

800 years after the Memorial purposes: Towards a reinterpretation from the perspective of the signs of the times

MEMORIALI PROPOSITI

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*I am the vine, you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit,
because without me you can do nothing (Jn 15: 5).*

Introduction

Before addressing the question of the relevance that the Franciscan penitential charism may have in the current conditions of our history, we must recognize the great work done in the study and in the various publications of the Franciscan sources, especially from the beginning of the *Franciscan question*, initiated by Paul Sabatier with his *Vie de Saint François d'Assise* (Paris, 1893) and continued by many historians and theologians, inside and outside the Franciscan family. In contemporary times, much progress has been made in the study and analysis of the text and context of the aforementioned sources, with the "pre-text" – the legitimate purpose – of identifying the author or authors, the original form, the intention of the author, transmission, etc. Following the well-known Dossier by the Dominican Meersseman (1961), the specific theme of the relationship between Francis of Assisi, the penitents and the Franciscan Third Order was addressed in various historical research congresses¹. On this particular topic, I would like to acknowledge the work of many historians, particularly that of Fr. Raffaele Pazzelli and Fr. Lino Temperini. The latter is part of the historical commission of the Order, re-established by mandate of the last General Chapter of 2019. To him and to Fr. Seraphim Beshoner, coordinator of the aforementioned commission, my gratitude for their collaboration in the preparation of this celebratory day.

The epochal change we are experiencing in society brings very concrete opportunities and challenges for each of our entities, both for religious and secular Franciscans. The current pandemic has accelerated this change of era which raises significant questions about our identity and mission. For the Franciscans linked to the ancient Order of Penance, in addition to the *Memoriale Propositi*, there are other inspirational documents, especially the two versions of the *Letter to the faithful* of St. Francis (1 LtF and 2 LtF) and the current Rules that the Church gave us - for the seculars that of Pope Saint Paul VI of 1978 and for the brothers and sisters of the TOR, that of Pope Saint John Paul II of 1982. Now, if we want our

¹ See G. CASAGRANDE, *Il movimento penitenziale francescano nel dibattito storiografico degli ultimi 25 anni*, in *Santi e santità nel movimento penitenziale francescano dal Duecento al Cinquecento*, ed. by L. Temperini, Roma 1998, p. 351-389.



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MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021

Franciscan penitential life to be meaningful for the here and now, the “pre-text” that seems most pertinent for re-reading our foundational documents is to seek inspiration and strength in these texts to respond to the challenges of our historical context. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the signs of the times and places that require an honest and courageous interpretation, as well as an evangelical and prophetic response in order to be faithful to God in history.

Here are some of the most significant challenges that our Order has to face and which can find an echo in some other religious communities and in the OFS Fraternities. It is not intended to present a complete list or respond to all these challenges, but only to provoke a reflection that leads to the search for answers, according to the circumstances and possibilities of each entity.

1. Demographic changes

Currently our Order has 9 Provinces (2 in Italy, 1 in Croatia, 1 in Spain, 2 in the United States and 3 in India), 5 Vice-provinces (South Africa, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Paraguay and Mexico) and 3 Delegations (Sweden, Bangladesh and Philippines). Different entities also have a presence outside of their countries of origin, in places like France, Peru, United States, Austria and Germany. This year – God willing – the Vice Province of Sri Lanka will be officially elevated to the status of Province. Now, at our 2019 General Chapter, the demographic report highlighted a number of significant changes that entail consequences in various areas of the Order: fraternal life, apostolic life, government, economy, education, representation, etc. Ignoring this phenomenon would mean acting without responsibility before God and before history.

A notable aspect of the demographic change that has occurred in the Order in recent decades is that of the “aging” of some provinces, that is, the fact that the majority of its members are elderly. Obviously, longevity is not a problem in itself, because thank God there are friars who have persevered for many years in their consecration to God and in service to the Church. Rather, the difficulty is that of having few young religious. This is explained by various reasons, namely the low number of candidates who have entered in recent years, the lack of perseverance of some religious² in initial formation, or even after solemn profession and ordination; the demographic phenomenon of low birth rates in several countries³; the atmosphere of secularism and de-Christianization that has affected the participation of families in the life and mission of the Church, etc. On the other hand, there are entities that, while not

² This topic has been analyzed by various theologians of consecrated life. On 10 December 2020, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), presented its Guidelines online on the theme: *The gift of fidelity - The joy of perseverance. Manete in dilectione mea* (Jn 15: 9). In our Order, the cases of abandonment in recent years have been analyzed and it has been seen that the majority of the friars who obtain the dispensation from religious vows are incardinated in a diocese. The 2019 General Chapter asked us to analyze the causes of this phenomenon in the various entities and in the Order in general.

³ On May 14, 2021, Pope Francis spoke at the opening of the *Stati generali della natalità*, underlining that “For years Italy has thus had the lowest number of births in Europe”. He also expressed his appreciation for the law that establishes an allowance from the Italian government for every child that is born. And he proposed three ideas: the primacy of gift (of life), the need for generational *sustainability* and structural *solidarity*.



suffering from this “aging”, have not been able to consolidate their development and have also gradually decreased. These phenomena are sometimes accompanied by a weak vocational promotion and the absence of updated formation plans.

Worthy of note here is the case of the TOR contemplative Franciscan sisters, with whom many friars have a fraternal relationship of mutual support and who are present in Italy (a federation of 4 monasteries), Spain (two federations, each of 5 monasteries) and Mexico. (a federation of 11 monasteries). We are also aware of a Polish federation with a presence in other European countries, but so far, we have no communication with them. As with other Orders, the monasteries of Italy and Spain are experiencing, for the most part, a sustained aging. In some cases, however, there are younger nuns proceeding from Latin America and Africa.

On the other hand, the male TOR has seen constant growth in countries such as India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. In other places, such as Mexico and Peru, a more formal and sustained effort in promoting vocations has begun to bear fruit in recent years. All that it has nurtured gives hope among the friars, but it also makes it necessary to work seriously on the formation of formators, on the renewal of formation plans and on the gradual integration into the life of the Order at the international level. The numerical decrease experienced in various entities of the Order and in many religious communities is a sign of the times that invites us to sincere reflection, to a humble position before the Lord of history. We could say that it is a *kairòs* in which God calls us:

to begin again, to place at the center of our life and mission the awareness and living of the charism that the Spirit has given us, rethinking our lifestyle and our institutional commitments. As people of faith, we cannot simply give up and resign ourselves to dying because we are unwilling to change. Our penitential charism implies the daily struggle to live a genuine conversion, personal and institutional⁴.

In the light of these current challenges, we might ask ourselves, what elements of our origins and our inspiring documents can help us to renew our enthusiasm for the penitential Franciscan life and to persevere in it. What is the novelty of the penitential life described in the Letters to the faithful of St. Francis that attracted the first brothers and sisters of Penance? What do they mean to us today? What are the worthy fruits of penance that we are produce today according to our current Rule? Do we have a life plan capable of awakening new vocations? What importance do our foundational documents give to the initiation and formation of the members of the Order and what real importance do we give them?

⁴ *Me siento llamado a construir la comunión*, Interview to Amando Trujillo, Franciscans TOR’ Minister General, in *Vida Religiosa*, n. 8, Vol. 127, Madrid, October 2019, p. 40-41.



2. Taking care of personal health

An aspect that has been observed for some years now is the need for the brothers and sisters of the Order to take better care of their personal health. Speaking of the spiritual aspect, Pope Francis invited young people to protect their heart in his Message for World Youth Day 2015⁵, an invitation that is also valid for us friars in the various stages of life. Furthermore, given the current needs of the ecclesial ministry, it is also essential that the friars take adequate care of their physical and psychological health, whether in terms of eating habits and the need for physical exercise or a proper balance between work, the life of prayer, rest and fraternal recreation. It is very painful to see the consequences of some diseases which could have been avoided, but which, due to neglect, have caused much pain and even sad losses.

Another theme related to health is the importance of healthy recreation, contrary to the culture of entertainment that offers “whatever you want, whenever you want it” which generates insatiable consumerism and various types of addictions. The media and entertainment industry has become a *business* of great proportions which, if we are not careful, comes to condition the use of our time and our best energies.

The penitential ascetic practices contained in the *Memoriale propositi* responded to a mentality and customs of the time, but what can we learn from the importance given there to the corporeal dimension of prayer, conversion and sacramental practice? Flexible discipline, sensitivity towards the sick and pregnant women – what do they tell us today about the importance of taking care of our whole person? It is not a question of falling into an obsession with personal well-being, but rather of promoting a healthy balance that favors the fulfillment of our service. What are the values underpinning the *Memoriale propositi*'s norms regarding certain types of entertainment? What value do we give to rest and the true search for balance in our activities?

3. Renewed desire for holiness

As we know, chapter V of *Lumen Gentium* deals with “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church” and proposes a search for holiness based on “the love of God and the love of one's neighbor which points out the true disciple of Christ” (LG 42). Since the papacy of John Paul II, the Church has canonized a growing multitude of men and women, from different states of life, many of whom belong to the Franciscan family. In this regard, in some entities a renewed desire to live the call to holiness is perceived, while in other areas it is scarcely spoken of, perhaps to avoid falling into some stereotypes corresponding to the past but not to the evangelical needs of the present. Without the search for holiness –a gift from

⁵ “We need to show a healthy concern for creation, for the purity of our air, water and food, but how much more do we need to protect the purity of what is most precious of all: our heart and our relationships. This “human ecology” will help us to breathe the pure air that comes from beauty, from true love, and from holiness”, in *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Thirtieth World Youth Day 2015: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* (Mt 5:8), 2.



God and not the fruit of human commitment alone, our consecrated life can fall into mediocrity, cynicism, careerism, bitterness, etc.

For all this we must nourish the desire for holiness that the Holy Spirit himself awakens in our hearts. We must propose it to our friars in initial formation with a testimony of evangelical life that makes the newness of Christian love transparent. Today a theological and pastoral reinterpretation of this call to holiness also appears necessary. This seems to be confirmed by interventions such as Benedict XVI's General Audience of 13 April 2011, dedicated precisely to the theme of "Holiness", and the Apostolic Exhortation of 19 March 2018. *Gaudete et exsultate* by Pope Francis on the call to holiness in the today's world.

We must not be afraid to speak of holiness, but we must seek its current meaning. Let us ask ourselves what are the works that make penitents "happy and blessed" according to the 1LTF and 2LTF of St. Francis and what do they imply for us today? How can we deepen our communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit according to the teaching of these letters? What model of holiness do they propose? What Gospel values do the detailed norms of the *Memoriale propositi* correspond to? The current Rule of the TOR and the OFS make multiple explicit and implicit references to the vocation to holiness. How can we experience them more fully?

4. Bearers of peace and mercy in the face of social conflicts and ideologies

Without pretending to make a complete sociological analysis, it can be said that today's world is the scene of multiple ideologies, some of which are recent but very widespread. On the political level, a polarization of positions and parties seems to reign, leading to a violent confrontation in the most diverse spaces, sometimes also spoiling family unity and harmony between consecrated persons. Ideologies construct a partial and tendentious interpretation of reality and, on the basis of this, they propose models of thought and action that end up indoctrinating people and creating deep divisions. We must use a healthy critical sense to process the information disseminated by the various media that respond to particular interests, otherwise we can become repeaters of their tendentious messages. While healthy pluralism can enrich everyone, falling into ideological polarizations does not allow evangelical values and the principles of the Church's social doctrine to serve as fundamental criteria for the social and political participation of Christians. In this context, the service rendered by our friars to culture is crucial, both as writers and as teachers in universities, colleges, etc.

International armed conflicts, terrorism and violent and authoritarian regimes continue to cause real human tragedy and fuel further violence, resentment and a desire for revenge. Recently Pope Francis reiterated an appeal to recover the sense of fraternity among individuals and peoples: "Our "we", both in the wider world and within the Church, is crumbling and cracking due to myopic and aggressive forms of nationalism (cf. [Fratelli Tutti](#), 11) and radical individualism (cf. [ibid.](#), 105). And the highest price is being paid by those who most easily become viewed as *others*: foreigners, migrants, the marginalized, those



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MEMORIALE PROPOSITI 1221–2021

living on the existential peripheries”⁶. The current pandemic has worsened the economic situation of many families, causing an increase in the number of poor people and in the drama of migration. As Franciscans, we have a special appreciation for the gospel values of peace, preferential love for the poor and the least in society, and the care of Sister Mother Earth, the home we share with many other creatures of the Lord.

Throughout history, works of mercy have been a central aspect of living our penitential charism. In some entities there is a very active parish social ministry, a shelter for the terminally ill and homeless, rehabilitation centers for alcoholics and drug addicts, parish medical dispensaries, etc. Another work of mercy is to teach those who do not know. The Order currently has two universities in the United States, numerous schools in India and others in Spain, Sri Lanka, Paraguay, Peru and Bangladesh.

Now, how can the commitment to peace expressed in the precepts of the *Memoriale propositi* be applied today? What criteria of love for neighbor can we draw from 2LtF for our actions in today's society? The current TOR and OFS Rules have a rich content of criteria and values to guide our reflections and actions in this sense. Do we cultivate peace in the heart before proclaiming it with our lips? What are the obstacles that prevent us from being bearers of peace, reconciliation and justice between individuals, groups and peoples? How can we be more consistent with these values on an individual and community level? How important are our works of mercy in our community and provincial projects? In addition to these works of mercy, how can we strengthen human promotion, the drive for more just laws and structural change? What value do we place on institutions like Franciscans International and JPIC commissions?

5. A renewed missionary spirit

In the twentieth century, the Order experienced significant growth, mainly thanks to missionary endeavors and the incorporation of several congregations of diocesan right. Some provinces have sent missionaries to various countries, such as India, Brazil, Paraguay, Mexico, Peru, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, South Africa and the Philippines. Social and cultural changes had an impact on the life of the Church and religious congregations, contributing also to the transformation of the missionary approach and activity of the Church. Since the vast majority of people are now living in cities, the evangelizing and catechetical mission was necessarily focused on them. At the same time, the missionary spirit seems to have weakened in some friars, including some of the young ones. This can be explained by the attachment to the social well-being found in urban centers, by the aging of some entities of the Order, and by the development that some of our entities, previously considered as missions, have achieved. However, there is still a need to have friars willing to be missionaries abroad, at least temporarily, and to strengthen some entities of the Order, and - why not? - to start other missions.

It is also evident the increasing use of evangelization and catechesis *online*, accelerated by the pandemic and the restrictions placed on liturgical celebrations and church meetings. It is encouraging to

⁶ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2021, [September 26, 2021], Towards an ever wider “we”, Rome, May 3, 2021.



see the creativity and determination with which some brothers use social networks and new telematic resources to spread the Gospel and promote vocations. While this must not replace the face-to-face meetings, it has become a powerful and effective tool.

What impulse can the itinerancy of Francis of Assisi and many of his followers give us? Although the *Memoriale propositi* does not address the theme of mission, we find instead elements in 2LtF that speak of the importance of sacramental life, love of neighbor, proclamation of the Gospel, the availability of oneself that religious must have as legitimate obedience and the desire to “be servants and subjects to every human creature for God’s sake” (2 LtF 47). Numbers 29-31 of the current Rule express the Franciscan foundations of the apostolic life of brothers and sisters who have been sent “into the world so that they might give witness by word and work to His voice and to make known to all that the Lord alone is God” (Rule 29).

6. Spirituality of communion

With our Franciscan profession we commit ourselves to living the Gospel in fraternity. In our time there is a desire for greater participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church and, in particular, of families and women. In many cases there is a vital reciprocal communion with the brothers and sisters of the OFS and YouFra, but this desire also embraces other lay people. However, this should not be a simple remedy for the shortage of friars, but a way of contributing to the promotion of the role and mission of the baptized laity. We often speak of a “family” experience between the laity and consecrated persons; of the need for a new way of being Church and of living religious consecration. This requires serious discernment to listen to the voice of the Spirit, who constantly seeks to reform and rejuvenate the Church, but also to avoid falling into easy arrangements that can cause further confusion and tension. The history of our communities has been woven through close collaboration between the various types of Franciscan penitents, generally in relationship with the other members of the Franciscan Family. However, the current conditions make many brothers and sisters feel the need to deepen this sense of fraternal communion in order to realize more fully and harmoniously the vocation of all believers. Already at the beginning of the third millennium, Saint John Paul II had proposed the challenge of adopting a spirituality of communion⁷.

Let us ask ourselves, then, how we are accompanying, forming the laity and collaborating with them in our various communities. What evangelical values do our inspiring documents and the origins of the Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance offer us with regard to the experience of fraternal communion?

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Vatican, 06.01.2001, 43: “Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us [...] Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth”.



Do we become neighbor to the families who participate in our activities? Do we try to foster family meetings that allow us to get to know each other better and promote authentic fraternal communion? What criteria and attitudes do we need to promote an authentic sense of “family” between lay people and consecrated persons? How to encourage the participation of the laity, avoiding their manipulation and subjection? Are we working on creating environments that guarantee the protection of minors and vulnerable adults? What are we doing to eliminate the culture of clericalism?

The spirituality of communion also has consequences for the interprovincial life of the Order and among our peoples:

Christians in general and especially consecrated persons are called to build and rebuild bonds of fraternity and communion between people and groups of different nations and cultures, especially in this age of globalization and social fragmentation. These factors external to religious life, together with its internal possibilities and challenges, make it necessary for greater collaboration and synergy between the various entities of the Order. However, these efforts must be made with clear and transparent objectives, with a real cultural sensitivity and based on projects duly analyzed and taken on by all the entities involved, which respond both to the surrounding reality and to our identity as consecrated persons⁸.

The challenges that our time pose to our penitential Franciscan charism is not above all that of surviving a possible numerical extinction of institutes or provinces, but above all that of being truly salt of the earth and light of this troubled world. We are called to generate hope and to open the way to God’s future in the midst of so much uncertainty and so many conflicts; in the midst of helplessness and indifference before the serious and grave challenges of our age. Thanks for your generous attention and may the Lord give you peace!

⁸ *Mi sento chiamato a costruire la comunione, in Vita Religiosa, n. 8, Vol.127, p. 39.*

