

October 04, 2017



**MESSAGES** - Saint Francis: Active Listener of the Word. Dear brothers, May the Lord give you peace! We are about to celebrate the feast of Saint Francis, our father. When a parent is being celebrated, the entire family meets to share their joys, emotions, and experiences; an event of that kind is also an opportunity to take stock of problems and plan together for the future. At this particular moment in time, we (as sons) are invited to reflect on the significance of this feast day, because our lives are not just a repetitive series of the same events – in fact, this year the feast of St. Francis falls at a special time for our fraternity because we are preparing for the Plenary Council of the Order, which will be held in Nairobi from June 12th to 28th, 2018.

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The theme of the Plenary Council has already been decided: “Those who have ears to hear, let them listen to what the Spirit is saying ..... to the Friars Minor” (Rev. 2:29). While the reference is to the past, in the Book of Revelation, our concern is the present moment and the specific message that the Spirit addresses to us in the many different circumstances in which the friars find themselves.

From September 18th to 22nd last, the General Definitory visited our brothers who live in Turkey — we thank them for their fraternal welcome, and for their commitment and witness. Bishop Rubén Tierrablanca (OFM), Vicar Apostolic of Istanbul, joined us in visiting the archeological sites of the Churches of the Apocalypse, where we spent time meditating on the letters to the seven Churches (Rev.1:17–3:22). This visit enabled us to connect to the messages addressed both to the Christian communities of the past, and to us here and now.

## **Listening in a Time and Place**

While visiting those places in a spirit of listening, we soon became aware of a particular process and methodology for evangelization and mission. This process is the foundation of all renewal: John is in solidarity with the persecution and suffering of his brothers and sisters and he recognizes that the gathering of the community in prayer on the Lord's Day is the appropriate setting for him to communicate his message to them (Cf. Rev. 1-3). The Lord's Day is the time and place for fraternal sharing, where anxieties and sufferings find a response in listening to the Word and in being immersed in the Spirit. Encountering the Risen Lord and listening to his voice enlightens and strengthens us in facing daily problems and emerging "victorious" in our struggles with the powers of evil. The Lord's Word is always one of hope, opening us up to the beatitude: "blessed are those who listen to the words of this prophecy" (Rev. 1:3).

## **Listening to the Spirit so as to know how to listen to the world**

Listening to the Word and being immersed in the Spirit do not isolate us from the concrete world that we belong to. On the contrary, they help us to discover our mission in the world. This is the meaning of the messages addressed to the Churches that appear at the beginning of the Book of Revelation.

The concrete context in which the Church is present is the reality of the World, represented by Babylon. Although by definition the Church is the faithful spouse, nonetheless in the life she lives she experiences the presence of evil within herself, and she is afflicted by many of the problems that beset this world. Because of this, before reproving the inhabitants of the earth for their evils, the Church herself is called to rediscover the victorious power of the Resurrection of Christ, engaging in a process of conversion that, through the light of the truth that she is called to proclaim, will bring about a renewal in her.

## **The dynamism of listening**

We can see a pattern in the letters to the Churches of the Apocalypse: each one is introduced as the word of the Risen Lord to an individual Church — "To the angel of the Church at .....

these are the words of the Son of God...” — and each concludes with a word addressed to all the Churches by the Spirit — “Those who have ears to hear, let them listen to what the Spirit says to the Churches.” While the words spoken by Christ address specific and defined situations, the message from the Spirit is universal — a message to all the Churches. This, however, is not just a generalized enunciation of principle, but is reality-based and specific to each situation.

Listening generates a process by which the received word becomes a reality in our lives. The first letter, addressed to the Church of Ephesus, delineates the stages of this process: “consider — repent — do” (Acts 2:5) Conversion is born from listening to the word of Jesus which, animated and brought into reality by the Spirit who makes a “memory” of it, produces life changes.

### **What is the Spirit saying to the Friars dispersed in the seven Churches?**

The word that the Risen Lord speaks to the Churches of Asia Minor is once again addressed to us, sons of St. Francis, in the multiplicity of situations where the Order has a presence, on several continents.

The Word spoken to the Church of Ephesus recognises and points out the significant gifts of that Church; hard work and orthodoxy. We can count these among our gifts too, but we also hear the Lord remind us that without love all of this is vain.

What is said to Smyrna deepens our hope and enlightens our discernment, teaching us to live our poverty as something enriching.

The letter addressed to Pergamon calls us to open ourselves to the purifying power of the Word, which can give us the capacity to overcome difficult situations — both in our relationship with the outside world as well as within our fraternal lives.

What is written to the Church of Thyatira helps us to recognise the path we are trying to follow and, at the same time, invites us to a process of discernment which will rid us of misguided elements or mistaken principles.

What is said to Sardis indicates that the worst thing for a community is when the interior life of its members is neglected, even if many good works are still being done. But this criticism is followed up with encouragement; change is always possible, and it can spring from the vitality and dynamism present in the Church of long ago, as well as in today’s Order.

The letter to Philadelphia offers us a way of seeing our weaknesses as well as encouraging us to persevere. It reminds us that if we are faithful to the Word, then our witness will be recognised and will be successful.

The message addressed to Laodicea reminds us that the most negative attitude is that of

feeling self-sufficient. This smothers any desire for change and progress, because the gravity of certain stagnant situations is not acknowledged — and so, neither reason, nor threats, nor the force of authority can bring about a positive resolution. Indeed, it is only the warmth brought by love that can engender cordial relationships of friendship and conviviality. The Lord does not force any door open; he knocks and waits until the door is opened in response to his voice. Love's strategy is to wait and ask to be freely received, and in this way attain its goal.

The words addressed to the Churches of the Apocalypse, therefore, resonate in a living and concrete way with us and our fraternities.

### **Listening in obedience to the voice of the Spirit**

Dear brothers, like John, we too need to consciously live the 'Lord's Day', listening to the Word of the Risen Lord and being immersed in the Spirit. Just like the communities of the Apocalypse, we need to find ourselves anew, recognising our human and spiritual identity so as to then go out to the world, inserting ourselves into that reality and witnessing to the newness of life brought about by the Lord's Resurrection. But such a mission can only take place as part of a process of conversion. Our lives, and that of our fraternities, need to be purified from the negative worldly influences that have leached into our way of life.

The voice of the Spirit reminds both us and the seven Churches that the Lord who has died and is risen knows our weaknesses as well as our strengths. The Lord calls us to always remember how much he continues to do in us today, and how much he has done throughout our history. The voice of the Spirit teaches us that we must never allow ourselves to be held prisoner by an unthinking attachment to the past, however glorious it may have been. Instead, we need to be nourished by the constant and effective renewal brought about by that Spirit, through whom the Word of the Risen Lord is ever new, vital, and relevant to any situation in which we may find ourselves.

So let us never tire of eagerly learning, and gratefully accepting the ever new dynamism that flows from an intense and passionate listening to the Word of God. Let's not be afraid of becoming more expert and mature in our listening. If we cultivate an ongoing approach of listening in a living and dynamic way, then we will be freed from the many written and spoken words that are useless and vain. The one true Word will become part of us, revealing the mind and will of God, which has become incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Our life needs to reclaim space and time dedicated exclusively to this living and dynamic listening, which will move from our senses to our minds. Then it will reach our hearts and become an active love. Before we engage in any planning, we must recover a process that comes between listening and taking action. This involves discernment occurring within the person whose inner being has been strengthened by the Spirit (Cf. Eph 3:16; 2Cor 4:16ff).

#### Francis — Active Listener of the Word

Francis was an attentive and active listener of the Word of God. He and his first companions discerned their vocations by the light of the Gospel, which became “life” for him. “His highest aim..... was to pay heed to the holy Gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace His footsteps.” (1C 84)

For Francis, it is the Spirit who guides our reading of the Word: just as in Mary and in the Church, the work of the incarnation is continued in the faithful by means of that same Spirit. (Cf. Adm 7; LtF 48-56) As a united fraternity, we seek new ways and means of renewal — always remembering that true conversion is born from the action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Therefore, together with our brother and father, Francis, we make this prayer:

Almighty, eternal,  
just and merciful God,  
give us miserable ones  
the grace to do for You alone  
what we know you want us to do  
and always to desire what pleases You.  
Inwardly cleansed,  
interiorly enlightened  
and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,  
may we be able to follow  
in the footprints of Your beloved Son,  
our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and, by Your grace alone,  
may we make our way to You,  
Most High,  
Who live and rule  
in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,

and are glorified  
God almighty,  
forever and ever. Amen.  
(Lt Ord 7:50-52).

As we prepare for the Plenary Council of the Order, may the Feast of Our Holy Father Francis be an occasion for us to be open to listening in a living and active way to what the Spirit is saying to each one of us and to all our fraternities.

While wishing you all the best for the Feast of our Seraphic Father, we also ask you to unite with us in a community of prayer, that our preparation for and celebration of the Plenary Council may have the best possible outcome.

Our preparation will also be enriched by the life-giving remembrance and joyful celebration of the 8th centenary of the Franciscan presence in the Holy Land. Truly, the Lord Jesus is with us every day, until the end of time!

Rome, 2 October 2017  
Memorial of the Guardian Angels

Your brothers,  
Br. Michael Anthony Perry, ofm (Min. Gen.)  
Br. Julio César Bunader, ofm (Vic. Gen.)  
Br. Jürgen Neitzert, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Caoimhín Ó Laoide, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Ignacio Ceja Jiménez, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Nicodème Kibuzehose, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Lino Gregorio Redoblado, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Ivan Sesar, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Valmir Ramos, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Antonio Scabio, ofm (Def. Gen.)  
Br. Giovanni Rinaldi, ofm (Seg. Gen.)

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