

Sollemnitatis Sancti Francisci 2009

Letter of the Minister General and Definitory

Ordo Fratrum Minorum



TO FOLLOW THE HOLY GOSPEL AND MAKE IT COME ALIVE AND VISIBLE TODAY

*My Dear Brothers,
May the Lord Jesus give you
His peace and all good things!*

At the beginning of our service to the universal fraternity, and continuing a tradition long established, we wish, on the occasion of the feast of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis, to send you a fraternal greeting and a simple message to resume the journey of our Franciscan life and mission “with authenticity and openness to the future.”

We have been through three years of reflection, of in-depth study, and rediscovery of the “Grace of our Origins”; we have been redirected to the original inspiration of our charism, to the “primordial” intuition of St. Francis as inspired by the Lord and which led to the “institution” in existence. Together, we give thanks to the Lord for the manifold fruits which such a climb back to the origins has truly produced in the Fraternities and Entities of the Order. It was like returning to the “first love”. How much we would like that such an enthusiasm and passion of the origins could continue to nourish and make our faithfulness dynamic every day! By going back to the origin of our charism, we have encountered Francis whom we have seen with new eyes. Yet our going back is not a going back to the historical and nostalgic past, but a revisiting of that founding experience of Francis as an icon of the future and the *forma vitae* we are all called to realize and bear eloquent witness to today’s world.

When we celebrate the “Grace of the Origins”, we look to Francis of Assisi, who went to the root of his plan for life by seeing Jesus Christ present in the leper he kissed, in the crucifix of St. Damian, and in the inspiring word listened to at the Porziuncula. And when Francis didn’t know what to do, the Lord himself revealed to him that

he was “to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel” (*Test* 14). Francis redirects all of us back to the Gospel and to the person of the poor and crucified Jesus. This is the great gift we have all received together with all other countless gifts, such as the gift of life, vocation, the brothers, and the Eucharist. For all these gifts, we give thanks to the Lord and are deeply grateful.

The recent General Chapter has reminded and re-proposed with clarity that “this is the Good News we have received, namely, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: it is a gift that changed the life of Francis of Assisi and changes the life of each of us” (*Bearers of the Gift of the Gospel [BGG]* 5). “To observe the Holy Gospel” (*Rb* 1,1) which means “to follow in the footsteps and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rnb* 1,1) is our “rule and life” (*Rnb* 1,1). Just as Francis “understood himself entirely in the light of the Gospel” (Benedict XVI), so we, too, are called to make the Gospel our starting point in order live it in the many different current conditions in which each of us lives as St. Francis did and in the manner in which he handed it down to us. In this way, we will have a suitable response with joyful and creative fidelity (cf. *VC* 37) to the signs of the times as the General Chapter of 2003 asked of us (cf. *May the Lord give you Peace* 6).

In order “to follow the Gospel more closely” (*GGCC* 5,2) as we have promised by holding fast to “the words, life, teaching, and Holy Gospel of Jesus” (*Rnb* 22, 41), we must first of all welcome in our life the words given to us; we must welcome the Gospel as a gratuitous gift offered to us daily and read it assiduously as the *prayerful reading of the Word* that purifies our intentions, guides our actions, and keeps alive the fire of our mission.

With the words of the Extraordinary General Chapter of 2006 which picks up where the

Minister General left off, we reiterate with emphasis and conviction, “let us return once again to the Gospel and our life will possess anew poetry, beauty, and the enchantment of the origins... Let us set the Gospel free and the Gospel will set us free” (*The Lord Speaks with us on the Road*, 14). Let us allow ourselves to be freed from spiritual sleepiness, spiritual dryness, and from fatigue and disinterest, and begin anew with Christ, his Word, and Francis, along with a strong desire to be true disciples of Jesus in and for the world of today.

St. Francis teaches that we cannot be true disciples if we are not at the same time witnesses and missionaries of Jesus. The Gospel that we receive and welcome cannot be kept just for ourselves; we must *reinstate it* by going about the world and proclaiming it to everyone as the General Chapter has stated, namely, as “Bearers of the Gift of the Gospel”. Yes, the Gospel, which is our *forma vitae*, the origin of our fraternity and of our evangelizing mission, must be *reinstated* with the witness of mutual love in fraternities through proclamation, and courageous Gospel choices. This will enable us “to incarnate the Gospel in a concrete way” (*BGG* 8) with creative fantasy to find in different circumstances new ways that are adapted to the diverse audiences of the world today.

The gift of the Gospel, welcomed and *reinstated* according to the Gospel logic of the gift (*LSR*, 19ss) is our fundamental “profession”. According to recent historical reconstructions of the probable essential content of the *Early Rule* presented by Pope Innocent III, Francis did not specify any specific way of apostolic activity; rather, he clearly indicated the conditions for Christian discipleship, its manner of understanding and living the Gospel radically, *viz.*, through the spirit of prayer and devotion, fraternity, poverty, minority, “proclamation of the Gospel of peace” (*BGG* 9), preaching, and evangelization. These are the priorities which we have sought to study in-depth and to put into practice in these past years. We have likewise rediscovered them rooted in the fundamental

choice of the Gospel lived out *sine glossa*, from which the *Priorities* themselves recapture their own charismatic integrity.

The General Chapter wished to propose the *Priorities* anew as “fundamental values” and reassess them under a twofold light. On the one hand, it wished to reassess them as Gospel dimensions of missionary/discipleship, *i.e.*, “from an evangelizing mission perspective, opened to the world” (*Mandates of the General Chapter 1*). On the other hand, it wished to reassess the *Priorities* as a commitment and responsibility of each Entity “to find its own methodology or process to study them in-depth and put them into practice” (*ibid.* 6). This is the concrete journey that the Chapter of Pentecost 2009 has indicated to us and which every Friar, Fraternity, and Entity is called to resume from now on.

We are urged at this time to underscore how important it is for all of us to enter into the dynamic of the *logic of the gift* in order to overcome above all every form of spiritual and pastoral “stagnation” as well as every tendency or temptation to “self-centeredness” which prevents widening our horizons. Rather, we need to be open to go and live on the anthropological and social borders and mend the wounds caused by the “cracks of a fragmented world through a commitment of integration and thus overcome these and other dichotomies as part of our journey of *reinstating*” (*BGG* 22). We also hold as equally important to promote among us a “social sensitivity” (*cfr. BGG* 29-30) that paves the way towards a new “shared evangelization” (*cfr. BGG* 25-27).

As the new General Definitory, we will take time during the second half of September until the first week of October to reflect deeply together on the document of the General Chapter. We will continue thus in the subsequent months. Then, towards Christmas we are considering making known to you the fruits of our reflections and decisions as the Spirit leads us for the animation of the Order and the implementation of the Capitular Mandates.

We wish on this first message simply to bring us and you up to speed on the essential contents of both our Rule and the Gospel which is none other than the person of Jesus himself to whom we have promised more “to follow” than “to imitate”, thus making him come alive and visible to the people of today.

The best way to honor and celebrate Saint Francis is by living the inheritance he has left us,

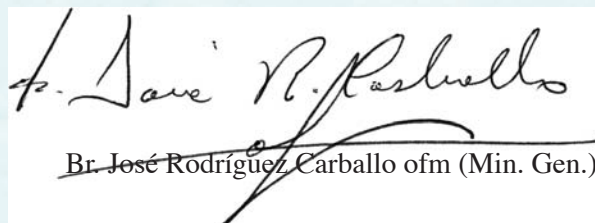
viz., by listening and welcoming in us the Gospel of Jesus, living it with authenticity and total adhesion, reinstating it for the men and women of today, and “walking through the streets of the world as Friars Minor, evangelizers whose hearts are turned towards the Lord” (*BGG* 10).

Happy Feast Day of our Father Saint Francis to whom we pray to bless us as his children and walk with us on the path of the Gospel.

Your Brothers of the General Definitory,

Rome - September 17, 2009
Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis

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