The Gift and Responsibility of Minister as Servant
(On Becoming Responsible Co-Disciples in the Franciscan Life)

Order of Secular Franciscans
General Chapter
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Chicago

Rule and Life of the Secular Franciscan Order

"The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people… going from gospel to life and life to gospel." (OFS, *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, chapter 2, par. 4)

Dear brother Tibor and members of the CIOFS, dear brothers and sisters of the Order of Secular Franciscans, may the Lord give you peace!

What a great joy it is for me to be with you for the celebration of your 2021 General Chapter here at the Seraphicum. This much anticipated General Chapter, unlike so many others, takes place at a moment of rich blessing but also of profound challenges. We commemorate the 800th anniversary of the *Memoriale Propositi* (1221), proposed to those men and women in the Church desiring to live their Christian discipleship by following the gospel in simplicity of life, sharing in fraternity, doing penance, caring for those who are poor and marginalized and promoting peace from within the context of family life, work, the Church and the larger society. This 800th commemoration provides new opportunities for an outpouring of grace and the possibility to once again renew your commitment to live passionately and prophetically your Franciscan vocation as members of a universal fraternity, the Order of Franciscan Seculars. What also is clear that as you celebrate this commemoration, you (we) must keep in mind the spiritual vision for the life of penance richly developed St. Francis' first (1215) and second (1221) *Letters to All the Faithful*.

Your Chapter also takes place within the context of the devastating global COVID-19 pandemic. It tests the limits of human and spiritual resolve. It has claimed the lives of loved ones – members of your local fraternities/Order – causing deep suffering and uncertainty: physical, spiritual, mental, social, economic, etc. It has exposed our fragility, inner confusion and contradictions. It has revealed long-standing fractures in the social fabric of societies, the destructive pathogens of injustice, social and economic inequality, racism, nationalism, exclusion, political divisions and so many other 'isms' that dehumanize, generating deep distrust, suspicion, and disaffection toward institutions. The OFS, OFM, indeed, the entire Franciscan family has not been spared some of these consequences since, as pope Francis reminds us in *Fratelli Tutti*, we are all in the same boat (Cf. 32). Our willingness to confront these many difficulties and challenges with eyes of faith, hearts of love, ears of listening and hands of compassion, ready to work together to embrace and promote God's vision of life and the world as outlined in Beatitudes (Mt. 5:1-12) and St. John's vision of the new heavens and the new earth described in the Book of Revelation (Rv. 21:1-5) can have a positive impact on the future of our troubled and wounded human community and the suffering planet (Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 49).

Critical Questions Begging a Response

General Chapter should be a time during which you ask very serious questions about your identity, vocation, fraternity, structures, missionary engagement, outreach to those who are poor and marginalized, care for the planet and also about the way you animate, govern and organize yourselves at the local, regional, national and international levels. Your *Instrumentum Laboris* has, I believe, sought to engage all OFS members in all of these areas in a way that is reflective and provocative, with the express goal of encouraging each brother and sister to deepen his/her understanding of identity and vocation, the *Rule and Life*, engagement in the fraternity and participation in the *missio Dei* entrusted to the Church by her Lord and Savior (Cf. Mt. 28:19-20; Lk 10:1-11; Jn 20:21).

In July 2021, we your OFM brothers held our General Chapter at the Collegio San Lorenzo outside of Rome. We were hosted and served by our brother Capuchins who demonstrated what servant leadership is all about; they washed our feet; collected our dinner plates; cleaned our mess in the various meetings rooms, public bathrooms, etc.; they treated us as their own. One of the many blessings of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it allowed us another opportunity to look beyond our differences and unique historical trajectory and to discover (recover) a deeply organic shared understanding of our Franciscan unity and fraternity, one that binds us one to the other as we persevere on this great Franciscan adventure.

Not only did we celebrate a General Chapter in the home of our Capuchin brothers a first in our history; we also conducted our work in record-breaking time: 2 weeks. While we felt serious constraints due to COVID restrictions, and also to the reduced time for discussion and discernment, we were able to cover a lot of essential ground. By the grace of God and the openness of the friars, the Chapter was conducted in an atmosphere that was spiritual, fraternal and marked by a deep sense of gratitude to God. We came one again to the conclusion – perhaps more a conviction – that God is not yet finished with us despite our weaknesses and failures. I am sure you will come to the same confession and conviction at the end of your Chapter. How else would it be possible for these all too human institutions to survive?

Key themes in the life of our Order, which find affinity with some of the major issues you are dealing with, include but are not limited to the following:

- Spiritual life of the friars – difficulty of recentering our lives in God; challenges of activism
- Fraternity – challenges arising from individualism and divided loyalties;
- Lifelong commitment to gospel life – how to deal with disaffection, spiritual and mental absenteeism by some friars within and departure of brothers from Order (solemn/temporary vows);
- Revitalizing life and fraternities – how to navigate the realities of aging, diminishment and other challenges, and to restructure all methods for governance and animation in light of our changing situation;
- Promoting and sustaining our vocation as co-disciples and co-missionaries in the Church and Order moving outwards from fraternity to mission in care for all of God's people;
- Promoting further integration of the constitutive dimensions of our faith - justice, peace, reconciliation, care for creation – into our spiritual, fraternal and missionary lives (Cf. *Justice in the World,* 1971; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,* 2006; *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013; *Laudato Si'*, 2015);

- Identifying and preparing effective servant leaders to care for the life of the fraternities with the express goal of creating a sense of belonging, co-responsibility, fraternal communion, and to employ effective tools for the ordering of the common life and missionary activities of the fraternities;
- Joining our lives with God's *anawim*, with brothers and sisters who are poor and excluded, seeking to live in simplicity of life as a means to help ensure that the goods of the earth might be shared in solidarity with all (Cf. *Memoriale Propositi*; Attilio Galimberti, "Living the *Memoriale Propositi* Today" related to the question of living in right relationship with earthly goods and in solidarity);
- Reaching out to youth and inviting them into an experience of the living God, respecting their creativity and involving them in collaborative ministry;
- Promoting commitment to lifelong penance and ongoing formation as the means for conversion and transformation.

These were critical themes that surfaced at our 2018 Plenary Council and that were examined prior to and during the General Chapter. They were explored within the context of a believing fraternity: believing in the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit; believing in the power of love and forgiveness over divisions and injuries; believing in our individual and common vocation to strive to live the gospel life according to the spirit of our Founder, adapted to the specific contexts and needs of the human community and the planet today and going forward into the future. Perhaps you recognize some of these difficulties and challenges. In fact, I felt a bit too 'comfortable and disturbed' as I read your *Instrumentum Laboris*, as if I were reading a description of some of the same realities taking place within the OFM world.

Renewing Life through Chapters

The goal of all General Chapters, of all local chapters, is to promote communion of mind and heart, and a renewal of the lives of each and every brother and sister of the OFS Order. Speaking about renewal, it is a long and difficult process that makes serious demands of us: the demand to return to the source of our vocation, the priorities and essential elements of our gospel way of life that, over the course of time can become less clear and, in the extreme, no longer serve to animate and set direction for our Franciscan lives. I am reminded of the Exodus event where Moses, his assistants and the Israelite (community of believers (followers) took great risk when they left everything behind and headed out into the desert, not knowing exactly in which direction they were heading and what the future might bring to them (Cf. Ex. 14:1ff). In the beginning, they kept their focus on who it was they were following, YHWH, the Lord. They also seemed to be able to maintain confidence in their leader, Moses in whom they had placed great trust. However, as time progressed, the demands of Covenant discipleship and the challenges of changing life circumstances began to weigh on their hearts. They progressively took their eyes off of the Lord God and off of Moses, the anointed leader. New altars were erected; images of the Baal gods were forged (Cf. Ex. 32:1ff); some Israelites chose to leave the Covenant community/fraternity and to cast their lot with other groups and other gods. Yet we witness a God who does not give up on those created in the image of God, who helped them time and gain to get back up after falling out of grace and favor, running back to Egypt and that this it represented.

This experience of the Israelites, this falling in and out of grace, is not all that dissimilar to the experience of our lives as OFS and OFM. How many times have we taken our eyes off of the Lord, individually and as institutions/Orders, suffering the consequences follow when we

lose our sense of direction and purpose? How many times have we harmed one another spiritually, emotionally and in other ways as a consequence of taking our eyes off of God? How many Baal altars have we erected over the centuries, transforming alien or non-essential elements into dogmatic principles and practices within our respective fraternities and Orders, those things that have little or nothing to do the essentials of the gospel life?

Separating the Essential from the non-Essential

I would like to say a word about what, in the field of missionary studies, are called 'constants in context' (Cf. S. Bevans, R. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2004). Simply stated, there are specific values or priorities of the Christian faith that remain constant no matter what specific context in which they are applied. These essential elements are contained within the credal statement of the Church (Apostle's/Nicene Creed). Within Christian life, these *constants* are connected to the life, mission, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to specific understandings and practices within the Church, the visible body of Christ, that continuously point us back to the Trine God. These constants inform the Church as it struggles to inculturate the faith within the vast diversity of cultural, geographical and historical *contexts* without losing that which is absolutely essential. At the same time, this process of inculturation, or interculturation (a more complex understanding of how faith and cultures interact and mutually inform/form one another) demands that we seek new ways to communicate the deposit of the faith as a praying and witnessing body of Christ (lex orandi, lex credendi). As some of you might recall, there was a time when the Church adopted as a lingua franca the Latin language. Over the course of centuries, people within the Church began to believe that in order for faith to be transmitted in its fulness and beauty, Latin must remain as the sole, authentic language for the praying and believing Church. With the rise of the liturgical movements within the Church in the early 20th century, and the experience of the Church in mission territories, vernacular languages assumed a prominent place in the pastoral and liturgical life of the Church. We discovered that the faith could be transmitted with equal dignity and depth by way of other languages. Another example involves the Church's understanding of the relationship between the sacred scriptures and each and every baptized Catholic. Prior to Vatican II, there was a deep suspicion about entrusting the study of the sacred scripture into the hands of ordinary Catholics. Why? Many believed that precisely because baptized Christians were allowed to probe the sacred scriptures on their own, they 'lost their way' and exited from the Church, a.k.a. the Reformation. What a surprise it was for the Church to discover, following the new direction of the Second Vatican Council, that ordinary Catholics could remain faithful to their Christian commitment and strengthen it through an encounter with the living word of God in the Bible. I cannot help but think about the centrality of the sacred scriptures in the vocational journey of St. Francis. So many of St. Francis' writings and prayers were informed by and infused with biblical texts. Why did it take so long for the rest of the Church to catch up?

Let us Love the Lord God

"With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude with our whole understanding with all our powers with every effort, every affection, every feeling, every desire and wish let us all love *the Lord God…." (*First *Letter to the Faithful*)

One short word about Franciscan essentials, which must be re-appropriated on a daily basis in the lives of those of us who have professed one form or the other of the *Rule and Life*

reflecting the spiritual insight our brother St. Francis. We are women and men of **prayer and devotion**; we believe that the Holy Spirit, the true Minister General of our respective Orders, invites us into **fraternity**, the fraternity of the Trinity and that of our Order; we embrace a **penitential lifestyle in simplicity**, seeking to remain close to God's poor, our teachers, to suffering humanity, after the example of Christ and Francis; we recognize that our discipleship in the Lord transforms us into **ambassadors of justice, peace, reconciliation and care for creation as co-missionaries** going forth from within the Church and our local fraternities; and we commit to follow the **path of lifelong formation to the gospel life**, opening ourselves daily to conversion of mind, heart and action. These are the essentials forming the kernel of the gospel life we follow. Renewal and revitalization of our individual and common lives as brothers and sisters of the OFS (OFM) fraternity depend on our willingness to move from gospel to life and from life to the gospel, allowing our lives to be transformed in this miraculous encounter with the living and loving God.

Renewal and revitalization also involve a review and revision of the very structures and methods we employ within the OFS (OFM) Order and at the level of each fraternity. Pope Francis speaks of the need for a missionary Church to go out and encounter brothers and sisters and our Mother Earth, to leave behind our obsessions with structure, doctrine, the fear of losing control over who knows what since, as the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare, we really are powerless before everyone and everything. He reminds us that the Church is called to place itself in service to humanity becoming subjected to all. Interesting. This is exactly what St. Francis called his brothers and sisters, called the Church and called all of humanity to do, namely, to embrace a spirit of humble and loving service as way of fulfilling the commandments of God. We see this call most clearly in his second *Letter to All the Faithful* (1221) written sometime soon after his return from Damietta where he witnessed the horrors of war and dehumanization and where he encountered the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamel and other Muslim believers. Francis was never the same after these experiences!

Back to Pope Francis. His call for the Church to embrace the way of humble service has given rise to many questions concerning the relationship between love of God and love of our brothers and sisters and the created universe. It also raises questions about how the Church understands and lives its identity, how it animates and governs. The pope has called for the entire Vatican structure to be evaluated and, where necessary, changed and adapted to a vision of the Holy See that is at the service of a missionary Church. In this vision, that which has been understood to be the center, the Holy See, moves to the periphery while local churches move to the center. In a missionary Church, the object of God's love – all of God's children without preference or distinction, most especially our poor brothers and sisters and our wounded planet – move to the center of the Church's attention, prayer and action. As a consequence, the very structures of the Church must continue to undergo conversion and transformation so that they might contribute to God's mission, which the Church is called to serve.

In the light of what Pope Francis has proposed for the Church, several questions come to mind regarding the future of our respective Orders.

1. **"What impact would a vision of our Franciscan life, guided by an awareness of our identity as co-disciples and co-missionaries, have on the way we live our vocation and animate and govern our fraternities?**
2. **What vision of leadership emerges from within the life and practice of St. Francis, communicated in and through his writings, and from within the**

principal writings and documents of the Order of Franciscan Seculars when placed in dialogue with Pope Francis' model of discipleship and missionary vocation as developed in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium [especially part III, par. 111-134]*?

As I have suggested to my brothers of the Order in a previous life, I am convinced that *Evangelii Gaudium*, placed within the context of our rich Franciscan tradition, provides key insights and a road map that could help promote the types of reforms spoken of in the working document for your General Chapter. A truly functioning, energized and revitalized fraternity is one that sees itself as a place for modeling discipleship in service to the universal mission of the Church. But in order for this type of fraternal vision to emerge, it is critical that we clarify our identity: who we are – we ARE Mission; Whom we serve – the Lord Jesus; among whom we are called to break open our lives in loving care and service in fraternity - OFS, Franciscan family, the global human fraternity and the entire created universe. Two other documents of the converted Argentinian Jesuit Cardinal and now Franciscan Bishop of Rome should also be studied and, where possible, integrated into our ongoing reflections and conversion journey: *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti.*

One final word about essentials and non-essentials. Too many times in our Franciscan lives, at the personal and structural levels, we can get lost in the trees (details) and no longer see the forest (big picture). We spend much energy maintaining time-tested methods for conducting our local chapters that no longer animate or provide direction on how to navigate the many new challenges coming to us from the present and the future. We perpetuate spiritual devotions that were meaningful to previous generations but no longer speak to the current or future generations of Christian believers or OFS members. Within the OFM world, we have made efforts to supplant some of the more traditional devotional practices with the introduction of such methods as *Lectio Divina* or *Emmaus*, as a means of coming to a deeper experience of encounter with the word of God, moving from gospel to life and from life to the gospel. While it has gained some traction, many of the brothers prefer to fall back on older spiritual forms, that make less demands on them, most especially the demand to open their (our) hearts and souls to each other in fraternity. We have a long way to go on this journey into Covenant discipleship. And we have tried to move from a model of conducting our local chapters as business meetings to moments in which the sharing of our faith and our struggles are encouraged and welcomed.

Leadership Understood from Within a Franciscan Vision

If I were a scholar of the gospel of St. John, I would say "all is prologue" since everything that John says everywhere else in the gospel is already found in the opening prologue. When speaking about servant leadership, a key theme of your OFS General Chapter, I also would say the same thing: all is prologue. While specific leadership skills and attitudes are vital to the animation and governing of your fraternal life and mission, as your *Instrumentum Laboris* elaborates, nevertheless, they depend on the foundation, the 'prologue' – a lifelong commitment on the part of members who are by vocation co-disciples and co-missionaries with the Lord Jesus and with all brothers and sisters in the OFS fraternity and the Church. Here, I would like to call special attention to the theme of fraternity. For St. Francis, fraternity was a sacramental space in which individuals sharing a common faith, hope and love were provided the opportunity to grow in awareness of and commitment to their lives as disciples and missionaries. Fraternity is a school where humanity and faith are deepened; where one's capacity to love, forgive and hope are expanded; where one is permitted to catch

hold of the beauty and goodness of God, God's unlimited love and mercy for all. As a consequence, the context for all exercise of the service of authority and animation – Ministers, Vice-Ministers, Councilors, Secretaries, Treasurers, other temporary categories of servant leadership – is this school of discipleship, which, for St. Francis, is the fraternity. In his Pentecost Letter to the OFS in 2021, Br. Tibor, citing Genesis 2, speaks to the centrality of the fraternity for our human, Christian and Franciscan lives.

"*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.*" We are created and destined to live together with others, to be in community, to love and to be loved. **The heart of our Secular Franciscan spirituality is the fraternity, where we experience the love of God and the love of one another."** (Emphasis added)

Franciscan Leadership is about Service and Liberation

As difficult as it is to admit, in far too many cases the exercise of Franciscan leadership employed currently in our respective Orders follows a logic and practices that are foreign to our specifically Franciscan understanding of the service of authority. This logic, these practices oftentimes promote – or at least produce - a two-tier structure of master/slave or boss/employee, concentrating all power and responsibility in the hands of a privileged few and removing all sense of involvement and co-responsibility on the part of the majority. Left unattended, this can lead to inertia, loss of a sense of feeling a vital part of the fraternity and can lead to other abuses. Leadership that functions in these ways can generate a sense of disaffection, anger and even passive/aggressive behavior. Open conflicts can and do erupt within the fraternities over competing understandings of leadership, not to mention specific forms of prayer, service to the poor, political ideologies, etc. causing individuals to take sides and draw battle lines. For other members of the OFS, feelings of being locked out or left out of the discernment processes of a fraternity can lead them to 'check out', either absenting themselves from the fraternity, or by formally abandoning the Order. This phenomenon happens also within the other Franciscan Orders, the "Hotel St. Francis effect," and within the monastic life of the Poor Clares and other Franciscan-inspired contemplative women's groups.

There are different causes for these distortions in the way the service of authority is exercises. In the *Instrumentum Laboris* you speak of brothers and sisters chosen and elected to serve their fraternities who bring with them structural and personal problems and limitations. In some cases, they bring dysfunctional and/or ineffective models of leadership they have experienced and inherited, that are operative within their local fraternities. Others bring personal insecurities, obsessive/compulsive behaviors, a general lack of human and/or spiritual maturity, functional incompetence, etc. Added to this is an apparent lack of good methods for ongoing formation in servant leadership. I refer you to your working document for a fuller analysis of deficits and challenges. It points to the need to put in place a better process for the discernment of individuals and to ensure a proper formation to servant leadership of those who have been elected. I would remind you, however, that leadership formation, critical as it is, does not take place independent of the life and growth of the fraternity: local, regional, national or international. Leadership training should be integrated into the ordinary life of the fraternity involving all sisters and brothers.

I draw your attention to four aspects of a Franciscan model of servant leadership that might serve in your quest to promote authentic servant leadership within your Order.

(1) Servant leadership takes place in the context of a learning community/fraternity; it is fundamentally an **interpersonal exercise**, the development of skills that bring leader and follower, Minister and member, closer together. While individual skills-building can promote better organizational and management qualities, a good Franciscan leader is someone who remains **deeply connected to the life of each of the members** of the fraternity, learning from them even as he/she 'teaches'.

(2) Servant leadership requires a **deep sense of humility** borne in the crucible of crises, the recognition of one's limitations and sinfulness and the joyful acknowledgement that everything and everyone is a gift from God. We have only to look to the journey of leadership experienced by St. Francis. His was a process of trial and error, learning as he and the brothers *did the gospel, did penance*. When Francis fell, he did not simply get back up on his own; he was pulled back up by God and by the brothers. Servant leadership knows when to step back and allow God, working through the fraternity, to take the lead.

(3) Servant leadership always **seeks to communicate** the central values of gospel life **by way of example**, embodying these values in a way that does not call attention to her/him but rather that enables all brothers and sisters to want to progress along the way of holiness of life (pope Francis: attraction by witness). Something a $6^{th}/5^{th}$ century B.C.E. Chinese philosopher and founder of Daoism once wrote continues to speak to us today: "A leader is but when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: "We did it ourselves."

(4) Servant leadership does not shrink from its responsibility to **recognize and sanction elements of the life of the fraternity that are negative, sinful, or do not promote growth in holiness of life**. Good Ministers – servant leaders – accomplish this task by demonstrating genuine care, recognizing the fragility of each person, while, at the same time, reminding the sister or brother that he/she is created in the image of God and is inhabited in the hearts of each and every sister and brother, as Francis writes in his second *Letter to All the Faithful*, in his *Admonitions* and elsewhere. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all who have embraced the way of penance, the gospel life that gives us the courage to confront and overcome all adversity together in the believing, serving, and loving fraternity of OFS/OFM/the Church, on the road with all of humanity and creation.

My Personal Journey as Minister and Servant of the OFM

I would like to share with you several personal experiences with my OFM brothers whom I served as Minister for eight years. At the beginning of my service, I recognized my own inadequacies and lack of skills for this particular role of service. Almost intuitively, I was drawn to the description of the role of servant leadership in the life of St. Francis whose role was minister but who identity was servant. This distinction is critical to any understanding of leadership within the Franciscan movement. Br. Francis constantly confessed his limitations and standing before God and his brothers (and sisters), accepting the role and responsibilities as Minister but, at the same time, placing this role within the context of a biblical understanding of service. He drew upon the example of Jesus in John's gospel where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. (Jn. 13: 1-17) On his deathbed, he asked that this same text gospel text be read aloud for him and also for all the brothers and others gathered around him. His dying wish was that each and every one of his followers might embrace a spiritual vision

of life, vocation and mission defined and lives through the placing of oneself at the service of all. Is not this a central message in the life and preaching of Pope Francis? Why, then, are Catholics so upset when the pope washes the feet of a Muslim female prisoner, when he embraces the Rohingya in Myanmar, when he goes to great lengths to keep contact with our poor brothers and sisters, when he sends messages to the world's leaders calling them to 'wash the feet' of their brothers and sisters through care for the poor, the marginalized, by promoting peace and dialogue and by caring for our wounded and threatened planet?

I cannot tell you how difficult it was for my brothers to accept the notion that I could be both General Minister and Servant at the same time. When I would go to conferences at some of our institutions, conduct visitations among the different entities, the brothers continually tried to give me a name and a title that did not belong to me; nor is it part of our Franciscan spirituality. "Reverendissimo," "Superior General", Father General: where in our Franciscan lexicon are these words to be found? Nowhere! Let us never forget that *language shapes behavior and reality.* It distorts the true nature of relationships within the body of Christ, within the broader human community and within the fraternities of our respective Orders.

Something that was even more difficult for many brothers to do was to recognize that while it was true that I was the 120th successor to the role of Minister General and Servant, I was not the only 'successor of St. Francis': more than 12,000 other brothers also were the successor of St. Francis. What if we were all to come to the realization that WE ARE THE SUCCESSORS OF ST. FRANCIS? What would this do to our quality of life, witness and to our relationships in the fraternity? What would it do to our sense of belonging and to that of being co-responsible with and for one another, with and for the Franciscan charism? I think one reason why my brothers did not like it when I said this to them was that it made them have face the fact that they, too, are directly responsible for the life of the Order.

Today, without any hesitation, I say to each and every one of you: **"Each of you is the successor of St. Francis!"** Sit with that for a moment. If you believe this to be true; if you embrace this identity; can you imagine what transformative power this might have over your lives, your fraternities, your Order? But the only way to achieve any of this is to undertake a most difficult journey, one that requires of us self-renunciation, a willingness to no longer seek to control or manipulate anyone or anything, nor to simply sit back and allow others to do our work.

Humility is Who God is

At the heart of the different understandings of servant leadership found within the life of Jesus in the gospels, within the life of St. Francis and in the lives of many faithful followers of St. Francis is the virtue of humility. Let us not be confused or distracted by a false sense of the nature of authentic humility. This virtue begins in the divine being. It is God who, by embracing the cross in Jesus, humbles self in an act of pure, unselfish love (Cf. St. Francis, *Praises of God*). German theologian Juergen Moltmann, reflecting on the suffering of humanity following the Shoah (Jewish Holocaust), urges us to plunge ourselves into the depths of the crucifixion where we will come face to face with the humility of God.

"God is not greater than he is in this humiliation (the crucifixion). God is not more Glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity." (Cf. I. Delio, OSF, *Franciscan Prayer*, Cincinnati, St. Anthony Messenger, 2004: 116.)

This same understanding is found in chapter 2 of the Letter to the Philippians:

"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, 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[b] 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!" (Phil 2: 6-11)

True Franciscan humility can be acquired only by entering into the suffering of God, embracing the cross of Jesus and of God's people. We must allow the suffering of Jesus, which continues today in and through suffering humanity and a suffering planet to embrace us and teach the way of This means that we must allow all of ourselves to be embraced by the humble and crucified God. If we can open our minds and hearts to this difficult truth, if we can follow the path of penance leading from the cross to the promise of the resurrection, we will then begin to appropriate the very spirit of servant leadership so desperately needed within the OFS universal fraternity and in all of the various Franciscan Orders and movements.

Amazing Things Happen When We Follow the Path of Humility

Franciscan leadership is about humanizing all encounters and all work of the fraternity. Returning to my personal story of leadership, I began to notice qualitative changes in the nature of my relationship with the brothers when I made my service all about them, about their human, Christian and Franciscan growth. When I could allow myself to be a brother among my brothers, amazing things began to happen. The friars became much more engaged. After all, they too were the successors of St. Francis! More time was devoted during my visits to listening and accompanying, sharing stories of success and failure, disillusionment and hope, difficulty and the power of the fraternity for overcoming all adversities. In situations of tension and conflict, rather than enter into the fray, I found myself being directed by the Holy Spirit to step back, listen to what was being said and to de-personalize the moment in order to gain some measure of spiritual objectivity.

Franciscan servant leadership requires a willingness on the part of all leaders not to let pride, defensiveness or any other human weakness keep us from reaching out to our sisters and brothers following the example of God in Christ. St. Francis steadfastly called all Ministers to be dispensers of mercy and pardon, promoters of reconciliation, placing God and the other person at the center of all attention, urging them to embrace and welcome brother or sister, most especially in moments of failure and sinfulness. (Cf. second *Letter to the Faithful; Regula non bullata; Regula bullata; Admonitions; Testament*) This same spiritual understanding of servant leadership finds echo in a prayer attributed to St. Francis, borne in the crucible of human suffering during World War I: "Lord, make me an instrument of peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light." The way of the humble God; the way of redeeming love.

Ecclesial Limitations and the Challenge to Identity and Servant Leadership

OFS is not only a universal fraternity; it is an Order, a sociological and ecclesial reality, as your working document insists. This reality and recognition on the part of the Church brings with it opportunities and challenges. One of the lingering challenges you face is related to an ecclesial misunderstanding of the nature and role of the laity within the universal Church. I have the perception – something you might also sense – that the hierarchical Church treats the laity in general, and Orders, Associations and movements of laity as 'second class citizens', in need of supervision and to be controlled. In speaking about 'second class citizens', I am reminded of painful moments in Assisi when during several of the annual celebrations of the feast of St. Francis, your Minister General was not allowed to sit with the other Generals. I was never told why when I asked. However, clearly it was because he is not a cleric. But he is a Minister General! What other title does he/she need? A second question relates to the difficulty your Minister General has in trying to meet with the pope. Why should it be difficulty – even impossible – for the Minister General of an Order to obtain an audience with the pope in order to share the fantastic story of the witness of life and evangelizing efforts of the OFS and to seek counsel.

Such questions take us into the minefield of clericalism, an idolatrous mental, spiritual and organizational concept of ecclesial identity based upon a system of privilege and accumulation of power, separating ordained from non-ordained, and having little or nothing to do with a genuine sense of gospel service (Cf. Pope Francis, Special Synod of Bishops 2018). This illness continues to create difficulties for all of us. Even your brothers in the First Order and the Third Order Regular suffer from what I would call an identity crisis provoked and sustained by the institutional Church. We are a fraternity called to one and the same vocation as lesser brothers, each with his own proper dignity and gifts. We are a brotherhood; we are not a clerical institute. And yet, the institutional Church continues to call us by another name: a clerical institute. These challenges probably play a role in the ongoing debate about the proper role of spiritual assistants at all levels of your Order. I know that for some OFM brothers, a clerical mentality distorts the way they interact with OFS and other laity, and vice versa. There is something institutional that is deeply flawed and in need of correction.

As I said at the beginning of this sharing, I would be succinct and brief, no matter how long it might take me. There is so much more that could be said but, in the end, what we remember about a person is not the words she or he shares. We remember, rather, the way they live their lives: the way they welcome us when we were a stranger; the mercy they show to us when we cannot forgive ourselves; the hope they transmit to us when we experience a sense of hopelessness; the peace they transmit to us when we are at war with ourselves and others; the love they demonstrate by simply embracing us and reminding us of our blessed and graced existence, that we are beloved daughters and sons of a loving God.

In closing, I wish to share with you the same message I shared my OFS brothers and sisters during my fraternal visits to the OFM friars. The words in this message are not of my own making. They were transmitted to me in the course of a number of encounters with my brother and friend Tibor. He was – and remains – a mentor and a true brother, who has shown me by his life what it means to follow the gospel in peace, demonstrating love and mercy and seeking to help me and all of us to stand steadfast and keep moving forward.
Here is the message that Tibor told me that I should share with the OFS each time I visited them:

1. You are an Order with all the rights, dignity and obligations that come from bearing this identity. Therefore, you are the principal protagonists for your spiritual, fraternal and apostolic/missionary lives. Do not wait on others to give you a name, shape your identity and control the way you animate and govern. This is your duty, your mission and your life.
2. You are a fraternity of sisters and brothers of penance, consecrated to live the gospel, called to cultivate your spiritual and fraternal lives so that you might love one another and love God's *Anawim* – our poor and marginalized brothers and sisters - as a mother loves and cares for her children (Is. 49; *Admonitions*).
3. You are a missionary fraternity, called to open yourselves to the universal OFS Order, the Franciscan family and the universal Church, going forth as brothers and sisters, promoters and ambassadors of social friendship and universal fraternity, as described in St. Francis' *Letter to All the Faithful,* in your *Rule and Life, General Constitutions* and expressed by pope Francis' in most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti.*

Br. Tibor also asked me to convey this same message to the OFM friars since not all of them understand, appreciate or fully respect your OFS identity. Tibor, I did my best to share these words of encouragement to your and my brothers and sisters, OFS and OFM.

I close with a thought from Blessed Raymond Lull, SFO, theologian, poet, language instructor and missionary that might help you in your Chapter deliberations:

The lover was asked to whom he belonged.
He answered: "To love."
"What are you made of?" "Of love."
"Who gave birth to you?" "Love."
"Where were you born?" "In love."
"Who brought you up?" "Love."
"How do you live?" "By love."
"What is your name?" "Love."
"Where do you come from?" "From love."
"Where are you going?" "To love."
"Have you anything other than love?"
"Yes, I have faults and wrongs against my beloved."
"Is there pardon in your beloved?"
The lover said that in his beloved were merch and justice,
and that he therefore lived between fear and hope.

Gospel identity. Servant leadership. A heart shaped by fraternity…all borne in love and destined for love…Brothers and sisters, let us begin anew!