

OFS General Chapter – Rome, Italy
Homily – Tuesday November 7, 2017 – Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, TOR

Diversity at the service of unity

In chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul exhorts Christians – the Israel of God – to correspond to God’s surprisingly faithful love for his people. One aspect of this response, as we heard in the first reading, is the call to live the diversity of gifts in service and love for one another. It is an exhortation to insert ourselves fully into the mystery of our communion in Christ: “*We, though many, are one Body in Christ and individually parts of one another*” (Rom 12:5). According to these words of the apostle, this communion is twofold: on one hand, it makes believers a single body united with Christ - though many and diverse - and, moreover, as members of a single body, we belong to and we need each other! This communion is profound and extraordinary indeed!

Now, this unity in Christ is to be fulfilled putting at the service of the community the gifts that each has received from the Holy Spirit, as well as all our personal abilities, our time and effective engagement in all possible areas. If we think of the OFS, for example, every brother and sister must contribute with their gifts and efforts to the good of the Order, as indicated by art. 30 of the OFS Constitutions:

1. *The brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the fraternity to which they belong and for the OFS as the organic union of all fraternities throughout the world.*
2. *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.*
3. *In a family spirit, each brother and sister should make a contribution to the fraternity fund, according to each one's means, to provide the financial means needed for the life of the fraternity and for its religious, apostolic, and charitable works. The brothers and sisters ought to provide the means necessary for supporting the activities and the operations of the fraternities at higher levels, both by their financial assistance and by their contributions in other areas as well.*

This exchange of gifts and services is something of an extraordinary beauty, if we take into account the diversity that exists among all Secular Franciscans in terms of languages, cultures, races, social condition, educational background, etc. At the same time, when this exchange of gifts and services is not practiced nor promoted, the single body that we form is weakened and, therefore, it cannot function well and becomes ill, sometimes seriously ill. We all know that co-responsibility for one another in the Church or in the OFS is not an easy task.

In this sense, today, the work of the Chapter will focus on the *Instrumentum laboris*, which gathers the contributions of national fraternities to the 2014 General Chapter’s theme: “*How should an Order like the OFS be managed at all its levels?*”. The document says about itself: “*The focus of the Instrumentum Laboris is on the management of the international fraternity. However, as Secular Franciscans, we must remember that our commitment, through profession, is to the entire Order; that is, to all levels of fraternity ... local, regional, national and international*”. (p. 2). For these reasons, it would be good to take on the discussion of the *Instrumentum Laboris* from the perspective of the Apostle Paul’s exhortation, that is, with a commitment to put the diversity of gifts at the service of spiritual and material communion. This implies to renew the sense of belonging to the Order and to apply more faithfully the principles of subsidiarity and shared responsibility at all levels.

Our alternative: Christian love

The Letter to the Romans has a second appeal in the passage we just listened to: to live authentic Christian love. Love is the only force that impels us to put diversity to the service of unity. That is why the apostle explains the various ways in which we must live this fraternal love, with sincerity and mutual affection, anticipating one another in showing honor, contributing to the needs of the holy ones, exercising hospitality, blessing those who persecute us, showing empathy with those who rejoice and those who weep, regarding each other equally and not being haughty but associating with the lowly. All of this sounds great, but it is really a great challenge: to overcome our egocentrism in order to love as Christ loved us, even loving our enemies. How many times have fraternities endured the pounding of envy and antagonism, the desire for revenge or resentment? How many times has the testimony of forgiveness and reconciliation among brothers and sisters has been absent when there have been offenses, differences and even disputes? Christians are called to renew the face and the heart of humanity through true love. The first words of Admonition 27 of Saint Francis enlighten us in this regard: *“Where there is charity and wisdom there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility there is neither anger nor worry”*. Obviously, this love finds its source and sustenance in our experience of God, so the apostle exhorts us to serve the Lord fervently, to persevere in prayer, to lose not the joy that springs from hope, and to endure in afflictions.

Invited to the banquet of communion and love

These two exhortations of the apostle help us to understand in a particular way the parable of the those invited to a great dinner that Jesus told in the Gospel of Luke (14:15-24). In its original sense, the parable reflects, on the one hand, the rejection that Jesus and his message suffered from most of the scribes and Pharisees. On the other hand, it reminds us of the gift of the Father’s unconditional love, which found greater acceptance in the poor and those considered “unclean” in Israel, as well as in the pagan peoples who came to believe in the Gospel. Accepting the invitation of Jesus to welcome the Kingdom of God and to enter in its dynamics also means accepting the gift of universal fraternity in Christ, and welcoming with faith and responsibility the diversity of gifts and ministries that characterize the ecclesial community. In our time, marked by increasing globalization, cultural and linguistic diversity becomes more evident and pervasive, often in a single OFS national fraternity, or in a single province or convent of religious. The face of the Church is changing in many ways, but we still often see diversity as a problem, rather than a gift that enriches us – if we receive it in faith and in love, with true wisdom. As those invited first to the dinner of the parable, we may also make absurd excuses for not entering into the dynamics of service, we may resist the painstaking task to live and work together in diversity; we may only seek our selfish interests or that of our group without really committing ourselves to the common good. In his book *Blaquerna* (1276-1283), blessed Raymond Lull uses his literary imagination to show that in all states of Christian life and in the most diverse circumstances of society, the power of the Gospel leads, through the sincere conversion to Christ, to a renewed communion between persons and peoples. Let us conclude with this prayer: Lord, help us to put all our gifts to the service of others with generosity and joy. Give us the strength to love them as you loved us, who gave your life for us and give yourself to us again in this Eucharist. Open for us once more the doors of the banquet of God’s Kingdom, which he has prepared for those who do not make excuses for love, but, rather, accept they are in need of Him and of the gift of fraternity in order to live fully. Amen.