

Responding to the Invitation of the Holy Spirit as Lesser Brothers in the Church and World

*'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord...
'to give you a future with hope.'* (Jeremiah 29:11)

Approved by General Chapter 17 JULY 2021

FINAL MESSAGE OF THE GENERAL CHAPTER

ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR

ROME 2021

1. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we, your brothers, more than one-hundred friars from around the world, gathered at the Capuchin Franciscan Collegio Internazionale San Lorenzo da Brindisi in Rome for the 2021 General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor. While every gathering of the brothers is an opportunity for rejoicing, this General Chapter was a particularly joyful occasion and a sign of hope.

2. Despite the manifold challenges that face the church and world today, we friars minor recognize that there are also opportunities amid the difficulties. Over the course of the fifteen days of this condensed General Chapter, many of the themes and good work that began at the 2018 Plenary Council of the Order (PCO) in Nairobi were carried forward and developed. The major theme of the PCO was ‘listening’ to what the Holy Spirit was saying to the Order today. In response to that attentive listening, we friars recognized a number of invitations that God was extending to us in the church and world.

3. We wish to communicate to our brothers throughout the Order some of these invitations and encourage one another in a spirit of fraternal solidarity to take up the invitations that the Holy Spirit presents to us with eagerness, humility, and passion.

Invitation to Gratitude

4. The Order of Friars Minor is the first religious order of the Roman Catholic Church to gather and carry out the duties of a worldwide General Chapter since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally scheduled to take place in Manila, Philippines in May 2021, it is nothing short of a miracle that we were able to convene in Rome and faithfully, safely, and successfully fulfill our responsibilities to the Order and the Church. We give thanks to God and to the many brothers who worked tirelessly before and during the General Chapter to ensure it could take place.

5. The experience of being able to gather in Chapter has renewed in all of us a spirit of gratitude for the gift of our fraternal vocation. All the brothers throughout the world have known the pain of separation and distance from one another during this time of pandemic. May what we have experienced in Rome during these days serve as a symbol for all the brothers of our shared desire to gather together again in person.

6. We also give thanks for the fraternal hospitality and solidarity of our Capuchin Franciscan brothers who graciously hosted us at the Collegio Internazionale San Lorenzo da Brindisi. We were profoundly moved by their humble service to us. Their generous and welcoming spirit reflects the deep roots of our common fraternity and offered yet another sign of hope that our shared commitment to the Rule and Life of Saint Francis unites us to one another in the Holy Spirit.

Invitation to ‘Renew our Vision’

7. As we opened our General Chapter, more than four million people had already died of COVID-19 worldwide, and millions more continued to suffer the consequences of this unprecedented disease. The presence of ‘our Sister Bodily Death’ (*Cant* 12) was never far from our thoughts as we called to mind the many friars and millions of other men, women, and children who had died. At the opening liturgy we prayed for the hundreds of brothers who died of COVID-19 and during our days together in Rome we learned of more friars who have been afflicted by the virus. Pope Francis has rightly called this moment in our history a ‘crisis’ and a ‘time of reckoning.’ The Holy Father reminds us that, ‘The basic rule of a crisis is that you don’t come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse,

but never the same' (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

8. An honest reflection on the 'signs of the times' both within and outside the Order reveal that, over these last six years, there have been and continue to be many 'griefs and anxieties' afflicting the human family and the rest of creation (*Gaudium et spes*, 4, 1). And yet, as lesser brothers we profess to 'follow in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ' (*RnB* 1, 1), who has called us to be ambassadors of the gospel, which announces good news to all people. It is within this context that we friars are committed to renewing our vision and embracing our future, recognizing with the Holy Father that we cannot simply be the same as we have been before the crises the world now faces.

9. One of the major themes to surface during our General Chapter was the need for renewal of our Franciscan identity and fraternal life. We recognize that like all people, we also are affected by the shifting contexts of our local and global communities. As Pope Francis has said, 'We are not living an era of change but a change of era,' which can be experienced personally and collectively as destabilizing' (Pope Francis, 'Meeting with the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church,' Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, 10 November 2015). Members of the Order of Friars Minor are not immune from such changes, but we must recall that our vocation is to be 'pilgrims and strangers' in the world (*RB* 6, 2; *Test* 24) and therefore to be 'missionary disciples' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120) *in the world* but not partisans *of the world*.

10. The task of renewing our Franciscan identity requires discernment, study, formation, and action. We cannot simply rely on the *status quo* as sufficient for justifying our sense of complacency. The People of God demand more from us by virtue of our public commitment to be *lesser brothers* after the example of St. Francis. We must never be afraid to 'begin again' for, as Thomas of Celano reminds us, that at the end of his life, St. Francis 'did not consider that he had already attained his goal, but tireless in pursuit of holy newness, he constantly hoped to begin again' (*ICel* 103).

11. We recognize that our name as *friars minor* contains the core of our identity and what some members of the chapter described as 'the two lungs that give life to all our actions' as Franciscans. These 'two lungs,' which allow the breath of the Holy Spirit to animate our whole way of being in the world, are *fraternitas* and *minoritas*. We are brothers first, and the mode of our fraternal life is one of voluntary minority in society and the church. Social pressures like the prevalent culture of individualism and ecclesial pressures like clericalism have no place in the authentic embrace of Franciscan life.

12. This renewal is a concrete challenge to each friar and every entity of the Order. As some of the brothers noted during the General Chapter, the core of our Franciscan identity to be *lesser brothers* requires a radical commitment to take up the Spirit's invitation to identify with the poor, marginalized, abandoned, despised, and forgotten of our societies. It is not enough to merely call ourselves 'friars minor.' We must also put into practice what our name demands: to take up the cause of those who are involuntarily 'minoritized' in our world, so that we who voluntarily identify with those at the margins can accompany and advocate for our sisters and brothers in need.

13. The invitation to embrace fraternity and minority as the core expression of our Franciscan identity, the 'two lungs' that animate our very being, requires a renewal in our approach to

both initial and ongoing formation. In response to this need, we see an invitation to engage more deeply in intercultural thinking, fraternity, and ministry. The General Chapter discussed proposals for the General Secretariat for Formation and Studies that would help facilitate resources and models for such renewal in a concrete fashion. We encourage all entities of the Order and every local fraternity to reflect together on how fraternity and minority are understood and lived out in practice, while always being attentive to where the Spirit may be inviting further conversion, change, and growth.

14. It also came to light in our discussions that we must not only attend to the situations and circumstances of our sisters and brothers outside the Order, but also attend to real needs of our brother friars who are struggling or are in some way afflicted. As St. Francis says in the *Rule*, “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! When any brother falls sick, the other brothers much serve him as they would wish to be served themselves’ (*RB* 6, 8-9). The 2019 document *Our Vocation: Leaving or Remaining Faithful*, prepared by the Commission on Fidelity and Perseverance, offers insight and concrete proposals on some of the many ways our fellow brothers are struggling today. The members of the General Chapter encourage local fraternities to consult with this resource and take up the invitation to embrace its concrete proposals.

15. The 2018 PCO proposed a paradigm for renewal of our Franciscan identity in terms of becoming better ‘contemplative fraternities in mission.’ As a General Chapter we affirm this call and continue to challenge our brothers throughout the world and ourselves to take concrete actions to protect and promote a ‘spirit of prayer and devotion’ (*RB* 5, 2; *LtAnt* 2), which is the foundation of our fraternal life and, therefore, our mission. For, as the PCO reminded us, ‘We are a mission in this world; this is why Friars Minor exist and we are completely dedicated to this’ (100).

16. Throughout the General Chapter we noted how providential it is to be living during the pontificate of Pope Francis. The first Bishop of Rome to take the name ‘Francis,’ the Holy Father not only has a profound respect for the founder of our Order, but he also exhibits a keen understanding of the Franciscan charism. We acknowledged that we are living in a distinctively ‘Franciscan moment’ in the life of the Church and that Pope Francis’s magisterial teaching—especially the encyclical letters *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*—is both a challenge and a guide for Franciscan action in the modern world. We not only encourage every local fraternity to study and pray with these texts, but also invite all the entities of the Order to use them as the guiding resources for the concrete animation of Franciscan renewal in the coming six years.

Invitation to Conversion and Penance

17. Two of the hallmarks of St. Francis’s spirituality are the experience of ongoing conversion and a life of penance. At the end of his life, he recalled his fundamental vocation to be a lesser brother as a call to a life of penance: ‘The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to being doing penance in this way’ (*Test* 1). And many in the early Franciscan movement were known as a community called the ‘brothers and sisters of penance’ (cf. *1LtF*; *2LtF*). In the spirit of our original calling as friars minor, we acknowledged several themes that invite us to greater conversion and penance today.

18. We expressed our continued commitment to the ongoing work of safeguarding minors and vulnerable adults. Sadly, there is no part of the world in which the crisis of sexual abuse has not affected the Order of Friars Minor as it also has the universal Church. As *lesser brothers*, we renew our dedication to accompany victim-survivors of sexual abuse and abuses of all kinds, while striving always to ensure that all places entrusted to the Order are safe environments for all God's people, especially the most vulnerable.

19. Concrete proposals and legislation have been advanced at the Chapter to make clear the obligation that all friars and entities of the Order have to cooperate fully in the prevention, reporting, and cooperation with all appropriate civil and ecclesiastical authorities in the work to guarantee justice and transparency in addressing accusations of abuse throughout the Order. We acknowledge that this is a challenging but necessary commitment, which arises from the heart of our identity as Franciscans and is also an invitation to greater conversion and penance.

20. We give thanks for the tireless work of the outgoing General Government of the Order and the exceptional generosity of individual benefactors, foundations, and various entities of the Order. Thanks to their work and support, the financial crisis experienced by the General Curia has been addressed in substantive and ongoing ways. New structures of accountability and transparency have been introduced and the road to economic sustainability for the General Curia and those important ministerial projects, missions, and entities dependent on it for financial support has been outlined.

21. Nevertheless, we recognize that the financial crisis was a 'reality check' and 'wakeup call' for the Order that we cannot simply handle the financial matters of the Order in the same way we always have. The financial crisis was also and above all a crisis of confidence and trust. There is no turning back; there must be a new way forward. This is required of us to be faithful stewards of the manifold gifts our benefactors have entrusted to us. In his report to the General Chapter, the General Bursar used the language of a 'fraternal economy' as one way to think holistically about how to integrate the mission, values, and responsibility we have as custodians of the generous gifts of others into the life of the friars.

22. Another theme that surfaced frequently during the General Chapter is that of clericalism within our fraternity. Despite the continual exhortation of St. Francis that 'we are all brothers' (*RnB* 22, 33; *Adm.* 7), and the clear articulation in the General Constitutions of our Order that 'all friars are completely equal' within the fraternity (*GGCC* 3,1), we nevertheless acknowledge that what is said in this regard is not always translated into practice in all entities and local fraternities around the world.

23. The 2018 PCO, citing a definition of Pope Francis, reminds us that clericalism 'extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness to the heart of her peoples' and that clericalism 'forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the people of God, not only the few chosen and enlightened' (103). As the PCO document states clearly, this is not an abstract danger present in the Church, but a real threat to our authentic fraternity, gospel witness, and Franciscan identity. We recognize that too little has been done at the local and regional levels of the Order to address the persistence of clericalism in our communities and in the hearts of many friars. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle addressed us early in the General Chapter and challenged us to attend to this issue, noting that one of the gifts we provide to the Church is our fraternal witness and religious life.

24. To this end, we call for new ways of fostering our ongoing conversion in this area, inviting all the friars to never lose sight of the fact that *all of us are brothers first* prior to any ministry, position, or title we may exercise or hold. We should not shy away from the penitential attitude needed to acknowledge the ways in which the evils of individualism and clericalism distort our sense of self and undermine our true vocation as *lesser brothers*. The General Chapter also has called for new ways forward in approaching initial and ongoing formation in this area, with special attention to emphasizing the distinctive vocation of those brothers not called to ordained ministry.

Invitation to Mission and Evangelization

25. Our life as friars minor is oriented toward mission and evangelization. We know that our mission is not that of our own making, but participation in the *missio Dei*—the mission of God. St. Francis always made clear that our call comes from the Lord and, as he reminds us in his *Admonitions*, every good work we do belongs to God (*Adm* 5). Likewise, it is God who calls us to be preachers of the Gospel by our whole lives (*RnB* 17, 3), which is why we refer to the form of our life (*forma vitae*) as the ‘Gospel life’ (*vita evangelica*).

26. What this looks like in practice today is described well by Pope Francis when he reminds us that, ‘In virtue of their baptism, all members of the People of God have become missionary disciples’ and adds that, ‘Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”’ (*Evangelii gaudium* 120). If this is true for all the baptized, how much more are we friars, who have vowed to live ‘the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (*RB* 1, 1), called to be evangelizers in the world?

27. Cardinal Tagle reminded us that the Church has a future when it is missionary. This is also true for our fraternity. We will not have a future if we are only concerned with ourselves. We will have a future if we live out our vocation for others as an evangelizing fraternity. Through many prayerful and engaging discussions of the General Chapter, we have discerned several invitations from the Holy Spirit for us to deepen our commitment to mission and evangelization in concrete ways today. We are called to go out into the world and be close to all God’s people, especially those who poor and are in any way marginalized. We also know that evangelization is a two-way street, and that our desire to remain close to the poor is an invitation for us also to be evangelized by our sisters and brothers.

28. At the end of his life, St. Francis recalled that at the outset of his conversion ‘it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers’ but that, ‘the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body’ (*Test* 1-2). Similarly, there are many populations of people in our world today that our societies have deemed ‘too bitter’ to be seen or even loved. It is these people that the Holy Spirit first invites us to accompany and bear witness to the Gospel through our loving, merciful, and fraternal actions.

29. We feel invited by the Holy Spirit to accompany young adults, particularly at this time in history when so many young people no longer trust institutions like the Church, are disaffiliated from the faith traditions of their families, or are even ‘unchurched’ or never

introduced to religion. We encourage our brothers to study the ‘Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting’ of young adults in March of 2018,¹ which reflects well the ‘signs of the times’ of our young sisters and brothers who rightly demand of the Church, and therefore our Order, mentorship, accompaniment, and opportunities to participate and be leaders in the Church. While vocation promotion is important, we know that our primary invitation is to walk together with young adults as collaborators and fellow ‘missionary disciples’ in today’s world. This generation of young adults has a discerning heart for what is authentic, which should challenge us to be better *lesser brothers* in all aspects of our life and ministry.

30. Another invitation we recognize the Spirit offering us is the work of justice, peace, and integrity of creation. Returning to the essential magisterium of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*, we are challenged to put into action projects that promote integral ecology, which must always recognize the interconnected ‘cry of the earth and cry of the poor’ (*Laudato Si’* 49). In this moment of climate crisis, where the poor will suffer first and most dramatically, we are committed to being leaders in the Church and world to advocate on behalf of all the voiceless, the human and nonhuman alike.

31. We are witnessing how we ourselves are destroying our planet. This is an invitation for us to care not only for our own human future, but also for the future of ‘our common home’ (*Laudato Si’*). We are invited to a new lifestyle shaped by concrete actions. This is one way today that we can live out our vow of evangelical poverty. We are also increasingly aware that environmental catastrophes and devastation, added to widespread political unrest and violence, has contributed to a scandalous rise in refugees and migrants fleeing their homelands in search of safety and freedom. We know the Holy Spirit is inviting us to a greater commitment in care for and accompaniment of our refugee and migrant sisters and brothers.

32. Part of what it means to respond to the invitation to mission and evangelization today is to enter into what Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called ‘the digital continent’ (‘Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communications Day,’ 24 May 2009). We know as well as anybody else that most people spend a significant part of their time on the Internet, using various social media platforms, and engaging with new forms of technology. While there are certainly dangers present online, part of the invitation to evangelize in the digital age is to be present on this ‘digital continent’ to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ by our words and deeds. It is an indispensable tool for vocation promotion, social organizing, ministerial outreach, and nearly everything else we do as friars minor in the modern world.

33. All of these developments in technology and shifts in society show us that more training is needed in areas previously unconsidered by the Order. Regarding social media and digital technology, we see an opportunity for establishing guides to assist our brothers and others in navigating the tumultuous ‘digital continent’ as ‘missionary disciples.’ In terms of the shifting social realities, we know we must work to incorporate better intercultural training and praxis into our programs of initial and ongoing formation. The invitation to mission and evangelization is important, but so too is the appropriate preparation we need as lesser brothers to be effective messengers of the Gospel. In announcing the Gospel, we invite our sisters and brothers into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and with one another. It is an invitation to ‘come and see’ what the Lord has in store for those who respond to this call.

¹ <http://www.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html>

Invitation to ‘Embrace our Future’

34. The trend of a collective decline in the numbers of friars across our Order is well known and was reiterated on several occasions in reports and discussions during the General Chapter. This is especially the case in the Western countries where the Order is present. While this statistical trend could be viewed in exclusively negative terms, we wish to speak an encouraging word to our brothers around the world.

35. Drawing from a longer historical perspective, we come to see that the numbers of our fraternity have always ebbed and flowed. What began as the solo project of the young man Francesco di Bernardone in the early thirteenth century grew within his lifetime to contain a multitude of men and women inspired to live his vision of the *vita evangelica*. Famously, that tremendous growth also caused forms of pain and difficulty previously unforeseen. Similarly, there have been periods of numerical decline not unlike the present trend. This is not necessarily a sign of ruin or cause for alarm, but a moment for creative renewal. Perhaps the experience of becoming numerically smaller is an invitation to rediscover and live out our call to *minoritas* in new ways. Our future does not depend solely on our numbers, but on the quality and authenticity of our life according to the Gospel.

36. To *embrace* our future means that we walk as brothers together into the unknown that lies ahead of us, called by Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit, as lesser brothers in mission. We should also look to the parts of the world where there is new growth and possibilities. Oftentimes, these entities are in need of special assistance in terms of sustainability.

37. During the General Chapter we noted that in the coming six years the Order will be celebrating a number of important commemorations, beginning this year with the eight-hundredth anniversary of the *Regula non bullata* (1221–2021). In the coming years we will mark the centenaries of significant texts, such as the *Regula bullata* (2023), the *Canticle of the Creatures* (2025), and the *Testament* (2026); key historical moments, such as the *Transitus* of our Holy Father St. Francis (2026); and important regional events, such as the arrival of European missionaries, including Franciscans, to the so-called ‘New World’ of the Americas.

38. We do not want these occasions to be missed opportunities for renewal and evangelization. As the three Ministers General of the First Order wrote in their October 2020 letter ‘To Live and Follow’ in anticipation of the 800th anniversary of the *Regula non bullata*, ‘let’s avoid celebrating this commemoration with the attitude of those who visit a museum without caring, those who have a tourist’s vague curiosity, without the slightest desire to be fully engaged; who only visit because “they must” or because “that museum is famous.”’ Instead, we believe that each of these historical markers is a *kairos* moment, a further invitation, an opportune or chosen time for renewal and hope. We are calling on all the entities of the Order to celebrate these events with an eye toward what can be generative and novel, an opportunity to ‘embrace our future’ rather than just review the past again.

39. Related to the marking of these important anniversaries, we believe that the Holy Spirit is inviting us to embrace a greater sense of collaboration among all the branches of the Franciscan family, but especially among the three First Orders and the Third Order Regular. These commemorations are opportunities for something of a ‘family reunion’ in which we can come together, invited by the Spirit and united in our shared Franciscan vocation, to build on the good work that has already begun and strive in practice toward that fraternal unity that is already reflected in our common identity as *lesser brothers*.

40. We discussed the need to review the structures of the entities of the Order, keeping always in mind that the Lord sends the Spirit not only to ‘renew the face of the earth’ (Psalm 104) but also renew the ‘face of the Order.’ We believe it is necessary to review the way we organize ourselves at all levels (for example, the General Curia, conferences, provinces, custodies) in order to be sure that how we relate to one another in terms of the Order’s governance best serves our mission in a manner in keeping with the spirit of fraternal solidarity. This is especially important as we think about intercultural, interprovincial, and international collaboration and joint ministerial projects.

41. We also recognize that our future is not simply our own, but is meant to be shared with others. We might imagine the Spirit’s invitation to collaborate more broadly, both within and beyond the broad Franciscan family, as a call to embrace another form of *sine proprio*. We must overcome the temptation to territorialism and ‘provincialism,’ which threatens communion and destroys fraternity. How may we open our local fraternities and ministries to greater collaboration with our lay sisters and brothers, other religious orders and congregations, and all people of good will regardless of their religious affiliation or status? In an age distinguished by increasing sectarianism, violence, and division, we can provide a prophetic witness of universal fraternity to a world in need of such a model.

42. The PCO has asked us to ‘listen’ to what the Spirit is telling us. Now it is up to us to respond to the Spirit’s invitation and ‘arise’ (*Ephesians 5:14*) from the slumber of our *status quo* in order to renew our vision and embrace our future as lesser brothers in the Church and world.

Concluding Prayer

43. As we move forward into the next six years, striving to always ‘renewing our vision’ and ‘embracing our future,’ we invite all our brothers to join us in the prayer St. Francis gave at the end of his *Letter to the Entire Order*.

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God,
give us miserable ones
the grace to do for You alone
what we know you want us to do
and always to desire what pleases You.
Inwardly cleansed,
interiorly enlightened
and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,
may we be able to follow
in the footprints of Your beloved Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
and, by Your grace alone,
may we make our way to You,
Most High,
Who live and rule
in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,
and are glorified
God almighty,
forever and ever.
Amen. (*LtO 50-52*)