

To all the religious
in their residences

Dear confreres,

Peace and Goodwill, and Ave Maria!

Approximately five months having passed since my appointment as Apostolic Commissioner of "our" Institute, I feel the desire and the necessity—as a man, a religious, a priest, and as Commissioner—to address you all.

The solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, which is particularly dear to us all on account of the special bond that unites the sons of the Seraphic Patriarch and the *Virgo Ecclesia facta*, provides me with an opportune moment to do this.

The forthcoming celebrations of Christmas, the New Year and Epiphany, are occasions of grace that will make my words clearer, more reassuring, and more fruitful.

As you know, the maternal care of the Church for each religious Institute is expressed in ways which include the office of "Commissioner", which I have received and exercise in obedience to the Holy Father. Through the exercise of the office of "Commissioner", the Church wishes to help religious institutes whenever these evince internal difficulties that cannot be overcome without the direct assistance of the Supreme authority of the Church. Such interventions aim at safeguarding the unity of the institute in question as well as the authenticity of its charism, which, having been recognized by the Church, is clarified by the Church if it should come to be subject to different interpretations. Every charism is given for the good of the whole Mystical Body of Christ (cf. LG 7) and not only for the benefit of those who profess it.

The recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis offers many points (cf. nn. 93-95) that, at this moment in the Institute's history, a moment that could be said to be "critical", may be of considerable assistance to the Franciscans of the Immaculate. I invite you to read it and to meditate upon it with an open and loyal heart.

I would like to quote here at least this passage: "*The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the centre which is Christ and then channelled into an evangelizing impulse. A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God's holy and faithful people for the good of all. Something truly new brought about by the Spirit need not overshadow other gifts and spiritualities in making itself felt. To the extent that a charism is better directed to the heart of the Gospel, its exercise will be more ecclesial. It is in communion, even when this proves painful, that a*

charism is seen to be authentic and mysteriously fruitful. On the basis of her response to this challenge, the Church can be a model of peace in our world.

"Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is the source of that diversity, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization..." (cf. nn. 130-131).

Since I have the Institute very much at heart, let me first of all apologise if by my manner of doing things I have unwittingly offended anyone's sensibilities. I apologise also for the fact that I have not yet met all of you. I have, however, met a large number of you, and with genuine empathy I have gathered and stored up the tears of suffering that have sprung from your hearts.

Permit me, then, to tell you frankly that every member of the Institute needs to undertake a major journey of faith, humility and trust.

With astonished dismay, I have witnessed disobedience and obstacles set in the way of my work, as well as attitudes of suspicion and criticism towards our holy mother the Church—even to point of slanderously accusing her of the "destruction of the charism" (*sic*) through my person.

I have also become aware of a lack in many of freedom and responsibility of thought and action. The Institute is permeated by fear and a "reverential terror" of the authorities that have been deposed.

I recall that in the letter with which I introduced myself to the Institute I listed four points to which the Commissioner was to give special attention: the manner of government in the Institute, educational and religious formation, the financial management of the Institute, and fellowship among the members of the Institute. These were the areas in which a number of religious—including some of the most senior members of the Institute (together with others)—had highlighted difficulties at various times.

It was not just about whether or not it was opportune to adopt the *Vetus Ordo*. It went beyond this to include the style of government; questions regarding the formation of both new vocations and the professed; and questions of financial management and administration—in these areas there appeared to be a lack of conformity with the directives and doctrine of the Church. Relations with the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate was, and continues to be, another area of concern.

In contrast to what has taken place in recent years with other Institutes, the intervention of the Congregation for Religious—which, in our case, was specifically ordered by the Vicar of Christ—I mean the intervention that was the appointment of a Commissioner to the Institute: this intervention immediately encountered, both within and outside of the Institute, a more or less explicit and virulent opposition.

First of all, there has been the involvement of the media, and especially various internet sites, which, in the majority of cases, have taken up a position in opposition to the intervention of the Holy See, disseminating confidential information that only a few of our own confreres had access to and could have known.

Following this, the five religious who were the first to appeal to the Holy See—something which they had every right to do—were attacked, even in an offensive manner; and with them were likewise attacked all who, in good faith, have cooperated with the Commissioner. Here we see an example of the well-known and immoral technique of “mud-slinging”, which, in the case at hand, aimed at depriving the appellants and those who have collaborated with the Commissioner of the status and authority that accompany the responsibilities entrusted to them by the Will of God expressed through obedience, so that their testimony might be rendered unreliable and untenable.

Well, dear brothers, with me and with the Congregation for Religious, these actions have produced quite the opposite effect! The more they were slandered and vilified, the more we admired them.

Here, as you can see, we are very far from the spirit of the Rule: “if a mother nourishes and loves her own son according to the flesh, how much more diligently ought one to love and nourish his own spiritual brother?” (RB 6). More than “nourishing one’s brother”—words that are to be understood in the sense also of mutual edification—one’s brother has been, as it were, “thrown to the pigs”, turning the order of values upside down.

I have *never* witnessed in your confreres—in those who have been the object of derision in the media—criticism of the Founders. Instead, I have been edified by their love for the Church and the Institute, by their doctrine, by their quest for justice.

Quite different is the attitude that I have noticed in those who consider themselves to be immovable in their roles because they are “more expert” than those who have taken their places, whom they consider their “ex-students”. They forget the adage that reminds us that sometimes the student may go so far as to surpasses the teacher.

Of course many, many lay people have been “mobilized” in this work, a work—to put it mildly—of “opposition”.

I wondered why there is this oftentimes ardent interest in our affairs, and I concluded that the Institute has become the battleground of a struggle between different currents in the Curia, with the specific involvement of persons in opposition to the new pontificate of Pope Francis. It is no coincidence that Fellay himself has spoken about us. I would have preferred it if bishops in general, and the “Bishop of Rome” in particular, had spoken well of you. Unfortunately I have to tell you that I have instead received negative testimonies from Ordinaries in Italy and several other countries.

Within the Institute, the discontent has manifested itself in continuous difficulties posed by individual religious—some of whom have been directly involved in formation—to my instructions given in the form of *obediencies*.

In addition to all this, there is an *extremely serious* matter, which only now do I make officially known to you.

It concerns the transfer of the control of movable and immovable goods of the Institute to members of the laity, persons known to be spiritual children or relatives of the Founder, Fr. Stefano M. Manelli, as well as to the parents of various sisters. These transfers were made *after* the appointment of the Apostolic Commissioner, and thus manifest the intention to embezzle funds

away from the control of the Holy See and to deprive the Institute of the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate of the necessary means for the maintenance of religious and, especially, for the works of the apostolate, and in particular of the missions.

These acts are seriously illicit from both moral and canonical points of view, and entail consequences also in the areas of civil and criminal law. Whoever accomplished these deeds or allowed them to take place is guilty of serious fault, and, if he is a religious, *is punishable by severe canonical penalties*.

A similar thing has happened in respect of works of the apostolate: the publishing house, the television station....

Again, there have been transfers of money—while I was fully in charge as Commissioner—to individuals with no official recognition from us, by persons who no longer had any authority or power of autonomous activity.

To all this, I add the covert gathering of the signatures of religious—without informing the undersigned—solicited by some high-profile members of the Institute, in Italy and in communities outside of Italy, with which the Holy See was petitioned for the foundation of a new Institute, characterized especially by the adoption of the *Vetus Ordo* as ordinary. These signatures were often extorted by deception, a fact attested by several letters that I have received from individual religious, who subsequently retracted their support for the petition. During the gathering of signatures, some religious were even presented with a page written in Italian, a language that they did not understand!

Thank the Lord, I have certainly met many religious sincerely concerned for the future of the Institute, and especially for its fidelity to its charism and to the Church, *two elements that are absolutely inseparable*. Unfortunately, though, many other friars identify the Institute with the very person of the Founder, who is surrounded by a kind of nimbus of infallibility. These friars see the intervention of the Church as a sort of abuse of what, in their view, is untouchable and, it would almost seem, the private property of the Founder.

All this reveals serious errors in the ecclesiological sphere with regard to basic principles of religious life. It reveals a great *spiritual poverty* and a *psychological dependence* that is incompatible with that “freedom of the children of God” (cf. Rom 8:21) that is presupposed in whoever sets himself to live total self-donation to the Lord through religious consecration.

Obedience, as the Second Vatican Council has shown, is not slavish automatism, but the responsible assumption of the will of God expressed by legitimate authority (cf. PC 14). This authority is not to be identified with this or that person, even if he should be the Founder, but with *Christ Himself*, who speaks through the hierarchical Church, of which one’s legitimate Superior is the immediate expression *insofar, and only insofar, as he is faithful to the Church itself*.

At the present moment, as you all know, the Superior of the Institute, according to the will of the Church, is the Apostolic Commissioner, that is, my humble self.

The formation of this "distorted" mentality has been contributed to in a notable way by some prominent members of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate. They have strongly influenced the style of life of the male branch.

This mind-set has also unfortunately appeared among many lay people belonging to groups of MIM (Mission of the Immaculate Mediatrix) and of the Third Order (TOFI). It has caused serious scandals among the faithful, endangering not only the apostolate of these groups but the very integrity of the faith of their members.

Mindful of all that has been described, and having duly brought the same to the attention of the Congregation for Religious, by virtue of the authority given me by the same Congregation, **I order the following, with immediate effect:**

1. *The STIM is suspended until further notice; thus, studies are interrupted.* In addition, students in the philosophical biennium will transfer to the Mother House in Frigento, where they will attend—when given license to do so by the undersigned—the interdiocesan theological College of Benevento; students in the theological triennium will go to the Generalate in Rome at Via Boccea, from which they will frequent—as and when I decree—the Pontifical Universities of Rome. As a result of these transfers, the Marian House at Sassoferrato will close.

2. *Diaconal and priestly ordinations are suspended for one year.* In addition, candidates for Orders who are presently in formation must personally subscribe to a formal acceptance of

- the *Novus Ordo* as an authentic expression of the liturgical tradition of the Church and therefore of Franciscan tradition (without prejudice to the what is permitted by the *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum*, once the current disciplinary decree of veto, *ad hoc* and *ad tempus*, is revoked for the Institute), and
- the documents of the Second Vatican Council, in accordance with the authority accorded them by the Magisterium.

Any candidate who does not accept these provisions will be immediately dismissed from the Institute.

3. Every religious in the Institute must clearly and formally express in writing his willingness to continue his journey in the Institute of the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, according to Marian-Franciscan charism, in the spirit of St. Maximilian M. Kolbe, according to the directives concerning religious life contained in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

4. MIM groups in Italy are formally suspended until there is, as mentioned in a previous circular, a formal declaration of adherence to the new authority. The same is true of the TOFI. The Apostolic Commissioner will appoint three religious to whom the members of the said groups may refer for eventual clarifications.

5. A Financial Commission will be constituted to assist the Administrator General in his work. This latter will also take advice from lawyers and experts in this field.

6. The norms relating to collaboration in the apostolate with the Institute of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate will be reviewed, with a view to avoiding undue interference. In the meantime, any of our religious who in any way assist or contribute to the publications of the said Institute are

required to suspend this cooperation. Distribution by the friars to the public of *Casa Mariana Editrice* publications is also suspended. As regards the spiritual assistance of religious of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate and of the Poor Clares of the Immaculate, each case will be evaluated carefully and subject to my approval.

I place a formal obligation upon Guardians (and Vicars of filial Houses) to read this letter to all the members of the individual communities; after which it should be duly kept in the respective archives.

Dear confreres, may the loving docility to God's Will of the Immaculate Virgin and of her chaste spouse St. Joseph be an example and an incentive to us all. May the humility, the obedience, and the detachment demonstrated by the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, in His Birth in Bethlehem, teach us the road to follow, so that we, like the Shepherds and the Magi, might eventually find light, peace and salvation! Amen!

Entrusting all to the maternal protection of the Immaculate Virgin, of whom St. Maximilian M. Kolbe was the noble knight who imitated in our times the heroism of the Seraphic Patriarch Saint Francis, I impart to each and all the seraphic blessing, while at the same time I ask of you a constant and fervent prayer for my delicate and important service.

I remain at your disposal for any clarifications or other needs.

Fraternally,

Rome, December 8, 2013
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

Father Fidenzio Volpi, OFM Cap.
Apostolic Commissioner *ad nutum Sanctae Sedis*