

November 5, 2017

General Chapter: Order of Secular Franciscans (OFS)

Rome – Homily

“The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Mt. 23)

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ and St. Francis, may the Lord give you peace! These days of your General Chapter are a moment to take stock of the current situation of your Order, examining questions of identity (prayer and fraternity), organization (leadership and service), and mission (strengthening your evangelizing outreach to a world in serious need of encouragement, hope, justice, and peace, and special attention to youth). I was much encouraged as a Minister to see these elements in your *Instrumentum Laboris*. If it is any consolation, we your brothers of the Order of Friars Minor are facing some of the same challenges. And we, like you, find ourselves returning to the starting point of our lives: Jesus Christ at the center of all things; fraternity as the sacramental means for living the Gospel; and evangelizing mission – to go out with the Gospel of compassion, love, mercy, justice, and peace in our hearts – as the driving force for participating in the building of the Kingdom of God.

One way of reading the Gospel of Matthew is through the lens of a crisis of identity and leadership. From the beginning, those coming to Jesus found themselves in crisis: how to live faithfully the religious identity they had received from their parents and ancestors while embarking upon the new spiritual way proposed by Jesus. Matthew highlights this crisis by presenting examples of religious leaders who are more concerned with self-promotion and accumulating power and wealth rather than with following the lead of Moses who demonstrated that authentic spiritual leadership must be grounded in humility, minority, and service. For Matthew, Jesus will follow this same path, grounded in the values of the Beatitudes, the foundational elements for identity, service, and mission in Jesus’ life. It is to these same set of ideals that Jesus calls his disciples – indeed, all of us who have been baptized into the one Body of Christ – to embrace this evangelical path. It is a path that requires of us the willingness to deny self-promotion, embrace the way of justice, truth, and service, placing the needs of others ahead of our own, and following in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt. 16: 24).

Someone once wrote: “Leadership is a dynamic relational process in which people under the influence of the Holy Spirit, partner to achieve a common goal...[which is]...servicing others by leading others by serving (cf. Martin Hanna, 2006, “What is Christian Leadership About?,” https://www.andrews.edu/services/jacl/article_archive/1_1_summer_2006/2_christian_leadership.pdf). Thus, *leadership is all about identity*: being grounded in the experience of Jesus, submitting our lives and our works to the Spirit of God. *It is dynamic*: it does not simply count on repeating what has been done in the past, no matter how well it might have worked. Times change; needs change; so too leadership styles must change in

order to meet people where they live today. The principle of change also points to another element that is oftentimes missing from our personal and fraternal lives, and also from our apostolic, evangelizing activities, namely, dynamism. Christian disciples – and all Franciscans – are called to be active, dynamic, engaged. We are called to commit all of our energies to living and sharing the Gospel life, with passion, joy, and hope. *Leadership is relational*: no person can function as an island, accumulating all authority and duties to him/her-self. And yet, how often do we in fact make ourselves the center of all that is, leaving no space for others! To the contrary, leadership in the spiritual community of Jesus – and in the fraternities created by St. Francis – is about *creating synergy*, serving others by sharing responsibility and convincing others that ‘we are all in this together’. The spiritual partnership that is to be promoted by leadership in the fraternities of your Order (and mine) is one that reminds each member of his/her authentic evangelical identity: co-disciples and co-missionaries with Christ, as Pope Francis has so clearly argued in his Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (cf. par. 21, 24, et alii).

One other important element about Christian leadership that emerges from the Gospel reading is that of living out one’s faith and beliefs in concrete deeds. For St. Francis, experiencing first and then sharing the Good News was not about crafting of eloquent words and creating a long set of burdensome rules and supporting structures, as important as some of these might be. Rather, coming to a deep and abiding experience of the Gospel life is about learning ever anew how to sit together at the feet of the Lord Jesus and learn from Him. It is about integrating the values of the Kingdom of God into all aspects of our lives, leaving no area untouched or undisturbed. I might add that embracing the Gospel life is about becoming dis-turbed! Being disturbed is another way of saying that we are ‘awakened from our complacency’, ‘shaken in our certitude’, and forced once again to place our lives in total dependence on Jesus. It leads us to once again embark upon an authentic life of ‘penance’ to which St. Francis has called each and all of us. It is precisely by embracing a way of living in this world that is open to the newness of the operations of the Spirit of God, transforming us into genuine seekers intent on learning anew what it means to follow Jesus and share his message of love and mercy with all, especially with broken humanity – with immigrants, brothers and sisters suffering from violence and poverty, and to embrace a wounded and threatened environment, creation, that we give witness to an integrity of life. Contrary to popular opinion, penance and simplicity of life offer us a means for coming to a greater experience of the transformative, creative, dynamic, hope and joy-filled experience being alive in the Lord Jesus as women and men living the Gospel life.

Brothers and sisters, we are the ones who have been called to restore faith with one another in a world that is tearing itself apart (Malachi 2: 8-10). May we open hearts, allowing ourselves to be embraced by Jesus, embracing one another, and assuming the position of ‘washers of the feet’ of one another, of all of humanity, and of all of creation! ‘Let us begin....’