

## General Visitators' Meeting

Rome, 14 November 2022

### ***“AND LET THEM VISIT THE BROTHERS”: THE ART OF LISTENING, OF DIALOGUE, OF SHARING GOODS AND FRATERNAL CORRECTION IN OUR LIFE.***

I start from the ER and LR, which concentrate the service of the friars who are ministers and servants of the other friars in a few verbs: “Let them **visit** them, **exhort** and **comfort** them, **admonish** and **correct** them”.

#### **1. LET THEM VISIT THEM OFTEN**

*“The Ministers and the Other Brothers and How They Are Related: In the name of the Lord! Let all the brothers who have been designated the ministers and servants of the other brothers assign their brothers in the provinces and places where they may be, and let them frequently visit, admonish, and encourage them spiritually. Let all my other brothers diligently obey them in those matters concerning the well-being of their soul and which are not contrary to our life. Let them behave among themselves according to what the Lord says: Do to others what you would have them do to you; and “Do not do to another what you would not have done to you”.<sup>1</sup>*

The first thing that stands out is for the minister to be the first to move, to go to the friars and not to call them *ad pedes*. The first attitude to be internalised in service as ministers - and you, brother visitators, participate directly in the service entrusted to me as Minister General for this time - is that of going out of oneself to go to the brothers. Each of you has enough commitments, and you can experience this service as just another thing to do. Many no longer understand what the Visitor is for and why it takes a friar away from his everyday work for a year or so. First of all, you are called to do what the Minister General is supposed to do by virtue of the Rule and which he clearly cannot do. You are that link that allows the general definitory to know and evaluate the situation of the entities and then make the appropriate and necessary decisions to accompany them and, in some cases, help them get back on the road. You are the first to be asked to take a step beyond your usual boundaries, to enter into a different reality, a sacred land in which you can take off the shoes of your own preconceptions and dispose yourselves to listen to and encounter the other.

Going out of oneself: St Francis wrote that “*when the friars go out into the world, they should take nothing with them for the journey*”.<sup>2</sup> This is the attitude of those who go out of themselves, leaving behind that which prevents listening, the encounter with new realities, and, therefore, the encounter. The invitation then is to determine what prevents us from going out to meet the other: personal conditioning and burdens to be reckoned with because they can interfere with listening and dialogue; performance anxieties to do everything with a certain perfectionism; pre-packaged schemes and ideas about our way of life and the Province we visit. All this and more can become a barrier between us and the other(s).

Be prepared for an encounter that opens you up to what you do not yet know and what may surprise you. Listen carefully, and do not be hasty in your first impressions and judgements: reality does not fit into our schemes; let us widen our gaze, mind, and heart.

Let us prepare ourselves to take this step. The service of Visitation touches us in who we are personally and is not something external to us. Each of us does well to ask ourselves where we are in our journey of life, faith, and vocation. What are the positive and growing aspects that will sustain us

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<sup>1</sup> ER IV, 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> ER XIV, 1

in listening and dialogue, and what obstacles and struggles may delay or even prevent it? Let us always remember, as St Paul says, “*I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith*”.<sup>3</sup> Let us allow the Spirit of the Lord make us magnanimous, give us a profound and wise gaze to recognise the good present in others, free us from aggression in our thoughts and pretensions, and clothe us with mercy to welcome the limitations and also the sinful situations of our brothers, believing that there is always a new possibility. Francis forcefully reminds us: “*Let the ministers and servants remember what the Lord says: I have not come to be served, but to serve; and because the care of the brothers’ souls has been entrusted to them, if anything is lost on account of their fault or bad example, they will have to render an account before the Lord Jesus Christ on the day of judgment*”.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. LET THEM EXHORT AND COMFORT

In this service, it is precisely those tiring situations that ask us to come out of ourselves to console and exhort. In the Bible, consolation is born from the encounter with God and His Word and grows in the encounter and relationship with Jesus. St Paul expresses it powerfully: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God*”.<sup>5</sup> The experience of consolation opens us to the other.

Open yourselves to our fraternity, which today is often fragile, both personally and institutionally. Prepare to encounter vulnerable brothers and fraternities at different levels: this encounter and prolonged and attentive listening are not easy. We are tempted to suffer bewilderment and weariness, to think soon that there is nothing more to be done, tempted perhaps to resort to stronger means. Let us make room for these emotions and work with them to avoid suffering them passively or responding hastily. Let us allow our position and reaction to mature in silent prayer, like the words to be said.

Francis unites the command “*not to take possession of anything, neither house nor place, nor anything else*” with being “*like pilgrims and strangers in this world*”.<sup>6</sup> This is the poverty that strips us of ourselves, first of all, to give everything good back to the Most High, including our brothers. On this path, Francis can conclude: “*Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another, let them show that they are members of the same family. Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit!*”.<sup>7</sup> To the *taciturnitas* typical of monasticism, Francis opposes the relationship marked by maternal tenderness, which can accompany the brother towards possible growth.

Here, then, is the exhortation: “*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear*”.<sup>8</sup> It is the opposite of uplifting and equally empty sermons. Let us not repeat worn-out words; let us not say things that are taken for granted: for adults, it is unbearable! Instead, to exhort means to speak from the abundance of a heart that has first received mercy; it has learnt to reckon first of all with its own frailty before that of others! And it is precisely from this limit that we can encounter the fragility of

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 1:24.

<sup>4</sup> ER IV, 6.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 1:3-4.

<sup>6</sup> LR VI, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> LR VI, 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Eph 4:29.

the other, and before speaking, be a good presence that comforts and encourages because it does not nail the other person down in his limitation but invites him to look further and take a step further. By making the record of the Visitation, for example, we do not photograph a situation flatly, without depth: we show the path that is continuing, the possibilities that, though small at times, we manage to glimpse. In a word, we give hope that comes from trusting in the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation, and we never close the door on the future, never! Even in the most complex and sometimes end-of-life situations, there is a glimmer of a future to be recognised, a story of salvation that continues to be written.

The word of exhortation and consolation is vital to encourage faith and vocation. We do not know in advance how this flame is kindled among us. In certain houses and several brothers, through personal encounters, we may register a smouldering glimmer, even a certain emptiness. Let us not be frightened! Remember that to believe means to remain on the road through the different ages of life. At the root of certain dissatisfactions and forms of individualism, as well as situations of unfaithfulness to the form of life, there is often a faith that no longer gives form and substance to life, which therefore seeks nourishment elsewhere. The root of our ills is an unhealthy relationship with God, and it is here that we are called to make the Good News of the Gospel resound: to call forth the necessary vigilance in the face of our spiritual maladies, to show what good is possible, to clothe others with mercy.

Francis tells us: “*They must be careful not to be angry or disturbed at the sin of another, for anger and disturbance impede charity in themselves and in others*”.<sup>9</sup> Let us remain brothers and minors before our brothers, let us not be surprised at anything, let us nourish interest and closeness to everything that is opened up to us in the life of the other, and let us not tire of remembering that the Lord loves each one, endlessly and seeks him, always. We may witness moments of an awakening of faith and call; we may also encounter forms of coldness and resistance, if not closure, to the very action of the Spirit. Let us not be frightened, pray for these brothers, never consider ourselves superior to anyone, and try what is possible in a way that is appropriate and not.

I advise you to find a way to ask each brother how you are:

- *At the human level*, your health, integral well-being, and feelings ...
- *At the level of your faith journey*, prayer life, spaces of silence and nourishment such as reading, studying, searching for reasons to believe today...
- *At the vocational level*, following Christ unites life around the evangelical counsels lived as a path of freedom; witnessing to the Gospel makes us missionary disciples, live the joy of faith and vocation...

### **3. Let them correct them with humility and charity**

*“Let the brothers who are the ministers and servants of the others **visit and admonish their brothers and humbly and charitably correct them**, not commanding them anything that is against their soul and our rule. Let the brothers who are subject, however, **remember that, for God’s sake, they have renounced their own wills**. Therefore, I strictly command them to obey their ministers in everything they have promised the Lord to observe, and which is not against their soul or our Rule. Wherever the brothers may be who know and feel they cannot observe the Rule spiritually, they can and should have recourse to their ministers”*.<sup>10</sup>

The environment in which the evangelical - not judgmental - act of fraternal correction can take place is one of full acceptance. Francis admonishes:

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<sup>9</sup> LR VII, 3.

<sup>10</sup> LR X, 1-4.

*“Let the ministers, moreover, receive them charitably and kindly and have such familiarity with them that these same brothers may speak and deal with them as masters with their servants, for so it must be that the ministers are the servants of all the brothers”*.<sup>11</sup>

We are always in the school of the Gospel. In the inverted logic of the Incarnation and the Passion, where Francis contemplates the humility of God, we learn to become accessible in listening and familiar reception, careful not to impose ourselves or remain in a silence dictated by convenience.

Please be prepared to discern the moment and the way to make explicit some situations that need correction: at a personal level, for example, critical relationships with oneself, with one’s brothers, with God’s people; forms of individualism, de facto independence, lack of care for oneself and one’s environment, dependencies, hardness and closedness; undue appropriations of what is common, unhealthy relationships with roles, money, and things. At the community level, the conflicts that are not addressed and crossed, the closures to dialogue, fraternal life reduced to a formality, prayer that is limited to the “trade union minimum”, the poor quality of the celebration of the local chapter, lifestyles that are too high compared to the profession of the very high poverty and standard of living of the people. And more.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to help two brothers or more to sit down and face together a relationship knot, a lack of dialogue and forgiveness. Charity fuels your creativity, and do not be afraid. Prayer and personal penance prepare for moments like these, which can prove very precious: they are spaces left open to the Spirit for his sovereign action.

Fraternal correction must never humiliate the other or others; let us not pass judgement or give the impression that we arrive with a ready-made version of reality and fail to listen with empathy and truth to those we meet. Please do not allow yourselves to get caught up in the petty politics of one entity, staying above, listening to all, and giving yourself time, reflection, and prayer to listen, discern, and propose paths of renewal and service.

Correction is often good to take place later, not leaving smouldering rubble behind when leaving a fraternity. It is good to talk about some things with the minister provincial and, if there are really serious things, confidentially with me. Remember that you are bound to secrecy *ex officio* about what you come to know, which applies throughout life. Only those who are discreet can correct and accompany, making it felt that they esteem and love the brothers anyway.

The Constitutions in Article 213 summarise what I have tried to communicate to you: *“Elected by the Minister General with his Definitory, the Visitor General makes canonical visitation of the Provinces or other entities and, according to the Rule, he admonishes, comforts, and charitably corrects the friars,<sup>12</sup> in the name of and by the authority of the Minister General. During the visitation it will be his concern to learn the circumstances of the friars, to examine their undertakings, to encourage their activities and, above all, to promote the spirit of fraternity and the observance of our Rule”*.<sup>13</sup>

The objective, today more than ever, remains *“to recognise whether in the Province or autonomous Custody there are present all the elements suitable for fulfilling the life and mission of the Order (cf. GS art. 120 and 121 §2), which is to be considered among his most important tasks”*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ER X, 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. LR 10,1; ER 4,2.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. CIC 628,1.

<sup>14</sup> GS 126.

The fragility of many Entities makes this article more relevant than ever to help the Minister General and the General Definitory to accompany the Entities in dialogue with the Conferences, to also look to their future in new ways, addressing critical issues, overcoming the risk of sterile stagnation and revitalising life in mission, for the good of the people of God and the world, to whom we are sent as missionary disciples.

Using an evangelical metaphor, the challenge is to “see the new shoots” and perhaps have the courage to “cut off some dry branches” so that life can blossom again. It is a matter of seizing these new beginnings, which we risk not seeing if we concentrate on imagining the Church and the Order only as they have been in the past, even the recent past.

I want to conclude by listening to the words of the Testament of Siena:

*“Write that I bless all my brothers, those who are and who will be in the religion until the end of the world. Since I cannot speak much because of weakness and the pain of my illness, I am showing my will to my brothers briefly in these three words: as a sign of remembrance of my blessing and my testament, may they always love each other; may they always love and observe our Lady Holy Poverty; and may they always remain faithful and subject to the prelates and all the clerics of holy Mother Church”.*

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