

DOMINICA
PASCHÆ IN
RESURRECTIONE
DOMINI



Litteræ Ministri Generalis
Ordinis Fratrum Minorum

“PEACE I LEAVE YOU; MY PEACE I GIVE YOU!”

(John 14:27)

Dear Brothers,

May the joy and peace of our Risen Lord be with you!

Our Father Francis composed a psalm for his *Office of the Passion* which he recited every day during this Easter season: “*Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done wondrous deeds. . . The Lord has made his salvation known. . . This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it*” (*Office of the Passion*, Psalm 9). What strikes me about this prayer is that Francis is calling himself and us to sing a “*new* song,” because “*this* is the day the Lord has made,” making his salvation known today in ever-new ways.

Moving out of our ‘comfort zones’

This year, I am particularly struck by one of the readings from the Easter Vigil, that beautiful passage in which the Prophet Isaiah invites us: “*All you are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come receive grain and eat*” (*Isaiah*, 55:1). It has become increasingly clear that we friars are spending much time and energy on things that do not give us authentic life. As the Prophet goes on to ask, “*Why spend your money for what is not bread, your wages for what fails to satisfy?*” (*Isaiah*, 55:2). All too often this takes the form of spending personal attention and energy on things that have nothing to do with our life as brothers and lesser ones, committed to be with God’s poor and to simplify our lives. If we are honest, we must admit that, like many of our contemporaries, too many of us

have become victims of the dominant “*techno-economic paradigm. . . caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. . . making us self-centered and self-enclosed*” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, #203, 204). Furthermore, we continue to expend a great deal of our effort on projects which may have been of service to God’s people in previous decades, but have little to do with how the Lord is “*making known his salvation*” today.

A story from the early sources tells us that one Easter Day, the brothers in the hermitage in Greccio had spread out their table, fit for a banquet, with white cloths and glassware. Francis came down, and when he saw the table so elaborately decorated, he slipped out. Then, when the friars were sitting down, intent on their feast, he knocked on the door with a begging bowl, crying out, “*For the love of God, give alms to this poor pilgrim*” (2 *Cel.*, 61). Thus, St. Bonaventure comments, “*he taught them with sacred eloquence to continually celebrate the Lord’s Passover in poverty of spirit, that is, his passing from this world to the Father, by passing through the desert of the world like pilgrims and strangers*” (*LM*, 7.9). Yes, Easter calls us to celebrate God’s gift of new life **today**, but we Lesser Brothers cannot do so by setting our tables with accomplishments from the past that today do not satisfy our hungers, or by settling for the false “blessings” of an over-abundance of the comforts of a world that is passing away. On the contrary, we must become truly pilgrims, free to move confidently into the future God is preparing for us.

‘Straining forward to what lies ahead’

I am writing this letter on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. In the readings today, the Lord calls us through the Prophet Isaiah: “*Remember not the events of the past, . . . for see, I am doing something new!*” (Isaiah, 43:18). And St. Paul reminds us that there one thing necessary for us: “*Forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead*” (Philippians 3:13). Yes, brothers, the Reign of God is “not yet,” but the Risen Jesus is breaking through the locked doors of our securities and fears (Cf. John 20:19) inviting us to join Him on the road. We are being called by the Risen Lord to renew our lives, to go to Him who offers life, and to listen to His voice, allowing God to reconstruct within us His vision of what it means to be men of the Gospel, bearers of mercy and reconciliation, committed to helping renew the face of the earth, both among our fellow human beings and the created universe itself, through a conversion of our personal lives and our fraternal life-style.

Our vocation as Lesser Ones and Brothers, a call that begins within each one of us and among us, can radiate from us out to all people, becoming a vibrant Gospel message in an age of division, violence, and the tendency to promote a politics and culture of exclusion. We can become a living example of the vision to which Pope Francis is calling us: “*Disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment. These attitudes also attune us to the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us. If we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society*” (Laudato Si, #208).

Mercy begins at home – forgiving one another

This Easter falls during a special jubilee year of mercy. The Prophet’s call to “*remember not the events of the past*” demands that we forgive

and set aside old hurts and injuries. All too often we can keep our own brothers imprisoned in the past. Something they did or said which may have offended us years ago continues to define our relationship with them. If we are to move into God’s future, and become the type of brotherhood called for in our world today, we must leave these hurts behind. The Risen Jesus empowers us to forgive (Cf. John 20: 22-23). Let us heed the voice of St. Francis: “*There should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, who after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy*” (Letter to a Minister, 9). Yes, brothers, as Pope Francis urges us: “*it is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that awakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope*” (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 10).

In a particular way, this jubilee year of mercy is summoning us as Franciscans to transcend the divisions in our brotherhood that have arisen over our long history. Next year, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of the so-called Bull of Union, *Ite Vos*, which separated the Lesser Brothers into different congregations. The General Chapter last year committed us to work together with our Conventual and Capuchin brothers to discern together what the Lord is asking us to do in our age as Lesser Brothers, and how we can cooperate with each other to achieve that end. Already we have made the decision to work together toward establishing one Franciscan University in Rome. This is indeed a sign of new hope and life. We also are working closely with the Third Order Regular (TOR) in areas of common interest.

Resurrection – new and transformed relationships

Isaiah’s assurance that “*we will eat well and delight in rich fare*” (Isaiah, 55: 2) can be an image of new and transformed relationships, just as the Resurrection is a promise of newness and transformation. While not forgetting the past, we rediscover the source of our true

identity in Christ and Francis, and the need and responsibility to seek life and not death; to seek forgiveness and mercy, not retribution and revenge; to seek reconciliation with the brothers of our own Provinces, with the wider Church community, with all of humanity, and with all of Creation. This is what it means to “*come to the water, without money, without price,*” (Isaiah 55:1) approaching in our poverty and minority.

Biblical scholar Gerhard Lohfink has written: “[*Being*] a Resurrection community means anticipating that at every hour the Spirit of Christ will show the community new paths, expecting new doors to open at any moment, counting on

it that at any hour the Spirit can transform evil into good, hoping that every hour the impossible will become possible, and never saying “later!” but always “now!” (Jesus of Nazareth, Collegeville, 2012, p.306). Brothers, that “now” is upon us! If we return to our vocation as Lesser Ones and Brothers in an authentic way, listening to the Risen Christ and allowing His words to take root within us, then the promise of Isaiah will be fulfilled - they “*will not return [to the heavens] till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful...*” (Isaiah, 55:10).

A blessed Easter to all of you!

Rome, 19 March 2016
Solemnity of St. Joseph



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