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Audience with the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual

At midday today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers!

I give a warm welcome to you, members of the General Chapter of your Order. I thank the new Minister General, Br. Carlos Trovarelli. I congratulate him and the Definitors General for the trust their brothers have placed in them.

Recently the Holy See approved your Constitutions, renewed in the Extraordinary General Chapter held last summer. To incorporate this revision, you have now discussed and approved the new General Statutes, which touch on essential elements of your fraternal and missionary life, such as formation, interculturality, sharing and transparency in economic management. This job is tiring, but the effort is well spent! Indeed, the Constitutions are the necessary instrument for safeguarding the charismatic heritage of an Institute and ensuring its future transmission. They express the concrete way of following Christ proposed by the Gospel, the absolute rule of life for all consecrated persons and particularly for the followers of Saint Francis of Assisi, who, in their profession, commit themselves to living "according to the form of the holy Gospel" (see Saint Francis, Testament, 14). I am struck by that advice Francis gave to the brothers: "Preach the Gospel, if necessary also with words": it is a way of living. If every consecrated life "arises from listening to the Word of God and from accepting the Gospel as the norm of life" (Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, *Propositio* 24), the Franciscan life in all its manifestations arises from listening to the holy Gospel, as the Poverello shows us in the Porziuncola when, after hearing the story of the following, he exclaims: "This I want, this I ask, this yearning to do with all my heart!" (Thomas of Celano, *Vita Prima*, IX, 22).

The Gospel is for you, dear brothers, “rule and life” (Saint Francis, *Regula Bullata*, I, 1) and your mission is none other than that of being a living Gospel, “a living ‘exegesis’ of God’s word” as Benedict XVI said (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 83). The Gospel must be your handbook. Always listen to it carefully; pray with it; and following the example of Mary, “Virgin made Church” (see Saint Francis, *Greeting to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 1), meditate assiduously, so that, by assimilating it, you may conform your life to the life of Christ.

This way of following is characterized, first of all, by *fraternity*, which Francis considered a gift: “The Lord gave me brothers” (*Testament*, 14). Fraternity is a gift to be received with gratitude. It is a reality that is always “on the move”, under construction, and therefore asks for the contribution of all, without anyone excluding himself or being excluded; in which there are no “consumers” but only builders (see *General Constitution OFMConv*, 55, 5). A reality in which we can live out paths of continuous apprenticeship, of openness to the other, of mutual interchange; a welcoming reality, ready and willing to accompany; a reality in which it is possible to take a break from everyday life, to cultivate silence and the contemplative gaze and thus recognize in it the imprint of God; a reality in which you all consider yourself brothers, both ministers and other members of the fraternity; an experience in which everyone is called to love and nurture his brother, just as a mother loves and nurtures her own child (see Saint Francis, *Regula non Bullata*, IX, 11). I urge you to nurture your fraternity with the spirit of holy prayer and devotion “to which all other temporal things must serve” (Id., *Regula Bullata*, V, 2). In this way, your fraternal life in community becomes a form of prophecy in the Church and in the world; and it becomes a school of communion, to be exercised always, following the example of Francis, in a relationship of love and obedience with the Pastors.

Another feature of your way of life is *minority*. I like this a lot: thinking of your *minority*. This is a difficult choice because it opposes the logic of the world, which seeks success at any cost, wishes to occupy the first places, to be considered as lords. Francis asks you to be minors, following the example of Jesus who did not come to be served but to serve (see *Mt* 20: 27-28) and Who tells us: “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (*Mk* 10: 43-44). Let this be your only ambition: to be servants, to serve one another. Having lived like this, your existence will be a prophecy in this world where the ambition of power is a great temptation.

You preach peace. The Franciscan greeting that distinguishes you is “Peace and good unto you!”, “*Shalom we tob*”, in Hebrew, which we can translate well as *reconciliation*: reconciliation with oneself, with God, with others and with all creatures, that is, living in harmony: peace that brings you harmony. It is a reconciliation that takes the form of concentric circles, starting from the heart and extending to the universe - but in reality it starts from the heart of God, from the heart of Christ. Reconciliation is the prelude to the peace that Jesus left us (cf. *Jn* 14: 27). A peace that is not the absence of problems, but that comes with the presence of God within us and which manifests itself in all that we are, do and say. May you be messengers of peace, first of all with life and then with words. May you be instruments of forgiveness and mercy at all times. Your communities are places where mercy is experienced, as Saint Francis asks you in the Letter to a Minister: I wish to know in this way if you love the Lord and me, His servant and yours: that there is not any brother in the world who has sinned – however must he could have sinned – who, after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not looking for mercy, you would ask him if he wants mercy. And if he would sin a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him to the Lord; and always be merciful with brothers such as these” (9-11). There is no peace without reconciliation, without forgiveness, without mercy. Only one who has a reconciled heart can be a “minister” of mercy, a builder of peace.

For all this, an adequate *formation* is necessary. A formative path that favours in brothers the fullest conformation to Christ. An integral formation, that involves all the dimensions of the person. A personalized and ongoing formation, inasmuch as it is an itinerary that lasts a lifetime. A formation of the heart, that changes our way of thinking, feeling and behaving. A formation in faithfulness, well aware that today we are living in the culture of the temporary, that “for ever” is very difficult and definitive choices are not in fashion. In this context, there is a need for solid formators, experts in listening and in the roads that lead to God, capable of accompanying others on this journey (see Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, 65-66); formators who know the art of discernment and accompaniment. Only in this way can we contain, at least in part, the haemorrhage of abandonment that afflicts the priestly and consecrated life.

Dear brothers, I impart from the heart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the Communities of your Order. I pray for you. And it also comforts me that the Minister General said you will pray for me. Thank you!
