



CCXIII GENERAL CHAPTER
OF THE ORDER OF FRIAR SERVANTS OF MARY
(Pietralba/Maria Weissenstein, 13 September – 2 October 2013)

“BEHOLD THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD.
LET IT BE DONE UNTO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD” (Lk 1: 38)

*INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS**

To all friars of the Order

1. The Order of Servants of Mary, a community of men gathered in the name of the Lord, drawing continual inspiration from Mary, is about to celebrate its General Chapter 2013, as an intensive moment of fraternity to reviews its commitment to the Gospel.

This General Chapter follows the 2007 Chapter which bore the title, *Leaving everything they followed him* (Lk 5: 11) with its focus on the theme of Poverty. According to the *Legenda de Origine* our Order “was designed by Our Lady, founded on the humility of our friars, constructed on their concord and preserved by poverty...” (*Legenda de Origine* no. 44). Poverty emerged as an important part of our history, and likewise of the identity and charism of the Servants of Mary for the world of today. Seen as both individual and communitarian in character, it is something that is never completely achieved, and it has particular relevance for the economic crisis challenging today’s world.

The Order is called to a specific appraisal of how it is faithful to its charism in the areas of the sharing of goods, humble life-style, solidarity and work.

2. To help prepare for the 2013 General Chapter, the General Council is offering the following considerations to all our friars, and especially to those who will attend the Chapter, as an *Instrumentum Laboris*, a *foundation text* to help deepen our appreciation of the most significant themes of our life. This *Instrumentum Laboris* puts together and re-presents the reflections of many of our friars and groups in the Order who wrote in reply to the consultations organised by the General Council, as well as the various reports to the General Chapter.

From what they have written come the most pertinent themes for our future, the first of which is:

to deepen our awareness of our identity and charism.

“From this will all people know that you are my disciples, that you love one another” (Jn 13: 35).

The General Chapter is called to reflect on the theme of the identity and charism of our Order, with the following question: And for ourselves as Servants of Mary, by what do people recognise us?

* *Arch. gen. OSM*, Prot. 164/2013. Text composed on 11-13 March 2013 by the *ad hoc* Committee (Paul M. Addison, Hubert M. Moons, Ermes M. Ronchi, Ángel M. Ruiz Garnica), finalised and approved by the General Council on 19 March 2013.

I. MARIAN INSPIRATION

3. The theme-statement or motto of the 2013 Chapter is “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to your word*” (Lk 1: 38).

Building on the image and words of the Annunciation we can find help to deepen our sense of some basic features of our identity.

4. Holy Mary first appears in the episode of Luke’s Gospel as the One who Listens. She is showing us that the first service we can give to God and to the brothers is that of listening. The Servant of Mary is in the world as the one who listens: listening to the Word of God, to the cries and the jubilation of creation, to the events of the world around us, and to the brothers and sisters of our Servite family.

We assume the stance of listening to the call that is directed to us from so many scenes of sorrow and of hope. Our listening will be like that of the Virgin Mary: empty-handed, poor in ourselves and our life, with hands open in readiness for whatever is offered.

5. Mary, the One who Listens, hears the first word: “*Rejoice*” (Lk 1: 28). This same invitation is passed on to each one of us, too. It communicates an unmerited, unexpected joy, given to us freely, long before we ever reply, “Yes”. God comes into our lives, and continues to draw us lovingly because the divine language is the language of joy. In all our daily annunciations and in the midst of our daily lives, each friar receives the angel’s call to be people of hope: *Rejoice!* It is not a question of deserved merit. It is grace. And the reason for its joy lies in the second part of the declaration: “*Full of grace*” (Lk 1: 28), meaning “*you are beloved for ever*”.

6. “*Do not be afraid, Mary*” (Lk 1: 30). In her pilgrimage of faith Mary lives a continual passing over from fear to hope. And we, like her, are moving from fear towards freedom: fear of the world, fear about the future, fear of becoming old, fear of having no meaning. Instead we are called to engender hope and to spread the gift of trust.

7. Then the angel leads Mary to focus her attention on Jesus, as he declares the qualities of the child as *Messiah, son of David, with a kingdom that will have no limits* (cf. Lk 1: 31-33). Jesus is the source of our identity. The friar Servant of Mary, like Mary herself, finds the meaning of his life in his relationship with Jesus Christ, who is Servant and Lord, Brother and Master, the person in whom are united the human and the divine.

8. Mary brings Christ to the world. Living the Good News and bearing witness to it constitute the unifying energy of our communities.

Our task, before we ever try to carry and give the Good News to others, is to share and meet and listen to it in our brothers: and then it is not so much bringing Christ to people, but rather bringing people to Christ, encountering Christ with them, amid the struggles and joys of everyday life.

9. “*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord*” (Lk 1: 38). Mary describes herself as ‘the servant’. As we contemplate her and listen to what she is saying, we recognise our

description of ourselves as ‘the servants’, people who make the plans of God become our own plans. We dedicate our hearts and our intelligence to God. The focus of our lives begins within us but will reach out far beyond ourselves.

Being “servant” means allowing ourselves to enter into a much vaster reality that will embrace the whole human family, indeed the entire cosmos. It will place us at service of the needs and the joys of every creature.

This will connect us with those who have gone before us on the same journey. Likewise we link with the present reality of the Order, and into the unknown realms of the future with whatever it may bring. And all of this forms part of the time-frame of the Kingdom, “which will be achieved when life comes to fruition in all its various forms” (fr. Giovanni M. Vannucci).

The General Chapter is called to reflect on: How does our Marian inspiration permeate our identity and our service? What suggestions can you give for the future?

II. COMMUNITY

10. In the Gospel accounts Mary never appears alone. She is always the person of relationship and a person who brings about encounter. Likewise, the Servant of Mary does not live his vocation alone, but rather in community. He is committed to creating communion, walking in ways that will bring him into contact with others.

The General Chapter is called to reflect on: What will help us to deepen our fraternity, which is such a distinctive feature of the Servant of Mary? By what will people recognise that we are Servants of Mary?

11. We wish to re-emphasise our confidence in being called to be people gathered in the name of the Lord. We wish to renew our belief that our mission in the Church and the world is to create and extend the gift of fraternity (cf. *Const. 74*).

Within our Order the Common Life has taken on a variety of forms and expressions. The present-day identity of the Servants of Mary is not confined in uniformity, but shows rather in the growth of a whole range of ways, new and old.

12. We can grow in our characteristic fraternity by re-emphasising the following:

- our conviction that ‘every person is my brother or sister’;¹
- the confident trust that each brother is seeking the same things in his heart as I do;
- by seeing the other brother with eyes of faith, since he too has received God’s “annunciation”, he too is called by God to be God’s dwelling-place, God’s tabernacle among people;
- by listening to each brother, even amid the complexity of his life-story, a listening that becomes hospitality, dialogue, welcome and constructive collaboration;
- by showing mutual trust, because this is the first step towards forgiveness. Forgiveness works within us and around us. It is the unique gift that does not reduce us or others to being victims. Only people who know forgiveness are free

¹PAOLO VI, *Every Person in my brother or sister*. Message for IV World Peace Day [1 Jan. 1971] (14.XI.1970), in: *AAS* 63 (1971) 5-9.

enough to transmit their freedom to others and multiply the presence of forgiveness among others.

The General Chapter is called to reflect on: How can we further develop our characteristic fraternity?

13. We will deepen our sense of identity as Servants of Mary when we celebrate in community the whole liturgy of life, not merely in acts of religious cult. “The discovery of my being trusted by the brothers and by layfolk came to me as an amazing grace. It gave me confidence to put my trust ever more fully in the Lord. This trust in God is the guiding light for intimate union with the Lord.” (fr. Andrea M. Cecchin)

The General Chapter is called on to put specific proposals to the various jurisdictions of the Order so as to list those ‘significant’ communities that best express the values and charism of the Servants of Mary. They would be asked to focus the appointment of friars to those communities, and to place any friars there who are called or sent from other parts of the Order by way of exchange or support.

III. CHARISM – SERVICE

14. Changes in the world and the Church, situating our Order within different cultures, the high speed of social change: all these can leave the friars disorientated and confused about their identity. They can make it much more difficult to live in today’s world with that inner silence where each one can process and interact with all those realities (cf. *Const. 31*).

Nevertheless, the circumstances where God places us become integral parts of how we define our vocation and our mission in the Church and the world. Such realities challenge us to deepen our sense of vocation. For Mary this meant being ready to question the angel, as she wanted to understand more deeply what was being announced to her. She was committed to holding and meditating the events and words of her story, eventually accepting something totally new and very far beyond any of her personal life-plans (cf. *Const. 116*).

15. Our charism of Servants of Mary is for people of today. The friar Servant of Mary, in the reality of his present situation, is one who will create communion and community, and extend the fraternity of his life outwards towards others.

He will do this in the principal ways proposed in the *Constitutions*:

- by creating only relationships of peace, mercy, justice and constructive love toward creatures (*Const. 319*), and extending fraternity to the people of today who are divided. (*Const. 74*);
- by taking our place at the foot of those countless crosses where the Son of Man is still being crucified in his brothers and sisters (*Const. 319*);
- by listening with an open heart to the endlessly new call from new situations in the Church and the world, arising out of places of grief, places of construction, places of hope and places of joy.

This is our gift and charism for the Church and the world. It is a witness to the Gospel. It is possible for every friar, long before any priestly ministry and certainly opposed to the risk of any clericalism in the Order.

16. Our Order is called to show the gift of compassion to the world, not as some clerical solution; not even as a ministry or sacramental solution, but rather as the fruit of our Marian inspiration and spirituality: “In her life the Virgin Mary is a model of that motherly love which must fill everyone who shares in the new birth of humanity in the apostolic mission of the Church”.² Compassion and Mercy are recognised as qualities of the Servants of Mary. They continue in their lives the example and presence of the Mother of God (cf. *Const.* 52).

The different stages of the vocation of Mary as celebrated in the liturgy and in popular devotions urge us to welcome the Word of God in the different stages of our own pilgrimage, and especially in times of sorrow and days at the foot of the cross.

The General Chapter must therefore reflection on: How do we display the reality of being Servants of Mary? How does our identity show itself in service to the Church and the world? How do we deepen our sense of service to the Church and our ever-evolving world?

17. Our Order is a pilgrim order, in a kind of Exodus. And so our identity is open. We have a journey that is anything but negative, a journey to be lived out with trust. One day we shall see how things that appeared like burdens were instead new opportunities. Therefore any restructuring in our Order will always be ongoing, never finished. A clear example of this can be seen in the way a Province became a Vicariate, a Vicariate became a Delegation, a Delegation became a community. Similar things can be seen with the Regional Conferences.

Taking note of how authoritative powers have not been transferred by Provinces to the Conferences, and noting the regular occurrence of meetings between Provincials and the General Council, this General Chapter will have to evaluate the usefulness of the Regional Conferences, as it aims for any restructuring and the simplification of structures around the Order.
The General Chapter must therefore also consider: Which services should we be choosing in a world of rapid evolution?

18. The first thing we must do is to evaluate the happenings of our world, without simply being directed or overrun by them. And we should be checking our judgments with those of other brothers, trying together to respond to the complexity of today’s world.

This is the world in which we are called to continue our journey and share the Good News. It is, after all, a declaration that a better life is truly possible. It is possible to live well, and Jesus Christ holds the key to making the world a better place. Saint Bernard sums up this mission of the Apostles very poignantly, “Docuerunt me vivere” (‘They taught me how to live’)³ – this is the formula for a good life. Similarly our

² VATICAN II COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 Nov. 1964) no. 65

³ Sancti BERNARDI, *In sollemnitatem Apostolorum Petri et Pauli, Sermo I*, in: *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 5 (Editiones Cistercienses, Romae 1968) pp. 189-190: “Hi sunt magistri nostri, qui a Magistro

friars, basing everything on the Gospel, on their Marian inspiration and their fraternity, give witness to the possibility of a better quality of life that goes way beyond individualism and self-concern as a challenge every sorrow and crisis.

19. One of the signs of the times today is the growing attention given to the importance of each individual person and to human rights. Quite often this may seem to run into conflict with aspects of community.

The General Chapter is called to reflect on: How to promote encounter and interaction between individual and group, individual friar and community?

A healthy friar is more useful to the community than one who functions below his best. But as soon as self-development becomes an end in itself, it no longer aims for the common good.

This challenge is met with the rich teaching of Saint Paul, who presents the various charism-gifts of the individuals as designed for building up the community. Similarly the Rule of Saint Augustine (*Rule no.31*), where he directs us to submit personal needs to the common good and not the other way round.

20. Personal development, and everything that enables a person to grow, is for the good. This is the goal of our ongoing formation.

Many friars have written strongly to urge the provision of ongoing formation. However, it seems that many good plans in recent years have not had much follow-up or significant results. Ongoing formation could focus on the following considerations:

- re-assimilation of the *Constitutions*, which provide the basic statement of our identity, because “they say clearly who we are, what we do and how we are to do it” (fr Joseph Loftus)⁴. This is a task to be started in each community;
- deepen awareness of the Marian dimension of our calling, making use of the many facilities available in the Order, with works of liturgy, history, theology and art. Modern technology can be of great help in this.
- register the importance of the priory and the service given by the community at Monte Senario;
- involve the whole Servite Family in this movement as much as possible.

When Nicodemus asked Jesus, “How can someone be born when they are old? Can a person re-enter a mother’s womb and be born again?” (Jn 3: 4), Jesus replied, “You must be born from above” (Jn 3:7). As friars in our Provinces and Order, in the breeze of New Evangelisation, how can we be born anew in the Church and the world of today?

CONCLUSION

“LET IT BE DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD” (*Lk 1: 38*)

omnium vias vitae plenius didicerunt, et docent nos usque in hodiernum diem. [...] Docuerunt me vivere. [...] Bonam autem vitam ego puto et mala pati, et bona facere, et sic perseverare usque ad mortem. Dicitur vulgo quia qui bene se pascit, bene vivit.”

⁴ *Letter Presenting the New Constitutions*, in *Acta OSM 28* (1968), fasc. II, p. VI.

21. Holy Mary is our guide, with her life, her pilgrimage of faith from Nazareth, to Bethlehem, to Cana, to the Cross, to the Cenacle and beyond. She guides us to reply with our “Yes” all the time, in a continual rhythm of invitation and response (cf. *Const. 105*). We say our “Yes” to God, to our charism, to those with whom we share community, and to the people of today.

Mary did not ask for a sign, but the angel offered her a sign. Similarly, we do not ask for signs or reasons concerning our future. But God offers us small signs every day: the holiness of the brothers, their generous service, their intelligence and cordiality, their creativity in fields of theology, charity, work, apostolate, proclamation of the Word, art, and the energy that radiates from our Marian shrines.

These signs from God often present themselves in situations of sorrow, where we stand with empty hands, like the Virgin of the Annunciation, placing our complete trust and confidence in the Lord. And so those signs become seeds of hope that help us to declare, with the confidence of little ones, our heartfelt “Yes”.