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BELONGING TO THE SFO

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Introduction. The Crisis of the sense of belonging in postmodern times

1. The general picture. Zygmund Bauman, one of the great sociologists of the 20th Century, compares the present world to a body whose "solid state", becomes the "liquid state" as it passes through the last centuries. In the "liquid world" there exists no longer a culture of learning, of accumulation, but a culture of withdrawal and lack of continuity. In "liquid" modernity those certainties that used to provide solid structures have become more scarce: the national State, institutions, the family, work. Nothing is fixed or guaranteed; everything is modified and changes with incredible ease, beginning with consumer goods. Even interpersonal relations have become more superficial. There is no longer the willingness to committing the time to maintain stable, loving relationships and friendships since the individual often fears the future. He is no longer driven to initiating long-term projects and therefore all that he does is exclusively focused on the satisfaction of his own fleeting sense of well-being.

In the face of uncertainty and risk, people's response is to search for immediate satisfaction here and now. The present consumer society breeds the desire to have more, creates artificial needs, and imparts the impression that a person can choose and buy what he wants. In the realm of personal life, a mentality is spreading that each person is considered in absolute control of his own decisions and accepts fewer and fewer traditions -- sometimes even basic ethics. The search for happiness, for personal accomplishment, for the self-satisfaction of the individual (aspirations that in themselves are legitimate) taken as absolute criteria of conduct, have heavy negative consequences on social relationships. No one wants to bind himself to anything or anyone. Above all, no one "belongs" to anything in a definitive way. Interpersonal relations and relations with institutions find themselves fragile and easily cast aside.

A very complete and effective picture of the current situation was expressed by the General Minister OFM, P. José Carballo, at the Chapter of Mats of the Young Friars Minor (30 June 2007): "Many who are ruled by emotion and live for the moment allow themselves to be dominated by the dictatorship of relativism through which all is suspect, all is always negotiable; and, in many hearts, it

breeds feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and instability, with nothing existing of the sacred, of certainty and worthy of preserving. There are many victims of systematic doubt, compelled to take refuge in the day and in the world of emotion. There are many seduced by the culture of 'part time' and of 'zapping' (speed) that causes one to avoid long-lasting engagements, to pass from one experience to the next, without deepening any of them. There are many seduced by a "light" culture that leaves no space for utopia, for sacrifice, for renunciation. Many are seduced by the culture of subjectivism, for which the individual is the measure of everything and everything is seen and appraised as a function of oneself, of its own actualization. This post-modern reality produces, especially in the young generations, an uncertain little-defined personality, that makes it more complicated to be able to understand what is already in itself difficult: the radical requirements of the ways of following Christ".

2. Belonging to the family. Let's speak, first of all, about the identity of the family. The subject is complex. In the very definition of "marriage", a man chooses a woman as a companion for life and as a part of his destiny. A woman chooses a specific man as spouse and companion. Between the two of them, they make a plan for life. The one belongs to the other. They want to live together for a lifetime, not temporarily, but characterized as "for always", in joy and in sadness, in health and in sickness, respecting each other and tenderly welcoming each other at every moment. Only under these premises is it possible to organize life in a manner in which children can arrive in the stability of a house, of a home, of a family.

The family is the greatest resource for the person and for society. It provides generosity, unconditional welcome, and solidarity in different life circumstances. It sees itself besieged today by many challenges of the modern world: to precariousness (to which we referred earlier), to prevailing materialism, to the search for immediate pleasure, to the influence of the media. The family, then, becomes weakened and is attacked by proposals that equate it to cohabitation under the same roof. The family, marriage and children often are not the accomplishment of a plan drawn up together and built little by little, but rather an accident of circumstance. People more and more are choosing cohabitation and, even in marriage, often one of the parties or both choose a state that we could define as "celibacy in the marriage". The high incidence of separations and divorces is a confirmation (a survey conducted recently in the USA pointed out that couples married at the end of the '70s have a less than 50% chance of still being husband and wife). The number of single mothers and of children living outside of the family context is growing so much that it can almost be defined as "normal". In this context, which Benedict XVI

defined as "worrying", it is important to show ways to strengthen the family and to educate new generations in the Catholic faith, and to acknowledge it as the greatest gift that parents can give to their children. The fact that the family may be a "buffer zone" between the individual and society makes it a natural antagonist against cultural tendencies, and so they try to destroy it.

3. Belonging in professional life. The effects of precariousness are also heavily seen in the working life of the people. In the world of work one speaks precisely of precariousness that is the cause for millions of youth not to plan for their own lives, repeatedly postponing the main rites of passage -- from leaving the parents home to the birth of children. The employment crisis makes it so that many accept the type of work for which they do not feel drawn or they abandon their career and try to earn money in fields for which they were not prepared. For this reason they feel like strangers without roots in their profession.

4. Belonging to a nation. According to a recent survey on migrations by the Fides Agency, 175 million people reside in a country where they were not born, and if one takes into account the fact that 85% of the world population resides in developing countries where they must live on 3,500 dollars per capita per year, one understands why migrations represent an irreversible phenomenon. But the sense of belonging to a specific territory is profoundly changed not only because of great cultural and professional mobility, but also because the national reality, which at one time made one feel deeply rooted and with a personal identity (I am Italian, Spanish, English...) is being replaced with a supranational entity being imposed more and more, even to individuals, with points of reference and rules of behavior that don't deepen their roots in a solid tradition. On the contrary, attention grows toward regional realities, to a restricted environment where one's interests lie and where one protects those interests – they would go so far as constructing many "small homelands" independent and self-sufficient.

The general picture is that of a general precariousness, from work to interpersonal connections, to families, to solidarity. It is not difficult to understand why people do not feel more deeply bound to their homeland, to the family, to the professional world. With other social consequences:

- The fragmentation of society: There is a deprivation of the thought and of the culture of solidarity that makes strangers of the people in the cities. Individuals live "near" or "opposite", not "together";
- The little-appreciated sense of the social: highly guarded privacy creates a permanent conflict

between the good of the individual and the good of the community;

- The culture of suspicion: Suspicion and distrust, bred from the climate of violence that surrounds us, paralyzes serene and cordial relation with others and are the true worm borers that undermine the base of civil society.

5. Belonging to Ecclesiastical Life. The object of discussion between the Church and the world is no longer, as at one time, a specific point of Catholic morality, as it happened in the '70s, when they used to discuss divorce, abortion or the use of the pill, but accepted Christian enforcement of life. Today the discussion centers on alternate and global visions of man and of woman, of fatherhood and of motherhood, of sexuality, and above all, on the ways of living so that men and women can fulfill themselves in life and feel satisfied and happy. How do those who, by their Baptism, are members of the Catholic Church, belong and how do they identify with it? Some belong totally and without reserve. There are those who live in the Church calmly and serenely, with the full conviction that they belong to the soul of the Church, of being a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. But there are also those (and perhaps more in number) who are bound to the Church with a very fine thread, with a sense of belonging limited to outward appearance, quasi bureaucratic. And finally there are those who live only some aspects of the faith, outside of any belonging to the Church (believing without belonging). In the doctrinal note on some aspects of evangelization, published December 15, 2007, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith denounces specifically the "crisis of belonging" to the Church as one of the subjects of which we should be vigilant because it compromises the original evangelical work of the disciples of Jesus.

The Church, even if it is always enlivened by unwavering Christian hope, does not hide its worry in the face of the phenomena that we have briefly presented. She is directed to give a prophetic reply to the challenges of our time. It maintains, in fact, that the only therapy is the recovery of authentically human and Christian values, with the return of the faithful to the very origins and to their very identity in a Christocentric perspective. Three conclusions flow from this: the strong link between faith and reality; the importance of Christ in the "everyday"; the continuous attention to the correct relation of truth/freedom.

Through the SFO, the larger expectation is to find ways to share this effort, this huge task, but, to realize it, it needs a continuous re-foundation, of a return to the most authentic roots, that make it

possible to live the Gospel and to proclaim it, without betraying it and without softening it.

Belonging and identity

6. The main connection. Every talk on belonging, for every person, is connected closely to identity and presupposes it. What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What is the role of the priest? What does it mean to be a religious in our day? What does it mean today to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? What is good and fundamental for me? Where am I going? What should I pursue in life to be able to arrive to the fullness of existence? To whom do I belong and who belongs to me?

The close connection between belonging and identity is a psychological law, but, even more, it is a structure of being. Plato would say -- One thing, in order to be itself, should distinguish itself from the others, because one thing that would want to be itself and at the same time to be all the others would be both itself and the negation of itself. It is a logical principle. There is no identity without belonging and there is no belonging without identity: they are distinct and yet always substantially joined. And therefore it is obvious that to speak of belonging, it is necessary to speak of identity: to have awareness of oneself and to distinguish oneself from the other.

7. The Secular Franciscan Identity. Who are the Secular Franciscans scattered all over the world? What is their identity? Some of us, lay and religious, have had occasion to know other realities of the Third Order. There were in the past very many groups. Mostly their members used to wear characteristic clothing, different for men and for women. In some places there were different fraternities for men and women and, even when they were mixed, the men sat on one side and the women on the other. In the course of the second half of the twentieth century the Franciscan Family experienced deep transformations. On June 24, 1978 the tertiaries received the new Rule, approved by Pope Paul VI. First, there was the Second Vatican Council with its new focus. The Council documents strongly influenced the writers of the Pauline Rule. We entered into a period of study and of assimilation of the new Rule. It became a fundamental point of reference in the search for "identity". In the new times it was necessary to find the road of renewal within faithfulness to tradition. For some time some Fraternities presented themselves still composed of laity with a certain nostalgia for the life of the friars and of religious, although having the persistent call to be valid tools of action of the Church in the world. But the attitude

of the brothers and of the sisters was changing into a new way to be Franciscan, identical in its essentials, but different in how it manifested itself... The Franciscan Third Order had assumed the new Franciscan name of The Secular Franciscan Order, exactly because it wanted to underscore the presence of Franciscan laity in the world; it wanted to distinguish itself in its "secular" state, the most significant feature of the Third Order. Later, in the *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II, recalling the doctrine of the Council, wrote: "The vocation of the laity to holiness carries with it that life according to the Spirit be expressed in a particular way by their insertion in temporal reality and in their participation in earthly activity" (n. 17). With such direction come more obligations for those who accept the call to the SFO. We cannot forget that the young are caught up with doubts, questions and the cultural transformations of our times. The human being does not exist only in space. He lives in a specific existential context. In life he has a series of tasks to carry out, but every person is more than what he appears to be, more than what he does, more than what he accomplishes. Every person is a mystery.

And so, to update the discussion, we have to ask ourselves: What does it mean today to be a Secular Franciscan? What are people seeking who are making their Profession in the Order today? These questions do not annoy us and do not worry us more than any other time because it seems to us that our reply is already given in the everyday. All seems resolved: in the every day, each person is what he does, and each Fraternity is what it accomplishes. Nevertheless, with a spirit less accommodating, we should not satisfy ourselves with this first response. Anyone can fulfill the functions that we practice in the world, and any association or movement can fulfill the apostolates that we do, without the need to belong to the SFO. When we realize that, an abyss is opened in front of us. We worry, and our conscience accuses us of inconsistency and of scarcity of radicalness in "following the poor and crucified Christ", in the manner of Saint Francis. To appease ourselves we seek to give a Franciscan color to what we do (or what the Fraternity does): we promote devotion to Saint Francis, we organize Franciscan exhibitions of articles, we put on stage the *Transitus* of St. Francis, we talk about St. Francis on radio programs. Can this Franciscan color be perhaps superficial? Could it not be that the Franciscanism that we promote is an incidental reality, secondary, accessory? In other words: it will not be that we are professionals, students, businesses, directors, ministers of the Eucharist, habitual goers of parish groups, and in addition also Franciscan? Or perhaps, to be Franciscan belongs to the most intimate part of our personal identity, to the marrow of our being, to the most authentic essence of what each of us is?

At the beginning of the Rule are found, in concise form, the fundamental elements of the Secular Franciscan life. In Article 2, Secular Franciscans are men and women who, "led by the Spirit, strive for perfect charity in their own secular state. By their profession they pledge themselves to live the gospel in the manner of Saint Francis by means of this rule approved by the Church." The updated legislation of the SFO (Rule and General Constitutions) states that the identity of the Secular Franciscan is expressed in a triple dimension: personal (the inner life), fraternal (co-responsibility) and universal (the mission).

8. Inner Life. At a time of instability and fluctuations, it is fundamental to arrive at the heart of spirituality to give consistency to commitments and to personal faithfulness. Without the basis of spirituality, all our life lacks consistency and without foundation, suspended as in space. We run the risk of forgetting how extraordinary the adventure is in which Jesus involved us. This is the theme for which our Rule (n. 7) reminds us that conversion "should be carried out every day". And the General Constitutions (art.8.2) affirm that our life must substantiate itself "in a journey continually renewed by conversion." There are other tools for this re-foundation of the person, that take us to the rediscovery of our identity and of the sense of belonging: first of all an ongoing formation which should awaken the consciousness that being Franciscan is fulfilled by always becoming like a new Franciscan: it is never a completed story behind us, but a journey in which awaits ever new exercises. The re-foundation of the person is done with small undertakings that should flow in this greatest of undertakings that we call "form or plan of life".

Our contribution in overcoming the problems that clutch the world and the Church is not realized by transforming us into "activists", but into disciples of prayer. It is certain that for Secular Franciscans, like other citizens, we are called to political commitment, professional competence, promotion of solidarity and of liberty, of rights and of justice. Nevertheless what is specifically ours is prayer to the living God. The contemplative dimension allows us to go through the world with eyes enlightened by hope and compassion. There is no true Christian commitment in the world without prayer. Naturally, prayer should be accompanied by a living experience that transforms, enables the capacity to love and lets one discern the way to inner happiness. On different occasions, Benedict XVI insists on the fact that, before any plan of activity, there must be adoration, which frees us in the truth and illuminates our actions. This is why it is very important that Fraternities be eloquent schools of prayer,

places of harmony, mirrors of charity and sources of hope, so that their members feel the joy of being loved by their brothers and sisters, and at the same time to communicate to those around them the fullness of joy of being disciples of Christ.

9. The spirituality of the TAU. The external sign of belonging/identity of the Secular Franciscan is the TAU (art.43 of the CC. GG). St. Francis highly regarded and honored this sign, the symbol of conversion. He used to write it on the letters that he sent, he carved it in the cells that he occupied and he repeated it in the commendations "as if – says Bonaventure – all his zeal was to make the sign, according to the words of the prophet, a TAU on the foreheads of men groaning and suffering, truly converted to Jesus Christ". In wearing it, we can also be witnesses and invite others to an authentic and passionate about their conversion to the love of Christ and to follow Him.

Our vocation and our profession aim for this. The exterior sign of the TAU gives testimony which by grace we connect ourselves to the "spirituality of the cross". We reread Rule n. 10: "...Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to Him even in difficulties and persecutions." Let us reread also art. 10 of the General Constitutions: the Cross is "the 'book' in which the brothers and sisters, in imitation of Francis, learn the purpose and the way of living, loving, and suffering." When we were working on updating the Constitutions, the request came in from a national Fraternity to abolish or to change this article because it was too pessimistic. What is more optimistic than to give to our suffering an eternal and universal value?

He who does not accept the mystery of the cross will never find peace, nor will he find any answer to the eternal questions of man about the meaning of suffering, of illness, of death, of the uncertainty of existence. He will never understand the great love that is hidden in the wounds of the Cross. He will never know how to put himself in the wounds of His sacred side, of the hands and feet of Christ with the confession of Thomas: "my Lord and my God"; or with the discovery of Paul: "(Christ) loved me first and he gave himself for me", or with the invocation of Francis: "that I may die for the love of your love, like you have deigned to die for the love of my love". There is no other explanation for suffering and pain if not on the horizon of love.

In the homily for the canonization of St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina (June 16, 2002), John Paul II affirmed that our times have a need to "rediscover the spirituality of the cross in order to re-open the heart of hope." Hope in a world in which "every tear will be dried", but also the hope of improving the human condition in this world, making it more just and evangelical through the practice of Christian virtue and

through the works of mercy.

10. The “sense of gift”. These brief examples of the characteristics of identity and of the spirituality of the Secular Franciscan bring us to the necessity of rediscovering the sense of gift, of building the culture of gift, based on the watermark of the Encyclical *Deus caritas est* (God is Love) of Benedict XVI. The challenge to which *Deus caritas est* invites us is to strip ourselves in order to reaffirm the primacy of the relationship on the good that is given, of personal identity over the utilitarian, primacy that should find room for expression everywhere, in all domains of human activity. Definitively, the central message that the first Encyclical of Benedict XVI sends us is that of thinking of giving freely, that is to say, fraternity, as an essential point of reference of the human condition. In a society where we are brought up with the idea of having rights, worn down by the expectation of "what is due" (to us), of what we expect from life, from the world, from others, it is perhaps time to introduce the "sense of gift", that, among others, today represents an essential point for interpreting and renewing social dynamics.

For the Christian (and, to a greater degree, for the Franciscan) the relationship based only on justice is never enough because fraternity calls for more. Fraternity is not consumed within the narrow arch of I-you, but it pervades the we, until it enters into the space of the planetary tent (the world) (*Canticle of creatures*). One should never reject this catch-all dimension of fraternity because, if it is true that the loss of individuality is feared by a Christian as a serious loss, so also is privatization of those aspects of Christianity that are considered supporting columns of the whole Christian structure feared.

In a recent speech, the Pope affirmed: “In the knowledge that love is a life-style that sets the believer apart, don’t tire of being witnesses of charity everywhere.” (O.R. of Feb. 21, 2008)

Belonging as co-responsibility

11. Belonging to the Order. Our belonging to the Secular Franciscan Order is based on Profession, that is, the act with which we are solemnly committed to “live the Gospel in the way of St. Francis and through this authentic Rule of the Church” (Rule N. 2). Fr. Felice in his presentation spoke to us wonderfully about Profession, which Article 42.2 of the General Constitutions describes as being incorporated into the Order. He told us among other things that the incorporation (profession) “means the insertion into a living body and the merger with the same organism, in which a new reality is constituted.

Incorporation involves the transformation of many realities into only one, through a process of absorption and assimilation.”

The "plan of Gospel life" outlined in our Rule is a plan to fulfill and to live "in fraternal community". Perhaps we should reflect more often and more carefully on the definition contained in Article 3.3 of the General Constitutions. "The vocation to the SFO is a vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal community. To this purpose, the members of the SFO reunite in ecclesial community that they call Fraternities" and these Fraternities are cells grouped in organic union, that is to say, the large, spiritual family of the SFO, scattered all over the world.

Speaking of belonging, it is necessary to protect oneself from the risk of "absolutizing" this identity with something of an attitude of pride, superiority, and exclusivity. "Clinging excessively and exclusively to one's identity can become pathological. In fact, it can breed in individual's narrow mindedness, in populations' nationalism, in religions and in cultures fundamentalism, " writes Mons. Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture. So, with reference to identity/belonging, we should emphasize the sense of communion and co-responsibility. The General Constitutions affirm emphatically in art. 30.1: "The brothers are co responsible for the life of the Fraternity to which they belong and for the SFO as the organic union of all the Fraternities scattered around the world". Here it is not about responsibility in the legal sense, like that entrusted to the Superior Major of the First Order and TOR (holders of the *altius moderamen*) and not even of what is expected of the Ministers, the Councils and, in general the "spirituals assistants and leaders", legitimately elected for the governing of the Fraternity at varied levels. Instead, it is about responsibility of a theological nature: a fraternal communion, of faith and love, that needs to be nurtured by mutual prayer, by reciprocal knowledge/awareness, by assiduous attendance.

At the level of the whole Order in the world, co-responsibility means, above all, attention and availability to what is called for and proposed by various Councils at the higher levels: regional, national and international. It requires then an effort to seek to know and to understand the reality of the Order in other geographic and cultural contexts, because one cannot love what one does not know. It requires, finally, "to contribute to the expenses of the Councils of the Fraternity of the higher levels" (Rule 25). Permit me to dwell a moment on this delicate subject to emphasize the importance. We must consider the

size and the complexity of the commitments that now weigh down on the regional and national Councils. They must be able to fulfill completely their responsibility of coordination and relationship to the local Fraternity. Furthermore, the Presidency of CIOFS, on the international level, should coordinate, animate and guide the SFO, improve collaborative relations with the other components of the Franciscan Family, and promote the life and the apostolate of the Order, etc. (Cf. CC. GG. Art 73).

12. Belonging to the local Fraternity. We know by memory the definition of the local Fraternity contained in art. 22 of the Rule: "the basic unit of the whole Order ... a visible sign of the Church, ... community of love..".

To clarify these fundamental assertions, the General Constitutions in art. 30.2 state how belonging to the Fraternity should be lived: "The sense of co-responsibility of the members requires personal presence, witness, prayer, and active collaboration, in accordance with each one's situation and possible obligations for the animation of the fraternity." In the hope of not providing just a theoretical discourse I think we must dedicate a minimum of time to these essential "requirements" of co-responsibility. We see, therefore:

1. personal presence, namely regular participation (not optional!) at the meetings of the Fraternity, that cannot be called any more the well-known "monthly meetings", but "frequent encounters (gatherings)", organized by the Council to stimulate everyone to the life of fraternity and for growth of Franciscan and ecclesial life (Rule. n. 24);
2. witness, of Gospel life and of fraternal life also as a means of promoting vocations (C. C. G. G. art. 45,2) and as assistance in the formation of new members (Rule. n. 23 and C. C. G. G. art.37.3);
3. prayer, it is the soul of this "community of love" (Rule N. 8)
4. active collaboration, of each and everyone, for the good of the Fraternity, for dynamic meetings and with good participation, for completing its charitable and apostolic initiatives (C. C. G. G. art.53.3);
5. possible commitments to bring life to the Fraternity, particularly, when it comes to

candidates taking on office/service (C. C. G. G. art. 31.4)

6. Economic contribution, based on the ability of the individual members (CC. GG. Art. 30.3), to provide for the financial means required for the life of the Fraternity and its religious, apostolic and charitable work.

But it is still not enough: co-responsibility requires all of its members to take care of the human and spiritual “well-being” of each of the brothers and sisters (CC. GG. Art. 42.4): no one should be left alone in the face of problems and difficulties, but in the Fraternity one should find help (even material), sustenance and comfort.

In essence, to live and work today in the Fraternity means to be conscientious of some firm points, such as: meeting with others in their real situations, accompanying them on their growth as a human beings, experiencing prayer in its different forms, educating themselves on the commitment to the building of the Kingdom and a degree of ecclesial belonging that makes us perceive the sense of the global goal; the growth and actualization of the new person in Christ (Rule. SFO N. 14).

13. Multi-belonging. One of the major obstacles to co-responsibility and that which we conventionally call “multi-belonging,” is the tendency of some Secular Franciscans to join multiple groups and ecclesiastical associations. One must not forget that “The vocation to the SFO is a specific vocation that gives form to the life and apostolic activity of its members.” (CC.GG. Art. 2). When the Secular Franciscan is also involved in other associations, the Franciscan inspiration that should permeate his life totally, in every expression and manifestation, “gets watered down” when mixed with other spiritualities. Besides, when commitments increase and cross, they hinder the punctual observance of obligations of Fraternity life.

These considerations should be held in mind by those responsible for formation and by the Fraternity Councils when they appraise the suitability of the candidate for SFO profession.

Belonging and mission

14. Being open to the world. In the era of globalization, in a multicultural and multireligious situation, but also characterized by individualism and skepticism, the Church finds itself again, as in the first centuries of Christianity, facing the task of proposing to humanity the message of Jesus. The message of

the Gospel is a free gift that the Church gives to the world, and to Secular Franciscans, "to be more strongly bound because of Profession", are called to announce Christ "by their lives and words" (Rule N. 6). Word and witness illuminate each other reciprocally: if the word is denied by the conduct, it remains ineffective; but the same is true of witness, when it is not supported by a clear and unequivocal message. The love of Christ, in fact, is communicated to the brothers and sisters with examples and words, with one's whole life.

The field of mission today is immense: the sectors most marginalized in society, aboriginal communities, the poor in urban areas, migrant, refugees, the excluded....The objective should be to promote the Christian message through presence, (the sense of witness and dialogue with life), the message and prayer. But evangelizing is not only the prerogative of a few of the People of God, who were entirely consecrated and called to proclaim salvation: "The universal vocation to holiness is firmly tied to the universal vocation to mission; each of the faithful are called to holiness and mission" (Redemptoris missio no.90).

How true it is, that a Church that is not missionary betrays its fundamental task; it is also true that the SFO and each local Fraternity and every single Franciscan, as "live members of the Church," must become "witnesses and instruments of its mission among men." It is necessary, in the first place, to bring the Gospel to people in a credible way. For this, we need courage and availability to travel new roads, conquering the temptation to remain among people who think like us and to satisfy ourselves by cultivating our own garden.

The mission of Secular Franciscans is rooted in being, in life configured to the evangelical counsels (cfr. Nn. 10, 11 and 12 of the Rule), in the spirit of the Beatitudes of the Kingdom. Their style and their form of service are adapted to their talents and their personal family situation, and also to the demands of the environment in which they work. Their apostolic commitment is related in a particular way to the practice of charity, to transforming into reality the plan of reuniting all things in Christ, to the commitment of work and to the responsible exercise of their own profession, but we must not neglect true and actual political activity. Speaking of St. Catherine of Siena, her biographer wrote:

"Compromising with circumstances is part of holiness."

Even in the face of new and insidious challenges presented by globalization, Christians do not

resign themselves to an economy or vision of society oriented only on efficiency, that pushes aside the weakest, or on a nationalism that suffocates liberty and humiliates the person. In every country, therefore, it is necessary to go forth with “courageous initiatives” that affirm that we may be truly lay, that we must go forth in the service of social life according to the Thomistic concept of “the common good,” taken up vigorously again by the great and forgotten teacher Leo XIII. Even in countries where Christians are in the minority, where they cannot exercise any political weight, Christian virtues can decisively motivate and help their compatriots to accept democracy as a way of life. That must include the most fragile, those that today are marginalized and excluded, and must include even future generations, to which we must turn over a livable world.

The city and region are the places in which to build authentic relationships, where Christian charity can impregnate the function of civil structure. Secular Franciscans are asked in a personal and communal way to pay attention to the weakest and to do works of mercy: approaching the sick, teaching the illiterate, caring for children, helping the elderly, comforting the afflicted... These are the duties that we always have, practiced by the Brothers and Sisters of Penance from their beginnings, but today these duties present themselves often in new ways and they require new ways of intervention.

But be careful: one must not confuse the end with the means. The means are the life and the word but the end is evangelization (“Go and proclaim the Gospel to all people. ...”). “...There exists in some the idea that social projects are meant to be acted upon with the greatest urgency, while the things that pertain to God or the Catholic faith are things more or less details and have less priority. Nevertheless...wisdom dictates that evangelization should take precedence, that the God of Jesus Christ should be known, believed and loved, so that even social things can progress, for the advent of reconciliation. ..Social action and the Gospel are simply inseparable.” (From the Pope’s speech at Ratisbona).

15. New forms of intervention. Forty years have passed since the Second Vatican Council, but the reference to the Consiliar Magisterium (Teaching) is always current and promising with its intrinsic dynamism. We are called to project it, to apply it to new frontiers in these years according to a precise conception of the person and of the values connected to him: values that, as such, appear “non negotiable”, that is, they are not related to the process of secularization and relativism that goes through

our history.

- New forms of intervention require socio-political formation, through the understanding and development of the social doctrine of the Church. The “Compendium” from which all the faithful must draw from, will serve as a guide, but in a particular manner for those who intend to get involved in social commitments and in the political sphere with more honesty, a sense of justice and of the common good, that should mark the work of the Christian with respect to a practice sometimes separated from human values and the Gospel. It will be necessary also to read again the fundamental document of Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, and to revisit it in light of the most recent teaching, above all the second part of the Encyclical of Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*.

- The most congenial form of presence in the social scene is, for Secular Franciscans, voluntary service. Voluntary service is not only a "to do"; it is above all a "way to be", that comes from the heart, from an attitude of gratitude toward life, and asks us "to give back" and to share with the other the gifts received. ... The action of the volunteer is not seen as an interventional "stop-gap" towards the State and public institutions, but rather like a complementary presence, always necessarily attentive to the last and promoting personal styles in interventions. There is no one who cannot be a volunteer: even the most destitute and disadvantaged surely have a lot to share with others, offering their own contribution to build the civilization of love (Benedict XVI in Vienna, Sept. 2007).

- Another form of appropriate intervention is attention to the young who, not having more solid values on which they can rely, are especially exposed to the dangers of instability, aggravated by the fact that even the world of adults gives greater importance to the power that an individual can exercise or to what he possesses in economic terms, rather than to the values of honesty and morality that should belong to us. We should continue to reflect on these in order for us to be truly free and capable of choosing. The youth of today are shaken by old and new weaknesses; but they also demonstrate a large capacity; they express passion, a desire to serve and a will to discover. They are ready to realize "courage to live and to serve" is enlightened by love. To succeed, nevertheless, they need those who accompany them in the search for the

Face of Christ.

When we talk about attention to youth we do not mean to refer solely to the constitution and the animation of Franciscan youth groups, an activity for which special attitudes and predispositions are necessary, but rather to the duty of every SFO Fraternity to reflect, to discern and to pray on the subject of the "transmission of the faith", to bring to life an adult Church, capable of witnessing the Gospel in today's world. Above all, by example, we should bring the youth back to the faith and to the ecclesial community, to help them acquire a human and spiritual maturity, to help them discover that it is through the gift of themselves to others that they will become freer and more mature. The strategy consists in creating ways that enable an encounter with Jesus, recognized as the Lord who saves and gives a full meaning to the life of every person. From this encounter with the Lord Jesus, the desire to follow Christ and his call to radicalness, faithfulness, patience and discipline.

- **Ecology.** Motivated by the worrisome conditions of our planet, a new sensibility is developing toward ecological problems: based on the perspective provided by the Creator, the need to fight to deliver a truly habitable planet to future generations is imposed upon us. There arise new values, new dreams, new behaviors taken on by an ever larger number of persons and of communities. The basic principal is that of safeguarding creation. It is a principal that binds each and every one of us. It is evident that, with every planetary effort, each country and even each person, should contribute to the best of their ability.

As Franciscans, besides strengthening our own personal commitment for a simple lifestyle (Rule. n. 11 and CC. GG. art. 15.3), we are also called to build, together with the many who work in the harvest of the Kingdom, a world globalized within which all can enter, where there is a respect of creation, love among all and just relationships that allow an honest life to all. And then, taking care of creation means pledging oneself in different fields of action, each one connected to the others: from the elimination of nuclear weapons to a change of lifestyle, from a regeneration of political/economic/military power to the adoption of nonviolence as a way of living the connectedness with things created and with all creatures.

- **Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue.** In the ecumenical field it is essential to convince

oneself that ecumenism is not a matter just for the upper echelon, but rather a way to live the faith and a relationship with Jesus, being together with Him in prayer where we are all one. For this we cannot help but feel responsible for communion among all. As far as interfaith is concerned, understanding is essential, respect, reciprocal welcoming, the overcoming of the reciprocal prejudices of order, psychology and history. We should be convinced that diversity, far from leading necessarily to divisions and to rivalry, carries in itself the promise of a reciprocal enrichment and of joy. Equality, as an indispensable premise of dialogue, concerns the personal dignity of the speakers equally and not the content. The Christian in dialogue cannot hide nor be silent about the truth of his/her faith based on the mystery of Jesus Christ. Be it in relations with the members of other Christian sects, be it in relations of believers of other faiths, it is necessary, in essence, to embrace the occasions to pray together (wherever it is possible) and to find common areas of involvement such as the struggle with poverty, peace, safeguarding creation through questions tied to ethics and the environment. As far as social justice we can walk together immediately: it is not necessary to wait to untie complex doctrinal knots!

- **Mission to the people.** The Church today is paying careful attention to the development of peoples, particularly those who are fighting to free themselves from the yoke of hunger, from misery and from endemic diseases, from ignorance; who seek wider participation in the fruits of civilization, a more active validation of their human qualities; who are directing themselves with the purpose to fuller development. (cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, *Centesimus annus*, *Deus Caritas est*. ...). It is accomplished by strongly reaffirming the need to begin with recognition of the moral natural law, in clear opposition to the logical relativism that dominates national legislations and international politics. If problems are not lacking, such as the scarcity of religious vocations, then neither are the "signs of hope" in all parts of the world that give testimony of an encouraging missionary vitality of Christian people with the consciousness "of all being missionaries, all involved, be it in diverse ways, in proclaiming and in witnessing to the Gospel". Even the missionary commitment of Secular Franciscans and of Fraternities cannot and must never be limited to World Missionary Day or to a Franciscan Missionary Day. Nor is economic support to the Missions of the friars enough. A wider perspective is necessary. It includes supportive participation with the peoples of the earth by denouncing and fighting

against every violation of the dignity of the person and against grave inequalities that were and, unfortunately continue to be in the contemporary world.

Conclusion: some operating instructions

How, in practice, do we nurture the sense of belonging to a Secular Fraternity and to the whole Order? Let us never forget that our Constitutions, in art. 30.1 already cited, strongly affirm that Secular Franciscans are members of a local Fraternity, but that they belong to everyone, in life and in mission.

16. On the local level. Every single Fraternity, at the various levels (not just local, but also regional and national), should consider seriously the objective of becoming:

1. **a school of sanctity** – These are instruments that the Fraternity can use to promote in its members full development of the interior life: an intense liturgical life, sacramental and charitable life, and also taking care in organizing Franciscan retreats in the spirit of rest and renewal of life;

2. **a school of formation** - the spirit of belonging is nurtured in the measure of which the Rule becomes the "life" of the brothers and of the sisters. It will assure a kind of "assimilation" of the spirit of the Rule in the life and in the history of each person. Those who are assiduous readers of the writings of Francis and of Clare and of the ancient biographies will be strengthened in their Franciscan identity. Therefore, Secular Franciscans should regularly read spiritual readings from the Sources;

3. **a witness of ecclesial communion** – It is necessary that Franciscans intensely live their meetings (please, let's not speak any more of "monthly meetings"!) as a sacrament of the Fraternity. It is essential that everyone make the decision to make himself/herself present in the life of the brothers and sisters: rejoicing with those who participate, being mindful of those that do not come, trying to find the reasons for which someone has lost the motivation. The Council should look for and plan meetings that are pleasant, productive and enriching;

4. **participation in the apostolic purpose of the Church** – Too often Secular Franciscans tend to

stop at traditional ways in fulfilling their apostolic commitment, forgetting that the Rule recommends to us to be creative. Society has changed, the Church has renewed itself and is renewing itself again. The Gospel is always the same, but new approaches and new encounters with the Gospel and history are necessary;

5. **presence in society**, in the light of the social doctrine of the Church – Every Fraternity should question its priorities in its own missionary commitment.

- In what direction do we develop it?
- On what, for what should we concentrate our available strengths?
- How should we support concretely the proposed initiatives of the higher levels?

17. On the International Fraternity Level. One should:

- intensify horizontal and vertical communication inside the Order;
- increase reciprocal knowledge and esteem in the sphere of the Franciscan Family;
- insist that social themes enter in the ordinary formative courses of our Fraternity;
- contribute actively to the work of International Franciscans who are engaged in competent organizations at the international level, so that all Countries can undertake appropriate measures that guarantee that the human rights of the most vulnerable people be protected adequately and that their human dignity be respected;
- tear down barriers and to build bridges in order to collaborate with movements and institutions that pursue the same end (CC. GG. Art.18.3 and 23.1).