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Exhortation to the General Chapter of the Capuchin Order

Collegio San Lorenzo da Brindisi, Rome, 26 August 2024

I am grateful to our Minister General for inviting me to speak to you on such a solemn occasion, because this gives me the opportunity to express the affection and gratitude I have for my religious family. I owe everything to the Capuchin Order, and in particular to my Province of the Marches! As a poor 12-year-old boy just emerging from the horrors and hardships of the Second World War, the Order welcomed me and has formed and supported me at every stage of life to this very today.

Four years ago, when Pope Francis told me on the telephone his intention to make me a cardinal, I replied that I would have preferred to die wearing my Capuchin habit. He reassured me by saying that I could do both, continuing to wear my religious habit as a cardinal. And that's what happened. I have never worn purple, other than this modest red zucchetto on my head!

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With his report, which I had the opportunity to read in advance, our Minister General gives us a "high definition" photograph, so to speak, of the situation of our Order. I can only invite you to welcome it with an open heart, thinking on the enormous amount of work it presupposes. I limit myself to the only point on which I am able to say a word: that relating to the *Ratio formationis*, that is, spiritual formation in our Order.

I take my inspiration from what our Formation Office wrote in view of this Chapter: “Having the same feelings of Jesus...is the ultimate and fundamental criterion...conforming ourselves to the way of life of the Holy Gospel, is the authentic path to holiness.” These words remind us of to us the opening words of the Rule of Saint Francis: “The life and rule of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I would like to encourage you, members of the Chapter, as you are forced to deal with more concrete and practical things, to ensure that these words do not remain a premise, albeit a necessary and fully shared one.

One never reflects enough on the words pronounced by our Seraphic Father as he neared his death, almost as his last very short Testament: “I have done my part; may Christ teach you to do yours.”<sup>1</sup> It was as if to say: if you want to know what God wants from you, don't look at me, look at Christ; don't even stop at the Rule, go to the Gospel! The Franciscan charism does not consist in looking at Francis, but in looking at Christ with the eyes of Francis!

The centenaries that are being commemorated — the birth at Greccio, the writing of the Rule at Fonte Colombo, the imprinting of the Stigmata — and which will end, in two years, with the centenary of the St. Francis' death, present us with a choice. They can either serve as an opportunity to celebrate the figure of the Poverello, showing his place in history, his relevance

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<sup>1</sup> Celano, *Vita secunda*, 214 (FF, 804).





for today, and so on, or they can serve as an opportunity for something more useful and dearer to the heart of our Seraphic Father himself.

There is a very specific reason that forces us not to stop at Francis: “The law,” it is written, “was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17). This statement means that the Rule was given to us through Francis, but the grace and strength to put it into practice come to us only from Jesus Christ and his Spirit. Benedictines, Dominicans, Jesuits: we all must say the same thing: “The rule was given to us by Benedict, by Dominic, by Ignatius... but grace comes only from Jesus Christ.”

This has consequences for formation. In the past, young people arrived at the novitiate coming almost always from families and a society permeated by faith in Christ. One could, therefore, take the foundations of Christian life for granted and insist on the particular spirituality of one’s institute. The writings of its founder were the main subject of retreats and conferences for novices.

Today, we know, the situation has changed. Formation can no longer focus on embellishments and stuccos, but must build the foundation walls of the spiritual building, that is, familiarity with the Word of God, openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, and above all, knowledge and love for the person of Jesus Christ. Between the two approaches there is the same difference as between building on sand or building on rock.

Let us remember the heartfelt exhortation of Pope Francis in his *Evangelii gaudium*: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.”

Today we are witnessing a disturbing phenomenon for us religious people. Thousands of lay people experience this personal encounter with Jesus and have their lives changed by it, while many religious people go through life without ever experiencing a true friendship with Jesus which is what makes his yoke easy and his burden light.

I am reminded of a little incident that occurred in the Apostolic Palace of Loreto where I made my theology studies. At that time, in my region of the Marche, the term “Christian” generally referred to a simple layperson as distinct from clerics. One day, at the end of a meeting, a large group of friars came down the central staircase of the palace. Seeing them, a man downstairs exclaimed: “So many friars but not even one Christian!” We must make sure that this is never true, in a different sense!

The question that arises at this point is: how can we help the candidates to our life to experience that personal encounter? We cannot expect external changes to bring this about. Ongoing attempts, not only by us Franciscans — reducing fragmentation, uniting provinces, merging custodies, and creating common places of formation — are certainly steps in the right direction, but we know all too well that all this does not solve the problem. Toward the end of his work *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Saint Bonaventure helps us to understand what is needed:





“No one knows this very secret mystical wisdom,” he writes, “except those who receive it; no one receives it except those who desire it; no one desires it except those who are inflamed within by the Holy Spirit sent by Christ to earth.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the only one who can help us and our novices to experience a personal encounter with Jesus is the Holy Spirit! Saint Bonaventure tells us that it depends on us to desire it, to acknowledge the need we have of it, to invoke it... to shout, as the Church does at the beginning of every important action, “*Veni creator Spiritus!*,” Come, Creator Spirit!

As I was saying, we have entered a three-year period of the great Franciscan centenaries: Greccio, the Rule of Fonte Colombo, the Stigmata, and the death of our Seraphic Father. There is yet another very significant centenary that has passed unnoticed: the Chapter of Mats held at the Porziuncola around Pentecost of 1221. This was the first General Chapter of the Franciscan Order and the inspirational model for all the successive chapters. It was the chapter in which the creation of new provinces was decided, including those of the East, Germany, and France. It was the moment of the first great and joyful expansion of the Franciscan Order.

Today, at least here in Europe, at almost every chapter, both provincial and general, we are forced to make decisions about closing friaries one after another to the great suffering of everyone! (Recently, I saw on the Internet the departure ceremony of the Capuchin fraternity from our friary in Olten, Switzerland, and I was moved by the serenity of the last friars and the sadness of the local people in seeing them leave.) It is somewhat consoling to see, in return, the fraternity expanding into what were once “mission territories.” Today, we Europeans have become a “mission territory!”

One truth supports us and prevents us from falling into discouragement and resignation: “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8). His Spirit is as powerful today as it was at the first Pentecost and as at the Franciscan Pentecost of 1221. He can do (and I am convinced that he will do!) new things for us Capuchin Friars Minor too. The important thing is to be able to say to those who come after us what the Seraphic Father said on his deathbed: “We have done our part; we did all we could. Christ will teach you to do your part.”

I end with a prophetic exhortation that I once quoted in the presence of Saint John Paul II and another time at Westminster before the General Synod of the Anglican Church. It is the oracle pronounced by the prophet Haggai at the moment when the people of Israel, returning from exile, were planning to rebuild the Temple of God. It seems apropos for many of us older Capuchins who in the span of our lifetimes have witnessed such a radical change in the situation:

“Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem like nothing in your eyes? Now be strong, Zerubbabel — oracle of the Lord —; be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, high priest; be strong, all you people of the land — oracle of the Lord —; and work! For I am with you — oracle of the Lord of hosts.” (Haggai 2:3-4)

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<sup>2</sup> St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VII, 4.





Be strong, brother Minister General, present and future! Be strong, all you members of the General Chapter! And work, because I am with you, says the Lord!

