

TO THE FRIARS OF EUROPE



ROME, NOVEMBER 22, 2020

SOLEMNITY OF CHRIST THE KING

PROT. N. 00844/20

TO THE PRESIDENTS OF THE CONFERENCES
TO THE MAJOR SUPERIORS
TO ALL THE FRIARS
OF EUROPE

*I DREAM OF A EUROPE THAT IS A FAMILY AND A COMMUNITY.
I DREAM OF A EUROPE THAT IS INCLUSIVE AND GENEROUS.¹*

Dear Brothers,

Recently, Pope Francis addressed a letter to His Eminence Cardinal Parolin who was to attend an October 28-30 meeting in Brussels to mark the 50th anniversary of the Holy See's collaboration with the European Institutions and 40 years since the establishment of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE). I would like to use his remarks as a springboard for this letter.

The Holy Father speaks about a dream; a dream that is real and can be realized; a dream based on awareness of the Lord's faithfulness within and throughout our history; a dream whose roots are imbedded extensively and deeply in the past and which are vital for producing a wealth of additional, beneficial human achievements; a dream that can be realized if we work together and generously to build family and community. What comes to mind, as expressed

¹ Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe, to his Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, October 22, 2020.

in the two recent encyclicals, *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*, are the main points of reflection and direction the Pope gives for the journey forward of the entire Church.

I have already encouraged all the friars of the world to use the various possible means of animation in the Order without being overly conditioned by the limitations imposed by the current pandemic. Even here at the General Curia, I called for discussion and collaboration among the friars in charge of the various offices to identify potential ways to animate the Capuchin friars of Europe.² Out of their expertise and desire to be of service to the Order, a variety of ideas surfaced, which I would like to share briefly with you.

1. THE GOAL

Thinking about the current situation here in Europe, I agree with what one of the Councilor's observed: **we must begin to think of ourselves as European Capuchin friars!** We cannot envision the future of the various places where we are present in Europe without first involving all of us in a cooperative effort before we resort to international fraternal collaboration. We, first and foremost, are responsible for our own future in Europe. This means stepping beyond the threshold of our own little house, our own little fraternity, our own small and at times stifling Province. We must take to heart the Pope's powerful message that it is an illusion for anyone to think that he is self-sufficient and can proceed on his own. We want to explore what this means concretely for ourselves. We have an advantage in that our charismatic identity enables us and continually prods us *all* to be *brothers* ("*fratelli tutti*"). For some time

now, the Order has made significant strides in this direction, starting with the 2014 Fatima meeting, which offered, without doubt, a deep breath of hope. Because it seems more urgent and necessary now than ever before to join forces, collaborating as much as we are able, to come to a common understanding of where God is calling us, we want to act with more decisive and open continuity. The Capuchins of Europe still have many vital strengths; our goal is to find ways that optimize their appreciation. Open those ways without worrying about the results. The future that awaits us remains always in God's hands, but it is up to us, in his name, to take risks rooted in hope. All of the offices of our Curia are committed to preparing whatever means might be helpful to support the dream we want to pursue.

2. THE METHOD

To be worthwhile, any path of action must include adequate reflection. To accurately reflect on our current situation in Europe, we need everyone's input based on their own knowledge, experience, maturity of faith and their personal perceptions. Whatever choices will be made and the evaluation of their effectiveness, as well as their coherence with what God is asking of us, will require the same commitment to reflection.

As we consider both the numerical decrease and the important issues that are becoming more evident (e.g., closures, provincialism, vocational and formative issues, pessimism), as well as the positive initiatives already underway (e.g., the St. Lawrence Fraternities, interprovincial and international collaborative efforts, interprovincial fraternities and houses

² See *Let us give thanks to the Lord!* n. 17ff.

of formation), we must keep the Word of God, the voice of the Church, our Rule and Constitutions, the *Ratio formationis*, etc. as essential points of reference as we attempt to read the signs that God is giving us today.

Therefore, it is important to encourage the maximum involvement of all the groups that already exist in the various spheres of the Order (e.g., Conferences, Secretariats, Ministers, other groups, etc.) Aware of the special role each of them plays in encouraging the brothers, we ask all the Ministers and all the Secretariats at the various levels for the same attitude of generous attentiveness and animation. The offices of the General Curia will coordinate a timeline for sharing and collecting the input each has to offer. This will allow us to put together a synthesis of the friars' suggestions from which, with additional discussion, we will be able to sharpen our focus. Although our responsibilities are clearly different, with the participation of everyone, we can make some operational choices whose effectiveness, however, depends on expanding the awareness of everyone involved.

3. THE TOOLS

Since we already have a number of tools at our disposal, it may not be necessary to look for new ones. Instead, I think we could simply use the means we already have, making good use, in our current situation, of the means of communication which technology has made available. To this end, we are engaging the help of the following:

- The Offices of the General Curia: to prepare helpful resources and to involve the diverse

entities at the various levels; to coordinate and track practical ways of implementation, to gather and organize the input received; and to offer the General Council tools for updating and reflection. Sharing a single focus, each of the Offices of the General Curia will nonetheless, operate within its own competence and area of service.

- Various groups or bodies: which, with the encouragement of the Offices of the General Curia and their respective Ministers, we invite to become proactive in their corresponding area of involvement and focus.
- The Commission for the Mediterranean and for the proposed European encounter.
- The Commission for the St. Lawrence of Brindisi Fraternities.

Since the *Ratio formationis* is a rich resource that the General Chapter gave us to be implemented in our daily lives and activities,³ it would be wise and profitable to take as much advantage of it as possible.

4. THE SUBJECT MATTER

Without necessarily wanting to set limits on the substance of our work, I would like to point out that four areas have already been identified for our reflection and cannot be dismissed:

4.1. The need to update our European organizational structure

This is a theme about which the General Chapter has already expressed itself, and which we intend to pursue.⁴ Currently, Europe is divided into four Conferences (CIC: comprised

³ See *Let us give thanks to the Lord!* n. 6ff.

⁴ See *Let us give thanks to the Lord!* n. 20ff.

of three Provinces whose numbers continue to dwindle; CIMPCap: comprised of 17 Provinces the number of which is expected to be reduced; CENOC: comprised of seven Provinces and two Delegations that are also rapidly diminishing; and CECOC: comprised of six Provinces, three Custodies, four Delegations plus a few Houses of Presence). With these, we also want to involve the Conference of ASMEN (comprised of three Custodies, two Delegations and one House of Presence). A dispassionate, objective look at the data and the consistent patterns that have emerged over the past few decades and those that can reasonably be expected into the future, requires us to revise and lighten the structures that were designed under very different circumstances in order to establish Conferences that can more effectively carry out the role envisioned for them by our Constitutions. Besides the Conferences, we must also consider ways to best reform the Circumscriptions that do not have, or will soon lose, the vital requirements for remaining such.

4.2. The Area of Formation

This is a topic of utmost importance. Above all, we have to reflect on the choices we make with regard to initial formation, applying the criteria offered to us by the *Ratio formationis* to all European candidates. Some directions are already well underway and we will not be able to pull back from them in the future. I am referring to the interprovincial and international formation fraternities, particularly those in Italy. Italy and Poland aside, Europe has a serious lack of formation fraternities; competent formation personnel are

difficult to find, and as a result candidates are often left without any real accompaniment, in programs unable to provide for the necessary peer interaction. Is it really possible to continue in this manner, contrary to the norms of the Ratio which the Order unanimously approved? Can the General Minister honestly allow a formation so at odds with how our identity understands it? For the sake of the greater good we wish to accomplish, we must join our forces, while we still have them, to find ways overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of real collaboration in the field of formation. For this to happen, “conversion” to fraternity on the part of the Ministers is absolutely crucial.⁵

While thinking about better ways of organizing ourselves for the future, we can already profit from some recent developments. Probably boosted by the presence of the two St. Lawrence Fraternities at Clermont-Ferrand and Lourdes, France —thank the Lord—, there has been a slight vocational surge so that there are now a number of friars in the post-novitiate phase. Why not use this opportunity to create an international fraternity capable of accompanying this group and the few other candidates scattered throughout the other provinces? There will be linguistic issues or breaking down other barriers we have built, but experience tells us that, although difficult, these are completely and relatively easily overcome. In the immediate future, we need to prepare a common novitiate which could begin as early as next year.

As you can well imagine, it is urgent that we face each other without fear, without withdrawal, but with a willingness to seek

⁵ See *Let us give thanks to the Lord!* nn. 30 and 31.

together whatever is best for the future of the Order, determined to set our sight on a broader horizon.

4.3. The St. Lawrence Fraternities

The General Minister has received more than a few requests from our Circumscriptions asking to establish other St. Lawrence Fraternities. This is a promising prospect for the Order in Europe. Precisely for that reason, with the passage of a number of years since these fraternities were established, now might be the right time to evaluate this initiative. We want to learn from our lived experience in order to capitalize on the positive aspects and to address appropriately the criticisms that have arisen. For example, we need to focus more clearly on the responsibility of the welcoming Minister; on what kind of relationship exists between the friars of these fraternities and the host Circumscription, and how can the host friars share in the life of these fraternities; on what should be the minimal duration of an assignment; on how to guarantee continuity, especially when Ministers change; as well as on various other aspects.

For that purpose, visits to all of the current St. Lawrence Fraternities have been arranged by some of the Offices of the General Curia to get to know them, and to share and reflect with them. Unfortunately, the pandemic has once again halted everything, but it cannot stop us because gathering the input of everyone is not only useful but also necessary.

Finally, due to their international composition, the St. Lawrence Fraternities also have a missionary dimension characterized by the witness of fraternal life in the midst of

a society plagued by divisions. In light of the next Plenary Council, this specific aspect also requires in-depth study.

4.4. International Fraternal Collaboration⁶

The General Chapter of 2012 had already approved some *ad experimentum* guidelines dealing with the collaboration of personnel. Those guidelines were supposed to be reviewed by the next Chapter, but that never happened. Now, after considerable experience with placing friars from Asia and Africa into the world of the Americas and Europe, we have a lot of data that allow for a better evaluation of such experiences both in retrospect and still in process, to identify the good points and to correct the errors or problems that have arisen. The goal is to make our collaborative efforts more stable and effective, with a more orderly distribution, and with a clear connection (on the part of both those who send and those who receive) to the missionary dimension, the witness of our charism, and our effectiveness with youth and vocations. In terms of collaboration of personnel, the Order can deploy many resources; we want to do more and better.

It is our hope that the close bond that unites the St. Lawrence Fraternities to the Order's missionary dimension will add depth to our reflections on the missionary aspect, not only in anticipation of the next Plenary Council, but also to promote its maturation in all of the current emerging Circumscriptions.

5. CONCLUSION

Dear brothers, as you can see, there is no lack of incentives for venturing forth and envisioning

⁶ See *Let us give thanks to the Lord!* n. 24ff.

a future and hope. Let us all take advantage of it. With all the energy and skill the Lord has given us, let us dare to dream a little! I have come to a conviction based on a reflection that will be shared during an online meeting of the Union of Major Superiors of Men at the end of this month, namely: “We are stronger when we stand on our own two feet while holding on to one another. This is true for both individuals and communities.”

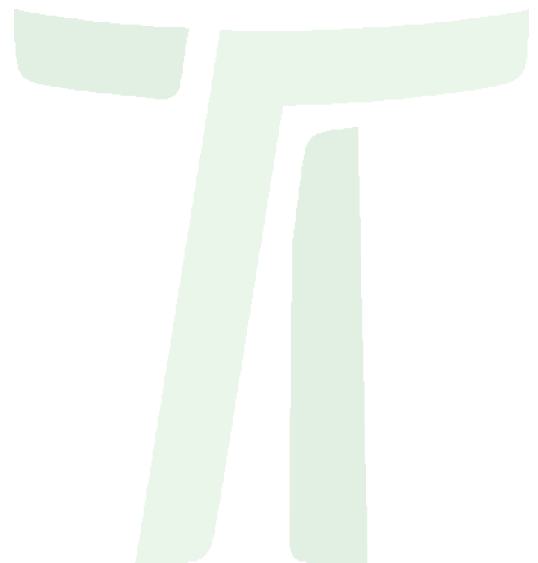
It is, above all, the Gospel – the Father’s dream made real in the person of Jesus – that encourages us to remain united, reminding us that only when we are together does our life become a journey full of meaning with hope on the horizon because “no one matures or finds fulfillment in isolation.”⁷ Together, as brothers guided by Jesus, fear can no longer control our life and our plans. His word

remains true: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Trusting in his word, let us confidently cast our nets (see Jn 21:6)!

I would like to take this opportunity, then, to offer you all my warmest regards. I wish you a really good journey, all of us together, among ourselves and with the Lord who comes to visit us!



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⁷ *Fratelli tutti*, n. 95.

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