# FRANCISCAN SERVANT LEADERSHIP

A Reflection on the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the OFS General Chapter 2021

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Thank you for the invitation to share with you this moment of communion, prayer, and discernment. Let me just say first of all that I have come among you today not so much as a bishop but as a fellow Franciscan. Being a Franciscan and a bishop at the same time is not always an easy juggling act. While there are many bishops who come from religious Orders, I happen to believe that they have quite different charisms, which can be potentially conflicting. Bishops are custodians of traditions while religious, especially those of the mendicant and itinerant tradition, are more identified with the people on the periphery. St Francis very wisely discouraged his friars not to compromise their status of *minoritas* by aspiring to lofty offices. He was not a rebel, but neither was he simply someone who endorsed the *status quo* of the Church at the time. He was a reformer and even a critic in the best sense of the word. He loved the Church, but also challenged and renewed her with a vision of the radical powerlessness of the Gospel.

We are living in a very privileged moment, even if it is also full of uncertainty and chaos. When Pope Francis appeared on the balcony of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome, down below in the Piazza, many people greeted him with banners that read *“ripara la mia chiesa” (“repair my Church.”)* It is ironic that a Jesuit Pope should be called Pope Francis and be inspired by a Franciscan dream. It was a Franciscan, Pope Clement XIV, who suppressed the Jesuits in 1814. God does work in mysterious ways. With Pope Francis, I believe we Franciscans are uniquely placed to transition the Church into a new era that the Holy Spirit has ushered us into. I am convinced that just as Francis and his friars were critical to the reform of the Church of Christendom, today we are called to play a critical part of the reform of the post-Christendom Church - one that is not necessarily powerful, dominant, and prestigious, but one that is poorer, humbler, but hopefully a more effective sign of the Kingdom.

I’d like to offer you a few thoughts on the notion of servant leadership that was the central theme of the *Instrumentum Laboris* of your General Chapter in 2021. At the very beginning, it is acknowledged that, “…as OFS, we see leadership differently from a simple understanding of wielding power. We call it ‘servant leadership.’ It is about emphasizing and highlighting an essential way of accompanying others, where the personality and capacity of individual brothers and sisters and of the individual Fraternities should be promoted. The plurality of expressions of the Franciscan ideal and cultural variety must be respected.”

**Franciscan leadership is rooted in the kenosis (self-emptying) of Christ**

This is a key passage in the document, and I’d like to unpack it as well as I can. First, I’d like to go back to St Francis himself and see how he understood leadership. For him, it is rooted in the self-emptying of Christ. Leadership is not only about service but. it is also about the rejection of the way that power is exercised in the world. Christian leadership, as practised by St Francis, has to be understood in the broader context of the self-emptying of Christ.

Being a servant leader is an invitation for us to live the very mystery of *kenosis* that St Paul summarises by saying that Christ, though being in very nature [a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

In this magnificent hymn of praise, Paul recapitulates the saving mission of Christ in terms of his *kenosis* or self-emptying. For Paul, Christ came to save humanity not through a show of human power and strength, but through complete weakness and vulnerability. From the beginning to the end of his mission, he demonstrated the servant leadership by radical self-emptying.

Francis of Assisi understood something of the *kenosis* of Christ. For him, it was a complete inversion of his former value system, one that was born out of a competitive, up- wardly mobile society.

Prior to his conversion, Francis was steeped in the world view that defined clearly who was in and who was out; who was honoured and who was shamed, who was first and who was last, who were the *majores* and who were the *minores.* In fact, so obsessed was Francis by the cultural expectations of greatness, power, and glory, that he set out to become one of the *majores* by way of seeking the knighthood. Unfortunately, he was captured and made a prisoner. It was only after his conversion that he began to see reality with new eyes. He began to pattern himself on the *kenosis* or the self-emptying way of Christ. And so, instead of building his self-worth according to the expectations of a patriarchal society, he turned one hundred and eighty degrees and learned the upside-down way, the culturally radical and subversive way of the Gospel.

This *kenosis* turned out to be the operating principle – the *modus operandi*- that permeated his whole existence. Thus, Francis called his brotherhood Friars Minor or the lesser brothers, in direct contrast with the prevalent culture of titles and privileges in both the Church and society at the time. He prohibited the use of money or horses, which were the means of the rich and the privileged.

**Franciscan leadership is expressed in *sine proprio***

*Sine proprio* means “without anything of one’s own.” It is the most common association that is made with St Fran cis, at least in popular imagination. It has been the most contentious issue among his followers for centu ries. The division of the first Order into three branches took place precisely because of the disagreement on the application of this core value to the life of the friars, particularly when it came to making the radical renunciation of all possessions.

But there is a deeper dimension of *sine proprio* that is not just about material poverty. Francis intuitively understood the importance of living not as a self-centred individual but as part of the larger whole. He championed the art of living in deep harmony and communion. He called everything brother or sister. He pioneered the radical life of *sine proprio*, not necessarily without material things but without being possessive. We are easily frightened by dispossession because dispossession equals powerlessness. Yet, what Francis discovered in *sine proprio* was the freedom of living with and for others. This radical relation al freedom was born out of a deep spiritual communion with God, the Creator, and the Father of all.

Nature lives *sine proprio* because nature is *sympoietic* (*sympoiesis* is a process of collective organization and production). It exists within layers of deep intercon- nectedness and flowing boundaries. Nature is not “red in tooth and claw,” not “big fish swallowing little fish” but group gatherings, communal sharing, and reciprocal relationships. The lions are as much dependent on the antelopes as *vice versa* in a delicate ecological balance that evolution has shaped over millennia.

Franciscan leadership, therefore, is about creating harmonious and sustainable living among our brothers and sisters but also in a wider relationship with all of God’s creation.

## Franciscan leadership is oriented towards the pe riphery

## Francis felt that in order to find a way out, he had to live in close proximity and even solidarity with the excluded ones in his society.

He changed sides. He had been born among the upper class in Upper Assisi. In the lower part of town lived the lower class. Francis not only moved to the other side of town, but he actually moved to the plain below Assisi where there was a leper colony. Francis and his friars decided to live socially and physically apart in a place called Rivotorto, on the fringe of the city. It was not an act of *fuga mundi, “* flight from the world.” It was a radical imitation of Christ.

Rivotorto became a symbol of the primitive Franciscan community which challenged the *status quo* and invited all to a new way of living the Gospel. In effect, Rivotorto was an expression of Francis’ adoption of an alternative consciousness, one that was not based on the ascending cultural system but on the descending or self-emptying Gospel model. It was a precarious and liminal place as Francis and his friars came to reject all forms of power and embraced fraternity, lived in poverty and minority. They attempted to do what no one else before had done. They danced to a different drumbeat if you like. They were not rear guard but vanguard, pioneers and trailblazers who responded to the great cultural challenges of their time in creative and prophetic ways.

Franciscan leadership is about empowering others to be their best self, to grow in Christian maturity and to serve as best they can. Hence, our challenge as Franciscan leaders is to accompany people from the margins into a journey towards the fullness of life and love.

We are meant to be in the coalface, in the messiness of it all and at the same time in fidelity to the Gospel. We are sent to the strong and the weak, the wholesome and the broken, the pious and the impious, the normal and the bizarre. We are to be “a Malcolm in the Middle” who occupies betwixt and between, liminal, peripheral, and precarious places. Like Christ in his ministry among the sick and the lost, we are called to meet God in the most unlikely people and places. We too must be in that frontier space. It is that precarious liminal space where the full cost of our discipleship is counted because we dare to walk with the Samaritans of our time, just as Jesus did before us.

The servant leadership model is much more than what we do to the people. It is indicative of who we are in the likeness of Christ who came to serve and to give his own life for others. Hence it is a way of life - a *modus vivendi* - before it can be translated into a way of service - a *modus operandi*. We are more than ever before challenged to embrace the journey of self-emptying that is at the heart of the Gospel.

If you noticed carefully, Pope Francis actually wore a stole like a deacon –and not like a priest- when he performed the ritual of Washing of the Feet, on Holy Thursday. I suspect it was an intentional act, a symbol of the Church that is committed to humble service, the Church that expresses *diakonia* in actions that heal and nurture people and relationships. The spirit of *diakonia* must characterize the very nature of the Chris tian ministry of leadership and service.

It seems to me that we need to recover this fundamental Franciscan intuition against the context of human struggle, which is often couched in terms of power, strength, and dominative control. The Church can only be faithful to its mission when it embraces fully and unequivocally the journey into divine vulnerability. It can be the conduit of compassion and speak the language of hope to a broken human ity only when it truly personifies powerlessness and stands where Christ once stood, that is, firmly on the side of the outcast and the most vulnerable.

Religious life in general and the Franciscan movement in particular has always revived at the point of every major change in history. It neither clings steadfastly to the old nor embraces rash revolution. Our revitalization hinges on the authentic discernment of the Spirit, fidelity to our core values and the audacity to launch ourselves into the future.

At a General Chapter, we are called to ground our core values and to find new ways of expressing them for the sanctification and transformation of the world. In reading the signs of the times, we are particularly challenged to become servant leaders in the Franciscan tradition of living the *kenosis* of Christ, of embracing radical *sine proprio,* and of serving others in humility. The challenge of Pope Francis for the Church to be bruised, wounded, and hurt because of its daring commitment to the vulnerable, is poignant to us Franciscans. To reach out to those who are on the margins of society even at the cost of our own success and power, remains the fundamental Gospel imperative. To go to the peripheries and discover new horizons in accompaniment and solidarity remains the challenge of our mission.