

Lifelong Formation for Franciscan Men in the U.S. in service of God's Mission  
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**A BROTHERHOOD OF MISSIONARY DISCIPLES**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Prior to St. Francis, religious life in the Church was modelled on the early Christian community described in Acts 2:

*“And all who believed were together and had all things in common; ... And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes; they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.” (Acts 2: 44-47)*

Consecrated Life established on this model continues to radiate the living presence of God in our world.

However, Francis consciously chose another model for his brotherhood, namely, a **discipleship model**. St. Francis chose to model his Order on the life of Christ and his disciples:

*“After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live after the pattern of the Holy Gospel.” (Test. 14)*

This assumes critical importance as we consider our Franciscan call to mission in the Church today. In **Joy of the Gospel**, Pope Francis extends this vision of discipleship to the entire Church, challenging us to be a missionary Church, a community of Missionary Disciples. I wish to consider the contribution which our Franciscan tradition brings to this challenge of forming the Church as a community of Missionary Disciples.

**THE EMBRACE OF FRANCISCAN BROTHERHOOD IS FIRST AND FOREMOST, THE EMBRACE OF JESUS CHRIST**

*“Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for he created and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body and to his likeness according to the Spirit.” (Adm.V,1)*

St. Bonaventure helps us to understand the perspective of Francis: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God.”* (Jn 1: 1). Reflecting on these opening words of John’s Gospel, Bonaventure teaches that the Word is the expressed “Image” of the Father: the total self-giving love of the Father is “imaged” in the Son. Reflecting on the next passage of John: *“Through him (the Word) all things came into being, and apart from him (the Word) nothing came to be”* (Jn 1: 3). Bonaventure states that the Word is the “exemplar” – the template or model – for all of creation. Furthermore, within creation, the human person is created to be an expressed “image” of the Word. Therefore, Bonaventure speaks of the human person as the “little word” of the Father. Jesus is the “Definitive Word” of the Father in the flesh – we are “little words of the Father” in the flesh. When this “little word” is spoken with clarity in and through our lives, God is made visible in the world.

St. Francis modelled this reality in an incredible manner. For Francis, imitation of Jesus was doing what Jesus did. Imitation of Jesus was living as Jesus lived, thinking as Jesus thought. It was all this and incredibly more! ***Francis sought to reproduce in his life the same relationship which Jesus lived with the Father!*** Imitation of Jesus was an invitation to enter into Trinitarian Relationship. Francis sought to be the “little word” modelled perfectly on the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. This is the profound significance of the third defining moment in the conversion experience of Francis:

*“From now on I will say freely, ‘Our Father who art in heaven’, and not ‘My Father Pietro di Bernardone”* (Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. 2, p. 251).

In imitation of Jesus, Francis seeks to give himself totally to his relationship with the Father: *“From now on I will say freely, ‘Our Father .. in heaven”*.

Jesus takes him by the hand and shows him the way. At his baptism by John, Jesus enters the Jordan River as the carpenter from Nazareth. This is a profound conversion experience in which the Father touches the passionate heart of Jesus, *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”* (Mk 1: 11). Jesus is moved to the depth of his being and emerges from the Jordan as the living gospel of God. Jesus leads Francis along the same path of conversion! a short time after the event before the Bishop of Assisi, Francis hears the voice of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew sending his disciples two by two to preach the good news of penance and peace (cf. Matt 10). He is moved to the depth of his being. Just as the Father touched the passionate heart of Jesus at his Baptism, so Jesus, through his Word, touches the passionate heart of Francis:

*“This is what I want, for this I yearn, this is what I desire to do with all my heart!”*

In Francis we see the true meaning of conversion which is defined, not by what we leave behind, but by what we embrace! The conversion of Francis was his embrace of Jesus Christ. The consequence of his conversion was the abandonment of his life as the playboy of Assisi. In Francis we also see that conversion is not a once-and-for-all affair! His conversion continued

throughout life. At the end of his life he exhorts himself and all of us: ***“Let us now begin, brothers, because until now we have done nothing!”***

Pope Francis reminds us that ***“mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people”*** (EG, 268). If our Franciscan brotherhood is to be a force of mission and evangelization in our world, each of us must continually renew our passion for Jesus and his people.

In chapter Luke 6: 12 – 49, Jesus shows us the way. Jesus has just spent the night in prayer with his disciples on the mountain. At daybreak, he calls the disciples to him and appoints the 12 apostles. Jesus, then, leads them down the mountain and arrives at the plain where he encounters a multitude of people (cf. Lk 6:17). The scene is dramatic. The apostles and disciples, gathered around and behind him on the slope, witness his powerful presence among the people, whom Luke tells us, have come *“to hear him and be healed of their diseases; ...the whole crowd was trying to touch him, because power went out from him which cured all”* (Lk 6: 18-19). Luke continues: *“Then, raising his eyes to his disciples, he said: ‘Blessed are you poor ...’* (Lk 6:20). In Luke, the beatitudes are addressed primarily to the apostles and disciples **for the world**. The beatitudes – poverty, humility – are not simply ascetical virtues meant to perfect us – they are meant to forge bonds of communion and love to transform the world! Jesus challenges his disciples to share the saving, transforming power which they can visibly see him exercising among the people by configuring their lives according to the beatitudes of the Kingdom. But there is more!

Again, in Luke, specifically addressing the disciples, Jesus tells them a parable:

*“Can a blind man act as guide to a blind man? Will they not both fall into a ditch? A student is not above his teacher ... Why look at the speck in your brother’s eye when you miss the plank in your own”* (Lk 6: 39 – 41).

*“Can a blind man act as a guide to a blind man?”* Just as the preaching of the beatitudes takes new meaning by referring back to Jesus’ electric relationship with the crowds, so this passage takes meaning from the introduction of the Kingdom event: *“He went to the mountain to pray, spending the whole night in communion with God”* (Lk 6:39). Only a return to the mountain, to contemplation, can open the eyes of our hearts, allow our passion to be re-ignited, for Jesus and the transforming power of the beatitudes. Only contemplation of the face of God can transform the beatitudes from social theory to faith practice. We see this in Francis’ embrace of evangelical poverty. Standing before the Bishop of Assisi, contemplating the face of God, Francis strips himself not only of the clothing provided by Pietro di Bernardone, but the security his wealth promised, and entrusts his security to God alone. Contemplation of the face of God transforms the beatitudes from social theory into faith practice.

*“A student is not above his teacher; ...”* (Lk 6:40). It is important to ask: *“Who is our teacher?”*. Through whose eyes do we look upon the poor? Through whose eyes do we look upon the consumerism and greed of our world? The daily newspaper or nightly television news? A journal of sociology or even of theology? Or, do we listen to the Word of God in daily prayer?

*“A student is not above his teacher ...!”* If the daily newspaper or sociological journal or even a theological text is our only teacher, we are unable to lead our people beyond our teacher! The, the person of Jesus, the Word of God, purifies us and continually reveals to us our true identity, the identity of the poor and the true identity of our world.

*“Why look at the speck in your brother’s eye when you miss the plank in your own”* (Lk 6:41). We are painfully aware how the toleration of sexual misconduct on the part of the clergy has blighted the Church’s proclamation of the gospel. Our newspapers make us aware of that! However, do we realize how our newspapers and televisions immunize us to the violence, greed and dominating power which so oppress our world and whose roots exist in every human heart, including our own? Only a return with Jesus to the mountain, only the contemplation of the holiness and compassion of God can help us to recognize the dimensions of our immersion into the corporate sinfulness of our world and even corporate sinfulness of our Church which impedes us in extending the healing touch of Jesus in our world. Prayer and contemplation must transform us from ecclesiastical functionaries into apostles/disciples/ministers of the mysteries of God:

*“Prayer to God, as the breathing of love, has its origins from a movement of the Holy Spirit through which an interior person listens to the voice of God speaking to the heart. For (it is) God who has loved us first ... ”* (Const.OFMCap. 45:1)

For Francis, Clare and Bonaventure, contemplation is seeing with the eyes of the heart! Prayer and contemplation must constantly ignite and re-ignite in our hearts the passion expressed by St. Bonaventure as he describes the Journey of the Soul into God:

*“But if you wish to know how these things come about,  
Ask grace not instruction,  
Desire not understanding,  
The groaning of prayer not diligent reading,  
The Spouse not the teacher,  
God not man,  
Darkness not clarity;  
Not light but the fire  
That totally inflames and carries us into God ...  
This fire is God,  
And his furnace is in Jerusalem;  
And Christ enkindles it  
In the heat of his burning passion.”*

### **Joy of the Gospel**

In the **Joy of the Gospel**, Pope Francis has a number of statements which merit our reflection:

1. "The spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization." (EG, 78).
2. "Standing before him with open hearts, letting him look at us, we see that gaze of love which Nathaniel glimpsed on the day when Jesus said to him: 'I saw you under the fig tree' (Jn 1: 48). (EG, 264)
3. "A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him." (EG, 266)
4. "Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people." (EG, 268)

**Question:**

- In the animation of our fraternities and in promoting our mission, we often presume the personal commitment of each brother to Jesus Christ. How can we re-awaken in our brothers the passion for Christ which we see in Francis:

*"This is what I want, for this I yearn, this is what I desire to do with all my heart!"*

*"Let us now begin, brothers, because until now we have done nothing!"*

**FOR FRANCIS, THE EMBRACE OF JESUS LEADS DIRECTLY TO BROTHERHOOD**

*"After the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live after the pattern of the Holy Gospel."*  
(Test. 14)

Francis chose humility, minority, as the defining characteristic of his brotherhood. Bonaventure gives the theological foundation of this choice. Bonaventure tells us: the turning of the Father toward the Son in total self-giving love is the Father's humility. Therefore, in his *Praises of God*, when Francis addresses God, he does not use the adjective "humble", but the noun "humility". Humility is not a quality of God. Humility is the essence of God as love. Humility defines the "TO BE" of the Father – the very essence of the Father – eternally turned toward the Son in Self-Giving Love. The option for **relationship** defines the humility of God. God is communion of Father, Son and Spirit made one in total, self-giving love. We are accustomed to speak of "**one God in three persons**", it is more precise and correct to speak of **three persons who are one God**. When we speak of "one God in three persons", it is possible

to think of God as a static reality. When we speak of “three persons who are one God”, the unity of God is ecstatic and dynamic. Bonaventure situates the mystery of Church communion within the dynamism of this Mystery of Trinitarian Relationship. He speaks of the “**Eternal Word**” in the bosom of the Father – the “**Incarnate Word**” enfleshed in Jesus Christ – and the “**Inspired Word**” enfleshed in the communion of the Church. Just as there is only one “**Word**”, so there is one **communion**. There are not two sets of communion – one among Divine Persons and the other among human persons with the latter called to replicate or imitate the former. There is one mystery of communion which includes God and humanity as beloved partners in “perichoresis”, “circumincessio”, “the dance of life”. We are taken up into Trinitarian Relationship, Trinitarian communion. This understanding of the communion of the Church is echoed in Preface VIII for Sundays in Ordinary Times:

*“When your children were scattered afar by sin,  
Through the Blood of your Son and the power of the Spirit,  
You gathered them again to yourself,  
That a people, formed as one by the unity of the Trinity,  
Made the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit,  
Might ... be manifest as the Church.”*

In this Trinitarian understanding of communion, our Order finds the dynamism and meaning of the witness of fraternal living. The Conventual Constitutions speak of fraternity as “**icon of the Trinity**” (OFMConv.62) and the Capuchin Constitutions speak of fraternity as “**a human space inhabited by the Trinity**” (OFMCap. 88.3):

*“The Church, born from the side of Christ as a sacrament of unity, is essentially a mystery of communion, whose richness and depth are reflected in fraternal living, a human space inhabited by the Trinity.”* (OFMCap. 83.3).

There are three characteristics of the early Franciscan fraternity which strongly impact our mission in the Church:

- The early Franciscan fraternity was based the personal relationship of each brother with Jesus Christ and, through Christ, with each of his brothers in fraternity. Fraternity is not the embrace of structure. Rather, it is the embrace of each of our brothers. It is profoundly relational.
- Franciscan fraternity is to be the **Inspired Word**. Franciscan fraternity is not simply a group of brothers called together **to serve** the Church. Francis formed his brotherhood **TO BE** Church. The fraternal gospel life, inspired by Francis, is a whirlpool drawing all who encounter it, all who witness and experience it, into a lived experience of Trinitarian Love: “**a human space inhabited by the Trinity**”.
- These two basic characteristics of the early Franciscan Order were strongly influenced by the fact that Francis chose an itinerant model of life. Itineracy in the Franciscan tradition is more than wandering! In an itinerant model, fraternal life takes new forms not only place to place, but also with each group of brothers. Our Discipleship Model has been institutionalized yet the itinerant origins of our charism continue to have

important implications today, and must continue to infuse our fraternal vision and our fraternal service. All communal forms of religious life are **functionally** relational. However, generally speaking, in the Acts Model of religious life, structure gives rise to, it determines, and it gives form and stability to fraternal relationships. In the Discipleship Model established by Francis, relationships give rise to structure and structure exists to sustain relationships: **Franciscan communion does not flow from structure, rather, structure flows from Franciscan communion.** This is very clearly expressed in the Conventual Constitutions when speaking about the Conventual Chapter: *“the privileged instrument of communion”* which must *“establish a suitable schedule for communal exercises which take into account the daily life according to the spirit of the fraternity and of each of the friars”* (OFMConv. 63). Fraternal relationships are the “glue” which holds all structures together: *“As brothers given to each other by the Lord ... we should accept one another gratefully”* (OFMCap., 89.1). Friars don’t fit the structures. Rather structures are molded to fit the friars, express their unity and release the creativity of each.

I wish to develop four consequences which touch our mission in the United States today:

- **We are an Order of brothers;**
- **Francis formed his brotherhood TO BE Church;**
- **We are an Order obedient to, but separate from, the hierarchical authority of the Church;**
- **The Holy Spirit is the General Minister of our Order.**

#### **1. We are an Order of brothers**

We are an Order of brothers! The brotherhood we share is profoundly relational. Whenever Francis refers to himself, he always refers to himself as “I, brother Francis”. Leo was an ordained minister, but he was “brother Leo”. And in both cases, it is “brother” with a small case “b”, not a capital “B”. Because the title is relational not occupational! Francis was enthralled by the fact that, in his Incarnation, Jesus became his brother. Francis became acutely aware that just as Jesus became Francis’ brother in the incarnation, Jesus also became brother to every man, woman and child and forged a fraternal relationship with all of creation. Francis’ relationship with Jesus, caused him to become brother to every man, woman, child and even every living creature on the earth. This is more than cute! It is revolutionary! This is fundamental to our charism. The three branches of the First Order have been united in recent times in petitioning the Church to recognize the unique nature of our brotherhood and to dispense our Order from the requirement that only clerics can assume the ministry of leadership in our Order. This is important for the unity of our brotherhood. It is also an important witness to the Church that a Franciscan cleric can be subject to a lay member of the Church without impeding but rather enhancing his priestly ministry.

However, there is another equally important ecclesial dimension! A Franciscan who identifies himself as brother as Francis identified himself as brother, will minister to his neighbour in an entirely different way. There can be no hint of domination in an authentic fraternal relationship! This is a strong witness and antidote to clericalism in our Order and in our Church. Pope Francis reminds us that priesthood has authority, however, “its key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist” (EG, 104). Franciscan fraternal relationships, lived joyfully, should become a force to redefine priestly relationships which are “totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members.” (EG 104 quoting JP II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 27). Aside from how we may be addressed by our people, a friar priest ... or a friar bishop ... who identifies himself as “brother” will exercise his ministry in a different manner.

### **Joy of the Gospel:**

1. *“Some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross ... True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others.”* (EG, 88)
2. *“God’s word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us.”* (EG, 179)

### **Question:**

- “A friar priest ... or a friar bishop ... who identifies himself as ‘brother’ will exercise his ministry in a different manner.” Do you see this as an antidote to clericalism in our Order and the Church? Can we provide concrete examples?

### **2. Francis formed his brotherhood TO BE Church**

Franciscan fraternity is not simply a group of brothers called together **to serve** the Church. Francis formed his brotherhood **TO BE** Church. Inspired by Francis, fraternal gospel life is a whirlpool drawing all who encounter it, all who witness it, into a lived experience of Trinitarian Love: **“a human space inhabited by the Trinity”**. We remember the incident in the life of Francis when he invited a young brother to accompany him to preach in Assisi. They walked through the town greeting all whom they met. When they returned to the Portiuncula, the young brother asked when they were going to preach. The response: “We already have!” Pope Francis reminds us, “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.” (EG, 15). This assumes even greater importance in the American Church today. The credibility of Church teaching is severely conditioned by decisions to protect institutional structures at the price of care for the vulnerable.

The itinerant nature of the early brotherhood also influences this witness of fraternal life. Just as fraternal life took new forms place to place and with each new group of brothers, so their gospel witness also spoke to the particular challenges of each new group of people they met ... think of the Wolf of Gubbio. It was not a “one-size-fits-all-Christianity”, rather the witness and

proclamation of gospel life was applied to each person and each community they encountered. They brought an encounter with Jesus Christ and not an ecclesiastical structure.

### **Joy of the Gospel:**

1. *“The spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization.”* (EG 78)
2. *“Salvation ... is for everyone. God ... has chosen to call them together as a people and not as isolated individuals.”* (EG 113)
3. *“The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”* (EG 114)
4. *“It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.”* (EG 15)
5. *“The human person is always situated in a culture ... Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.”* (EG 115)

### **Question:**

- How can we call our local fraternities to avoid “one-size-fits-all-Christianity” and to foster an outreach of witness and service which creates space “*where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the gospel?*” (EG 3)
- 3. An Order Obedient to, but separate from, the Hierarchical Authority of the Church**

The early Franciscan brotherhood and its mission was carried out in communion with and in total obedience to the hierarchical authority of the Church. When Francis had only a dozen followers, he went to Rome to ask Pope Honorius to approve their way of gospel life and witness. However, the brotherhood never formed part of the hierarchical structure of the Church! Even when the Order became institutionalized, it remained obedient to the hierarchical structure of the Church but outside of it. The Friary and the Friary Chapel were integral to the faith life of the local communities, but they did not participate in hierarchical authority. This gave the brothers a unique relationship with the faithful among whom they were recognized as brothers of the people. I am certain that this was not unique to the Capuchin branch of the Order but was shared by our entire Franciscan family. This relationship with both the faithful and the hierarchy provided a privileged platform to announce the gospel of Christ.

Speaking about the Capuchin branch, and I presume it is true of other branches of the Franciscan family, this changed in the mid-1800’s when we became a missionary Order. We became immersed in the hierarchical authority of the Church, taking responsibility not only for parishes but for entire Vicariates! We appointed not only pastors, but bishops!

Does not the present crisis in leadership in our Church not summon us to repossess our tradition? Functioning outside but totally obedient to the hierarchical structures, could we not

immerse ourselves in fraternal relationships with our people and lead them to renewed trust in the authority structures of our Church? We could do so with no conflict of interest.

### **Joy of the Gospel:**

1. *“We speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word.” (EG 38)*

### **Question:**

- How can we consciously re-possess our tradition of obedience to, but separation from the hierarchical authority of the Church?

#### **4. The Holy Spirit is the General Minister of our Order**

St. Francis tells us that the Holy Spirit is the “General Minister of our Order.” In Trinitarian Relationship, the Holy Spirit is the bond of unity between Father and Son. Cantalamessa refers to the Holy Spirit as “The Divine Us”. It is not we who enter into relationship with the Holy Trinity, it is the Holy Spirit, the “General Minister”, who draws us into relationship, creating “a human space inhabited by the Trinity”. The Franciscan Order is a network of Provinces. Each Province is a network of local fraternities. Just as the unity of the Trinity is dynamic, happening here and now, so each fraternity must be the same living, dynamic reality. The unity of the Fraternity is not a structural unity, happening in the moment I become assigned to that fraternity and accustom myself to the rhythm of this particular group of brothers. Like Trinitarian Unity, Franciscan unity must be dynamic and ecstatic. Franciscan unity must generate an energy which embraces daily all the brothers each in his own uniqueness and giftedness. This gospel energy must burst forth to embrace the world.

This defines authority in our brotherhood. The primary purpose of a minister’s authority is not “to get the job done”! Nor is it simply “to make the right decisions”! Rather the Minister must draw the brothers into communion and activate the gifts of each brother for the service of the fraternity and our gospel mission to the world.

The Holy Spirit, “the General Minister of our Order” calls the local fraternity to be formed as the wise maidens of Matthew 25: 1-13. As missionary disciples, we seek to touch and respond to the deepest desires of each person and of each society in the world around us, for this reveals the presence of God. Joined in local chapter, the brothers, like the wise virgins of Matt. 25, are to constantly scan the horizons of their society and, especially, the people among whom we are planted, seeking signs of the emerging presence of the Lord, seeking to touch God in each living person.

### **Joy of the Gospel:**

1. *“All of us are asked ... to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the gospel.”* (EG, 20)
2. *“‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough. Throughout the world let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’.”* (EG, 25)
3. *“Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary.”* (EG 272)
4. *“Christ’s resurrection is not an even of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world.”* (EG 276)

### **Question:**

- How can we as Ministers move beyond “mere administration” to foster a brotherhood “permanently in a state of mission”?
- How can the Local Chapter or Conventual Chapter truly become “*the privileged instrument of communion*” (Const.OFMConv. 63): discerning and uniting the gifts of each of the brothers in mission; and discerning the signs of the presence of the Lord in the people we serve?

### **Conclusion**

I wish to close by returning to Bonaventure’s vision of Trinitarian Relationship. God is communion of Father, Son and Spirit made one in total self-giving love. The Love-Who-Is-God, is not self-contained: the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, the Father and Son One-in-the Spirit, forming a self-contained spiral of Eternal Love! No! Trinitarian-Unity-in-Love is ecstatic and dynamic bursting outward and giving birth to creation and to history. In a similar manner, Franciscan fraternity, “Icon” of the Trinity, “a human space inhabited by the Trinity”, is not self-contained. It must burst forth into the world in compassionate love.

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