

***BROTHERS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:***  
**MEETING OF THE SEVEN PROVINCIAL DEFINITORIES**  
**TECHNY, ILLINOIS, USA**

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St. Francis, in his *Regula non-Bullata* 22, 25-26, wrote the following:

*But in the holy Charity, which is God, I beg all the friars, the ministers as much as the others, that with every impediment removed and every care and anxious concern put behind, in whatever manner they can better serve, love, honor and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind, that they do so, because He seeks this above all things."*

My dear brothers, may the Lord give you peace!

Before wading into the murky and turbulent waters of revitalization and restructuring, I believe it to be important for me to name several 'presumptions' that are behind any comments I might offer to you during these days together. First, I presume that we are on the same evangelical adventure or journey, the pursuit of radical evangelical life. Second, I presume that we profess the same commitment to the development of our life with God, our life with the brothers, and our life as 'missionaries' ("we are mission," as Pope Francis reminds all Catholics in *Evangelii gaudium*) in the service of the Church and the world. Third, I presume that God is calling us to life, conversion, renewal, revitalization and to embracing a future that will be radically different from the past or the present because it embraces the fullness of God's vision for the life of the world, not our tiny and limited visions. Fourth, I assume that all of us have come to this meeting with open minds and hearts, and that all of us are committed to a process begun in its current form during and following the meetings in Milwaukee and Racine.

This process offers us the possibility of revisioning our lives as Friars and Minors in the United States and the world, to re-energizing our brothers, re-founding our fraternities, and re-directing our missionary efforts to embrace a world that is in rapid change. This became very clear to us who participated in the General Chapter as we realized that the Church and the Order is shifting away from Europe and towards the South and East. For you in the United States, the Order is finding itself before a similar phenomenon, with the rise of the Sunbelt (West) and the South-belt (South) where the Catholic experience is rapidly increasing. At the same time, not only are these regions expanding numerically but they are also becoming very diverse, expressing a diversity for which new tools and new forms of evangelical life will be required to respond effectively these emerging realities. And, finally, I assume that we are prepared to abandon all for the sake of the Gospel and the revitalization of our Franciscan charism, including the possible – if not probable – restructuring and reorganizing of our current structures that could lead to a reduction of the number of existing provinces in the United States for the sake of revitalizing our lives, not simply

to become more efficient. In the end, the processes of restructuring in which you are engaged must seek first to deepen the experience of the living out of the Core Values of our Franciscan evangelical charism expressed in the *Five Priorities*, priorities that find their full expression in the 7+ 1 values expressed in the document, *Ite Nuntiate...Guidelines for the New Forms of Life and Mission in the Order of Friars Minor* (GSME, Rome 2014). I will name these 7 + 1 principles presently.

The theme of revitalization is *de guerre* in the life of the Order today. Closely linked to this theme are processes for restructuring that go in multiple directions. These include both a reduction of the number of entities in some regions, and an expansion of entities in other regions. Spain is a most recent example of the former while the Democratic Republic of Congo witnesses to the latter. Thus, restructuring is not a one-way experience in the current life of the Order. Most if not all of these processes of restructuring have had as their point of origin or destination the desire to give birth to a deeper experience of the Franciscan charism in the life of the Order, the Church and the world.

One of the most difficult challenges has been to find ways of articulating these two necessarily inter-related processes – *revitalization* [values/vision] and *restructuring* [structures/processes] - in a language that is intelligible, meaningful and capable of generating energy, hope and commitment to the *core values* of our Franciscan life and mission. Thus, as Jack Clark Robinson made so clear in his double-helix image shared with me and with the members of the FIT team, the DNA of Franciscan life involves both content and form, stability and movement, imagination and structures. I might add that in the case of emerging entities of the Order, those that are experiencing numerical expansion, restructuring does not automatically imply revitalization. As with the Gospel text from Matthew 19 that we heard yesterday, it comes only to the degree that we **make an explicit commitment** to place God at the center of our lives, and to the degree that we commit to living with and for our brothers in fraternity, fraternities that are engaged in God's mission to the world and, as *Laudato Si* reminds us, a mission that extends to the care and protection of our mother earth and all forms of life.

One additional challenge that you have expressed in the course of this meeting is the temptation to seek the path of least resistance, to choose those modes that make little demand upon us and that risk simply changing the external forms of our lives without helping us to enter into radical conversion of life and mission. Perhaps some re-thinking is in order as you move forward today and in the coming months. Perhaps you need to include in the proposals to be shared with all of the brothers of the 7 provinces one of the more radical models (e.g. Model F or E) precisely in order to engage the brothers at a deeper level in a process of reflection for the revitalization of our lives and to make evident those values that will be most essential to the ongoing renewal of our life and mission.

Someone raised the question about a possible alternative to the proposed models, namely, that the provinces remain as they now are and that a type of 'federation' be created, promoting interprovincial collaboration. I am reminded of a comment from the Minister Generals of the Capuchins and Conventuals, who jokingly stated that the Order is made up of a federation of provinces, each with its own version of near absolute autonomy; provinces are made up of a federation of local fraternities, again, each with its own relative autonomy; local fraternities are made up of a federation of individual friars in the fraternity, each expressing his own relative

autonomy. In the end, the good of the collective is sacrificed on the altar of the individual and his personal needs. You who are provincials know that of which I am speaking, those individual friars who refuse to accept a transfer because it might upset the 'vital' ministry in which they are engaged. The idea of federation works for the Poor Clare nuns and their monasteries, which by definition are independent, autonomous ecclesiastical jurisdictions. Federation, however, does not work for us Friars Minor because by the very nature of our evangelical identity, which is rooted in the belief that we are called to live in absolute interdependence and solidarity with and for one another. Because of the fundamental and revolutionary idea of 'fraternity' in the spiritual imagination and practical living proposed by Francis of Assisi, we can never allow the experience of our local or provincial fraternity to be restricted by the juridical or affective structures that are meant to serve for the generation of a universal sense of brotherhood and shared mission. Our *Rule and Life*, our *General Constitutions*, and so many of the more recent documents of the Order remind us of this central conviction about the specific nature of our Gospel brotherhood, the universal fraternity.

*Seven Plus One Core Values of Our Franciscan Life and Mission:*

I would now like to turn attention to the set of seven plus one core Franciscan values, which have the potential to lead us, in the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to nurture 'our dream'. This dream is about identifying, embracing and being embraced and transformed by (the experience of Francis at San Damiano and the Crucifix, Francis and the leper) eternal values, which are capable of evoking and provoking a revolution of mind, heart and spirit within each of us and within each of the brothers of our respective entities. I am speaking here of what revitalization is about, namely, a restructuring of the inner world of each of us; a restructuring of the vital relationships that guide our lives and lead us to a deeper experience of life in God, life with the brothers, life in the Church and in the world; and a restructuring of our affective as well as effective means for being a sign and symbol of the Kingdom of God to a world that is desperately in need of 'good news'.

Values, dreams and visions are not one and the same thing. Vision is what happens when we commit to the deepest values of our human, Christian/Catholic, and Franciscan identity and to the reorganizing of our structures in such a way that they reflect our deepest identity as men of faith, hope and love, men of the Gospel, the Church, and men committed to living fraternity with one another and with the world as the most authentic manner for expressing our specifically Franciscan identity. Vision emerges from the confusion, chaos, sweat and faithful commitment to sticking together, living to the best of our abilities the core values in pursuit of the Gospel life, living as fraternities guided by the *Beatitudes*. Vision is the confirmation or certification that the manner in which the core values of our Franciscan vocation/charism are being embraced and applied in our lives is authentic, life-giving and spiritually renewing for individual friars and for the institutions and structures that serve as temporal containers for the promotion ongoing formation, transformation, and conversion.

Again, in "*Ite Nuntiate: Guidelines for the New Forms of Life and Mission in the Order of Friars Minor*", seven core values are mined from the experience of a number of new fraternities that have emerged in different regions in Europe and which seek to propose the revitalization of the life and mission of the Friars Minor in the world today. For those who are members of Sacred Heart Province, you will remember well the provincial chapter of 2009 where I was invited to

participate in a 'fish bowl' experience and where I basically 'shot down' the proposal of the preparatory commission that proposed the creation of one or several fraternities to give expression to the deepest values of our Franciscan life. My central concern then as now was and is that these core values should be at the heart of the living out of the Gospel life by each and every friar, each and every fraternity, each and every entity, and also at the level of the General Curia. At the same time, I also realize that the creation of fraternities that give a clear and uncompromising witness to these core values has a specific and useful place in the experience of the Order today. Thus, I admit to some type of conversion of thinking in my own life.

The core values for Franciscan life and mission articulated in "*Ite Nuntiate*" (pp. 30-31), include the following:

- 1. Primacy of the life of prayer and of listening to the Word of God;**
- 2. Care of the authentic and deep fraternal relations, which irradiate a testimony of fraternal life;**
- 3. A simple and sober lifestyle, minority and testimony;**
- 4. Welcome and sharing of life with the people of God, and above all with our brothers and sisters who are poor (encounter with people);**
- 5. Evangelizing mission with a character of inter gentes, itinerancy, presence in unknown, difficult and risky areas, closeness to the poorest of the poor, the suffering, and to the excluded through 'inserted fraternities' (living among the poor);**
- 6. Communion with the local Church (testimony to fraternity and minority); and**
- 7. Willingness to adopt forms of active collaboration with the laity and the Franciscan family.**

To these 7 core values, I would add an 8<sup>th</sup>, which find expression in the lived experience and writings of Francis of Assisi, and in the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (cf. Chapter 4) and Encyclical *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis.

- 8. Commitment to the transversal values of JPIC, and to working for the social transformation of the structures in society and the reconciliation and healing of the social and natural world.**

"*Ite Nuntiate*" makes clear that the 'new' that is so widely invoked in the recent past in the life of the Church and the Order reflects the ardent desire to undergo a more radical and continuous conversion of mind, heart and soul. "To be real, the 'new' always demands the embrace of the past with the richness of its heritage, and the [embrace also] of the future, with all the changes that can already be perceived in the present. The 'new' subsequently conjoins (unites) memory and prophecy, the return to the sources and the longing for the future [as God imagines it to be]" (p. 20).

*Role of the Minister General and the General Definitorium in the Process:*

During discussions here at this meeting, it was asked of me as your Minister and Servant, what the role of the Minister General and the General Definitory might be as you engage in this necessary process of revitalization, and allow the demands revitalization make of you to find new expression in the way you organize our Franciscan presence in the United States. Neither I nor the General

Definitory can remain indifferent and 'on the sidelines' as you face and embrace the consequences of living the Franciscan charism in the U.S. today. As I mentioned earlier, we are not a federation. We are a universal fraternity, each responsible with and for one another. The General Definitory has by right and obligation the responsibility to accompany, cajole, encourage and challenge you to seek new ways for revitalizing our presence in the U.S., and to open your geographic experience to the universal brotherhood and the universal Church. I am speaking here of living as fraternities open to the '*missio Dei*', God's mission, which continuously challenges us to undermine all efforts to restrict our understanding and living out of the charism to the confines of our mental and geographical constructs. The General Definitory is required by the mandates of fraternal charity to accompany and to 'meddle' in your business since your business is our business, and vice versa. At the same time, the General Definitory and the brothers of the General Curia must also be engaged in a permanent process of revitalization and, where necessary, to restructuring our lives and the forms we have developed to carry forward the mandates entrusted to us. In a concrete form, the General Definitory might need to re-think the current physical structure of the General Curia, which was conceived for a time when the Order was composed of over 26,000 friars and with more than 70 brothers in the service to the Order. As we approach a changed reality of 13,000 plus friars and 39 brothers living at the General Curia, it might be time for us to review whether we should remain in the current physical structure or whether we should lead by example and move the Curia to a new location (e.g. a return to St. Antonio/PUA) that would reflect both the evangelical/charismatic and also the practical dimensions of revitalization. What is at the heart of the matter is not where we live but rather HOW we live: how we live in and for God; how we live with and for one another; how we live as 'mission' and as 'missionaries' to the world and to all of creation.

Parenthetically, one of the new and more exciting possibilities that is emerging in discussion between the OFM, Conventuals and Capuchins, and also TOR is the formation of inter-obediential fraternities to express the common nature of our Franciscan identity and evangelizing mission. A 3-year program has been developed to promote mutual understanding, healing and reconciliation, the emergence of new structures that would allow us to live together and, perhaps, to open our lives to the possibility of a future reunification of the Orders. In 2016, we will mark the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pardon of Assisi by focusing collectively on the ways we have done violence to one another and to seeking reconciliation. In 2017 we will commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bull of Pope Leo X, *Ite et vos in vineam meam* (May 29, 1517), which divided the Friars Minor of the Regular Observance and the Friars Minor Conventuals. We will call upon the historians and specialists of our respective Orders to review the literature and to propose ways in which we might renew the vital links between us. And in 2018, efforts will be made to create opportunities for sharing and collaborating on common missionary projects, with the possible creation of a unified Franciscan University in Rome and of inter-obediential fraternities in different parts of the world.

In closing, I would urge you to spur the brothers of your respective provinces to seek new ways of living out the Franciscan evangelical charism in the U.S. I urge you as leaders to do just that: to lead; to stimulate the brothers to engage fully in the life of the fraternity, to deepen their life with God and to expand their horizons of what it means to be brothers in the one universal fraternity. I urge you to speak the truth to the brothers and not to promote false ideas of what this process of revitalization and the potential for restructuring of the 7 provinces in the U.S. might portend for their lives. I urge each of you to do all you can both individually and collectively as the Definitory

of each of the 7 provinces to make visible and 'enticing' the 7 Plus 1 Core values of our Francis life, to model these in your relations with one another as Definitory and leaders, and to challenge the brothers to pursue these values and not to succumb to the threats of individualism, isolationism, and the annihilation of the fraternity, a dangerous consequence of becoming a 'virtual person'.

I urge you to come to a new understanding of the historical heritage and beauty of your 7 provinces in which history becomes prologue, setting the stage for the rich and exciting future that God is preparing for the friars and the Order in the U.S. I urge you to get the friars moving again. We are members of a Movement. We have not made a vow to '*stabilitas loci*' but rather to '*stabilitas evangelicum*', if such a term exists. Our stability does not come from structures or geographical locations but from the enduring values of the Gospel expressed in the 7 Plus 1 Franciscan values, expressed in the daily taking up of the Cross of Jesus and following in his footsteps. We are not called to maintain that which has served us well but which, for one reason or another might no longer be capable of serving us. We are called to reclaim the charismatic, itinerant nature of our Gospel life, walking by faith and not by sight, nor by fear, nor by a false sense of historical security.

Neither you nor I have the right to allow a province to choose death but only life. Believe and trust in God's promise to be with us always, even in the midst of diminishment, aging and an uncertain future. Believe in the power of the fraternity and in the universal nature of our Franciscan charism that allows us to recognize one another as brothers pursuing the same evangelical values. Believe that the future is in God's hands and that God is calling and urging us to step out with the same radical trust that Francis of Assisi and the early brothers demonstrated in their lives, a radical trust expressed in the lives of the great biblical figures of faith: Abram and Sarah; Moses and Miriam; Mary and Joseph.

*"Let us begin, brothers. For till now we have done little or nothing."*

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*Minister and Servant*  
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