

## **Reflections on the Capuchin Constitutions in light of the 8<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the Proto-Rule of St. Francis**

As a child I began to serve Mass as an altar boy when I was six years old. My brother Ted was eight and had made his first communion so he taught me the Latin and how to mumble the *Suscipiat*. We lived very close to the parish Church, and in those days they always used acolytes at Mass so we served very often, especially the early Masses. It was then I met my first Capuchin. His name was Father Camillus, and he was a Don Camillo. He was very cheerful, a plump little friar. His bare feet fascinated me, and best of all he celebrated the Mass in fifteen minutes. Since we were fasting even from water, I really appreciated his speed so that I could get my breakfast.

A few years later my brother was going on a retreat at the Capuchin Seminary so my Dad took me along for the ride. I was still too young for the retreat. When we arrived we met an old German friar in a tattered habit who was working in the garden. We stopped and talked to him for a long time. On the way home my Dad said: “That friar is the happiest man in the world.” I knew that what my father said was true. The friar did not have a beautiful wife, nice clothes or a big car but he was filled with peace and goodness. I thought to myself I would like to be happy like that friar. Years later I joined the community there, and the same friar Father Bede became my confessor.

As a young friar I longed to go to the missions, and I was thrilled when I was ordained a deacon the Father General asked that I be sent to Easter Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I was going to work with a German friar, Father Sebastian, who had been working with the Indians there for forty years.

I began studying *Rapanui*, but before I left for the missions the Archbishop of Washington appealed to my Provincial for Spanish speaking friars who could work with the thousands of undocumented refugees fleeing the wars in Central America, from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua. My assignment was changed from Easter Island to the Lent of the illegal aliens.

I was allowed to live among the poor in a building where the *Centro Católico Hispano* was located. There was seldom heat or hot water and the cockroaches were the size of rats, and the rats were the size of cats. There were often gunfights in the building so one day I gathered all the tenants in the lobby for a “disarmament summit”. I put a table in the center of the room and asked everyone to hand over their guns. One old grandmother wearing a little bonnet opened her purse and produced a huge pistol. She waved it under my nose and said: “You are a priest, no one is going to do anything to you; me, I am keeping my gun”. Needless to say, I did not collect any guns that day. Working with the poor and with my brother Capuchins was a joy. I was the happiest man in the world. One day God said – look at Father Seán. He is too happy. Let’s make him a Bishop. When I was told – I said: “I should have studied harder in the seminary.” I have been a friar for 42 years. I should be much holier after so many years of religious life. I am still a construction site.

The joy of my life has always been my vocation as a Capuchin. My reflections today are not those of an expert, but those of a lover. I love Francis, his ideal, his way of life, his rule.

I love the Capuchin Order more than my life. I feel so privileged to be a part of this family, and my only desire is that we be better sons of St. Francis. The more we love

the same things, the more we do the same things, the more we live the same ideals the deeper our fraternity and the more powerful our witness of poverty, prayer and charity.

And so I share these rather disorganized musings with you with the hope that I might be contributing something positive to the conversations about our Capuchin Constitutions. Be patient with me.

### **Globalization: One Family, one identity**

In the year 2000 I was with a group of youth at the World Youth Day celebration in Rome. There were two million people participating. Pope John Paul II, though already very old, had a great love and pastoral concern for youth. He invited them to come to him. They knew that the Holy Father loved them with the love of Christ, and they were glad to be in his presence. During those days I visited an old friend, Cardinal Dario Castrillón, who was working in the Curia. We were in his office that looks over St. Peter's Square, and we looked out at the very long line of youth waiting to pass through the Holy Door of the Basilica. The line extended from the Church to the Tiber River. The Cardinal looked at the throng of youth that came from every continent and said: "Look, Seán, they all are dressed the same."

How the world has changed. When I was a seminarian, at the beginning of the 1960's, I went to Europe. In those days, it was clear from the first glance what country a person came from by looking at their clothes, their shoes, and their haircut. Forty years later, everyone dresses the same. We call this phenomenon globalization. I am sure it has its advantages and its disadvantages, but it is a reality that has resulted in a smaller world, and it has leveled the peculiar aspects of individual culture and ethnic identity.

As members of the Catholic family and followers of Saint Francis who is the universal brother, our vocation has an aspect of spiritual globalization. When our new Constitutions were written, there was a great emphasis on pluriformity. Having participated in the Chapters that have worked on the Constitutions, I understand the noble motivations of the leaders. Still, it has always concerned me, I feared that we might be introducing the Trojan Horse into the City of God and so might allow the radical nature of our life as Capuchins to be watered down.

### **Invitation of the Father General**

At Pentecost, our Father General wrote a letter entitled, "Circular Letter to all the Friars of the Order concerning our Constitutions." For me it is very significant that Fra Mauro had chosen the Feast of Pentecost to address us. Saint Francis desired that our Chapters be on the Feast of Pentecost so that the Holy Spirit would be with our Father General.

In his beautiful letter, Fra Mauro opens with the words of Saint Francis: "Great things we have promised to God, but greater things has God promised to us!" He announces that the Order will review our Constitutions, a task that will culminate in an Extraordinary Chapter in 2010. He invites all of us to participate in this project and therefore, I have decided to respond to this invitation. I am not a great theologian, I am not nor have I ever been a Provincial, nor a definator, and not even a Guardian. When I was named Bishop, one of the friars was heard to say, "The stone rejected by the builders

has become the cornerstone.” My sole credential for formulating these reflections is that I love the Capuchin Order more than my own life.

We are approaching the Jubilee of 2009 that will mark the 8<sup>th</sup> centenary of the approval of the first Rule, the **propositum vitae**, “revelation of the Almighty” to Brother Francis and that the Holy Father confirmed in 1209. The Father General encourages us to use this opportunity to commit ourselves anew to live the Rule that Pope Honorius definitively approved in 1223, and to live it according to the Constitutions.

For us Capuchins, the Constitutions are always conceived as a way to follow more faithfully the general inspiration that is the life and the Rule of Saint Francis. A profound desire to return to the original inspiration of Saint Francis, of observing the Rule without exceptions, animated our first Capuchin brothers. For them, the Testament was the first spiritual commentary on the Rule and a source of profound inspiration for the life of Capuchins.

Our Minister General is giving us a magnificent opportunity to rededicate ourselves to our way of life turning yet another time to our Constitutions, praying and reflecting over their meaning and asking the Almighty to guide us in the way of the Gospel of the life as Capuchin Friars Minor.

I am happy that the Father General is associating our efforts to improve the Constitutions with the Jubilee of 2009, uniting this exercise with the original proposal of Saint Francis for our life. In that simple list of injunctions taken from the Gospel, our founder delineates clearly the fundamental values of our fraternity. A detailed legislation was not necessary, but only a radical dedication to a few precise principles that orients the entire life and activity of each friar and of the entire community.

### **Fra Bernardino d’Asti: A Capuchin Moses**

For me the great historical figure that has contributed in great measure to our way of living the Capuchin charism of following in the footsteps of St. Francis, is Fra Bernardino d’Asti. He has been called the third founder of the Capuchins. It is a shame that he has never been canonized; he was clearly such a holy friar and a real instrument of God in the codifying and organizing of the Capuchin Reform! He was the fundamental author of the Constitutions of 1535, a masterpiece of Capuchin spirituality. It is said that a camel is a horse constructed by a committee. This is my only concern about us 12,000 Capuchins that are helping Fra Mauro revise the Constitutions. The Rule, the Testament and the original Constitutions were not the work of a large committee, but rather of the Holy Spirit.

Saint Francis could not be clearer about the Rule and the authorship of our way of life. “No one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the Pattern of the Holy Gospel. I had this written down simply and in few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me” (Testament 14 and 15). Saint Francis was a gentle person, in art he is portrayed surrounded by birds and Zeffirelli gave us a Saint Francis who was so sweet. But in reality he was a lion when it came to defending the Rule. Honorius at the end of the Rule warns us that anyone who tampers with the Rule or rashly dares to oppose it shall incur the anger of God and of His Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul. I am much more worried about the wrath of Saint Francis if we water down the Rule or produce Constitutions that are bland and innocuous.

The Rule of Saint Francis is very short but very powerful. When Bernardino d’Asti wrote our first Constitutions, I believe he was very inspired by the Holy Spirit and an unwavering commitment to the Rule and Life that Francis wanted to pass on to us as a gift from God. A sense of the enormous responsibility that weighed upon him and those first Capuchin friars. They felt they would have to answer to God and to Saint Francis. Those first Constitutions declare that the purpose of the document was to be a fence for our Holy Rule, in order that like the unconquerable tower of David, it might have a means of protection from whatever might injure the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and keep out all relaxations opposed to the fervent and seraphic zeal bequeathed to us by our Father Saint Francis.

In the first chapter of the Constitutions of 1536 it says that our life is the observance of the Gospel and that the Rule is simply the Incarnation of the Gospel. In this same chapter it is stipulated that the four Gospels be read three times a year, i.e., one Gospel every month. The second paragraph ordains that the Rule be read in each friary every Friday. Bernardino wisely points us to the Gospels and the Rule as the primary sources of our way of life.

Bernardino of Asti stated that three virtues were essential to the Capuchin way of Life: “Charity, Poverty and Prayer”. First and foremost is love but “charity cannot survive in us without prayer and poverty.” These three virtues, he added “witness one to the other.” Hence, there can be no real poverty where charity and prayer are missing. There can be no real prayer without charity and poverty, neither is there real love where there is not prayer or poverty (*Litterae circulares* 1548).

The Rule, the Testament and the early constitutions challenge us to live these Capuchin virtues in a radical way. We are to live them as individuals but also as a community.

The Constitutions of 1536 describe Capuchin poverty as a life of a fraternity committed to complete poverty, courting insecurity, rejecting any stable source of income. The Capuchin idea of poverty is not that of monastic poverty as practiced by the first Christians who possessed all things in common, but apostolic poverty as practiced by Christ and the Apostles. The sixth chapter portrays that sense of pilgrimage that betokens Francis’ words about living as pilgrims and strangers. The Constitutions say: “Let every friar remember that evangelical poverty consists in the firm resolution of not becoming attached to any earthly thing, of using the things of the world most sparingly as if compelled by necessity, and for the glory of God whom we are to recognize as the true owner of all things. Whatever is over and above our own needs, they shall for the honor of poverty, give it to the poor. We should always remember that we dwell in an Inn and eat the sins of the people” (No 67).

That spirit of being a pilgrim is even more radical in the first Capuchin *Statutes of Albacina* where the friars were to dwell in huts made of mud and sticks. The cells were to be so humble and narrow that they would be like graves for the living or a prison for penitents.

The Constitutions of Bernardino of Asti go even further in underscoring the pilgrim nature of our existence. He wrote that the properties where we have friaries are to be owned by the government or other benefactors. And every year, within the octave of the feast of Saint Francis, each guardian shall go to the owner of the Friary, thank him for the use of it during the past year, and humbly beg to grant him and the friars the use

of it for another year...should he refuse, “then without any sign of sadness, nay, with a joyful heart, accompanied by divine poverty, let them depart, feeling themselves indebted to their benefactor for the time they were permitted to dwell there, and not to be offended, because it is his property and that person has no obligation to offer it to the Friars.”

Not surprisingly, such a radical policy was changed by the 1552 revision of the Constitutions. Still the old legislation speaks to us about the need to be a pilgrim and stranger in this world. The friars of the Primitive Observance in my diocese are following the old practice but since they are few and have only four small houses, it is still doable.

### **Capuchin Charity**

The radical love and self-giving that characterize our Capuchin vocation is beautifully embodied in Benardinos’ 1536 Constitutions where reference is made to the care of plague victims by the friars. No 89 states: “And since they who are detached from this world find it sweet, just and charitable to die for the love of Him Who died for us on the cross, we ordain that during a plague the Friars shall succor the afflicted ...”. This article calling for heroic charity was omitted in latter editions of the Constitutions; nevertheless, the friars continued to sacrifice their lives to serve plague victims throughout our history. When the plague decimated the Venetian Republic in 1575 and 1576 the Capuchins performed heroic feats of charity. And when Milan was perishing in the plague in 1576, Saint Charles Borromeo asked the Capuchins to intervene. The friars labored cheerfully for two years. This was likewise the case in France, Germany, Spain and the Low Countries where many Capuchins died as martyrs of charity, providing for the bodily and spiritual needs of the sick. The chronicler, Marcellino of Pisa, wrote in 1676: “Future generations should know what a large number of friars bravely risked their lives in the service of the sick. As elephants are spurred on to battle at the sight of blood, it will suffice for future Capuchins to see these valiant warriors in the difficult and revolting arena of the plague fighting bravely and winning an eternal crown of glory.” In 1720 the Bishop of Marseilles recounted how forty two friars died and many others fell sick attending to the spiritual and physical needs of the plague victims in his city. He writes: “Not one Capuchin abandoned the city. There was not one who did not throw himself wholeheartedly into the work, not one who did not labor with complete disregard for his own safety to the very end” (correspondence of Monsignor de Belsunce, Bishop of Marseilles).

Shades of this idealism are found in our present Constitutions No 145: “Aware of our minority let us generously undertake those ministries that are regarded as especially difficult...as disciples of Christ and sons of Saint Francis the brothers should keep in mind that a spirit ready to suffer the cross and persecution, even martyrdom, is required by the faith and the salvation of our neighbor.”

I have not seen the recommendations for the new Constitutions. I am told that there is a desire to introduce more Peace and Justice and Ecology into the Constitutions. I believe the Capuchins should be very much embodied in promoting the social Gospel of the Church. I would like to express two caveats. First of all there is the danger of a false sense of security. In other words by talking a lot about the social justice themes we might think that we are living a radical form of the Gospel Life. I see many religious communities in my country produce documents worthy of the Green Party, but they are

dying on the vine themselves. Was it Saint Francis who said the saints did all the work and we get the credit by talking about them?

Francis reformed the Church and society by living the Gospel Life in a radical way. He did not criticize the hierarchy, the nobilities, and the corrupt leaders. He lived a life of intense prayer, poverty and love – and it was like a bomb dropped on the world. His idea of brotherhood led to a Christian pacifism in the secular Franciscans that brought many wars to a halt. He even held out an olive branch to Islam at a time when our ancestors were planting the seeds of an ageless enmity that is blossoming in terrorism today.

The second caveat is not mine, but rather comes from someone intelligent, a wonderful theologian who has been consulted on the recommended texts of the new constitutions. He sees a subtle plagiarism in the challenge of fixing everything that is broken in our world.

### **Positive Aspects of the Constitutions**

The present Constitutions emerged from a long process and the hard work of commissions and General Chapters. We also had the advantage of the newly composed Constitutions of the OFMs and the scholarly work of the legendary Fr. Cajetan Esser, O.F.M. Each Chapter of the present Capuchin Constitutions adopted a format which takes the Revelation of the Church and then Francis' genius and then our fraternity and then develops the topic of the Chapter. It is a wonderfully constructed ecclesial vision of religious life and Franciscan spirituality. It locates us in the context of the Church and not as a sideshow of charismatic wonder.

The Capitular fathers were grateful to the fine work of the Italian Friar Giuseppe Santarelli from the Province of Ancona who helped incorporate more of the original Capuchin constitutions into the new Constitutions. All in all the Chapters that worked on the Constitutions did a remarkable job. I was present for some of those Chapters as a lowly translator and witnessed firsthand the hard work of the Capitulars.

The new Constitutions despite its many strengths does have some flaws in my opinion. It is my hope that the call to re-look at the Constitutions might address some of these concerns:

- The new Constitutions dropped too much of our life of penance and the contemplative side of our life.
- The new Constitutions fail to give a clear formula for living a life of poverty “without explanations.”
- The new Constitutions favor generalities to honor an ill-conceived notion of pluriformity that has robbed the Constitutions of its fire.
- The new Constitutions needed to say more about the friars' love for the Church and the fidelity to her moral and dogmatic teaching. Francis was very devoted to the Church, despite all the defects and shortcomings of the clergy and leadership.
- Our Constitutions should not be a bland description of how we are living our vocation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, but rather a description of how we should be living our life in a concrete program of radical poverty, radical prayer, radical love. Constitutions should not be easily tempered with.

Performance and stability are important to inspire people with a sense of awe and seriousness. In today's world young people see how everything is expendable, "throw-away." Technology has created a world where everything is experimental or obsolete.

The Constitutions are our identity as Capuchins and need to be firmly grounded in our history. We do not need a document that is modern and trendy that will soon seem dated and passé.

## **Conclusion**

Capuchin Identity is safeguarded by the Constitutions only in as much as it inspires us to live the Rule and Testament in a radical way. Generalities will never do. The Gospel Life of the Capuchin Brotherhood is about radical love. It is a life that begins with contemplative prayer. This allows one to imitate the self-emptying of Christ's kenosis and leads to a radical witness that invites people to renounce the extreme individualism and materialism of our age in order to follow Christ poor and crucified.

Some people are advocating removing some of the concrete directives on prayer that are in the Constitutions and place them in the Ordinances. This would be a fatal mistake. The ordinances are unknown and irrelevant to most of the friars. The Rule and Constitutions will always be the documents that form us and teach us our identity. The Constitutions cannot be a weak exhortation to live a vague ideal of the most common denominator. Rather, the Constitutions should be a challenging document that incorporates concrete directives about the life of prayer, poverty, and austerity. We need more boldness in our Constitutions if we are going to inspire young men to join our ranks.

If we embrace or institutionalize a comfortable, bourgeois life style, the Order will die out, no matter how much lip service we give to a liberal social agenda. Our way of life lived in all its radical renunciation is capable of producing men whose witness of prayer, poverty and love will help transform society by calling people back to God, calling them to come home to the Church, by helping people to have a sense of personal vocation and to be part of a communal mission.

It is my conviction that the contemplative aspects of our life should be addressed first of all. The Capuchin charism begins with the eremitical emphasis of the first friars as reflected in the document of Albacina; the subsequent Constitutions elaborate more on ministry and mission. The point of departure however is the contemplative basis of our vocation. When the life of prayer is carefully delineated, then the other aspects of our life take shape. The centrality of the Eucharist and mental prayer needs to be very clear. Daily celebration of a communal Eucharist, two periods of meditation, and the communal praying of the entire liturgy of the hours needs to be enshrined in the Constitutions as a bare minimum. To leave that up to local communities to legislate is too risky. By leaving things out of the Constitutions we are sending a signal that they are not really important and we encourage a take it or leave it attitude.

The subjective mood, weak exhortations and mild recommendations do not communicate the sense of urgency that Francis wants to communicate in the Rule. It is a matter of life and death. St. Paul says no one will follow an uncertain trumpet blast. Our legislation should not be an exercise in subtleties. The directives about prayer and poverty need to be concrete, airtight and unyielding.

In looking at our Constitutions over our history, one finds that our Constitutions are not legalistic documents with a lot of regulations. However, they are concrete enough to guarantee a unified identity of what it means to be a Capuchin.

Preparing ourselves to celebrate the anniversary of the Rule of St. Francis, I pray so that our Capuchin Family commits itself anew to follow with decision and love our Seraphic Father, not at a safe distance, but up close.

May the work to which the Father General has called us reinforce our Constitutions and at the same time reinforce our decision to live our vocation of radical prayer, poverty and charity.

May the Mother of the Divine Pastor intercede for us as we invoke the special blessing of Saint Lawrence of Brindisi, the most illustrious member of this venerable Institution. *“Nos cum Prole Pia, benedicat Virgo Maria.”*

Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston  
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