



CONFERENCE OF THE MINISTERS GENERAL OF THE FRANCISCAN FIRST ORDER AND TOR

Dearest brother Ministers Provincial and Custodes,

May the Lord give you peace!

With this letter, the Conference of Minister Generals of the First Order and the TOR has wanted to reach out to all of you in order to express our gratitude for the generous service of pastoral and spiritual care that you offer in the area of your respective jurisdictions. We especially appreciate your service to the fraternities of the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO) and the Franciscan Youth (YouFra) dispersed throughout the world. Such assistance, which is the most important service entrusted to us by the Church with regard to the secular Franciscans, has been in existence for eight centuries now and it manifests itself as a true sign of our extraordinary sense of family, in the context of our life-giving reciprocal communion. This communion among Franciscan Orders should be always stronger, more appealing and prophetic within our common mission in the Church and society.

In this year, as we celebrate the VIII Centennial of the birth of our charism, our hearts are filled with gratitude and marvelous memories of the already historic Chapter of Mats – celebrated as Franciscan Family in Assisi last April. We want to encourage you to continue accompanying the SFO and YouFra fraternities with a new enthusiasm and a new impetus. To this end we also recall the invitation of our Holy Father Benedict XVI at Castel Gandolfo, in the unforgettable encounter at the end of the aforementioned Chapter. On that occasion he encouraged us, with paternal love, to go out, with confidence and courage, to proclaim Christ's Gospel and its beauty to all, and to set out again to repair today the Lord's house, the Church, as Francis did.

Aware of our common calling and mission, we wish therefore to make together the charism of our common Seraphic Father present in the life and mission of the Church, in various ways and forms, yet in life-giving reciprocal communion, which is characteristic of our Order from the earliest days. In fact, from the beginning of the charism, the bonds between Friars Minor and secular penitents who wished to follow a way of life similar to that of Francis and his friars were very much alive and fraternal. From their testimony and from the itinerant preaching, other forms of Franciscan life were born around the friars – either active or eremitic and contemplative – that brought together religious, lay people and clerics in a new spiritual family, the Franciscan family.

Among the diverse ways of life that still exist in the Franciscan Family, that of secular Franciscans – lay and cleric – occupies a very particular place. They recognize Francis as their founder and live the charism within the secular dimension. For them, since they are an integral part of the Franciscan Family and have been historically united to us Franciscan religious, the Church granted the

privilege of having the major Superiors of the First Order and TOR as those mainly responsible for their spiritual and pastoral care. We are responsible for the higher direction (the *altius moderamem*, of which can. 303 CCL speaks), that seeks to guarantee the fidelity of the SFO to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church and union with the Franciscan Family, values which represent a vital commitment for the secular Franciscans (cf. SFO Const 85.1-2).

This is where our office and our responsibility derive from, since we are called, as major Superiors, to exercise this office personally or through our delegates, the spiritual Assistants, to guarantee pastoral and spiritual care to every single fraternity.

Even today, after 31 years since the approval of the latest Rule by Pope Paul VI, and with the General Constitutions approved in October 2000 by the CIVCSVA, the SFO and YouFra are in need of spiritual and pastoral assistance which help them in their journey of faith and of holiness, in their specific mission and to acquire a sound Christian and Franciscan formation.

For this reason, and as a concrete sign of communion and co-responsibility, upon request of the Councils at the various levels, we Major Superiors are called to appoint spiritual Assistants, selecting them with careful discernment so that they may be suitable for this service. Besides this, we should foster their specific formation so that they may also be prepared to offer an authentic spiritual assistance, which is well grounded in Franciscan spirituality. In this way, they can effectively support seculars who are responsible for formation and their respective Councils in the field of initial and ongoing formation of secular Franciscans. This is also valid for all other persons which we can appoint as spiritual Assistants, in cases where no friars are available, according to the new SFO General Constitutions (art. 89). Once they are appointed, spiritual Assistants should not be left on their own, but rather supported and encouraged by their community and their major Superior, with a true sense of family, so that they may work with our secular brothers and sisters with enthusiasm and love. Likewise, it is absolutely necessary to make sure that fraternities are not deprived of this essential guide and that, at the same time, the indisposition of Franciscan friars or sisters does not result in the disappearance of any secular fraternity.

A subject which we consider equally important is collegiality in the service of spiritual assistance to the SFO-YouFra fraternities at the levels above the local Fraternity. This characteristic offers, first of all to us friars, a valuable occasion to collaborate among ourselves in the field of assistance and, at the same time, it becomes a concrete sign of the fraternal affection which the First Order and the TOR foster for the SFO and YouFra.

Certainly a key instrument that helps us to better understand and carry out this service well are the *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO*, approved by our Conference in March 2002. After seven years since their approval, the Conference of General Assistants has informed us that the Statutes have been received very well throughout the world and have produced indeed abundant fruit in the service of the SFO and YouFra.

And so now, based on their experience, the General Assistants have now presented to us new changes to some articles of the Statutes for our approval. In their opinion these changes can help to better clarify the service of spiritual assistance. After a careful examination, we have approved them and we now send them to you as an attachment to this letter.

To conclude this letter we want to thank you and all spiritual Assistants again for your service and to encourage you even more in assisting, promoting and taking care of the SFO and YouFra fraternities throughout the world, with interest and special affection, as we remind you of the words

addressed by Encarnacion del Pozo, SFO Minister General, to the friars present at the International Chapter of Mats (Assisi, April 16, 2009):

“Pastoral care and spiritual assistance to the SFO should flow from love and fidelity to one’s vocation and from the desire to share it, rather than from the juridical norm, respecting the nature of the secular fraternity and giving preference to the testimony of Franciscan life and especially to fraternal presence”.

We thank the Lord for each one of our brothers and sisters of the SFO and YouFra who, with love and courage, follow in the footprints of our seraphic father St. Francis in the joys and sufferings of this world, promoting Franciscan spirituality in the spheres of family life, work, culture, politics, sports and in many other areas of ecclesial and social life.

Let us always remain united in the journey and in bearing witness, together with the SFO and YouFra, in the ways of the Lord, and in the realities where men and women of our time live.

May the Lord be with us through his Spirit so that we may be faithful to our calling and our mission.

Rome, October 4, 2009.



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Minister General



Fr. Marco Tasca, OFMConv.
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