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PILGRIMAGE "TO THE HEARTS OF OTHERS"

(Message of the General Assembly, May 2001)

"That they might give witness by word and work to His voice" (TOR Rule 9:29).

FOREWORD

It was with great interest that I read the report of the General Assembly of the IFC-TOR held from 19th April to 4th May 2001 in Assisi and was interiorly touched by them. I deepened these texts with intense reflection.

One sentence struck me very specially, a key sentence of the message of the General Assembly addressed to "all people of good will", namely: Like Francis' pilgrimage, ours also must be to the hearts of others.

Spontaneously I thought: That's it! That's what it is! This sentence resumes our way of being and at the same time, specifies our mission.

Before taking up our pilgrim's stick to enter into the hearts of others, we must stop before our own heart.

We must try, to the best of our ability, "to serve, love, reverence and adore the Lord God with an honest heart and a devout mind" (RuleTOR 2:8).

"Let us listen with all your hearts" as Saint Francis proposes in his Letter to the Order (cf. LtOrd 6) .
Francis has many things to say to us.

If we, the sisters and brothers of the whole Franciscan family had listened attentively to the voice of our founder through the past centuries, many errors would have been avoided with regard to the evangelisation of peoples.

Francis was a missionary. He developed an altogether new model of mission which, till today, has not lost its attraction; to be a missionary according to the image of Jesus!

It is to this that each one of us in our big Franciscan family is called: Bloom where you are planted and give life. That is your vocation.

Sister Marianne Jungbluth

MISSION

**"That they might give witness by word and work to His voice"
(TOR Rule 9:29).**

1. Go and preach

At the Portiuncula, on the feast of an apostle, in 1208 or 1209, Francis heard the Gospel of mission sending of the disciples (Mt 10:5-14; Lk 9). It was at this point that he exclaimed: "This is what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart" (1C 22; L3C 25). This event marked his whole life to the point of making him put the proclamation of the Gospel before his desire for the hermit's life.

Francis had just three companions when he already formed two groups: Bernard and Giles took the direction of St. James of Compostella, Francis and the fourth went to the Rieti valley. Some time later, they met in Assisi. When they were eight, they went, two by two, in the direction of the four cardinal points. In 1209-1210, numbering twelve, they went to Rome to ask the Pope to confirm their form of life, "written briefly and simply" (Test. 15). After some hesitation, Innocent III orally confirmed their form of life and authorised them to preach penance to the people (1C 33; L3C 49). Francis went about the towns and villages, announcing the kingdom of God, preaching peace, teaching salvation and penance unto the remission of sins" (1C 36).

In 1212 Francis wished to go to Syria to preach to the Saracens, that is to say to the Muslims. A storm threw the boat on to the Dalmatian coast. Having embarked on another boat secretly, he arrived at Ancona from where he returned on foot to Assisi. A short time later, he set out with Bernard, to go to Morocco, passing through France and Spain. In Spain, he was struck down with malaria and once again had to return to Assisi. His second missionary departure was a failure.

But Francis did not abandon the idea of going on a mission to the Muslims. On the occasion of the Chapter of Pentecost in 1219, he made known his idea to about three thousand brothers. After having sent Brothers to France, Germany, Hungary and Spain in 1217, Francis himself decided to set out for Egypt (Jordan of Giano, 10). Accompanied by some Brothers, he embarked on a boat which was carrying food for the troops who had laid siege on Damietta. Towards July-August 1219, he disembarked in Egypt. At the sight of the laxity of customs in the Crusaders' camps, of their animosity and their cupidity, Francis was convinced that this could not be a just war. He tried to lead the soldiers and Cardinal Pelagius Galvan, chief of the Crusade, to conclude an armistice and to accept the peace being offered by the sultan Malek al Kamil. The imperialistic politics of the Christians blocked all concession; they wanted a total victory. On the 29th August, the Muslim army invaded the Crusaders' camp: 6,000 men perished. It was only after this defeat that the Cardinal allowed the herald of Assisi to go to the sultan.

Accompanied by Brother Illuminatus Francis crossed the neutral zone and came to the sultan (LM 9:8). Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Saint-Jean d'Acre, is a trustworthy source for these events. He writes: "For several days, the sultan listened attentively to Francis preaching faith in Christ to him and his people. But finally, he was afraid that some of his soldiers who had been converted to the Lord on the efficacious word of this man would pass over to the Christians' army; he therefore led (Francis) back to the camp with many marks of honour and security precautions, not without having said to him: 'Pray for me, that God may deign to reveal to me the law and the faith that please Him most' "

Francis' behaviour really impressed the Muslims. Nevertheless, he did not attain his end: neither martyrdom that he desired so much, nor the sultan's conversion, nor peace between the Christians and Muslims, nor the slightest echo of his idea of an unarmed crusade. But the way in which Francis met the sultan marked the beginning of a change; it was the announcement of a new way of behaviour.

When one speaks of 'mission', the words 'spirit', 'ardour' and 'prophecy' come into play. Francis proclaimed "the kingdom of God with the learning and power of the Spirit" (1C 36). "Burning intensely with the desire for martyrdom, he wanted to take ship for the regions of Syria" (1C 55). "His desire bore him along so swiftly that even though he was physically weak he used to leave his companion behind and hurry ahead, as if he was enraptured in his anxiety to achieve his purpose" (LMj 9:6). Medieval authors emphasise more the interior breath of the spirit more than physical strength, character or even knowledge of languages urging towards mission and martyrdom. This is confirmed in Francis' writings where, to go to the Saracens was the result of the urging of the Spirit.

2. The Franciscan concept of mission (ER 19)

Chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule contains Francis' missionary composition . When does this date from? Or rather, is it a Franciscan response to the appeal made by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to reform the Church and to get back the Holy Land? Or else, is it a consequence of Francis' experience that we have narrated above, and in this case, was edited shortly after 1219, the year of the events? Whatever that may be, ER 19 proposes an alternative, another way than that proposed by the Crusades, of going to the Saracens. On the whole, in the text of the Earlier Rule this manner of "going to the Saracens and other infidels" formed part of the texts which gave the brothers the "way of going throughout the world", texts which were included in Chapters 1 to 16 of the Earlier Rule The key word is "go": we find it in each of the chapters. To go to the Saracens is not an exception but rather is part of the form of evangelical Franciscan life. As ER truly contains the foundation for Franciscan mission, we need to study it attentively. It begins thus:

Jesus said: 'Remember, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves; so be cunning as serpents and yet as harmless as doves' (Mt 10:16) (ER 17:1-2).

As with the event of the Portiuncula, Jesus' sending is the point of departure. God's word is the reference, it is law. That is why all other directives, in this chapter 16 as elsewhere, is related to the Lord. For Francis, the Word of God is always relevant: the Lord spoke not only to His disciples in Palestine; He continues to speak here and now. He confides a mission to His disciples. Thus all selfish actions are banished. The messengers of the Gospel must experience prudence and modesty.

"And so, the friars who are inspired by God to work as missionaries among the Saracens and other unbelievers must get permission to go from their minister, who is their servant. The minister, for his part, should give them permission and raise no objection, if he sees that they are suitable; he will be held to account for it before God, if he is guilty of imprudence in this or any other matter" (ER 16:3-4).

Francis and his companions did not follow their own will. They sought for divine inspiration, "what God inspired in them". This expression is particularly dear to Francis. (Unfortunately, the words *divina inspirazione* are missing in some moderns editions). Francis uses this expression again when he refers to those who wish to enter the fraternity: "If anyone is inspired by God to live our life and comes to our brothers" (ER 2:1). The Poor Sisters whom we now call "Poor Clares" have chosen their form of

evangelical contemplative life "by divine inspiration" (Forviv.1). All these texts show how much the Franciscan life, whether it is the daily fraternal life or a life among the infidels, responds to a call from God. In these conditions, the minister (the superior) can neither force nor refuse a brother to go on mission, nor keep him back if he is suitable and wishes to go. Divine inspiration does not constrain: a person is free to accept or refuse. But the call and the will are preliminary conditions for mission that the minister must recognise and confirm.

At a period when the Crusaders led a merciless war against the Saracens, Francis sent his brothers not only to them but among them, as sheep among wolves. In conformity with the common medieval mentality, Francis counts the Muslims among the infidels to whom he wishes to bring the faith. Nevertheless, his attitude differs from the official missionary strategy. He does not attack the Muslims, but mixes with them, always ready to witness and be accountable for his faith till the end (this is true martyrdom).

"The brothers who go can conduct themselves among them spiritually in two ways. One way is to avoid quarrels or disputes and be subject to every human creature for God's sake (1P 2:13), so bearing witness to the fact that they are Christians. Another way is to proclaim the Word of God openly, when they see that it is God's will, calling on their hearers to believe in God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, and in the Son, the Redeemer and Saviour, that they may be baptised and become Christians, because unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5)" (ER 16:5-7).

Regarding the way missionaries should behave, Francis thus describes two possibilities of which we should respect the sequence.

What we find in the first place is not the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, or a social programme, but simply an attitude. The brothers must practise 'fraternity' among the infidels", to be a living model of fraternity and not to seek to quarrel or dispute with anyone whosoever. On the contrary, let them be - always and everywhere - smaller, minors, as their name says. The living witness of fraternal harmony, of reconciliation and of unconditional submission will be followed by the confession of being Christian. Fraternity, inside and outside and the will to dialogue, during which one will account for one's faith without imposing it on the other, are the foundations of Franciscan mission.

In the next place, there is room for the proclamation of the Gospel. This merits particular attention. The one who proclaims the Gospel is not master of the Word, but is first an auditor, and above all, one among the non-Christians. He who proclaims must adapt himself to the situation, that means, perceiving the divine will. It is only when one perceives that this pleases the Lord, must one proclaim the Word of God. One must not think here of a dogmatic sermon, which, in any case, in those times, was reserved to priests. It is rather a matter of the primitive Franciscan practice of singing the praises of God and exhorting others to do penance (laus et exhortatio). In chapter 21 of the Earlier Rule, we also find a model of what "all the brothers - therefore, those also who are not priests - can say in front of the people".

The Franciscan concept of mission therefore has as its aim the Christianisation of the whole world. But such an aim is more remote than immediate. It is not a matter of baptising many and as soon as possible, but rather, to accompany the slow awakening of faith in the God of the Gospel.

"They may tell them all that and more, as God inspires them, because our Lord says in the Gospel: Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven (Mt 10:32); and Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and that of the Father and of the holy angels (Lk 9:26)" (ER 16:8-9).

These few words are only a model, suggestions. Before all else, one must be sensitive to the reality. What matters is that one be not ashamed of confessing one's faith in Jesus. The words to be said will not come from directives prepared beforehand, but from the concrete situation in which one finds oneself. What counts, the base and the end, is Christ. That is what the following text says:

"No matter where they are, the friars must always remember that they have given themselves up

completely and handed over their whole selves to our Lord Jesus Christ, and so they should be prepared to expose themselves to every enemy, visible or invisible, for love of him. He himself tells us, He who loses his life for my sake will save it (Mk 8:35), for eternal life. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:10). If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you, and, speaking falsely, say all manner of evil against you, for my sake (Mt 5:11). Rejoice on that day and exult, for behold your reward is great in heaven (Lk 6:23). I say to you, my friends: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do (Lk 12:4). Take care that you do not be alarmed (Mt 24:6). By your patience you will win your souls (Lk 21:19). He who has persevered to the end will be saved (Mt 10:22) (ER 16: 10-21).

The third and last part of ER 16 is addressed expressly to all the brothers. Once again we see clearly how the particular mission with the "infidels" is linked to the Franciscan common life: it is a particular expression of the same form of evangelical life. It is a matter of following Jesus Christ before all else, abandoning oneself to Him. Since Christ offered himself out of love, the brothers and sisters should offer themselves out of love, even for enemies, visible or invisible.

To follow Christ means to follow him in humility, persecution, suffering, hatred, criticism, calumny; these are all the realities of Jesus' life and the characteristics of the case they made against him. All this is found in the Franciscan concept of mission expressed in ER 16. The text does not only echo the proclamation of Jesus' sufferings narrated in the Gospel (Sermon on the Mount) but is also the fruit of the first missionary experiences in Germany, Hungary and Morocco.

The leitmotif of mission is "to expose oneself out of love for Jesus". This is repeated all through the text. Not defending oneself, like sheep, the brothers and sisters must expose themselves to their enemies "out of love for Jesus". Martyrdom is clearly envisaged (cf. ER 22:1-4); Adm. 6:15; 2C 152). Mission can cost one's life. Whoever exposes himself like Jesus can expect to undergo the same results as He did. It is not only a matter of confessing God in words, but also in deeds, by living and suffering. Conflict is inevitable (cf. LtMin 2:71); they can sometimes hurt the body which no longer belongs to oneself since one has confided it to the Lord Jesus.

In spite of the risk that missionary commitment runs, joy and serenity prove that one does not nourish a vain hope. Patience in persecution is the sign that one believes in Him who by suffering and death came into glory. It is thus that a life of total disappropriation of self, ready to go even to martyrdom, is the most important witness, but also more difficult than words.

Anguish and terror, confusion and anxiety can hit the one who places himself/herself in the following of Christ and for that he will be persecuted. Francis encourages risking one's life totally without fear and persevering in patience. He is convinced that God will reward each one generously. It is thus that he concludes the presentation of Franciscan mission with the rejoicing person of Jesus.

3. First look at what unites

In the East, Francis learned the *salât*, an Islamic form of prayer. When the muezzin sounds the horn and calls the faithful to prayer, they assemble and say their prayers, bowing down to the earth. This practice struck Francis so much that he wished to do something similar in the West. In three of his letters, he speaks of it expressly. He asks for it imperatively from those responsible for the Order:

"When you are preaching, too, tell the people about the glory that is due to (God) so that at every hour and when the bells are rung, praise and thanks may be offered to almighty God by everyone all over the world."(LtCust 8).

The praise of God should unite Christians and Muslims. That is why Francis insists on 'all the people in the whole world'. As this unheardof desire cannot be achieved without the collaboration of the civil authorities, he repeats it in the courageous letter he wrote to 'all magistrates and consuls, to all judges and governors all over the world':

"May you foster such honour to the Lord among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcement may be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God" (LtRect 1:7; cf. 2LtCust 6).

Such a sign can become the expression of a common faith in the almighty God. This original idea of Francis still awaits its realisation.

4. The missionary dimension in Francis' prayers

Francis' behaviour among the Muslims, his concept of mission and his letters to rulers, to "all Christians, religious, clerics and lay folk, men and women; to everyone in the whole world" (Letter to all the Faithful 1) are a clear witness of his universal understanding of mission. We find this in the long song of praise and exhortation which enumerates peoples of all classes in the Church and in the world, addressing himself to: "the little and the great, all peoples, tribes, families and languages, all nations and all men everywhere, present and to come" (ER 23:7).

All must remain in the true faith and persevere in penance, and praise, glorify and thank God. This universalism is found again in other prayers, for example the paraphrase of the Our Father, Praises of the Hours: 65-11 and in the Canticle of the Creatures. He expresses himself in a specially strong manner in his Testament: "We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all your churches in the whole world, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world"(Test 5; 1Cel 45).

5. The Triune God as the deepest foundation for mission

However important Jesus' discourse on mission may be, Francis does not find the only motivation there for Franciscan mission, but little by little, arrives at a deeper understanding. For him, the origin of all mission is in God the Father Himself: out of love He sent his Son among men. His Son accomplished his mission by "taking on the true flesh of our humanity and our fragility", sharing his life with the poor and accepting suffering and death consciously, making them fruitful for us (LtF: 4-14). He continues His work in the Church, at the heart of which the Holy Spirit is always present. For Francis, mission is a gift anchored in the mystery of the Trinity and takes root in the deep love of God.

Francis reached this mystical vision of mission by contemplation on Jesus' final discourse. As it appears in his writings, he had interiorised perfectly Jn 17; ER 22: 17-55; 1LtF 1:14-19; 2LtF 54-60. As in Jn 17:6, Francis says that Jesus was sent above all to manifest the Father's name to people, to unveil His real being to them. This revelation was confided to the Son (ER 22: 41-42, 54).

The Son's mission did not consist merely of words. He reveals who God is by his actions. Francis describes this second aspect of the Son's mission in ER 23: 1-4: God created a good world and at the summit of this creation, he placed humans. But humans, through their own fault, destroyed this harmony. To re-establish it, the Son was made incarnate and gave his life as a ransom. Dead for us and risen, the Son of God will return to pass judgement and establish the Kingdom of God once and for all. Francis does not cease to give thanks for this creation, this redemption and this accomplishment. Everything finds its source in the love of God for human beings whom he loves as he loves his Son. That is what Jesus' prayer for his disciples says and is taken up by Francis in the Earlier Rule:

"Holy Father, keep in thy name those whom thou hast given me ... Sanctify them in truth. Your word is truth. Even as you have sent me into the world, so I also have sent them into the world. And for them I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. Yet not for those only do I pray, but for those also who through their word are to believe in me, that they may be perfectly made one, and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and that thou hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. I will reveal your name to them, in order that the love with which thou hast loved me be in them and I in them"(ER 22: 45,49-54; cf. Jn 17: 11-26).

This Johannine and Franciscan concept of mission is a marvellous cycle of love: of the divine love

between the Father and the Son, and the unspeakable love of God for men.

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Practical Exercise

1. Personal Reflection

To deepen the theme of Franciscan mission, meditate on the text of Isaiah 61: 1-3 that Jesus applies to Himself (Lk 4: 16-20). Allow yourself to be challenged by this text.

2. Reflection in groups

Chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule describes the Franciscan missionary concept.

- Give titles to the different paragraphs
 - Underline the key words which characterise a Franciscan missionary.
 - Put the key words in chronological order: which attitudes are the most important? Which come first and which last?
-