our Capuchin Franciscan charism. I will try to justify this affirmation by beginning with concrete situations.

A. WHEN THEY ASK YOU: "WHO ARE YOU?"

Dear brothers, when someone asks you, "who are you?", or when you present yourself, how do you respond, what expressions do you use? What is your immediate response? You say: "I am a Capuchin brother!" and you wait to see if eventually your interlocutor will ask you to explain in more detail what "a Capuchin brother" means? Or your response is: "I am a religious priest!," or you define yourself with the function or office you exercise, saying: "I am a pastor, I am a professor, etc.!" I am convinced that by our response to the question, "Who are

² 1 Cor 8:11. *And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.*

³ For more information: *Sulle orme dei santi. Santorale cappuccino*. Second edition, ed. Costanzo Cargnoni, San Giovanni Rotondo 2012, 226-234.

⁴ I realize that to some extent I am continuing the reflection on the topic treated in the letter, "Friars Minor Capuchin: their identity and sense of belonging" of last year.

you?”, or by the presentation that we make of ourselves, we reveal the concept that we have of our person. When I say: “I am a Capuchin brother!”, I affirm in the first place that I am a consecrated person, a religious, belonging to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin. I declare that I have chosen a life, that I belong to a fraternity; I define myself as a person who wishes to live authentic relationships with other brothers and sisters. Indirectly, I affirm also God’s paternity for my person. When I say: “I am a Capuchin lesser brother”, I bring with me the great fraternity of the Order, without making any distinction or selection, thus affirming the distinctive mark of minority that we understand in its meaning, though often we have trouble living and witnessing to it in daily life.

When someone defines himself as “father”, “priest”, “pastor”, “professor” or by still other terms, there exists at least the danger that the first response, “I am a Capuchin lesser brother,” is not enough for him. I don’t believe that one can justify this type of response by the simple desire to make ourselves more easily understood by our interlocutor; on the contrary, I am convinced that our response should reveal how we understand ourselves.

B. TO REMAIN OR TO BE?

There are also expressions in our language that reveal a way of thinking and our deep convictions. At times I have heard statements of this sort: “This good young man, a very gifted man, intellectual and otherwise, has decided to ‘**remain**’ a brother.” I confess that these words make me very angry! The word ‘remain’ reveals that that person to which we refer lacks something, that his vocation, his service, is partial or incomplete. It is to say that religious consecration is not sufficient to give full meaning to the existence of a person. I believe that this concept of the vocation our lay brothers influences in no small way the diminishment of the “brothers” of our Order and risks the degrading and weakening the depth and authenticity of the consecrated life. The language used to define the vocation of our brothers is not very fortunate; the names “lay brother” or “non-priest brother”, indicate a relation of lack with regard to the ministerial priesthood.⁵ It could be more fitting to speak of a “religious brother”, but I don’t think that this is the place to present the theology of the states of Christian life in the Church.

What worries and saddens me is the scarce consideration that exists within our Order for the vocation of the “lay brother” and it does not surprise that the number of brothers is progressively diminishing. There are Circumscriptions in the Order where nobody chooses to be brother, because all wish to become priests. I am aware of the situations in which provincial ministers and formators, in dialogue with a brother who possesses good intellectual resources and has perhaps studied theology, insist that he not “remain” a brother, but ask him to be ordained! The excessive preoccupation with directing young men in formation to the presbyterate will have as a consequence the progressive movement of our Order to amount to a clerical Order and perhaps we doubt that the real substance of religious

⁵ It seems to me interesting to observe how PCO VII, treating the theme of “Our life in fraternity and minority”, perceived the need to make more precise the figure of the (Capuchin) priest, but not that of the brother, it being sufficiently clear from this point of view. Cf. numbers 35 and following.

consecration can justify and give meaning to a choice of a life such as ours.⁶ Have we forgotten what St. Francis was?

C. SERVANTS OR SERVED?

At times, when one speaks of the employee personnel that work in our houses, I hear this statement: "Too bad we no longer have lay brothers who do the housework!". This situation must become an opportunity to reflect and check on how we can make more fraternal choices. On the other hand, if one of us has the gift of being a skilled cook or tailor or what have you, I don't see why this type of activity cannot be considered even more than a service useful to the fraternity, as an activity that gives meaning to that brother's life.⁷ Often the division between those who do housework and those who are in ministry and pastoral work makes for two categories of brothers: those who serve and those who are served. With regard to this, PCO VII affirms: "*every type of service in our houses must be appropriately shared by **all the brothers**, as a requirement arising out of their vocation.*"⁸ And our renewed Constitutions: "*Our life of poverty and minority calls for **everyone** to take part, as far as possible, in domestic chores in a spirit of brotherly communion. Such participation fosters mutual dependence and support, distinguishes our brotherhood and confers credibility upon our life. No brother's work dispenses him from caring for the house and the daily services of the brotherhood. We accept them as an integral part of our ordinary life.*"⁹ I ask myself: why there is so much difficulty in following up on the repeated invitations by the authoritative texts of our Order?

4. ADEQUATE FORMATIVE PATHS FOR THE LAY BROTHERS

The considerations that I have expressed thus far also have as a consequence the difficulty and the inability in thinking of and developing formative paths that allow the brothers to carry out a useful and distinctive serve to the fraternity, the Church, and society. Generally those that feel called to be lay brothers are joined to the formation routes that are foreseen for the candidates for priesthood. This means that the lay brother comes to be seen as the exception and not at all as the rule. In visits to the Circumscriptions of the Order I note that the tendency remains strong to consider the person from the point of view of the function he carries out or the usefulness of his work, rather than considering the identity of the person as someone consecrated to God and called to make a gift of his life. In initial and ongoing formation it is necessary to insist on the Religious Life as a fullness and a realization of

⁶ Many of our confreres who work in vocation ministry have asked me to write a letter to the Order on this topic. I hope to succeed eventually, but in the meantime I would ask everyone to have the courage to propose the vocation of lay brother as a full response to our being Capuchin brothers.

⁷ I hope that the next Plenary Council of the Order on "The grace of working" will take up this sort of question and help us to develop a more respectful conception of every type of activity that does "*not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute.*" (Later Rule, V)

⁸ N. 7c. My emphasis.

⁹ N. 83, 1-2. My emphasis.

existence. Rooted in this awareness, a religious will be able to take up a professional formation that will become a way to give of his proper energies and talents, keeping in mind the needs of the local and provincial fraternity. Many brothers carried out professional activities or exercised arts or professions before entering the Order. Continuing to do so within the fraternity, they are a resource and a very meaningful witness.

Often I hear it said that people don't understand the vocation of the brother. This statement seems to me a defeat, because it betrays our efforts at witnessing to the gift and the charism that the consecrated life represents for the Church. The Year of Consecrated Life called by Pope Francis represents a good opportunity to look with wonder and gratitude at the gift in which we share, asking the Holy Spirit with humility that our daily lives become an "existential explanation" of the deep meaning of the profession of the evangelical counsels.

5. OUR FRATERNAL IDENTITY

With this letter I renew my hope and I pray that the Church really help us, even by means of access to some services and responsibilities, in order to affirm the fullness of the vocation of brother. The current situation does not permit brothers access to certain responsibilities such as that of guardian, provincial vicar, custos, or provincial minister, and this type of exclusion instills once again the message that the brothers are lacking in something! Currently it is easy to obtain the dispensation for the service of "guardian," but not, on the other hand, for that of major superior.¹⁰ The request for a dispensation affirms that we find ourselves facing an "impediment"!

For years we have been asking and insisting with the Holy See, that the grace would be granted to live what St. Francis envisaged in the Rule, that is that all the members of our Order could be elected or appointed for all the services and offices set up by our Constitutions. It is enough, for example, to read the seventh chapter of the Later Rule to realize this.¹¹ Many General Chapters have advocated and supported this cause.

I believe it useful to recall the two texts voted upon during the last General Chapter on our fraternal identity:

The 84th General Chapter reaffirms the work done to clarify our Franciscan identity in accord with the Second Vatican Council and the Magisterium of the Church and fully supports its essential continuation along the same lines, in perfect consistency with the principal points approved by the recent general chapters and contained in our present Constitutions approved by the Holy See (cf., especially, Const. 83, 5-6; 84, 3-5; 115, 6).

¹⁰ On this our Constitutions read at N. 90,3: "Moreover, within the Order, the province and the local fraternity, all offices and responsibilities must be open to all brothers, bearing in mind, however, that certain acts require holy orders."

¹¹ "If these ministers are priests, with a heart full of mercy let them impose on him a penance; but, if the ministers are not priests, let them have it imposed by others who are priests of the Order, as in the sight of God appears to them more expedient."

*The 84th General Chapter entrusts to the prudent judgment of the General Minister, together with the General Ministers of the first Order, the continuation of the work regarding the recognition of our identity as brothers. In addition, the General Minister with his Council will continue to commit themselves to the internal animation of the Order, at all levels, on this dimension of our charism.*¹²

I also want to reiterate that this was insisted upon on this by my two predecessors, Br. Flavio Roberto Carraro (1982-1994) and Br. John Corriveau (1994-2006), who did not miss any opportunity to present our request to the competent authorities. The same also goes for the preceding General Chapters.

The same request is also shared by the other Franciscan families (OFM, OFM Conv., TOR); we went together to the Holy Father to ask the favor mentioned above. The monastic orders are also moving in the same direction. I have had the opportunity to speak of this directly with both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis; I presented our request to those responsible in the Congregation for Consecrated Life and the question was raised many times during the Assembly of the Union of Major Superiors.

Trusting in a positive response to our request from the Holy See, I want to speak a little more on the concern expressed above: the progressive clericalization of our Order. Is it a search for prestige? Or a lack of faith? I am aware that I am being provocative and I hope it is a healthy provocation. My fear is that we will progressively lose the sense of religious consecration, the vocation that manifests the desire to give one's own life to God and to all humanity in a total and exclusive way. The gift of self to God and to the brothers, which draws daily on the Gospel, as did our two "Saint Felixes", represents the strong motivation that makes the path of the lay friar a full and complete response to that "Come and follow me" pronounced by Jesus.

When I think of the vocation and the witness of the our Capuchin Poor Clare sisters and of all the other consecrated women, I am left edified because they don't need to be ordained, but they give their witness with simplicity, living fully their consecration.

Arriving here, as in other previous letters, I hear the objections and the benevolent criticisms of the brothers: 'Minister, why do you dismiss the ordained ministry?' or even 'this equality at all costs, does it not blur the gift that the priesthood represents in the Church?' None of this! As I was able to and had the intention of provoking a reflection, I wanted to affirm the originality of our vocation, which the state of life our lay brothers witnesses to in an eminent way and is that which joins us together: the following of Jesus in the consecrated life. "*Into this fraternity he welcomed all those who wanted to follow his ideal of minority – among them priests.*"¹³

6. CONCLUSION

Dear brothers and sisters, in this Year of Consecrated Life, let us recall the two meaningful anniversaries that speak to us on the holiness of two lay brothers. Let us take this event as an occasion for conversion, for rediscovering the sense and newness of religious life. I invite every brother to ask himself with simplicity and truth: 'How am I living my consecration?'

¹² Cf. *Atti dell'84°Capitolo Generale*. Official edition ed. Br. Carlo Calloni, Vol. II, 471. Note that citations are from the Constitutions of 1990. In the current Constitutions, cf. 88, 7-8; 90, 1-3

¹³ PCO VII, N. 36.

May the answer to this question become then an object of fraternal sharing, of mutual support, and of communication in the faith that assists the quality of our fraternal relationships. Let us help each other to witness to the people of our time the primacy of God and how belonging to Him is able to generate relationships where charity, welcome, mercy, and solidarity are the constitutive elements.

I want to finish this letter by inviting all the brothers of the Order to unite themselves to my gratitude for every lay brother present in our fraternities.

May the Lord bless you and keep you in his love!

Rome, 5 April 2015
The Solemnity of the Resurrection of the Lord

Br. Mauro Jöhri,
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