

## **Second Letter of the Conference of the Franciscan Family on the Occasion of the Jubilee 2000, in the Year of the Holy Spirit**

**“Above all, seek the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation”**

Brothers and Sisters,

1. “The year 1998, the second of the preparatory phase of the Jubilee, will be dedicated in a particular way to the Holy Spirit and to His sanctifying presence within the Church.” So wrote Pope John Paul II in his *Tertio millennio adveniente* (n. 44). Following on the letter “Reconciled in Jesus Christ” which we sent you last year, we would like to take the opportunity offered to us Franciscans this year by this circumstance to become more conscious of the place taken by the Holy Spirit in the experience of Francis and Clare and of the place which He ought to take today in the lives of their followers. May it at the same time stimulate us to discover what is the original contribution which the great Franciscan Family can bring to the movement of rediscovery of the Spirit taking place throughout the Church.

### **The Holy Spirit in the experience of Francis and Clare**

2. The Holy Spirit is the real secret which explains the life of Francis, the hidden spring from which flowed every intuition and initiative of his. Rereading the first biographies of the Saint in this light, one remains impressed by a singular fact: every chapter of these, it can be said, begins with a formula of the type “moved by the Spirit,” or “full of the grace of the Spirit,” or “by divine inspiration” Francis said, went, did.... All the great turning-points of his life are attributed to the specific action of the Spirit. It was “under the impulse of the Spirit” that Francis entered San Damiano and

received the command “Go, Francis, repair my house,” and it was the same Spirit that gradually revealed to him its meaning and significance.<sup>1</sup> It was again “by the grace of the Holy Spirit” that he later discovered that the Lord had not called him and his companions “only for their salvation, but also for that of many others.” He discovered, in other words, also the apostolic and missionary dimension of his Order.<sup>2</sup>

In his work of “formation” of the other friars, too, he let himself be guided by the Spirit: “The blessed father Francis was being daily filled with the consolation and the grace of the Holy Spirit; and with all vigilance and solicitude he was forming his new sons....”<sup>3</sup>

3. As has been said by eminent scholars, the movement set in motion by Francis was “the greatest charismatic movement in the history of the Church.” The “charismatic” traits were the novelty, the spontaneity, the immediacy of his action. His discourses were “full of the power of the Holy Spirit”; he invoked the Spirit before he began to preach, and his words poured out in such a way as to make it evident to all that “it was not he who spoke, but the Spirit of the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> Some of his typical gestures are of a clearly charismatic kind. Every time that “he was full of the ardor of the Holy Spirit, to express the exuberant warmth of his heart” he began to speak in French.<sup>5</sup> This was obviously his way for speaking “in tongues.” He did not even shrink at times from asking God to reveal His will to him “at the first opening of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup>

All this brings us to understand where is to be found the ultimate explanation of Francis’s “conformity” with Christ: not in a self-imposed program of methodical imitation of Christ in this or that virtue, but in having in himself the Spirit of Christ and the same sentiments which were in Him. His was an imitation of Christ which was “pneumatic” before it was ascetic.

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<sup>1</sup>LM 2:1 (*Omnibus*, p. 640).

<sup>2</sup>L3S, 36 (*Omnibus* p. 925).

<sup>3</sup>1Cel 26 (*Omnibus* p. 249).

<sup>4</sup>LM 2:2; 12:7 (*Omnibus* pp. 647, 725).

<sup>5</sup>1Cel 16 (*Omnibus* p. 242); 2Cel 13, (*Omnibus* p. 373).

<sup>6</sup>1Cel 92 (*Omnibus* p. 307).

4. The Holy Spirit which is the secret of the life of Christ, his “inseparable companion” as St. Basil describes him, who inspires his every action and guides his every step, is also the intimate secret of the life of Francis... And what is said of Francis, must likewise be said of his “little plant” Clare, on whom one day the Holy Spirit was seen to descend under the form of two wings.<sup>7</sup> In fact it is “one and the same Spirit” which has called the brothers and sisters.<sup>8</sup> These have been “espoused with the Holy Spirit” in imitation of Mary, “Spouse of the Holy Spirit” (a title which Francis himself helped to introduce into the language of theology).<sup>9</sup>

### What Francis taught his followers regarding the Holy Spirit

5. Francis was not content with himself living the whole of his life “in the Spirit,” but through his Rule and Admonitions also tried to stamp upon the life of all his followers this great opening to the Spirit. He once proclaimed the Holy Spirit to be “the General Minister of the Order,” regretting the fact that he could not insert this idea into his Rule, because this had already been approved by papal bull.<sup>10</sup> What the friars should desire above all things is to have “the Spirit of God at work within them.”<sup>11</sup> Both those who work with their hands and those who, like Anthony, dedicate themselves to study and teaching, should strive “not to extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion.”<sup>12</sup>

6. The Seraphic Father has also left us very valuable criteria, biblical in tone, for discerning on the one hand when a religious lives according to the Spirit and on the other when he follows the letter and the flesh: “A

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. “The Acts of the Process of Canonization” 9:4. Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993) p. 166.

<sup>8</sup>2Cel 193 (*Omnibus* p. 517).

<sup>9</sup>*OffPass*, Compline Antiphon. Armstrong and Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982) p. 82

<sup>10</sup>2Cel 193 (*Omnibus* p. 517).

<sup>11</sup>RegB 10. Armstrong and Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982) pp. 143-44.

<sup>12</sup>RegB 5. Armstrong and Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982) p. 140.

religious has been killed by the letter when he has no desire to follow the spirit of the Sacred Scripture, but wants to know what it says only so that he can explain it to others. On the other hand, those have received life from the spirit of Sacred Scripture who, by their words and example, refer to the most high God, to whom belongs all good, all that they know or wish to know, and do not allow their knowledge to become a source of self-complacency.”<sup>13</sup>

St. Bonaventure, faithful interpreter in this, too, of the thought of the Founder, has made of the anointing by the Spirit (“spiritual unction”) the characteristic of the Franciscan Order. He distinguishes among the various religious Orders of his time, “those who pay attention primarily to speculation and secondarily to unction and those who pay attention primarily to unction and secondarily to speculation,” placing the Seraphic Order among the latter.<sup>14</sup>

### **Our service of the Spirit**

7. In our life as followers of Francis and Clare how are we to rediscover this powerful spiritual lymph which was there at our origin? Today’s Church is aware of many and widely varying needs, but none of them is more urgent than this: to offer a genuine response to the world’s thirst for spirituality. Well-known is the statement made by Paul VI: “Many times We have asked ourselves what is the first and last need that we see in this blessed and beloved Church of ours... And you know what it is: the Holy Spirit! The Church has need of a perennial Pentecost; has need of fire in her heart, the word on her lips, prophecy in her glance.”<sup>15</sup>

The world, if it does not find in Christian communities a spiritual alternative to the materialism and arid technologism which characterizes today’s society especially in rich countries, will look elsewhere, at times in extremely doubtful places and forms. The attraction exercised especially on the young by such centers of spirituality as Taize, for example, demonstrates the positive aspect of the same tendency. But where have the Christian faithful more right to find “dwellings of the Spirit” than in our Franciscan

<sup>13</sup>*Adm. 7 and Adm. 12, Francis and Clare*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>14</sup>St. Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, 22:21. José de Vinck, trans. *The Works of St. Bonaventure* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1973) p. 351.

<sup>15</sup>Discourse on November 29, 1972 (*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, X, p. 1210 s.).

communities or fraternities? Many bishops want us in their local Churches expressly in order to respond to this need.

8. Saint Francis has indicated to us the guiding principle for carrying out this task: preserving the spirit of holy prayer and devotion. In other words, prayer. It is above all in prayer that the Holy Spirit creates “intimacy with God.” We may note a constant fact in Scripture: the Holy Spirit comes to those whom he finds in prayer. He came to Jesus after he had received baptism when “he was in prayer” (cf. Lk 3:21); he came upon the apostles while they were “of one mind and preserving in prayer, with Mary, the mother of Jesus” (cf. Acts 1:14). And Jesus himself had said that the heavenly Father gives the Holy Spirit to “those who ask him” (Lk 11:13). St. Bonaventure says that the Holy Spirit comes “where he is loved, where he is invited, where he is expected.”<sup>16</sup>

9. Alongside this principal duty, attention may certainly also be given to other interests and other types of “service of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:8). The Holy Spirit—as the Second Vatican Council affirmed—is at work also outside the visible boundaries of the Church, to guide the development of the social order and give everyone “the possibility of coming into contact with the paschal mystery of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> It is up to us Franciscan men and women to play our part in maintaining in life and developing “the spirit of Assisi” which has been given its highest expression in the meeting of the heads of all the religions promoted by John Paul II around the tomb of Saint Francis in 1986. A spirit of dialogue, of peace-making, of respect for creation. We should not forget, either, that the first visible effect of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was that of uniting in the one faith many different peoples. He is the Spirit of unity and he is present wherever unity is created or reinforced: between the partners of a marriage, in the community, in the whole world. To be noted also is that one of the most precious “fruits of the Spirit” is peace (cf. Gal 5:19).

10. In our own days the Holy Spirit has raised in the Church a great variety of ecclesial movements which are one of the more visible signs of the “new Pentecost” hoped for by Pope John XXIII on the occasion of the

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<sup>16</sup>St. Bonaventure, *Sermons*, Fourth Sunday after Easter, 2 (ed. Quaracchi, IX, p. 311).

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22 and 26.

Council. We must learn to appreciate this “grace of the Spirit” which is diffused in the Church today, seeing in it an effective invitation for our life and presence in the Church.

Let us also keep in mind that some components of the great Franciscan family have in recent years received special impulses towards renewing their lives by force of the Spirit, thanks to the formulation of their Rule. On December 8, 1997, in fact, there occurred the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the approval of the “Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis,” and on June 26, 1998, there will be commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the approval of the renewed Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. It is worth while giving due attention to these anniversaries in order to build a greater understanding and a determination to render an authentic service to the Spirit in the Church.

### Indications and proposals

11. On the basis of what we have just indicated as a possible “service to the Spirit” in today's Church we would like to offer some simple suggestions of a practical and operational kind.

#### *The primacy of the Spirit*

12. For the Franciscan family the most precious fruit of this year dedicated to the Holy Spirit should be a renewed effort to *restore primacy to the spirit*. Not only in a quantitative sense, by giving more time to prayer, but also in a qualitative sense, by bringing it about that every activity—manual, academic, pastoral—is imbued with that “spirit of prayer and devotion to which all other things are meant to contribute,” as our Seraphic Father exhorts us. To the renewal of the Franciscan charism may equally be applied what Pope John Paul II had to say of the renewal of the Church in general after the Council: it “cannot become a reality in any other way than in the Holy Spirit, that is to say with the help of his light and his power.”<sup>18</sup> This is the opportune moment to commit ourselves to making our Franciscan churches and houses and, as far as possible, our SFO Fraternities, into authentic “centers of spirituality.” Let us, for example, examine ways of making available “schools of prayer,” “times of the Spirit,” a well-qualified

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<sup>18</sup>AAS, 73 (1981), p. 521.

“spiritual direction,” the practice and the spread of the “lectio divina” or a meditative and shared reading of spiritual texts (especially Franciscan ones).

*The spirit of unity*

13. The children of Francis and Clare are called to live the spirit of unity especially among themselves, developing constantly closer *bonds of esteem, of concord and of collaboration between the different Franciscan families*, recalling in the words of Dante that the first companions of Francis edified the world most of all by “their concord and their joyful appearance.”<sup>19</sup> As we did in last year’s pre-Jubilee letter, we want to insist on inviting the great Franciscan family to an ever closer communion and collaboration. We ask that as far as possible our forces be united in various fields: for example in formation, in particular as regards properly Franciscan formation, in spiritual animation, in cultural, apostolic and charitable fields. Within the three Franciscan Orders (with all due respect to the specific vocation of the Sisters of the Second Order) encouragement should be given to meetings even of an informal kind, to exchanges, common moments of prayer and reflection, concrete initiatives of communion and fraternity.

*Ecumenical engagement* should find in the Franciscan family a particular willingness: the “spirit of Assisi” should make us particularly attentive and solicitous promoters of ecumenical initiatives.

*Peace*

14. We have recalled that one of the most precious “fruits of the Spirit” is peace, and we know how much our Seraphic Father himself desired to be an instrument of peace and have his Brothers spread it throughout the world, even through the manner in which they greeted the people.<sup>20</sup> The *Franciscan family ought to be in the “front line” wherever there is work for peace*. Where ethnic conflicts of all kinds tear nations apart and create situations of high tension, we ought to be promoters of peaceful concord, even if this means accepting initiatives which require great courage and upholding positions which are openly inspired by the Gospel and the “new commandment” of mutual love. This presupposes that in our own

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<sup>19</sup>“*la lor concordia e i lor lieti sembianti*,” Dante, *Paradiso*, XI 76s.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. LP 67 (*Omnibus* p. 1043).

midst above all we take the greatest care to eliminate the remotest trace of antagonism, hegemony, or division.

*The richness of the ecclesial movements*

15. Different movements throw light upon the need for a more living faith, a more concrete charity, a more heart-felt and spontaneous prayer: all these are values which Franciscan spirituality puts at our disposal abundantly in our choices of life. They stimulate our Fraternities to be more capable of letting the demands of obedience and fraternity prevail over our personal choices and experiences. We should be ready to welcome and make use of these stimulating reminders, recognizing them as *incentives to letting the rich spirituality proper to our charism grow young again* and wisely drawing from them pointers for the way in which we incarnate in our lives the spirituality proper to our charism. If we do not renew ourselves we run the risk of no longer saying anything or giving anything to the Church and to the world.

## Conclusion

16. We recognize that throughout the Franciscan Family the values which we have underlined in this letter already find positive and encouraging implementation. But we would invite you not to be content with what has already been done and is now being done, but to strive for new goals, always mindful of the exhortation of our Father Saint Francis: "My Brothers, we must begin to serve our Lord and God. Until now we have done very little."<sup>21</sup>

At the moment of writing this letter we have before our eyes the sad state of the earthquake-damaged Franciscan sanctuaries of Assisi: places which are "indispensable" to our spirituality and our living contact with Francis. While we hope for their rapid restoration so that they may remain the longed-for goal of pilgrimages, in the light of the Great Jubilee to come we pray that together with the material work there may also take place a "reconstruction" or our ever more authentic fidelity to Francis and Clare and, through them, to Christ and the Gospel.

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<sup>21</sup>LM 14:1 (*Omnibus* p. 736).



We ask our Poor Clare Sisters for a special prayer of intercession that with the help of our Father Saint Francis and our Mother Saint Clare we may let ourselves be molded by the Spirit as “new creatures” (cf. 1 Cor 11:7), docile to the Spirit who “renews all things” (Ap 21:5).

*Rome, January 1, 1998*

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