

ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR CONVENTUAL



# Food That Nourishes

*For a Healthy and Holy Life*

A letter of the Minister General  
to all of the friars of the Order

Rome 2015

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**Dear friars,**

*May the Lord give you Peace!*

In this letter, which you will receive during the season of Lent, I want to speak about food and nutrition. On the one hand, I'll deal with the scourge of hunger, and on the other, with the excesses of overeating. I will also speak about the injustices in food's production, distribution and consumption—processes that should be serving the needs of all. There has always been a close and inseparable link between food and spirituality, not just a functional connection. We are what we eat, or do not eat, and our way of relating to our “daily bread” as a gift of the Lord, which is ours and others, so that no one goes without, says a lot about our Christian identity.

The topic of food places the Church in direct relation to the world and in the world, in the sense that a *Church which goes forth*, as Pope Francis has described, must abandon any self-absorption to be in synch with the men and women of our time. In this sense, today's religious are innovators called to creatively respond to the challenges that everyone faces (food being one of the most important) with authentic sharing and prophetic boldness. Their “being not of the world”, in fact, cannot justify in any way a retreat from the world that might signify disinterest, also because, as stated

by Teilhard de Chardin, “Without the world, the Church is like a flower out of the water”. If on the one hand, the Church is salvation for the world, the health of the Church is found in the world. It is where Jesus’ disciples’ journey arrives at encounter, communication and exchange. Pope Francis writes “We achieve fulfilment when we break down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names!” (*Evangeli gaudium*, no. 274). It is how we want to deal with this topic which is so central and urgent to the life of the world.

People think of Franciscans as being frugal, even at table. They see them in particular as universal brothers who are attentive to the needs of all, especially the poor. Do we live up to this reputation? Can we somehow creatively rethink our lifestyles, the way we eat, the criteria by which we use the goods of the Earth? The ideals which drive us to want to change the world start from simple, everyday gestures, gestures that are shared and fraternal, taken as signs of the blessing that God pours upon us, and through us, upon the whole world.

At this point, we should take a look at the overall situation in our Order and how it’s taking shape in this second decade of the third millennium. My letter is intended to be the first of a series of letters dedicated to solidarity and lifestyle. This is to testify to the world that prophetic discipleship transforms one’s existence and opens one up to the giving of oneself, but also, so that among ourselves, at every level (individual friar, friary, Province, Jurisdiction and Order) we might pay due attention to the needs of the “most

powerless” individuals and communities. At the last General Chapter celebrated in Assisi, January 2013, Motion No. 4 was approved to encourage *fraternal solidarity*. Naturally, lack of bread wasn’t the issue. But especially for poorer areas of the Order it was about the opportunity to provide qualified formation emphasizing *Franciscan Discipleship*. This document, together with the drafting of the new Constitutions, is one of two instruments for implementing the priorities of the Order (*To Live the Gospel*) during the 2013-2019 Sessennial.

# Introduction

## Towards Expo 2015

Never in the history of mankind has so much food been produced as is produced today. And never before have food-related problems been so critical: while more than 800 million people still suffer from hunger, about 1.5 billion people are overweight and more than 500 million of these suffer from obesity. Global hunger and obesity – aside from being equally dramatic situations – are symptoms of a single problem, a bleak and negative relationship with food, the deprivation or overvaluation of food for economic and political motives, almost always for reasons of financial interest and gain (cf. R. Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*, Portobello Books Ltd 2007). Additionally, the Western world is rife with eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Anorexia is linked to problems with body *image* or aesthetics. Bulimia is tied to a *myth of consumption* that triggers a mechanism of endless and unstoppable accumulation. On closer inspection, this touches on two decisive issues for people today, since identity, increasingly determined by appearance, is also strongly linked with the acquisition and consumption

of goods. Reflecting on the complexity of this web keeps us from dealing with this problem as though it were taking place in some far off place or limited to other countries or marginal situations.

These types of discussion take place at international events like The Expo (officially: *The Universal Exposition*) of Milan, 2015, with its evocative title: *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*. This event will be held in Italy's economic capital for 184 days – Friday May 1 to Saturday, October 31, 2015. It will focus on the important issues of food and nourishment for all as they relate to the sustainability of the planet. This will be examined from two perspectives: Food Safety, or guaranteeing the authenticity of food that is consumed, and Food Security, namely, overcoming the scourge of global hunger by providing everyone access to the food and water they need.

The logo for the Expo 2015 is Leonardo da Vinci's famous "Vitruvius Man," the well-known image of a man fitting perfectly into the center of the movements of the planets and the cosmos. Indeed, Vitruvius Man stands within two geometric shapes, the circle and the square, both considered perfect forms by the Greek philosopher Plato. Together, they represent creation: the square recalling the Earth and the circle the Universe. This man comes into contact with the two figures in a totally proportional way representing the perfect nature of the creation of Man in harmony with the Earth and the Universe. Today, though, this man-planet-universe harmony is largely due for a makeover.

Some 144 countries, representing 94% of the world population, will be participating in Expo 2015. Within six months of its opening, a million visitors are expected to visit the Expo.

## Food, Not Just Fuel

Feeding oneself and feeding others are two acts that make up the framework of life; their repetition guarantees sustenance. Even if food becomes *routine* and loses its deeper meaning, it's what keeps us from dying. It shows us the very limitations of our human existence in the fact that we are needful and dependent creatures. Food, then, not only nourishes the body, but also consolidates and preserves relationships, enriching and defining them. This is why bread is never just bread, but refers to the good or unhealthy relationship we have with the world, with things, with other people near and far, with our bodies and the bodies of others. Feeding oneself and feeding others also expresses a separation of seasons, depending on the depth of meaning and importance that these have in relation to personal and community life. There are daily meals, holiday meals and there are times for fasting, which is a temporary decrease or deprivation of food. If the food at a feast is abundant and almost excessive, it's an intensified offer to eat and drink for the purpose of "partying". The real nourishment in fasting is fraternal and spiritual. Food is a daily reality whose deep-

er meaning lies in its being perceived, to some degree, as a gift.

The interweaving of food with the world, with life and with other people is tighter than one might think. It “dishes up” one of the great questions of human existence: the relationship between nature and culture. Let’s just consider the fact that in the Eucharist it’s not grain and grapes; its bread and wine. There’s a story of skill and transformation, of work and toil, in which man receives the gifts of the Creator and adapts them to himself. Beyond that, food always points to something else: the people who produce it (sometimes under exploitation or unjust remuneration, or even the deprivation of rights), the place where it is produced (talking about local, artisanal produce, more organic and less polluting), the way it is consumed (all alone, gulping lunch down at some *fast food* chain, or at a meal shared with good company). Food, then, raises many questions, even dramatic ones: when it comes to the natural, spontaneous and necessary act of feeding oneself, how much justice or injustice is involved? How much peace or violence? How much work or plunder? Food is not just “fuel” for staying alive; it implies long and short-range relational dimensions. It means talking about the huge problems that afflict and preoccupy humanity, and turning our gaze towards other horizons that are often overlooked.

## CHAPTER I

# Feeding Ourselves and Others

*The following reflections are taken from life so that they might live again. This presentation is not meant to be a series of rules but rather a description of some situations so that their lessons will not be listed at the end of the presentation, but will be found scattered here and there throughout the text.*

### Handling food

For many friars, especially in large communities, food is something that comes in on a metal cart. At the end of the meal, the same cart disappears with the leftovers. Generally it all comes out well-ordered in large trays and ready for everyone to make his choices. There are those who are in charge of buying the food, storing it and cooking it for us, so that we end up the last stop in an efficient assembly line. There are a few friars who have, as they say, “a finger in the pie”, who are in some way involved with the handling of the food which everyone generally enjoys in moderate abundance and variety. Yet some would argue that Jesus

himself was also a *homo culinarius*, that he knew how to cook (cf. G.C. Pagazzi, *La cucina del Risorto. Gesù cuoco per l'umanità affamata*, EMI 2014). [The Culinary Skill of the Risen Lord. Jesus: Cook for a Hungry Humanity] He certainly cooked for his disciples after the resurrection (“We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead”, Acts 10:41). Along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he had a completely ingenious way of bringing them together and resuming contact: “When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread... Jesus said to them ‘Bring some of the fish you just caught... Come, have breakfast’...he took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish” (cf. John 21:9-13). A too easy and obvious parallel to the Eucharistic supper can overshadow the specificity revealed in the Risen Lord’s gestures: they don’t just refer to something that was already expressed; they indicate a new and concrete way of taking care of the disciples. In transforming food and preparing it for these fishermen, (who before were down on their luck and now were surprised at “the large amount of fish” caught in their nets), Jesus experiences the pleasure of pleasing, of taking care of his friends, of restoring them physically and reviving their hope. *The handling of food, which more often than not in our friaries is delegated to professionals, is not something that should be completely avoided nor disdained because it says something about real and immediate attention to one’s brother and to his well-being in body and spirit.*

## Food that unites

When you want to meet a friend and spend some time with him, you generally invite him to lunch or dinner: “Do you want to eat something together?” Or, if time is short, you take him for a coffee, a cup of tea, a *mate*, etc. Food is a necessity but it’s also an opportunity to get together, to talk and tell stories, to update each other on the latest happenings, to find out how things are going or sometimes confide in each other. Friendships and family life bloom and grow around the table. So does human and religious community life. “Tell me how (and with whom) you eat and I’ll tell you who you are!” because mealtime is an exercise in humanization.

As friars, being at the table is often the only time we are so physically close, so talkative or quiet, with the need to respect precedence and synchronize our time with that of others. One person may literally devour his food; another may be more relaxed and laid-back when he eats, while still another – because he is elderly or sick – may require a special diet. There may be certain foods he needs to eat or avoid: all things which require everyone’s attention and willingness to help. *Participating or not participating at the common table are not equal options, because in the long run, with non-participation, it isn’t the eating that one neglects, it’s the relationship to food itself; everything about food that brings us together with others.* Eating together is drawing life from the same well, feeling supported and befriended, feeling close



to each other, each sharing responsibility for the well-being of the other: eating and drinking to someone's health! Eating is both a material and spiritual gesture: while feeding oneself one creates communion, one nourishes communion. If, on the one hand, food, which is more temporary than anything, seems to lead one away from what is eternal, (remember the famous quote of Ludwig Feuerbach: "Man is what he eats") the reality of the Incarnation directs us to food that is shared, because the act of eating becomes more "humanized" as it passes from its deep physiological and predatory roots to take on a meaning of openness and being a gift to others, until finally, it becomes a revelatory gesture, as occurred during the supper at Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:30-31).

## Blessed food

In all of our communities, before we sit down at the table, the guardian starts a prayer and everyone else joins in. It's usually a short prayer, because in many places the common meal comes right after the recitation of Midday or Evening Prayer. This is not to underestimate the importance of this prayer before meals. This prayer creates a healthy, even if temporary, detachment from the food already set before us but not yet shared. The distancing created by the blessing serves to symbolically overcome all greed, gluttony and aggression. For the friars, prayer connects the reality of the food to God, by acknowledging its source (God, of course) its destination (everyone present, not just one person) and its goodness: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the invocation of God in prayer" (1 Tim 4:4-5). Food is thus identified as a profound, totally positive gift, to be received and given anew, which cannot be claimed and taken at the expense of others. Prayer directs us beyond ingratitude, beyond the superficiality that makes us take for granted what we have received, beyond the attitude of self-sufficiency that deludes us into thinking we ourselves are enough; beyond indifference, which neutralizes the other so that we judge his presence as awkward or competitive.

If the blessing of food steers us away from a possessive mindset of individual accumulation and use to one of shar-

ing and gift, the common table is the best place to circulate that “gift” refracted into individual gifts. The peculiar characteristic of the gift is that it is a sharing of feeling more than of things, goodness more than goods. *Seen in this perspective, common meals are real strategic locations to lovingly encounter our brothers.* They are not mandatory breaks to load up on calories in preparation for demanding apostolic work, but spaces for a most profound fraternity, so much so that, if one can’t build fraternity around food, it will be very difficult to do so in other times and contexts.

## Wasted food

The waste of food is one of the most dramatic scandals of our time. It is a phenomenon with food retailers such as supermarkets – where the goods are offered for sale – restaurants, even our refrigerators at home. The word consumerism, too often abused or used in a moralizing sense, indicates, in addition to exaggerated and disproportionate consumption a mindset about expiration dates. Even before expiration, goods must be replaced as soon as possible with other, new and more promising items. “I consume, therefore I am!” This is the imperative of increasingly disoriented men who delude themselves by basing their identity and prestige on what they consume and how much they consume. Paradoxically, the economy of the Western world, which once prospered by exploiting the producers of goods, now makes its fortune by exploiting consumers of the same, flattering and seducing them with deceptive advertising. Waste is deemed “necessary” so that consumerism can continue its triumphal march, to the absurd point that waste is made a crucial cog in the economic process. “Consumerism,” according to Pope Francis, “has induced us to be accustomed to excess and to the daily waste of food, whose value, which goes far beyond mere financial parameters, we are no longer able to judge correctly. Let us remember well, however, that whenever food is thrown out, it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor, from the hungry!” (*Audience* June 5, 2013). “It is intol-

erable that millions of people around the world are dying of hunger while tons of food are discarded each day from our tables.” (Pope Francis: *To the Members of the European Parliament*, November 25, 2014). These are not new, previously unheard words, but rather words that tell us once again that one of the greatest difficulties of our time is being aware of others; tuning into the comfort or discomfort of others within their own experience, with true empathy, allowing oneself to be deeply touched by the real conditions of the other person’s life, which is the only way to be truly responsive. *For us Franciscans, not wasting should be a sort of commandment, because wasted food (water, energy, land, etc.) is a waste of creation and renders the earth poorer and less hospitable for future generations.* If food in the trash eats up resources and insults those who are suffering hunger, the imperative here, even in our own communities, is for the garbage can to lose some weight.

## Food for all

“He gives food to all flesh, for his love endures forever.” Thus Psalm 136:25 describes the concern of God for all creation, not just humanity. Every living being is entitled to receive its share of food, and God himself is committed to ensure that no one lacks what he needs. It’s no coincidence that the greatest miracle recounted in the Gospels – six times – is that of the multiplication of the loaves, after which Jesus offers food to hungry people; although he is clearly aware that the bread comes from God and is bestowed by Him. “No one before had ever eaten like Jesus did. The Son, in receiving the bread, acknowledges receiving life. Even in the act of feeding others he acts as a Son and shares that which he is well-aware of having received” (G. C. Pagazzi, *La Cucina del Risorto*, cit., p.18).

Today, bread for everyone, the guarantee of the food that every man needs for sustenance, is not yet a reality. In our world, the tragedy of hunger unfortunately, exists even at home. We have before us “one of the most serious challenges for humanity: that of the tragic condition in which millions of hungry and malnourished people still live” (Pope Francis, *Message for World Food Day*, October 16, 2013). The parable of the rich man is still relevant (cf. Luke 16:19-31), the one “who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day” (v. 19). However, it’s not these excesses the Gospel text directly condemns, but rather his blindness to the poor man “lying at his door...

who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table" (v. 21). The insensitivity and closed heart of the rich man is also the great sin of our time. It inhibits the poor from saving their crumbs, scraps and leftovers, so we are faced with "an economy of exclusion and inequality" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* no. 53). It is difficult, in this context, to defend the "trickle-down" theory of economics (ibid no. 54) which posits that if capitalism produces growth and well-being for those who are already wealthy, the poor would benefit, for they would be proportionally helped. That would be like saying in order to help poor Lazarus, the rich man should consume even more so that more crumbs would be produced (cf. Ó. Maradiaga, *Senza etica niente sviluppo*, EMI, 2013, pp. 58-59) [No Development without Ethics]. Social inclusion, the quality of relationships, recognizing equal dignity and rights, is the ultimate goal of solidarity and the sharing of goods. As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved – says Pope Francis – no solution will be found for the world's problems or, to any problems (cf. *Evangelii gaudium* no. 202).

How can they be solved? *With a poor Church for the poor.* That is Pope Francis' response. That is the Christian response. If the second aspect, *for the poor*, has always been practiced with great generosity, the first aspect, *poor Church*, has been little considered until now, both theologically and pastorally. *This same perspective is valid for Franciscans, in the sense that one must go beyond seeing poverty only as a*

*personal virtue and recover its fundamental Christological connections and its wider understanding in the Church (cf. Lumen Gentium, n. 8). One must take charge of one's own personal humanization in the light of solidarity with every brother.*

## Excess food

Every era has been marked by particular diseases. We think of leprosy and malaria in the Middle Ages, the plague in the seventeenth century, tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, cancer and AIDS in the twentieth century and in recent days, Ebola. The 21st century is being dogged by new epochal diseases, among which is widespread obesity (the state of being consistently and disproportionately overweight) with its procession of health woes: hypertension, diabetes, abnormal metabolism, etc. The phenomenon is so striking and disturbing that in 2001 the World Health Organization coined a new word: *globesity*, namely global obesity. In Western countries obesity is due to the wide availability of high-calorie food and an overall reduction of physical effort, especially in the workplace. There is a type of short circuit in the rest of the world: countries that recently beat hunger are on the road to obesity. But while the wealthy classes are more at risk in these countries, in the West, it's low-income population groups that are especially affected. So here, you can flip the traditional imagery of the corpulence of the rich and the thinness of the poor. If the non-availability of food is the cause of malnutrition for hundreds of millions of people and offends the dignity of man, food's immoderate and superficial use also causes many physical and psychological problems. The verb "to eat" signifies an unmet need for some, for others it's an obvious daily occurrence. But there are still others besides for whom eating becomes a tragic ob-

session that ruins lives—often creating dependencies which, once they become chronic, require specialized, long-term medical treatment.

One might ask whether the vice of gluttony is still important today. It was once considered important, but nowadays it is regarded with disdain. This is because the idea that food is culture is becoming absolutized, often without the caveat that not all culture can be reduced to food. The proliferation of TV shows, books and magazines on cooking, and its refinements, is indicative of this trend. In fact, a survey conducted in France in the fall of 2003 showed how, among all the vices, gluttony was the best known but also considered the least serious.

Scripture reminds us that making one's belly one's god leads to destruction (cf. Philippians 3:19). This is not because the natural need to eat – which involves legitimate pleasure – is contrary to the Christian faith, but because to the extent that people fall into a sort of "religion of food", they become slaves to their gullets. *As friars, the eating of food should always be combined with conviviality (cum-vivere), which then seasons the food with discourse, closeness, fraternity and sharing. It should also be marked by a certain austerity, which doesn't mean necessarily taking away, but qualifying, in the sense of "less but better." Less—but for everyone. Less—but genuine and non-polluting. Educating ourselves about food, its value and the dangers associated with its abuse may be helpful for realizing healthier, and at the same time, holier communities.*

## Food invoked

We don't only say a prayer of blessing over our food, which we talked about earlier, but also we pray for food, which has two dimensions, one that goes to and comes from the Father: "Give us this day our daily bread," Matthew 6:11, and the other is for men who need bread: "You yourselves give them something to eat" (Mark 6:37). God gives bread to be shared among his children and no one should ever go without.

But let's pause on the invocation of the "daily bread" contained in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and assigned to them as a template for every invocation. There's the recognition of the centrality of the Kingdom, which opens the *Our Father*, followed by the demands of the Kingdom, in the center of which – in both Matthew and Luke– lies the request for "bread", among other things, the only noun next to which we find the adjective: "daily". There is no life without some actual bread to eat every day. Spiritualization is avoided here so as not to diminish this material significance. Bread, then, is why man's daily need, and especially God's gift, must be renewed every day, discouraging any accumulation which casts doubt on Divine Providence. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly

Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?" (Matthew 6:25-26). The Good Father is the one who nourishes all his creatures, discouraging men from that impulse to hoard which triggers anxiety and antagonism.

The bread is also called "our." It is for all, which indicates that one cannot avoid sharing it. In fact, however, for many Christians asking God for daily bread when it is guaranteed and is not a primary concern, the prayer may appear to be recitation. But it is precisely that "our" that makes the difference and broadens our horizons, preventing the "bread" prayer from being reduced to an empty and harmless formula. And it makes us think a little about that *eco-gluttony* which is satisfied at the expense of other people's hunger, even though these people are often distant or invisible.

*Every day, during Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, the friars pray the Lord's Prayer, the prayer of sons and brothers which combines the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our faith. I ask you, in this time of Lent and through the six-month duration of Expo 2015, to pray the Our Father and to have it prayed with special attention to the invocation of bread for all.*

## Eucharistic food

The Last Supper is a very special event, foundational in its exceptional originality. Although connected with the Hebrew Passover, it goes beyond that celebration, since within it Jesus is establishing *his Passover*. “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for, I tell you, I shall not eat it [again] until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:15-16). This is an ambiguous text that Pope Benedict XVI interprets in the following way: “It can mean that Jesus is eating the usual Passover meal with his disciples for the last time. But it can also mean that he is eating it no longer but, rather, is on his way to the new Passover” (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, LEV 2011, p. 114). On the one hand, it commemorates the story of liberation, the exodus from Egypt and the people with whom God entered into a covenant; on the other hand, there is the anticipation of Jesus’s Passover, since the Eucharistic Gifts anticipate his cross and resurrection. “The act of giving his life includes the Resurrection,” (*ibid.* p. 130). Over the centuries, Christians eating the bread and wine blessed and consecrated by the priest have refocused their attention on the story of liberation and at the same time have accepted salvation in the person of Jesus. According to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (no. 7), the Conciliar Constitution on the Divine Liturgy, the ways in which Jesus makes himself present in his Church are His Word, the sacraments,

the assembly praying and singing: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20), and he is present in his holy ministers. But none of these presences, as authentic and important as they are, can exceed his presence under the form of the Eucharist. The Eucharist “contains Christ Himself and it is ‘a kind of consummation of the spiritual life, and in a sense the goal of all the sacraments’” (cf. *Summa Theol.* III, q. 73, a. 3). [...] This presence is called “real” not to exclude the idea that the others are “real” too, but rather to indicate presence par excellence, because it is substantial and through it Christ becomes present whole and entire, God and man (Paul VI, *Encyclical on Mysterium fidei*, 1965, nos. 39-40).

The daily celebration of the Eucharist unites us intimately to Christ and to the friars, and to suffering humanity starving for material and spiritual food. Man lives by bread, but not by bread alone “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). The body of Christ, the spiritual food, unites us with God and therefore opens us up to solidarity with every man. “*Do this in memory of me*” (Luke 22:19) indicates not only the need to repeat the gesture about bread, but to renew daily the gift of ourselves to others, in the style of “*breaking bread*”, sharing, feeding people and satisfying all hunger for God and for food.

## CHAPTER II

# To the Table of Francis

### Fasting

Francis of Assisi lived in the early 1200s and was very immersed – despite his unique creativity – in the culture and religious mentality of his time. Male religious practiced fairly prolonged periods of fasting, especially during those times prescribed by the liturgical calendar. This was something quite normal. Centuries of monastic tradition had refined this aspect of Christian asceticism and it was practiced spontaneously by the people as well. At that time in the Middle Ages, the list of seven deadly sins worked like a topographic map showing the separation and distance from God created by every human excess. In this perspective the throat was considered one of the two carnal vices, the other being lust. The throat was considered the gateway (“mouth”) of all the vices and therefore the first to block so the other vices couldn’t get through. The tempter, in fact, approached Jesus when, after having fasted for forty days, “he was hungry” (Matthew 4:2). The temptation of the bread is the first one to emerge and must be addressed



immediately. “For we cannot stand up to the conflict of the spiritual contest, unless the enemy who is posted within, that is to say, the appetite of gluttony, is first conquered” (Gregorio Magno, *Moralia in Job, Pars sexta, XXX 58*). This way of thinking was probably familiar to St. Francis. In the Rule, after his instructions on the Divine Office, he inserted instructions on fasting: “Let them fast from the feast of All Saints until the Lord’s Nativity. May those be blessed by the Lord who fast voluntarily during that holy Lent that begins at the Epiphany and lasts during the forty days which our Lord consecrated by His own fast; but those who do not wish to keep it will not be obliged. Let them fast, however, during the other [Lent] until the Lords Resurrection. At other times they may not be bound to fast except on Fridays. During a time of obvious need, however, the brothers may not be bound by corporal fast.” (*Later Rule 3:5*). As shown by the commentators, these practices were different from those found in the Earlier Rule, especially in reference to the Benedictine Rule and other laws. The text in verse nine also allows for exemption from physical fasting for reasons of “obvious need” (a broad expression and not one of a legal nature). The last sentence of the third chapter reads: “*Into whatever house they enter, let them first say: ‘Peace be to this house!’* According to the holy Gospel, let them eat whatever food is set before them” (v.14). The Rule speaks of when the friars lived among the poor, in a state of itinerant mission, – unlike the typical regularity of the monasteries. This concession should not be understood as just

being lax (“it is legitimate for them”), but in the sense that the friars had to settle for what little the people could offer them, trusting in Providence and thus exercising the reality of poverty. In essence, the rhythms of the apostolic mission marked the ways and times of fasting, not vice versa.

## Conviviality

If Francis understood prolonged fasting, he understood conviviality just as well and the fact that sharing food was a practical exercise of fraternal closeness and a concrete way of taking care of the needs of one's brother. It was an outward sign that was to characterize – even with abundance – the great feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially Christmas. “One day the brothers were discussing whether the obligation remained to eat meat, since Christmas that year fell on Friday. Francis replied to Brother Morico: ‘You sin, brother, when you call ‘Friday’ the day when *unto us a Child is born*. I want even the walls to eat meat on that day, and if they cannot, at least on the outside they be rubbed with grease!’” (2 *Cel* 199).

The Saint of Assisi, as we read in the sources, proved attentive to the needs of the friars concerning food by calling it an “act of charity” when he shared the table with a friar who had been afflicted in the night with hunger pangs, and invited the rest of the friars to do the same (2 *Cel* 22). He was also attentive to their particular tastes and desires, as when he went with a friar who wanted to eat some grapes in a vineyard, and started to eat first (cf. 2 *Cel* 176). He had no tolerance for those who only wanted to reap the fruits of almsgiving without doing any of the work, like “Brother Fly, the ‘friend of the belly,’ whom he bluntly dismissed from the Order (cf. 2 *Cel* 75).

A good summary of St. Francis' attitude toward food is

offered in the Major Legend of St. Bonaventure: “He was austere towards himself but considerate toward his neighbor, making himself obedient to the Gospel of Christ in everything, he gave an edifying example not only when he abstained but also when he ate” (*LegM* 5.1). The end of St. Francis' life is linked, as we know, to a strange request that hardly seemed spiritual. He asked that “Friar Jacoba”, who promptly perceived his request, bring him some of the sweets that he liked so much, specifically, *mostaccioli* (*Letter to Lady Jacoba* and *CAs* 8). Even in the final moment of death, food – in this case a type of cookie that he had often enjoyed in Rome during an illness –, communicates friendship and deep relational resonances for Francis.

The topic of conviviality can be seen reflected in the fact that Francis did not want to exclude anyone from his table. In our day, conviviality takes the concrete aspect of economic solidarity in the Order on a global level. Once a community has met its needs and finds it has a surplus, this should go to benefit other communities in its Province who are living in need. The same logic applies to the relationship between Provinces and Custodies in the same Jurisdiction and finally among the various Jurisdictions of the Order. Charity towards one's brothers means a look that sees and a hand that opens. Eventually this style of mutual care and mutual exchange will become something completely normal.

## Recognition and praise

“Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). For Francis, following in the wake of the Apostle Paul, the priority was to make the Lord the center of one’s life and to seek Him in fraternity, turning over all material issues to him, including nourishment, which cannot be under or overestimated. Attention to food is always to be marked by a proper relationship with God and one’s brothers, never dictated solely by the criteria of possession and enjoyment alone. God is praised in abundance and scarcity, and his gifts should always lead one to a meeting with the Giver, to recognize His loving kindness towards mankind and every creature. *“Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs”* (Cant 20). From gratitude to praise—that is the transition that the *Canticle of Brother Sun* declares and invites one to fulfill. Everything that comes from God, especially “Mother Earth”, is a unique and precious gift that sustains the lives of all. St. Francis’ awestruck view of creation does not overlook the need for “sustenance”. His reference to the Earth that “sustains and governs,” is usually translated as “feeds us and nourishes us.” In the words of Francis, poetry and concreteness coexist, for which he is both enraptured with God and attentive to the needs of all, caring for the created habitat the Most High wanted for his creatures, and for which men should

join together to carefully safeguard. “This means, on the one hand, that nature is at our disposal, to enjoy and use properly. Yet it also means that we are not its masters. Stewards, but not masters” (Pope Francis: *To the Members of the European Parliament*, cit.). As we said earlier, the issue of food is something that can be studied in many different aspects, that is, it gradually expands our horizons from the table to the world, from our need to the needs of all humanity, from the needful circumstances that we find ourselves living, to those of the entire planet—to the point that our gaze becomes focused by responsibility.

## Conclusion

Dear brothers, I hope you have found these reflections interesting and that some of the topics in this letter will be discussed in your community, to be developed within the specific context of the ministries you serve. The Friars Minor Conventual are present in 63 countries on five continents of the world. Therefore there is a wide variety of cultural and economic situations for which the subject of food takes on very different resonances. I ask you, besides, to engage the laity in this reflection as well, to seek together lifestyles that combine frugality and quality, well-being and sharing.

We thank our good and merciful Lord every day for the food he gives us and always puts on our table. May our common meals be authentic fraternal gatherings. May our hearts be full of gratitude and concern for the needs of the friars, especially the sick or the elderly. *May our time together be experienced as a time of grace the Lord grants us for the nourishment of our bodies, minds and relationships.*

Holy Mary, you nourished Jesus  
and you kept his words in your heart

help us to listen to your Son  
and so let our lives be nourished by Him.

Holy Mary, caring mother,  
at the wedding at Cana, you alone  
saw what was missing for the joy of all,  
make us attentive to the needs of our confreres.

Holy Mary, you praised God  
for having “filled the hungry with good things”  
Open our eyes to the needs of the world  
so that all might have their daily bread.

My dear brothers, may the Lord give you Peace!

FRIAR MARCO TASCA  
*Minister General*

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