

with our brothers and sisters. We must never forget that we are FRATERNITY. We are an ORDER of brothers and sister.

Firmly rooted in Christ and with a strong trust in his grace, let us not be afraid to look around us and go wherever we are needed.

However, we must not forget that there are areas which are 'closer' to us, which require our most immediate attention. Our Lord speaks to us as neighbours—not as 'distant ones'. At times we send money to Africa, we try to do good things for far away countries and then, perhaps, we fail to accomplish our duties towards those who are closer 'neighbours'. We end up doing good 'out' - and perhaps we have hell 'in' next door, at home! We are often sensitive to those who are far away, but we do not see or touch, and neglect our own family members; jobs; communities...It is a tougher job to put up with those who are near us and condition us in many ways!

If we really know, love and live our Rule and our General Constitutions we cannot ignore family, work, and social and environmental issues, justice and human rights—the very first and foremost areas in which we are called to serve. We could very profitably re-read and meditate on Articles 12, 17 to 26 of our GG.CC. to understand what the Church expects of us. If family, work and social, political, environmental, justice and human rights issues were permeated by our holy example, behaviour and commitment, these realities could be animated by God's love; our society and world would be better. If half a million Secular Franciscans did this—wow!

AS FRANCISCANS WE ARE CALLED TO SERVE. (What does it mean to us?)

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If you expect me to give you a list of things to do in order to accomplish our call 'to serve as Franciscans', I am afraid I will disappoint you!

In order to understand what 'serving' should be for us Franciscans, I would rather propose to meditate on Article 1 and Article 103 of our General Constitutions.

The spirituality of the secular Franciscan is a plan of life centred on the person and on the following of Christ, rather than a detailed programme to be put into practice. [Art 9.1]

*Fidelity to their own charism, Franciscan and secular, and the witness of building fraternity sincerely and openly, are their **principal 'services'** to the Church, which is the community of love. **They should be recognised in it by their 'being', from which their mission springs.** [Art 100.3]*

Therefore, it is evident that in order to serve [our mission], we have to 'be' and make sure that we understand what 'we are', or rather, 'what we should be'.

First of all, let us make sure that we fully understand that 'being Franciscan' is nothing but being 100% good Christian, striving to 'reach the perfection of love'. Like Francis. Nothing less, nothing more than this!

*'...the brothers and sisters, led by the Spirit, **strive for perfect charity (love)** in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of St Francis by means*

*have compassion on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to the one who has faith." Then the boy's father cried out, "**I do believe, help my unbelief!**".' [Mk 9.24]*

In order to be truly good Christians, we are never enough 'Marian'. Why? In order for God to take up our flesh, to become one of us, to share in our humanity, to save us, he needed to be *fully* accepted into the 'human consortium', to become *fully* the Son of Man. The only human, created being—recapitulating the whole of humankind—that accepted to receive the Word of God *fully*, unconditionally, was Mary. She had the courage and unshakable faith to believe God, to take up 'the risk'. This is why we must look to her to learn how to follow Jesus, to understand fully what is the track to follow in a pilgrimage of faith similar to hers. *8

What does it mean 'to serve' for us today?

It means to recognise that we can be useful (as opposed to useless) in many ways, generously and promptly to cooperate in whatever God puts before us. With prudence and patience, with realism and concreteness. Whenever we realise that there may be something in which we are called to help, we must pray over it, consult among ourselves, and go, go with courage together, with great faith. Together,

*8 She is our holy model just as she was from Francis. We become 'mothers of Jesus' just as she taught us with her life and example: 'We are mothers, when we carry him in our heart and body through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give birth to him through a holy life which must give light to others by example.' [Prologue of OFS Rule, (First Letter to the Faithful)]

'When the son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?' [Lk 18.8] Jesus asked, and still asks, this question because he knew how weak our faith is. He knows that we do not have enough faith. 'He said to them, because of their little faith, 'Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'

Do we have sufficient faith truly to believe:

- that God is really here with us, in our midst, in us
- that God loves us tenderly
- that God can help us in any circumstance for our good
- that God can transform us into new creatures, if only we wish to let him?

If we did, we would not be asking so many questions. We would, instead, be burning with love and positively become *new creatures* to the point of hardly recognising ourselves with respect to what we were before! But instead, many of us are afraid to surrender fully to God, to his call. We fear to leave our mediocre certainties to 'risk' God's project in full, the project God has thought for us from eternity. We are ultimately afraid to put ourselves into potentially uncomfortable, and possibly 'dangerous', situations, and thus, we render vain God's grace in us. How powerful we are! More powerful than God!

If we think we do not have enough faith, then we must do as the evangelical father who confessed to have some faith but, at the same time, asked the Lord to increase it. ' "But if you can do anything,

Of this Rule approved by the Church.' [Rule, 2]

The rest (what to do = serve) **is only a consequence of this focal point.**

We should not distract ourselves by wondering what single actions or activities we should implement. We must stay focused at all times on the heart of God's call for us, on the purpose of our entire 'being'. Our *specific* qualifying characteristic, as Franciscans, is as we have read, to be perfect Christians '**like Francis**': be as good Christians as Francis is, like him, with him, with his absolute surrender to God's will and grace. Let us go a little deeper into what it means to be a 'good Christian'.

Jesus is very clear on this: **So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect**—Matt 5.48. Jesus reminds us what God has been telling the *People of the Covenant*, over and over again, from the very beginning of his revelation: **Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy**—Lev 19.2. This concept of holiness requires a little clarification.

Only God is holy and, therefore, we can reach this holiness only by sharing God's own life. Sharing in the life of God means to **let him come within us**, with **full confidence** and **docility**, and let **him work within us** to be fully conformed to him and be able to exclaim with St Paul and St Francis: 'Yet, I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me' [Gal 2.20]. God can and wants to work in us such wonders as we are not even capable of conceiving. **This is the precondition of being able to 'serve'**: to let God fill us with his Holy Spirit and his grace to understand fully, and do his holy will.

Francis is also very clear on this: ‘...let them pay attention to what they must desire above all else: **to have the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity**’ [Later Rule, X, 8]

INDEED, THIS IS THE FIRST AND FOREMOST PROJECT OF OUR LIFE.

God has revealed to us that he is love. Consequently, by letting him come and stay within us, without conditions or reservations, we will be pervaded by love. His will becomes our will and the cause of our joy and realisation. His holy Presence will transform us into *new creatures*.

If this has yet happened, then we should conclude that we have not really or completely allowed God to come and dwell within us. *1

From ‘being in God-Love’ springs all that God wishes us to do. ‘Serving’, therefore, is just to accomplish God’s will and this can be completely encapsulated in one word: **LOVE**. St Augustine perceived this very vividly and taught us : **love and do what you want**. *2

*1 ‘...if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us. This is how we know that we remain in him and he is in us, that he has given us of his Spirit...Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God. We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. **God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.**’ [I John 4.12-16]

*2 ‘Dilige, et quod vis fac:...radix sit intus delectionis, non potest de ista radice nisi bonum existere.’ [Hom. I John 7.8]

of [n. 48] of the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* with these words: ‘The *parrhesia* of **faith** must be matched by the **boldness** (courage) of reason.’

‘In a climate in which **today’s Catholicism risks being too acquiescing** with respect to the prevailing cultures of values and human rights, often considered as easily changeable ‘rules of a social game’, the Holy Father claims for the Faith the right and duty to speak loud and clear, to announce Christ as the ultimate and definitive truth of man and of the world.: with **parrhesia**.’ [Joseph Ratzinger, A Lesson on the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* of John Paul II]

The second thing we lack is **Faith**.

Courage and determination to change positively our lives and actions to become ‘new creatures’ *6 flows from the **extend and quality of our Faith**. It is faith that enables us to put our entire trust in God, that allows us to believe that God is really present, that allows us firmly to believe in his Providence. Without a firm and solid faith we cannot go anywhere.

Unfortunately, we have to admit that many of us have not yet gone through that radical change that can authentically allow us to say that we are *new creatures* and, therefore, much too often, we continue to live some kind of theoretical faith in God, without implementing any concrete daily actions. *7

*6 II Cor 5.17; Gal 6.16

*7 ‘So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead...I will demonstrate my faith to you by my works.’ [Jas 2.17f]

thinking and acting. Often, we are very good at speaking in theory but reluctant or unwilling to perform or, if we do, our performance tends to be limited and sporadic. In reality, we often seem to lack two fundamental things: **Courage** and **Faith**.

- **Courage** to become involved in situations which might potentially render our life more uncomfortable or could make difficulties for us.
- **Courage** to assume positions that may be contrary to common prevailing thinking as, for example, towards immigrants, the marginalised, corrupt but powerful subjects etc

Indeed, often we do lack sufficient courage. Many of us are, ultimately, 'good', solid 'right-minded' persons (formally impeccable and 'politically correct'), who do not do any harm to anybody, who, however, do not do anything good either to anyone else, except to ourselves.

The message addressed to the OFS by cardinal Franc Rodè, Prefect of the CIVCSVA, on May 6 last year, emphasises this point effectively. He exhorts us to have the true **evangelical parrhesia**. But what is this 'parrhesia'? It is the frankness, the openness, the courage with which a person proclaims what he believes, without fear, to bear witness to the Truth.

The Acts of the Apostles ends with a very significant 'icon' of mission and parrhesia: 'Paul in Rome, prisoner in the house where he lived, **'with parrhesia'** [μετα πασης παρρησιας], proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.' [Acts 28.31] We know what St Paul had to suffer for upholding the Word of God.

The Holy Father, John Paul II, concludes the fourth

The last Encyclical Letter of pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, helps us understand these concepts:

Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life, and especially by his death and resurrection, **is the principal driving force behind authentic development of every person and of all humanity**. Love—*caritas*—is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace. It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth. **Each person finds his good, by adherence to God's plan for him, in order to realise it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free** [cf John 8.22].'

But, isn't this what any baptised Christian should strive to do? Yes, of course. There is nothing more perfect than being a perfect Christian, nothing more perfect than accomplishing God's will, the Project conceived by God for us from eternity which, if our vocation is authentic, cannot but be: follow me; love me; reach your *perfection*, like **Francis**.

St Francis, in his writings, always insisted with great strength on the necessity of converting entirely to God, in a *radical* manner. His *sine glossa* is well known to all. He did not leave specific directions on 'what to do' but rather on '**how to be**'. And what he asked us to do is clearly indicated by him as the fruit and direct result of penance—**Conversion**. *3

*3 'Worthy fruits of penance.' Letter to the Faithful, *first redaction* (Prologue to the OFS Rule)

'*Being*' is the first and foremost commitment of Secular Franciscans. They, certainly, due to their secularity must be fully engaged in the concrete situations of the world, but their 'doing' must spring from their '*being*', a being conformed to Christ, like Francis. Francis strives to remould himself, or better, be remoulded, by divine grace. Then, in full symbiosis with Christ who lives in him, he acts according to the mandate received by the Crucifix.

We cannot and must not be content with being 'mediocre' Christians. We must be Christian in a *complete, integral and radical manner*, even if this may entail 'risk' of profoundly changing our live and our relations with others and the world. Being Christ's disciples, according to the demanding criteria of the Lord, *4 does not alienate us from ourselves, but transforms us after the model of the perfect man, Jesus. *5



*4 'If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlooker should laugh at him and say, "This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish." Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. In the same way, everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.' [Lk 14.25-33]

*5 'Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more a man.' [GC, 41; cf also GS, 22]

Being disciples of Christ demands our whole selves. Francis understood this, wanted it, accomplished it. He was not content to accept mediocrity: he wanted and achieved *perfection*. We cannot and must not settle for anything less.

For us, therefore, '**SERVING IS NOTHING BUT OURSELVES BEING CONVERTED TO GOD, AS WAS FRANCIS, unconditionally, without reservations, limitations; and REMAIN IN A PERMANENT and PROGRESSIVE STATE OF CONVERSION.**' It should not be so difficult for us. Aren't we, after all, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance of St Francis? Of course we are, aren't we?

THE REST (WHAT TO DO) WILL COME BY ITSELF ('*from which their mission springs*'). The **AREAS** in which we have to serve (mission) are broad, all-encompassing, and demanding.

The St Damiano Crucifix gave clear and unequivocal instructions to Francis (and consequently to his successors and disciples of all times) on his mission: *Go Francis, repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.*

'Repair my house' is not limited to just one single thing to repair. It actually refers to '**anything**' that needs repairing. Francis, in fact, acted on anything that (in his best judgment) needed to be 'repaired in Christ'. Therefore, we too, must **be ready to act always and whenever we are needed.** Our action cannot be limited to just a few areas. It can, and must, reach any situation in life and in the world to which God prompts us. However, we all know that, oftentimes, we are quite distant from this way of