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Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

Reflection Session

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The various approaches to contemplative prayer by hermits, monks, cloistered nuns, non-Christians, clergy, laity, and members of the multitude of religious orders that have existed in Church history may lead one to wonder about what distinguishes contemplative prayer for a Capuchin. A group of 30 Capuchin formators gathered in October of 2011 to discuss this very issue and produced several documents for reflection.

To prepare for our discussion, first read the article on “Forming Contemplative Friars” by Bobby Barbato of Our Lady of the Angels Province. Then take time to reflect concretely on the questions below. The goal of this exercise is to share with other members of the community our own experience of contemplative prayer in order to better understand each other, but more importantly, to consider what steps we may want to take individually or as a fraternity to further strengthen our experience of and commitment to contemplative prayer.

As with every other aspect of the Capuchin charism, contemplative prayer is not simply an individual experience and commitment but something which draws its life from the fraternity. Therefore, it is essential to be able to discuss our experience, both to receive the support of others and to witness to the fruits of our contemplative experiences.

1. First share your general experience of prayer. How do you define prayer, mental prayer, or contemplation? (cf. pp. 1-3 of the article)
2. Concretely speaking, how vital is contemplative prayer your life as a friar? (cf. pp. 3-5)
3. What is the atmosphere of prayer in your friary? Is it conducive to contemplative prayer? Speak about times for prayer, space, and opportunities for days of recollection and retreats. (cf. pp. 5-7)
4. What tools do you find are helpful for your prayer, i.e., spiritual direction, methods, paths, techniques? (cf. pp. 7-8)
5. How do you see your experience of contemplative prayer as related to the liturgy in your fraternity? (cf. p. 8)
6. Have you ever tried a form of Franciscan *Lectio Divina*? (cf. pp. 9-10)
7. How do you concretely integrate contemplative prayer with the rest of your Capuchin life? (cf. pp. 10-14)

Forming Contemplative Friars

A talk by Bobby Barbato at the 2011 NAPCC conference on contemplation

I. Introduction:

Peace, brothers! I am here to offer some thoughts on the task of forming our brothers in contemplation during initial formation. I have tried to reflect on our Franciscan heritage, the documents of our Order, the reflections of the brothers as well as my own experience. I do not pretend that this is a comprehensive presentation, but I do hope you will find it helpful. I am going to speak in broad terms, and not focus on any particular stage of formation.

Inspired by St. Bonaventure, let me say that if there is anything good in this talk, attribute it to the Holy Spirit. If there is anything wrong with it, blame those who asked me to give it in the first place!

Just to begin with, I will admit that I am not going to focus on exact precision in regard to terms. When I talk about contemplation, I am speaking mostly about what the *Constitutions* call mental prayer, which can also be called interior prayer, or contemplative prayer, as long as the last is not understood as what we call infused contemplation. I am also referring to those things we might call *contemplative practices*, which are consciously directed toward contemplative prayer/living. I think perhaps Thomas Merton's definition of *active contemplation* is helpful:

“All traditional means and practices **of the interior life** come under the heading of *active contemplation* to the extent that they help us to know and love God by the simple act of gazing upon Him. Active contemplation demands thought and action and acts of will. Its function is to awaken and prepare the mind, to turn the heart towards God, to arouse a desire to know God better and to rest in Him...Above all, active contemplation prepares the way for love.”¹

I am speaking of those things which contribute to what the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes calls *the contemplative dimension* of religious life:

We describe the contemplative dimension fundamentally as the theological response of faith, hope, and charity, by which the believer opens up to the revelation and communication of the living God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. As the unifying act of all human movement towards God, the contemplative dimension is expressed by listening to and meditating on the Word of God; by participating in the divine life transmitted to us in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist; by liturgical and personal prayer, by the constant desire for God and the search for his will in events and people; by the conscious participation in his salvific mission; by self-giving to others for the coming of the Kingdom. There results, in the religious, an attitude of continuous and humble adoration of God's mysterious presence in

¹ *What is Contemplation* (Templegate, Springfield IL, 1978), 26. Emphasis mine.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

people, events and things: an attitude which manifests the virtue of piety, an interior font of peace and a person who brings peace to every sphere of life and apostolate.²

I would like to begin with a reflection on two friars who are very important to us and any discussion of being Capuchin Franciscans: Francis and Bonaventure.

We all look to Francis of Assisi as the *forma minorum*, the one who inspires all our discussions about our Capuchin Franciscan life. Therefore, I think it is important to realize one thing: Francis was **not** a natural contemplative. I know this goes against what a lot of people believe about him, but I think it's true and important to note. I won't go into all the details, but basically Francis got his energy from the attention of other people, and going off by himself to meditate or pray was not his natural inclination.

Yet, we know that Francis *was* in fact a contemplative, and did spend a generous amount of his time in hermitages, on mountainsides, on islands in the middle of lakes, to give himself to prayer. And this was because he realized he needed to do this. He had such a powerful personality and his greatest temptation was to make himself the center of attention that he knew he had to spend a lot of time and energy away so that he could remember who he was and who God was.

In other words, Francis learned to be a contemplative. It was something that was formed in him through his lifestyle and practices. So there is a point in trying to form people in contemplation, even those who seem far from it by nature.

The other friar I would like to consider briefly is Bonaventure, sometimes called the second founder of our Order. Unlike Francis, whom he really admired, Bonaventure *was* a natural contemplative. He naturally gravitated to the University of Paris, and even after joining the friars, he very contentedly settled into a very contemplative mode of life, teaching and writing. He had many great insights even early in his career, but I think it's true to say that Bonaventure did not enter into true contemplation until he was ripped out of his comfortable, contemplative environment and thrown into the cauldron of being the Minister General of the friars.

Bonaventure found being minister general an anguishing experience. He had to leave the peaceful life of academia, and was plunged into a world which challenged his contemplative nature. After three years, he fled to Mount La Verna, and wrote: "Moved by the example of our most blessed father, Francis, I eagerly desired this peace...It happened that...I was moved by divine inspiration and withdrew to Mount La Verna since was a place of quiet. There I wished to satisfy the desire of my spirit for peace."³ It was in the midst of his anguish that Bonaventure had the vision that led to his writing one of his great spiritual masterpieces, the *Itinerarium*. It was only after he was engaged in the problems and challenges of the world that Bonaventure was able to deepen his contemplative gaze.

² *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, Decree of March 1980, I.1.

³ *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, Prologue 2.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

So there is also a challenge in forming those who are contemplative by nature to becoming Franciscan contemplatives, engaged in prayer but also engaged in the world as servants.

In our work as formators, we will run into many Francises and Bonaventures, and everyone in between. This means that formation of contemplative friars is highly personal. On the other hand, there are things that we can put into our formation programs to help us with this task.

II. The Tasks for Formation of Contemplative Friars

What does it mean for us to form our new friars in Franciscan prayer? The task of described this way by the Fourth Plenary Council:

Formation should aid Franciscan prayer in such a way that prayer becomes more and more the expression of our whole way of being, our values, our essential individual and community existence, and the demands of our times. Inner or mental prayer, personal and of an affective character, has always held first place in our traditional prayer...⁴

So that's it. Go and do that!

What are the tasks that face us as formators? John Corriveau said in his Circular letter on prayer: "Contemplation leading to witness is a gift of the Holy Spirit, the source and inspiration of every Capuchin vocation."⁵ This reveals that we as formators have two main tasks: to form the brothers in a life of prayer within our Capuchin Franciscan tradition of contemplation, and to help them integrate their contemplative prayer with the rest of their lives as Capuchin Franciscans, reaching out in service.

1) Forming the Brothers in Prayer

Making interior prayer a constitutive part of our lives is an essential part of our Capuchin Franciscan vocation. Calling the friars in formation to this is one of the purposes of formation. What can we as formators do to help with this process?

a) Forming Consciences

In the chapter on prayer, our *Constitutions* say: "It is of the greatest importance to form one's conscience about the vital necessity of personal prayer." (53.1). As formators, we are called to help the brothers coming to us to do precisely this, form their consciences to accept the practice of interior prayer, mental prayer, contemplative prayer, as vital and life-giving, to the point that they are convinced that it is always and everywhere essential to their being Capuchin Franciscan friars.

⁴ IV CPO 40.

⁵ Circular Letter 18, The Prayer of the Brothers, Part I: 3.2.

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Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

If we are to convince the friars in formation of this, brothers, then we have to be convinced *ourselves*. We have to embrace the belief that a life of contemplative prayer is an essential part of our vocation. This is not just my opinion, not just the personal preference of some of the friars, or a point for debate in formation councils. Doing reading and research for this presentation has put me in touch once more with how contemplative prayer is given to us within our vocation in the Lord and in the Church.

We know that this is our call in the church. We've heard from Br. Christopher about the historic reality, about the vision of the early Capuchins in regard to how they were called to live out their Franciscan vocation. The Church ratified this vision and has never taken that ratification back. Vatican II called us to renew ourselves by connecting with the root insights of our vocation and renewing our living of them in our own times.

In 1968 Paul IV said to the friars: "The contemplative spirit, which shines forth in the lives of St. Francis and his followers... is a precious gift which his sons must now again promote and put into practice. True renewal of your Order must flow from the living and life-giving spring of prayer, which has many expressions. This is absolutely necessary if the contemplative aspect of your way of life is to be rediscovered, at the same time giving greater strength and broader efficacy to your apostolate."⁶ John Paul II also repeated this sentiment: "You have justly reaffirmed the first thing which ought to involve your life, whether personally or as a community—prayer and in particular, according to your very genuine tradition, contemplative prayer."⁷

These words are not just an ecclesial definition, but a plea. The church has need of the many different charism and forms of religious life, including ours. In a very real way, the Church does not tell us who we are: it calls us to be who we've said we are. The Church asks us to be the contemplatives we say we are. We've also never stopped telling ourselves who we are supposed to be.

In a document in the *Analecta*, 1974, in a reflection on the Life of Penance in the Order after Vatican II, the authors called "a lack of mental prayer" the "most damnable deficiency and the cause of all evils," as well as resistance to the Holy Spirit! They reminded the friars of the *contemplative work proper to our Order, the special charism of the Capuchins, as history attests—prayer and the promotion of prayer among the people of God.*⁸ Most documents since then have avoided the extreme language, yet the call has continued.

This is clear, of course in our *Constitutions*. The theme has been reiterated in the Plenary Councils of the Order. The Second Plenary Council (Taizé) was dedicated entirely to the theme

⁶ *Analecta OFM Cap.*, 90.5 (September/October 1974), p 277.

⁷ "Uomo de perfetta letizia, Operatore di pace e di prosperita universale," Message to the General Chapter, August 15, 1982, in *Con Francesco nella chiesa* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 145. Translation mine.

⁸ *Analecta OFM Cap*, 90.5 (September/October 1974), 319: "Lacuna damnosissima et prima omnium malorum cause est defectus orationis mentalis, una cum resistencia Spiritui Sancto obiecta..." "...munus contemplativum Ordini nostro proprium... Charisma speciale Capuccinorum, historia teste, est oratio ac promotio orationis in populo Dei."

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

of our prayer. Other councils touched upon the theme, but the most dramatic was probably the Fifth Plenary Council (Garibaldi) on our prophetic presence in the world. Instead of beginning with a focus on poverty or prophetic action, as might have been expected, the council focused first of all on our contemplative call. Flavio Carraro called contemplation ‘perhaps the theme with the most urgency and power during the council at Garibaldi.’⁹

The document produced by the fifth PCO begins: “Our presence in the church and the world demands contemplation as its very foundation.”¹⁰ It continues with a long reflection on contemplation, before moving on to the themes of fraternity, poverty, and witness, especially among and for the poor. This reflects what Elizabeth Johnson said in 1994: “The emerging understanding of [religious] life is primarily that of persons and communities called to prophetic ministry embedded in a contemplative relationship with God.”¹¹ For us this “contemplative relationship” is expressed especially in a lived commitment to mental prayer, interior prayer, contemplative prayer.

I could cite other historical and contemporary sources that reiterate the essential place contemplative prayer has in our lives, but I think the point is made. Our task is to help ourselves and the brothers in formation not only know this truth, but accept it and integrate it into their own vision of life, their own consciences as Capuchin Franciscans. I would like to offer some reflections on how we can help this come about in initial formation.

b) Creating the Atmosphere

Formation is and should be a unique time in the life of those who come to us to enter into our way of life. In a real sense it is *artificial*, but I don’t mean by this it is pretense or fantasy. Rather I am referring to the meaning of the word in regard to creativity: during formation we have the gift of being able to create to a great extent the atmosphere and reality the friars in formation will experience. In formation houses and formation programs we have the ability to create a particular atmosphere to help the brothers become contemplative friars.

What we need to do, then, is consciously create as much as possible an atmosphere in which the brothers may develop a life of contemplative prayer. In formation in many ways we have the opportunity to give the brothers the time and space in which to do this.

John Corriveau says in his circular letter on prayer: “When the *Constitutions* speak of mental prayer they do not begin with a description of a method, but rather, with a faithful commitment of our time!”¹² The second plenary council puts the reality baldly: “One who has the spirit of

⁹ Circular letter 24, *Messagio all’ordine in nome dei Frati del V CPO*, 3.

¹⁰ *The Path of Renewal: The Documents of the Five Plenary Councils and the First Assembly of the Order of Friars Minor, Capuchin*, 111..

¹¹ “Between the Times: Religious Life and the Post-modern Experience of God,” *Review for Religious*, 53:1, Jan/Feb 1994, 12.

¹² Letter 18, 4.3.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

prayer will find time for actual prayer. Whoever does not find time does not have the spirit of prayer.”¹³

The first thing we can give the brothers is time to pray. Schedules in formation houses have to be constructed with this in mind. We have to put our money where our mouth is. I know that there are many demands, especially schools and ministries, but in formation especially these need to be secondary considerations. We could let our life be defined by an outside rhythm, but our call is to consciously oppose such a tendency. It is important to impress on the brothers the importance of daily prayer, not only the office and mass, but also quiet time for interior prayer. I believe the support we give to this by coming together for such prayer is vital, always in our life, but especially in formation. If we allow the brothers to take the prayer time individually, we are obligated to challenge them and make sure this is happening.

Besides our daily prayer, we are called to give the brothers in formation more. John Corriveau says formation must include “...regular periods (e.g. every three months) of spiritual retreat and prayer away from the intensity of work to personally interiorize the experience... Integration and interiorization require time in a brother’s life..”¹⁴ It is good to encourage the brothers to take responsibility in this matter, but I think we need to serve them well as formators by figuring out how to program this into the rhythm of the formation house.

We also need to give the brothers a good space for prayer. Fortunately, formation houses are often among the ones that are not dictated by other realities. They are not rectories or retreat houses or shrines. I think we consciously need to look at how we create a space and an atmosphere which promote a life of prayer and reflection as well as study and ministry.

The discussion of time and space leads me to say a word about hermitages. Preparing for this presentation, I kept running into the notion of hermitages and their importance in the constant renewal of the Franciscan Order and in the history of Capuchin life. As our brother Francisco Jimenez reminds us: “A longing for solitude and a desire to retire to solitary places, to dedicate oneself with greater intensity and freedom to contemplative prayer has been continuous down through the centuries.”¹⁵ Our *Constitutions* say: “...it is useful, according to the manifold grace of God, to encourage, either in provinces or in regions, fraternities of recollection and contemplation in which brothers can devote themselves for some time to the spirit and life of prayer, as God gives them grace. Let those brothers, in communion with the provincial fraternity, be mindful of what Saint Francis wrote for those who wish to live religiously in hermitages.”¹⁶

I’m not sure how we can integrate the experience of hermitage into all our formation programs, but I think it needs to be considered as we talk about formation for contemplative life in our provinces. I know that we’ve had collaborative efforts to give the friars in formation an

¹³ *The Path of Renewal*, 31

¹⁴ Circular Letter 9 on Formation, 3.7.

¹⁵ “Past and Present Contemplative Franciscan Fraternities,” *Greyfriars Review* vol. 3, n. 1 (April 1989), 69.

¹⁶ No. 56:2-3

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

experience among the poor, and of the missions. Perhaps we could work together to provide every summer an opportunity for three or four friars in formation to experience a hermitage.

c) Give the *tools* for developing contemplative prayer

i. Personnel

Formation is a time in which we can give the brothers not only the time and space to pray, but also help them by giving them the *tools* they will need to develop their life of interior prayer and contemplation. As IV PCO on Formation says: “Qualified local formation personnel with experience of prayer are needed to instill spirit and life and promote creativity so that ritualism can be avoided.”¹⁷ How are we doing this? Perhaps this workshop is a step in this direction.

ii. Spiritual direction

A tool that can help the brothers in formation in regard to their life of prayer is suggested by John Corriveau in his circular letter on prayer: “Spiritual direction is another invaluable aid to the growth of the spirit of prayer and fidelity to the gospel.”¹⁸ The importance of spiritual direction in developing the contemplative dimension of our religious life was also emphasized by the Congregation for Religious: “Spiritual direction also deserves to be restored to its rightful place in the process of spiritual and contemplative development of religious.”¹⁹ The Congregation also recommended the allied use of the sacrament of reconciliation as a means of contemplative growth, as “there can be no contemplative dimension without a personal and community experience of conversion.”²⁰

iii. Knowledge of methods, paths, techniques

As formators, we should also make available to the brothers various methods, paths and practices that will help them to learn how to pray and give themselves to contemplative prayer. I know that as Franciscans we are often suspicious of methods and techniques. We have almost deified spontaneity. But for most of the brothers struggling with interior prayer, and how exactly to “do” it, the wisdom of the ages and Christian tradition are a great help.

It is true that as Franciscans we are not bound by any one method. There are no Franciscan contemplative practices that are analogous either to the Benedictine, Carmelite or Jesuit life. Like good minors and poor men, we don’t need to invent our own methods, but that doesn’t mean we despise them. There are books, DVDs, workshops on contemplative prayer.

We can offer our brothers many different paths/techniques to help them ‘cultivate the Spirit of the Lord and His holy operation.’ Remember what Francis said to Leo: “In whatever way it

¹⁷ *The Path of Renewal*, 83.

¹⁸ Circular 18, 4.8.

¹⁹ *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, II.11.

²⁰ *Ibid.* II.10.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

seems better to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and poverty, do it with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience.”²¹ I think we give the brothers an introduction to various forms and methods of prayer, and then apply a simple Capuchin principle: *whatever works!*

iv. Liturgical Prayer prayed contemplatively; Contemplative devotions

We *can* help the brothers to learn to pray our common prayer more reflectively. Again, formation is a unique time in which we have a lot of control over what is prayed and how it is prayed. We can pray the Liturgy of the Hours at a contemplative pace. We can introduce periods of silence so that the brothers can become comfortable with them. This can all be done especially with the Eucharist, celebrating it in a reflective, contemplative way.

This is true, also, of devotions. The Congregation for Religious said of devotion to the Virgin Mary:

The Virgin Mary is a model for every consecrated person ... This is particularly evident when we consider the spiritual attitudes which characterized her... By reviving devotion to her, according to the teaching and tradition of the Church, religious will find the sure way to illuminate and strengthen the contemplative dimension of their lives.

The rosary is, after all, a contemplative form of prayer, which can be very helpful in forming our own minds and hearts to follow Mary’s example and “ponder in our hearts.”

v. Help from contemplatives

Besides our own teaching, and bringing others in to teach our brothers in formation about contemplative prayer, I think there are other resources we can and should tap into. If we want to learn something about contemplative prayer, why don’t we go to the contemplatives? We don’t have to reinvent everything, and we can certainly learn from, dare I say it, monks?

I know, I too have spent a large amount of energy making clear to people that *we are not* monks. (I just saw a nineteenth century Gothic novel, *The Monk*, whose main character was the “Abbot of the Capuchin monks.”) We all know and agree that we aren’t monks. But after years of fighting against ‘monasticization’ of our practices, maybe now we can be confident enough to seek help from monastic life.

This is not a new idea. Francis learned from monks. Our own friars in the earliest days took refuge with and absorbed a lot from the Camaldolese. And while some of the brothers may have wanted to become Franciscan monks, the early brothers maintained the reality of our life as friars. But this does not mean that they rejected everything they had learned from the monks.

I suggest that one help to the brothers in formation is experience of praying in monasteries. When I was a student we went every year for a winter retreat to either the Trappists or the

²¹ *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, eds. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, 3 vols. (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 1999- 2001), I, 122.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

Camaldolese. These retreats were both inspiring and challenging to me. They did help engender in me a great love of quiet prayer and prayerful silence.

Secondly, why not tap into our own resource for Franciscan contemplation: our Poor Clare sisters, especially the Capuchinesses? In fact, in one way it's odd that we would gather and talk about Franciscan contemplation without one of them here to teach us about it. The sisters are not just cute, brothers. They're not just the bakers of great cookies. They are women, some of them very saintly, who are as dedicated to the Franciscan vision as we are, and we can learn a lot from them.

vi. Franciscan *Lectio Divina*

Finally, during formation we have a chance to help the brothers reflect prayerfully on the fundamental documents of our life: the scriptures, Franciscan and Capuchin sources, Church documents, and signs of the times. Can we help them enter into these documents using the practice of *lectio divina* in its various forms.

Such reflection already happens quite a bit, I'm sure, with the scriptures, which are of course the center of all our prayer and reflection. It may also happen with the documents of our Franciscan heritage (at least I hope it is), especially the writings of St. Francis and of our other saints and spiritual writers. I wonder if we need to recover reflection on our own Capuchin writings. How many of us have heard of most of the friars or writings mentioned by Br. Chris Popravak in his talk?

Our Capuchin Franciscan *lectio divina* would also include reading our own legislation and documents contemplatively. Every year while I was in formation we had a reading from the *Constitutions* (and sometimes the PCO documents) once a week. But, I wonder, have we ever tried to read the *Constitutions* and the PCO documents contemplatively, as source for prayer, as a font of life? How about the letters from the Minister General?

As formators, we can also help the brothers read church documents this way: seeking the words of life, not just the theological jousting or ideological expressions. After my studies of Lateran IV, I am sure Francis meditated on at least some of the canons, which found their way into his *Rules* as well as other writings.

Finally, and most elusively, can we help the brothers read the "signs of the times?" I will admit that I am not always sure what this means, and I would be tempted to just ignore it, except that Jesus chided the Pharisees precisely for not being able to read the "signs of the times," and the Church and Order also call us to do so.

2) Helping the brothers to integrate prayer into the Capuchin Franciscan life as a whole

If Capuchin Franciscan contemplation does not have a particular method, it does have a particular context. We are not forming Trappists or Jesuits. John Paul II said to the friars in 2000:

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

You should keep in mind ... first of all, the priority and centrality of Gospel brotherhood, as St Francis wished, which distinguishes you as friars and makes you an order of brothers. From this perspective, it will be your task to instill in every aspect of your life what is characteristic of the Franciscan-Capuchin charism: the spirit of prayer, lowliness, simplicity, poverty and austerity, contact with the people, closeness to the needy, zeal for evangelization, joy and Christian hope.²²

Our task as formators then is not only to help the brothers form their consciences about the importance of personal prayer, but also help them see how that prayer relates to the rest of their Capuchin Franciscan lives. One model is given in the V PCO document. It begins, as I have noted, with contemplation, and then moves on to fraternity, poverty, and outreach/ministry.

If we can't be truly Franciscan and Capuchin without contemplation, we also cannot be true to our vocation if we isolate our prayer or ourselves from the other important values we hold as followers of Jesus in the way of Francis. Michael Blastic, OFM, speaks of the Franciscan tradition of contemplation and compassion and says: "Franciscan contemplation is relational, it directs one out of oneself and toward the other in compassion...its purpose is not primarily self-therapy."²³

²² "Address of the Holy Father John Paul II to the General Chapter of the Friars Minor Capuchin," July 7, 2000, from the Vatican website, http://vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2000/july-sep/documents/hf_jpii.

²³ M. Blastic, "Contemplation and Compassion: A Franciscan Ministerial Spirituality," *Spirit and Life: A Journal of Contemporary Franciscanism*, vol. 7 (1997), 171.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

a) Developing an atmosphere of fraternal support/challenge for prayer

We are called as brothers. *Fratres minores*. The Congregation for Religious made an interesting observation: “The religious community is itself a theological reality, an object of contemplation. As a family united in the Lord's name, it is of its nature the place where the experience of God should be able in a special way to come to fullness and be communicated to others.”²⁴ Our life has to be played out in the context of fraternity, recognizing this not as merely a convenience to provide us with support and comfort, but as a gift and challenge from God. “The Lord gave me brothers,” as Francis said, and he certainly did he pay for it!

i. Recognizing our call to be a contemplative fraternity

I think an important part of this fraternal reality, fraternal economy if you will, is that we are not called to be a community of contemplatives, like the Camaldolese perhaps, but a contemplative community. What does that mean? I think that it means we all support one another and challenge one another, but we also recognize that within our brotherhood different gifts are given.

I believe all the brothers are called to a contemplative lifestyle; I do not believe that all are called to deep contemplation. In a way, what the *Constitutions* say in regard to work could also be applied to prayer: “Each one of us, according to each one's capacity and God's special gifts, is suit to different kinds of work.”²⁵ What we hope to do in formation, I think, is to help each brother not only discern his own particular way of praying, but also to support other brothers whose way may be different.

In this regard, I was impressed by the insight of one of the novices, expressed in an edition of the *Caperone*:

One of the things that I've learned here is just how widely this need of time one's self differs for each person. Some guys think that the time allotted is too much time, while I know some solitary people who, if placed in our novitiate, would not have enough time to themselves because of the program's stress on fraternal life...²⁶

I know, of course, that there are brothers who are lazy, and that needs to be challenged. But there are also brothers who are genuinely called to a more mystical prayer, and who by that may not be as attentive as others. We need to learn how to support one another as a contemplative fraternity.

²⁴ *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, II.15.

²⁵ No. 77,1

²⁶ Br. Michael Beaupré, *Caperone*, III.2, p. 3.

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Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

ii. Creating a contemplative fraternity together

If we hope to have our brothers in formation accept that they are part of a contemplative brotherhood, then we also need to give them the tools to develop this aspect of our life. According to the *Constitutions*: “In its chapters, let the local fraternity examine itself concerning the common and personal prayer of the brothers. Let all the brothers, especially the ministers, feel themselves responsible for inspiring a life of prayer.”²⁷ In his letters on prayer, John Corriveau addresses the idea of the local fraternity’s role in the prayer of the brothers:

“We must have the trust and confidence in one another to honestly express which supports are best suited to each brother’s growth in prayer. . . . Local fraternities must reawaken among the brothers a thirst for God. . . . Docile to the Holy Spirit in fraternal sharing of life, let us search and fulfill God’s will in every event and action.’ These texts of the Constitutions give the local chapter a contemplative dimension.”²⁸

“The contemplative prayer of the brothers will form within the fraternity a vision of faith. [ref. to local chapter] . . . our prayer environment in each fraternity must be created with care and purpose.”²⁹

How can we as formators help the brothers to use the local chapter and other means to promote the prayer life of the fraternity and support and challenge each brother in his own contemplative prayer?

b) Prayer and Work/Ministry

The *Constitutions* say: “Prayer and work, inspired by one and the same Spirit of the Lord, far from being opposed to each other, complement one another.”³⁰ Documents of the Church and of the Order all point out this wonderful harmony between prayer and activity. The only problem is, almost everyone who is dedicated to prayer and activity as a Christian experiences that the opposite is true: there is often opposition and conflict.

I was spiritual assistant to the Capuchin nuns in the U.S., our fine contemplative sisters. The one consistent thing I heard in all their monasteries was the complaint that it was hard finding enough time for prayer because of all they have to do. Saint Antony of the Desert had to keep moving farther and farther out because of all those he attracted because of his prayer. Francis had to wrestle with the question: do I stay up here and pray, or go down there among people and preach, where I will be tempted and distracted?³¹

²⁷ No. 53.4. The Congregation for Religious says that all means to become contemplatives “will be more effective and fruitful if they are accompanied by the personal and communal practice of evangelical discernment.” (*The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, II.14)

²⁸ Circular Letter 18, 5.1 and 5.3.

²⁹ Circular letter 19, 3.3 & 6.1.

³⁰ No. 46.5.

³¹ Cf. Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*; Chapter 12.

T
Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

In formation we are called to help the brothers recognize that this conflict will *always* be a part of their lives. If they are to live as Capuchins with joy, they need to learn to find the balance that will work for them. Again, this balance will be different for different brothers, and we are in fraternity to keep one another honest before the Lord.

One of the realities is that our contemplative/private prayer will affect how we do ministry. One practical aspect is that if we are faithful to giving time to communal and personal prayer, we won't have as much time to do things. The reality is there are only a certain number of hours in a day, and if we are careful in giving a full hour to mental prayer (cf. *Constitutions* 53:2) plus being faithful to community prayer, we will have to curtail some activities.

Lest anyone think this is abetting laziness, I would offer the example of many of our saintly brothers. Look at the example of our brothers Lawrence of Brindisi and Pio. Lawrence was a man of prayer and contemplation. His masses could go on for hours. Yet, when you look at what he did, you have to wonder where he found time to sleep, let alone pray. The same with Pio. Hearing confessions all those hours, answering letters from his spiritual children, yet he was a man of deep and abiding prayer.

c) Sharing Prayer as Ministry

We are called to share our life of prayer and reflection. John Corriveau pointed out the example of the friars at Loreto: "...the first friars used to build their churches upon the model of the Holy House of Loreto in order to imitate its poverty and relive its climate of lofty contemplation... The thirst for God and a desire to discover the meaning of life draws many men and women, adults, youth and children to our shrine... This thirst for God is a gift of the Spirit and requires a place of silence and prayer where pilgrims can again find themselves, rediscover the basic values of their lives by experiencing a recollect, silent contact with God within their own hearts."³²

One of the challenges for us as formators is also to help the brothers see that our own prayer is something we are called to share, as a vital aspect of our ministry. The *Constitutions* tell us: "As disciples of Christ, although poor and weak, let us also apply ourselves to prayer that those who sincerely seek the Lord may be invited to pray with us. Above all let us cultivate among the People of God the spirit and development of prayer, especially interior prayer..."³³

I believe this can be and often is integrated into our formation houses as we invite others to pray with us. I hope we can help the brothers in formation see that this is not a distraction, but part of our call to serve God's people. As the V PCO said: "We should cultivate a welcoming attitude in our fraternities. These should be open to individuals or groups who want to come to share our prayer-life and to understand more about Franciscan spirituality."³⁴

³² Circular letter 7, 1.3 and 4.4.

³³ No. 53, 5-6.

³⁴ *The Path of Renewal*, 114-5.

T
Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

d) Other aspects of our life

As formators we also try to help our brothers integrate the other values of our lives, especially study, work, and poverty. Perhaps this integration should be the topic for future gatherings of this group.

III. A Few Particular Suggestions

Before concluding, I would like to offer just two insights which I hope will be useful for us as formators. One is a challenge in regard to those who are coming to us, the other is in regard to our own attitudes.

1) Contemplation in a world of media, noise, connectedness

As I was working on this talk, I found myself sitting in the Twin Oaks Café in Los Alamos, near San Lorenzo. I was eating breakfast and working on my outline. It often helps me to put myself into another environment. After a while working on this task, I noticed something: the noise that was all around me. There was traffic outside. Inside there was a television set on some reality show or other, a radio blaring out country music, the waitress talking on the telephone. What surprised me was not all this noise, but how oblivious I was to it all until I sat and took notice.

That is the world we live in, and that is the world which has helped formed most of the men who come seeking to enter our way of life. We have people for whom media saturation is not just unnoticed, but an integral part of their world. I watch the novices head for the computers, getting in their precious 90 minutes a week.

We know that this presents challenges as we try to form contemplative, compassionate brothers. With the ever developing media and means of communication, we have a world in which people are connected half-way across the globe and yet unable to communicate with the person next to them. We have access to more knowledge than the library of Alexandria, and very little wisdom on how to use that knowledge, and how to distinguish between what is necessary and what is merely distracting. We do live in a world of 140 character tweets, mass distributed Facebook updates, and almost anything you'd ever want to see, or not, playing on You Tube.

We know the problems that can ensue: self-absorption, need for immediate response, unreflective assessment of others. We know the problems with pornography and the amount of time that can be wasted on computer games, fantasy worlds, and idle social interaction.

Yet, the media and communications are also a great gift. We cannot just disconnect ourselves from the world around us. I don't think our vocation calls us to be Luddites. On the other hand, we must make ourselves aware of the power of images and the need to be proactive in our connection to media. John Corriveau, quoting our brother Raniero Cantalamesa, noted that there

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

is a healthy fasting from images, realizing their power. “The best way to overcome the seductive power of images is not to ‘fix our gaze’ on them, not to become ‘enchanted’ by futilities.”³⁵

What we have to do is bring our Capuchin Franciscan contemplative values to these media. Is there such a thing as Contemplative Facebook, Tweeting, Texting? I am sure there is, and maybe with the help of our brothers raised even more in the midst of all this we can bring that gift to the world. It will take work, sacrifice, and penance. But it will also be a great service.

2) The atmosphere today, new candidates, not fighting old battles...

One other brief suggestion. When we discuss among ourselves and work with the brothers coming to us, let's try not to fixate on old battles.

When I was living in one of our friaries, we used to have night prayer at seven-thirty, after the evening news. As I often went to my room to finish up projects from the day, I would come in late to night prayer. At a community meeting I suggested maybe we might ring a bell five minutes before, to alert us all. I was excoriated by one of the brothers, who declared that during his formation he had to live his life by bells, and he was not going to let that happen again! I withdrew my suggestion, but wondered why he reacted so strongly.

It is true that the brothers coming to us might on the whole be more ‘conservative’ (although I am leery of such labels). They may be enamored of practices that some of us have written off, because we may have seen excesses in the past. This is an opportunity, however, to bring in the best of our tradition with the insights that we continue to gain due to the grace of God. I hope we can be open to that, challenging and challenged ourselves, so that we can figure out what it is that will help us to promote the Spirit of prayer and devotion which all things ought to foster.

IV. Conclusion

Just a few closing remarks, and then I promise I'll shut up. I hope that in this gathering of the brothers we can help each other to rejoice in hope. There *is* a desire for God and the things of the Spirit still found in our world, which can be fulfilled in our Capuchin Franciscan way of life. We as formators do have an important role: to help our brothers recognize and deepen their prayer. Remember that Francis did not only teach the brothers; he learned from them. Is it hard to imagine that he learned how to be a contemplative with the help of Bernard, Giles, and Leo, his little lamb? Did not Bonaventure learn the depths of God's love when the brothers called him out of his comfortable life as a professor at the University of Paris?

Taking up this challenge of forming others in prayer and contemplative living invites us to look at our own lives, our attitudes, practices, convictions. This is not easy, but it is a GIFT, and an OPPORTUNITY. Because what we're trying to convey is, we hope, what God seeks of us too. Forming Capuchins can help form us as Capuchins. I have been very grateful for the invitation to give this talk, if only because it has caused me to read and reflect on things which I should have

³⁵ Circular letter 4, 4.2.

Contemplative Prayer for the Capuchin

been reflecting on anyway. It has truly been a contemplative task and I am grateful to God and all of you.

As we work in formation, with all its frustrations, challenges and joys, I hope we can remember the point of it all. It is interesting that Francis only uses the word contemplation once in all his writings, in the *Admonitions*. In the first of these he says: “As he revealed Himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so He reveals Himself to us now in sacred bread. And they saw only His flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that He was God as they contemplated Him with their spiritual eyes, let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are his most holy Body and Blood, living and true. And in this way the Lord is always with His faithful, as He Himself says: Behold I am with you until the end of the age.”³⁶

That is what we all want to be able to do: see with the eyes of faith. That’s what we hope to share with our brothers, both in formation, and our brothers and sisters in the world. And we have a God who is willing to give such eyes to us. Thanks be to God forever for that.

³⁶ *Francis and Clare*, trans. Ignatius Brady and Regis Armstrong (*Classics of Western Spirituality*, Paulist Press, New York, 1982), 27.