

Second Plenary Council  
on Our Life and Practice of Prayer, Taizé 1973

Second Plenary Council of the Order

Taizé: 18<sup>th</sup> February – 9<sup>th</sup> March 1973

*Dear Brothers,*

*With this letter we wish to present to all our brothers the suggestions and wishes of the Second Plenary Council of the Order, as they were put to the General Definitory.*

*The Plenary Council met in Taizé, France, to consider the life and practice of prayer in the Order. As the days went by, the prayer rising from the hearts of all the members became more insistent: 'Lord, teach us to pray!'*

*Encouraged by that same intimate appeal, we tried to draw daily closer to the Lord, so that, being present among us by His Spirit, He might be our teacher in prayer.*

*That is why we are confident enough to hope that it was the Lord Himself who taught us the things you now have before you summarized in this Document – drawing upon the contacts we had with the people of Taizé and those who came to join us in prayer. We ask you to receive these words with an open heart, so that you too may have a share in what the Plenary Council experienced so intensely as a gift of the Holy Spirit.*

*First of all, we, the General Minister and Definitors accept the Document faithfully and gratefully, and we intend to give it an important place, as a source of inspiration and guidance, not only in our personal lives but also in our pastoral service of the friars and the Provinces.*

*In offering the Document to the Order we earnestly invite each friar and each fraternity to accept it willingly, to meditate upon it individually and in community, and to discuss it, especially in their local and Provincial Chapters, with a view to its practical application in everyday life. We urge Superiors not to be over-anxious when it comes to renewing traditional prayer forms as occasion requires, or to finding new ones that are more suitable.*

*No-one is unaware of the vital importance of prayer: in fact it concerns the very life and death of our Fraternity. Every effort to renew the life of the Order in accordance with the principles of Vatican II, the spirit of St. Francis and the signs of the times, will be futile if we ourselves are not thoroughly renewed in our life of prayer: 'If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labour' (Ps. 126:1).*

*The subject of prayer, like the themes of the Plenary Council in Quito, is of such importance that it seems advisable to discuss it again at the next General Chapter, in addition to completing and improving the text of the Constitutions.*

*May our Order grow more and more in Christ, who is 'our life, our prayer and our work,' into the fullness of Christ Himself (Eph. 4:13).*

*Therefore, let there be nothing in us to hinder the Spirit of the Lord nor to separate us from Him, so that in our Fraternity and in each one of us His action may be manifest (Const. 164).*

*Yours devotedly in Christ,*

*Your brothers in the Lord,  
Paschal Rywalski, Minister General  
William Sghedoni, Vicar General  
Benedict Frei, Definitor  
Bonaventure Marinelli, Definitor  
Aloysius Ward, Definitor  
Clovis Frainer, Definitor*

*Optatus Van Asseldonk, Definitor*  
*John Dovetta, Definitor*  
*Lazarus Iriarte, Definitor*

Taizé,  
8 March 1973

## Message from the Second Plenary Council of the Order

- 1.** As your brothers, we would like to speak to the whole fraternity of the Order on the subject of prayer. The experience we have shared together in the Plenary Council of the Order, both personally and through the reports of the delegates, as well as the importance of the subject itself, moves us to speak to you on this matter with confidence and in a fraternal spirit.
- 2.** The Plenary Council held in Quito undertook to examine our identity in terms of our fraternity and poverty. On this occasion, here in Taizé, we thought it important to make a more thorough investigation of the spiritual life and practice of prayer, without which we cannot be truly poor or truly brothers. Moreover we wish to do this not in an abstract way but in the context of the Church and society of modern times, which are subject to so many changes.

### The Situation Today

- 3.** From what was said by nearly all the delegates, we learned that a good number of friars are experiencing:
  - a)** a genuine desire to pray;
  - b)** a certain dynamic tension in the search for harmony between action and prayer;
  - c)** a measure of determination to tackle in a constructive way the factors that give rise to disquiet and anxiety;
  - d)** various positive experiments already in progress;
  - e)** attempts to purify the image of God and to renew certain prayer forms;
  - f)** a lively awareness, especially among missionaries, that finding a solution to the problem of prayer is often a matter of life and death for us.
- 4.** On the other hand, we also found the following obstacles to prayer:
  - a)** insecurity in faith, and the difficulty of communicating with a transcendent God;
  - b)** the fact that many friars have not been sufficiently prepared to meet the changes in the Church and in the world;
  - c)** the separation of love of God from love of neighbour, and consequently of prayer from action;
  - d)** excessive activism, and conversely, the remoteness of prayer from the reality of human life;
  - e)** deficiencies in fraternal living;
  - f)** failure to take advantage of the assistance afforded by pedagogy and sound psychology;
  - g)** rejection of old forms of prayer, without renewal of the spirit of prayer;
  - h)** negligence in the formation of candidates to the Order and in training special leaders (animators) of the life of prayer.
- 5.** Acknowledging our common responsibility, we offer you these reflections on prayer as a help towards daily growing in faithfulness to our vocation.

### The Spirit and Life of Prayer

- 6.** Prayer, under the impulse of the Spirit, should be an expression of a vital need of the human heart, the very breath of love: man cannot fully become himself unless he makes the transition out of self-love and into communion with God and man, in Christ who is both God and man.

In making this transition or exodus some discover God as He is in Himself, while others find Him more in their brethren (Mt. 25:35ff).

Like the development of any other inter-personal love, man's journey to God is exposed to a variety of changing circumstances, both favourable and unfavourable, and is subject to the laws of vital growth.

It is a long, dramatic and fascinating road that leads to complete human maturity in the freedom of God's sons and daughters, "until Christ is formed in us" (Rom. 8:22ff; Gal. 4:19).

- 7.** Christ Himself is our life, our prayer and our work. It is when we love the Father and our brethren that we are truly living with the life of Christ. It is in His Spirit that we pray and cry out as sons to their Father: "Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

The Spirit of Christ is possessed by the person who remains in His Mystical Body, and in his prayer never separates the Head from the Body, praying as a member of the Church and seeking and loving Christ in the Church.

- 8.** The Father is the first to show His love for us (1Jn. 4:10), and speaks to us in the Spirit of His Son. We should listen to Him in an atmosphere of silence.

By our response of "faith, which makes its power felt through love" (Gal.5:6), we carry on a child-like conversation with the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit (cf. Const. 32).

- 9.** Real prayer is known by its fruits in life. "A man prays well so long as he works well" (St. Francis, *Legenda Antiqua*, 74). If prayer and work are inspired by one and the same Spirit of the Lord, far from being in opposition, they complete each other (II Rule 5 & 10; Const. 145).

- 10.** A spirit of prayer that is really alive inevitably vivifies and animates the whole concrete life of the friars, and therefore necessarily renews sound traditional forms of prayer and creates new ones.

- 11.** One who has the spirit of prayer will find time for actual prayer. Whoever does not find time does not have the spirit of prayer.

- 12.** The letter or outward form, without the spirit, is dead. On the other hand, it is impossible for the spirit, without the letter or form, to revitalize human life. We are human persons, in whom the spirit exists in an 'incarnate' or 'embodied' form.

- 13.** Prayer can be expressed not only in words, formulae and ceremonies, but also by silence, various bodily postures, symbolic actions and signs, according to the example of Saint Francis.

- 14.** We should pray as 'lesser brothers.' We will really be brothers when we are gathered together in Christ's name, in mutual affection, in such a way that the Lord is in reality present among us (*Mt.* 18:20; *Perf. Car.* 15; *Const.* 11 & 72).

We will really be 'minors' when we are living in poverty and loving obedience with the poor and crucified Christ, together with the poor (*Lk.* 4:18; *Phil.* 2:5-11; *Gal.* 2:19; *Const.* 11 & 46).

Our prayer ought to be the cry of the poor in the sight of God, and we should effectively share their condition (Paul VI: *Ev.Test.* 17; *Const.* 45; *PCO Quito* passim).

- 15.** We should honour and imitate the Blessed Virgin, who was associated with Christ in His Passion (*Const.* 39). We ought never to separate the Mother from her Son (*Const.* 1, 160, 174). Through her we can attain the Spirit of the poor and crucified Christ.

- 16.** So that the paschal mystery of Christ in the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance may daily more effectively renew our life, we should purify our sinful condition by contrition of heart (*L.M.* V:8).

We should embrace the Father's will before our own, persevering in prayer even when it is distasteful and self-love fights against it (*Mt.* 26:39 & 42; *Lk.* 22:44).

Anyone who prays only when he feels ready for prayer is using prayer to further his own self-love. We would do well to keep in mind always that prayer ought to be an act of genuine love.

We should live out the crucifixion of Christ, bringing to prayer the daily hardships, dryness, anxieties and trials of life. By accepting them in the power of love, we will become true images of God's Son (*Rom.* 8:29). It is in this way that we put into practice in our lives, and proclaim to others, the conversion or penance to which the Gospel calls us (*Const.* 87, 88, 90).

- 17.** Our prayer is more the 'affective' kind, a prayer of the heart, which leads us to experience God in an intimate way.

- 18.** In contemplating God, the Supreme Good from whom all good derives, our hearts should break out in a chorus of adoration, thanksgiving, wonder and praise.

In the joy of Easter, seeing Christ in the whole of creation, we should go through the whole world praising the Father and inviting people to praise Him, witnessing to His love by *our fraternal life, prayer and apostolate* (*I Rule 21-23; Canticle of Creation; Mirror of Perfection 100; Const. 23*).

We ought always to pray in spirit and in truth, with a pure heart and a pure mind, since this prayer alone is pleasing to God (*Jn. 4:24; II Rule 10; Admon. 16; I Letter of St. Francis*).

- 19.** The chief supports of prayer are Sacred Scripture and an attentive listening to the Spirit speaking in the Church, in the signs of the times, in the life of people and in our own hearts.  
A particular source of prayer for us is provided by the writings of St. Francis, together with the Constitutions, both of which we trust are available to each friar.
- 20.** The spirit of prayer and its promotion among the People of God, especially interior prayer, has been from the beginning a particular charism of our Capuchin fraternity. History witnesses to the fact that this has always been an off-shoot of genuine renewal.

#### The Practice of Prayer

- 21.** Gathering together the experiences of the friars as they were expressed in the reports of the delegates, we propose the following for common consideration.
- 22.** Each friar, praying in spirit and in truth, should trustingly commit himself to 'divine inspiration' in evangelical freedom.  
It is in keeping with our character to encourage pluriformity with regard to traditional forms of prayer, which are to be renewed as occasion requires (e.g. Stations of the Cross, devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Rosary, etc), and to the creation of suitable new forms, without prejudice to the unity of the spirit and life of prayer in each fraternity.
- 23.** A praying fraternity makes good progress when the friars regard themselves as responsible to one another for the vitality of their prayer life. Superiors, however, whose task it is to give spirit and life to the friars by their example and teaching, should be the foremost promoters of the life of prayer (*Const. 147*).
- 24.** Everywhere friars are experiencing the need for specially trained 'animators' of prayer and the spiritual life, to work among the faithful and, in a special way, in our fraternities and in the whole Franciscan family.
- 25.** Every fraternity ought to be, in reality, a praying fraternity. So that ever greater progress may be made towards achieving this, it is useful to encourage the setting up of fraternities of recollection and contemplation, using sound principles. This has already been done in several Provinces in recent years, with a good deal of success (*Religious Life in Hermitages; const. 42; PCO Quito II B, 20*).
- 26.** It is imperative that one's conscience be formed to feel the need for personal prayer. Each friar, wherever he is, should set aside sufficient time for private prayer each day (e.g. a whole hour). Many friars, especially missionaries, are experiencing this as a vital need.
- 27.** Dynamic and ordered growth in prayer requires that we should first have been adequately formed as human and Christian persons. For this too the use of new methods of meditation will be helpful.
- 28.** All the friars have their part to play in creating an atmosphere favourable to prayer, with silence and mutual understanding, and also by moderating the use of instruments of social communication by common consent (*Const. 43, 77*).
- 29.** If any friar is unable to find sufficient time for prayer because of excessive work, he may have recourse to the Minister, in fact he ought to do so (*II Rule 10; Const. 157*).
- 30.** In view of the many tensions of modern life, it sometimes becomes difficult to maintain a regular pattern of daily prayer. For this reason, periods of prolonged and more intense recollection undertaken by each individual friar, and indeed by each fraternity, will do much to prevent the weakening of the rhythm of prayer (*Evang. Test. 35*).
- 31.** The whole of human experience is a fusion of a two-fold dimension, the individual and the communal. It follows that private and communal prayer complete each other. The more intense one's private prayer, the more vigorous one's participation in the prayer of the community. The one cannot take the place of the other; rather it is the case that the one feeds the other. If preference is given to the one for a period of time, the other cannot be neglected altogether.

- 32.** No community can be called Christian, still less Franciscan, if community prayer is not a regular occurrence. If any friar ordinarily opts out of community prayer, the fraternity should be concerned for him in every possible way (*Const.* 94-95; *PCO Quito* IIA 10).
- 33.** Prayer becomes truly communal when it is effectively shared in by everyone and expresses real fraternity through mutual trust, understanding and affection (*Const.* 73). In this connection, as Capuchin tradition testifies, spiritual discussions, the exchange of experiences, shared reflection on the Gospel, communal penitential and bible services, evaluation of life-style and other things of this nature, can be of great value (*Admon.* 21; *Const* [1536] 3 and passim; *Const.* 149).
- 34.** The communal and individual prayer of the friars should be a subject for self-examination and criticism in the local chapters of each fraternity.
- 35.** Since fraternal life is the primary and fundamental condition for the normal development of our Franciscan vocation, friars who are compelled to live alone should come together at least periodically to join in fraternal life and prayer (*PCO Quito* IIA 8; *Const.* 80).
- It is altogether fitting that friars, especially missionaries, who are unable to have a community life, are now doing all they can to form a praying community with their helpers and the other faithful.
- 36.** The Liturgy of the Hours, being the Church's own prayer, should, together with the Eucharist, have first place in every fraternity and in the life of each individual friar (*II Rule* 3; *Test.*; *II Letter of St. Francis*).
- The celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours should be active and dynamic, and occasionally include singing, especially selected psalms, hymns, readings and spontaneous prayers (*Gen. Instr. Lit. Hours* 244-252).
- The danger of carrying it out in a mechanical fashion, with the lips alone, should be carefully avoided (*Const.* 38).
- Intervals of silence, somewhat prolonged, greatly contribute to a conscious and fruitful celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours.
- In many places the friars benefit greatly from joining with the faithful to pray the Hours.
- 37.** The Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which Christ Himself celebrates the Paschal Mystery with His Body the Church, should be a real banquet of love and a bond of unity. It should more and more become the vital centre of the whole life of the friars.
- Let the communal celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, especially concelebration, be highly recommended as the source and summit of our fraternal life (*Const.* 35). Where a daily celebration in community is impossible, there should be one at least at intervals, and all the friars should really take part in it (*Analecta*, 1972, 262-264).
- 38.** Experience shows that it would be very useful for each fraternity to appoint a friar or commission to prepare the liturgical celebrations, to keep them free and continually renewed.
- We should also develop a sense of fidelity to the liturgical laws, as well as creativity and spontaneity in accordance with their spirit (*Gen. Instr. Lit.* passim and 46 & 47).
- It will be the responsibility of the local Chapter to determine practical details regarding the time and manner of the celebrations (*Const.* 37).
- 39.** We should make a serious effort to renew our dialogue with Jesus Christ who is truly present in the Eucharist as our High Priest and Elder Brother (*Rom.* 8:29; *Presb. Ordinis* 18; *Const.* 36 & 40), enabling the liturgy to have a continuing influence by bringing us into unity with Himself and with our brothers.
- A sign of genuine devotion to the Eucharist can be seen in one's effort to live the life of Christ and to serve Him in one's brothers and sisters, in the poor and the sick.
- 40.** Of great value to us are those friars who apply themselves to continuous prayer 'in spirit and in truth', particularly the sick, who strengthen our lives by joining their sufferings to those of Christ. We thank God for these and all other benefits.
- At the same time we ask pardon for our inadequacies, which we sincerely acknowledge, joining all our voices to beg for 'the spirit of holy prayer and devotion ... to which all other temporal things ought to be subservient' (*II Rule* 5).
- 41.** Finally Brothers, we are conscious of the fact that our prayer life cannot be renewed by words, but by deeds. Let all of us together – every single friar and each and every fraternity as it actually exists – courageously set

out to perform those deeds, starting now, straight away, realizing that ‘the only thing we should desire is to have the Spirit of the Lord at work within us, while we pray to Him unceasingly with a heart free from self-interest ...’ (II *Rule* 10).

Taizé, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1973

[cf. ANALECTA 89(1973) 121-127]