

**Opening Eucharist
General Chapter
May 11, 2015
Homily**

Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum, habitare fratres in unum!

Thomas of Celano, in the reading we heard at the beginning of our celebration, has provided us with an idyllic description of the life of the first Friars who placed the love they bore toward one another at the center of their lives and their evangelizing activities. Celano understands that unless and until the Brothers embrace fraternity as a central and unifying element of the Gospel life, they will not experience the fullness of the gift of the Spirit of God at work in the Order. It is clear that Celano seeks to draw attention away from the experiences of failure of the Brothers to live the radical truth of their vocation in simplicity, humility, reciprocal respect, promoting the well-being of the other and not their own personal needs and plans. Thus, Celano was as concerned with helping the friars deepen their lived experience of identity, fraternity and mission as we who are gathered here for this General Chapter.

For Celano, Friar Minors are called to live out their Gospel vocation as disciples who are grounded in a personal experience of the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus, just as St. Francis did. They are called to be ‘on fire’ with love for one another; to express this love through concrete actions; to share this love with all they meet; and to demonstrate it in the way they care for God’s beloved creation. Thus, Celano makes clear the prior and more fundamental relationship upon which the gift and challenge of fraternity must be constructed: the absolute and unconditional bond of love and trust with the Lord Jesus. It is this foundational relationship that Francis came to embrace, that directed his every activity and his every choice, and that led him to a profound experience of the Trinity as a circle of love and mercy into which all of humanity and all of creation is invited to participate. The post-synodal document on Consecrated Life, *Vita Consecrata* (1996, par. 14) makes clear this same radical demand: that we must enter into an intimate relationship of love and trust with the risen Lord Jesus if our lives are to be transfigured, transformed by God and with Jesus. All authentic discipleship must be grounded in the experience of “intimacy with the Master,” where we see “Jesus only” (*Vita Consecrata*, par. 14). It is when our lives are rooted in the eternal love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit that we are able to see beyond our own personal limits and sinfulness, to see beyond the limits and sinfulness of the brothers, and to recognize the mystery of the grace of God’s uncontrollable mercy and love, which comes to

console us in our difficulties and challenges us to live in the freedom of the children of God.

In the Gospel of John, we have been following Jesus' "Farewell Discourses" in which Jesus reveals the depth of His love for the disciples, and for all of humanity, and His promise that they will never be left orphans, never abandoned. His invitation to live in intimate communion with Him is extended not only to us as individuals but to the entire community of faith, the Church. By extension, this same invitation is given to us Friars Minor, to live in intimacy of life with one another, to receive the gift of the brother as a sacramental sign of God's presence in our world, and to live our radical evangelical commitment with passion, compassion, joy and unconditional love for the brothers and for the universal fraternity, which extends to all of humanity and all of creation.

We are reminded that our call as disciples is to become children of light, of truth, of love, filled with passion for the Kingdom of God and for sharing with others the gift of faith that we have received and which we continue to nurture. "When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. And you also will testify, because you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15, 26). My Brothers, during this General Chapter, we are called, indeed challenged, to seek the truth with love and compassion. We are challenged to examine our lives, the quality of our commitment to live in radical dependence on God and radical interdependence with one another in the fraternity of faith-filled disciples. We are challenged not to be satisfied with the 'status quo' in the life of the Order but, like the apostle Thomas, to probe the wounds of Christ, the wounds inflicted by a lack of trust, respect, open communication, honest dialogue, zeal, unconditional faith, economic transparency and all other wounds. It is the Advocate, the Spirit of God, who is always with us, who seeks to make manifest the glory and love of the Father for each of us, and who will give us the grace necessary to undertake this journey towards eternal life for which each of us longs. But we must let go of all that is not of God, all that distracts us, all that causes fear, anger or any other feelings that keep us from allowing God to instruct and guide us during these days of Chapter. Perhaps what we need at this Chapter is a spiritual Tsunami that will enable us to arrive where the Spirit might be leading us.

As the Gospel makes so abundantly clear, the promise of the resurrection provides us with the spiritual courage to take up the cross daily and follow in the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ. This following of Jesus is expressed concretely in the daily living out of our Franciscan religious profession, through our commitment to build fraternities of salt and light, and through our 'going out' to the existential peripheries and there proclaiming truth and the good news of God's unconditional and limitless mercy and love. The Spirit of God will bring to fulfillment the promise

of God in our lives and in the life of the Order if we remain true to His word, true to the life to which we have been called as friars and lesser ones, willing to humble ourselves before God and one another, begging for forgiveness, lifting one another up, and walking together towards the promise of the Kingdom.

“I have told you all of this so that you may not fall away” (John 16, 1), Jesus tells his disciples and he tells us, the members of the General Chapter, and all the brothers of the Order. We all have a share in the glory of the Son; we are beneficiaries of the unfolding love of the Father, expressed through the loving commitment of Jesus the Son, and fulfilled through the gift of the Spirit, the true Minister General of The Order, that has been given to each of us and to all the brothers. May we grow in the confidence of the Spirit, trusting that God is present here with us and will lead and guide us, bringing about a renewal of our minds and our hearts.

Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum!

My brothers, I conclude with some parts of the prayer of Saint John Paul II found in *Vita Consecrata*. Let us pray:

“Holy Spirit, Love poured into our hearts...fill our (our) hearts with the deep certainty of having been chosen to love, to praise and to serve. Enable (us) to savor your friendship, fill (us) with your joy and consolation, help (us) to overcome moments of difficulty and to rise up again with trust after (we) have fallen; make (us) mirrors of the divine beauty. Give (us) the courage to face the challenges of our times and the grace to bring all humankind the goodness and loving kindness of our Saviour Jesus Christ (cf. Titus 3:4). Amen.”