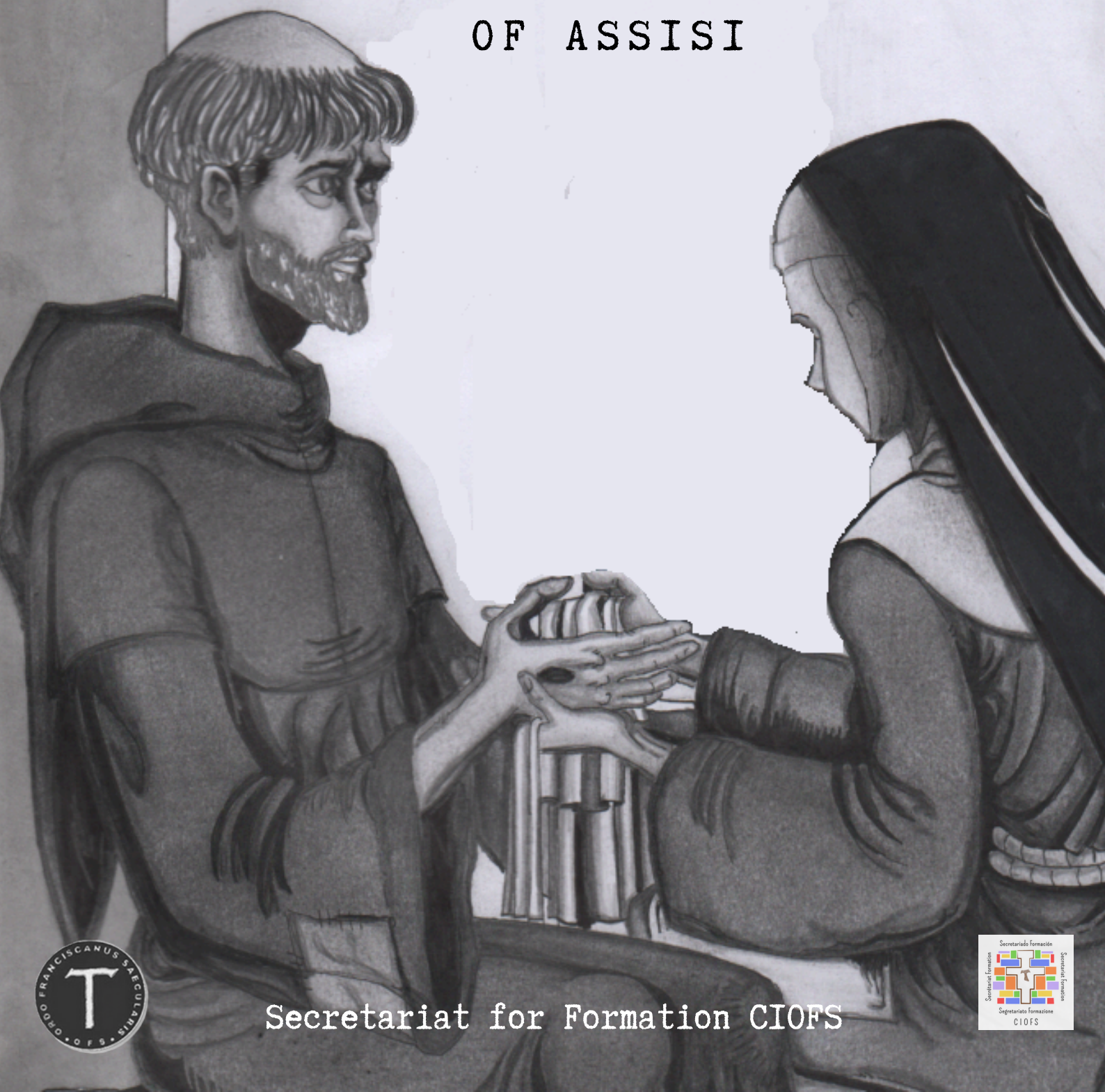
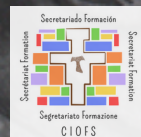


SERVANT LEADERSHIP
IN THE WRITINGS
OF ST. FRANCIS AND ST. CLARE
OF ASSISI



Secretariat for Formation CIOFS



PRESENTATION

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Secular Franciscan Order and Franciscan Youth,
Peace and Good

Continuing to work with the assumed priority during the General Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order 2021 the theme Servant Leadership was presented and it was assumed as one of the priorities to continue our formation in this dimension of service.

This priority stated: "Servant Leadership. Additional focus on servant leadership, sharing tools from Instrumentum Laboris and Br. Michael Perry's talk on the main theme, provided excellent tools for local fraternities to use (modules, templates, training format/outline, simple language)...".

The CIOFS Presidency approved to animate this priority by accepting the proposal that the Formation Secretariat for the year 2024 the theme is "Servant leadership in the Writings of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi".

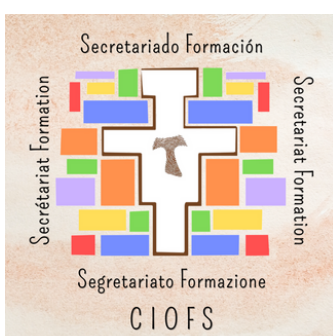
We consider it important to deepen this theme from our Franciscan sources, discovering together the life journey of our brothers Francis and Clare of Assisi.

St. Francis and St. Clare have left us a legacy of great value for our world, 800 years later we are still trying to make this legacy visible.

We hope that this material will respond to the priority given and that it will be useful for the formation of our brothers and sisters.

Fraternally,

CIOFS Formation Secretariat
Silvia Noemi Diana OFS
Eremenciana Chinyama OFS
Fr. Stefan Acatrinei OFM Conv
Alonso Acevedo OFS
Diane Frances Menditto OFS
Lucia Hidveghyova OFS
Mayara Ingrid Sousa Lima OFS



Drawings of the document: Luis Alejandro Maldonado OFS

July 2024

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE WRITINGS OF ST FRANCIS AND ST CLARE OF ASSISI

INTRODUCTION

The power of image, its role in the media, as well as its ability to influence man is well known to everybody. God himself, in revealing himself to Moses, used an image: the burning bush (cf. Exodus 3:2-4). The prophets, in order to convey God's message, often associated the word with the image (cf. Is 61:10-11; Ez 16:15-34; Jeremiah 24:4-7; Joel 1:5. etc.). Jesus Christ, in announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God, very often resorted to various images (cf. Matt 13:1-52; Mk 4:26-29; etc.).

Christians, from the very beginning, made use of images, in the form of symbols, to express their faith, their identity; further, by involving art, they created a fruitful tool of evangelization (particularly Biblia Pauperum – scenes of Bible painted in churches), capable of speaking to all categories of people: children, young and old, learned and unlettered. Those painted images have been able to impress and shape “living images” who are still shining today and continue to touch people’s lives. Among them, we proudly find St Francis and St. Clare who were eager to share their own experiences.

FRANCIS, A LEADER OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR CAREFREENESS

Any person reading the life of St. Francis of Assisi cannot escape a strong image from it: that of a leader. Thomas of Celano highlights, in the very first pages, Francis' ability not only to draw around him the youth of Assisi but also to lead them. And if the young people “elected him king”, against his own will, there is no doubt that he had demonstrated his ability to be “a guide in their carefreeness”. He really disposed, beyond his economic possibilities, of extraordinary natural gifts (cf. 2C 7; L3C 7). Although by birth he did not belong to the nobility, the leading class of those days, he invented his own nobility.

It is impressive to note that it was precisely they, the young people, who wanted him on that pedestal; a position very attractive in their circles (as well as in ours), and always coveted by many. It is known of Francis that he “sought to excel over others everywhere and with boundless ambition” (1C I 2). After longing for it (cf. LMj I 3) further he assumed it with insatiable joy for quite some time. Who would not feel comfortable in such a condition? Who would wish to leave such a position that offers such satisfaction? Who would wish to abandon such an atmosphere and move from the centre to the periphery? Certain satisfactions, as well as that of enjoying the attention of others, being always surrounded and amidst applause, even if well entitled, are short-lived, lead to crisis and end in failure if they do not have a solid foundation. Francis, after following his initial desires, plans and dreams, was not spared from disappointment and loss of meaning in life.

THE “SWEETNESS” OF “BITTERNESS”

No one would ever want to experience failure but, at certain times, it seems to be the only thing that helps people discover “the sweetness of bitter things” (cf. Test 3; 1C 9). Solitude and silence, which had now become Francis’ companions, after his role as leader no longer gave him any satisfaction (cf. 1C 17; 2C 9; LMj I 5), guided and prepared him to undertake another kind of leadership.

**“the sweetness of bitter things”
(cf. Test 3; 1C 9).**

Francis had already come a long way in that he had renounced the glory of the world, and the admiration of his friends. One day, whilst he was riding near Assisi, he met a leper. Lepers disgusted Francis and normally he would have avoided any he had met, but on this occasion, he got off his horse and went to the leper and embraced him. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Francis, records the following: “the leper caused him no small disgust and horror; nevertheless, lest like a transgressor of a commandment he should break his given word, he got off his horse and kissed the leper” (cf. 2C 9). It was a simple gesture, but an action which required a long period of time for its real meaning to mature inwardly in Francis.

When writing about this matter, Thomas of Celano states that from that moment St. Francis “began to consider himself less and less, until by the mercy of the Redeemer he came to complete victory over himself” (1C 17). There is a huge reversal of attitude, moving from a desire to always attract the attention of others to turning his attention to lepers, whom, previously, he could not bear (cf. 1C 17; 2C 9; L3C 11): “he undertook to serve them, washing their feet, bandaging their ulcers and sores, removing their pus and rot, and kissing their feet...” (Other Franciscan Testimonies XV 2).

Twenty years later, when Francis was dictating his Testament, he remembered that important moment: “when I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God Himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them” (Test 1-2). Francis had found Christ in that man, one of the poorest in the society of his time. The fact is that he met the Redeemer through the leper, in whom poorness united with sorrow and humility directed his whole conception regarding his following of Christ. In the leper, Francis saw the poor Christ suffering as a victim for our sins. It also marked the spiritual dimension of his future fraternity: to serve.



Thus, Francis discovered in his failure the presence of God who, through his Son Jesus, becomes a neighbour, a neighbour to every human being through his incarnation, culminating in his passion, death and resurrection. This new image of God's presence made him determined to adopt a different way of life, which made of him a new leader.

LEADERSHIP RESHAPED

To reshape Francis' conception of leadership, the first step asked by God from him was one of self-abandonment, so that He could make known His will to him: "If you want to know me, despise yourself" (2C 9). To know and to serve Christ means to embrace and serve the leper in whom Christ revealed Himself to Francis.



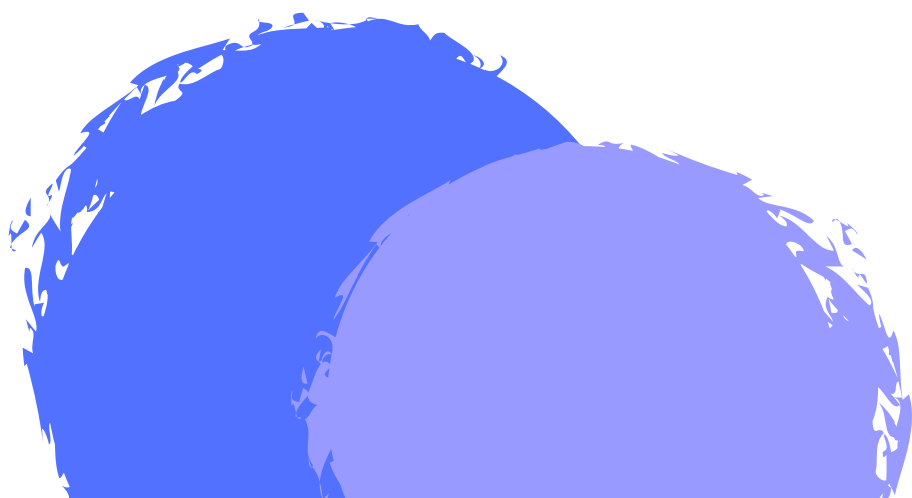
Realising what God was asking of him, he took up a different way of leadership which consequently brought with it the transformation of what was 'bitter' and offensive to him, into a state of happiness and sweetness. This kind of leadership overcomes every rivalry and division and leaves one able to be free to possess God's true glory. This constituted the charismatic impulse of his new being, the gift of God; it was also the fundamental attitude which he wished to be present in all his disciples, in both those who have been and those who are to come.

In the two years Francis spent around the church of San Damiano, which is the period between his renunciation of his father and the beginning of his preaching, he met people who insulted him. But those same people were also curious about him and gradually, he gained their admiration. In the year 1212, Clare Favarone di Offreduccio, impressed by the new image of Francis, the life he had chosen, came to him and promised her own obedience in the service of God. Francis accepted her faithful gesture with goodwill and prudence, leading her to the Benedictine nuns "to remain there until the Most High would provide a proper place for her" (cf. LCI 8.). Then, Francis moved her to San Damiano when the rebuilding was complete.

Around her, at San Damiano, there was gradually formed a new evangelical community that sought to follow Francis' leadership, but to live it in a feminine way (cf. 1C 18). St. Clare affirms in her Testament, that Francis looked after the spiritual progress of the poor ladies: "moved by pity for us, he bound himself both personally and through his religion, always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers" (TestCl 29).

In the same Testament, mentioning some of her own experiences after she had to take over the role of leader, she uses Francis' language: "I want them (the sisters) to obey their mother ... so that seeing the charity, humility and unity they have towards one another, she might bear all the burdens of office more lightly, so that what is painful and bitter, might be changed into sweetness, through their way of life" (TestCl 67-70). These words of St. Clare convey her own personal feelings. The responsibility of authority was for her a burden, even though she carried it out with love, humility, and a spirit of self-abandonment. The responsibility of Abbess made her live the same sentiments which marked the beginning of St Francis' new life of meeting and embracing the leper (cf. LCl 12).

It is right to point out that Francis' behaviour was not limited only to a platonic admiration of Christ in an attitude composed of tears and sobs. It became a reality of joyful action through the choice of the social category into which St Francis wanted to insert himself and all his followers, brothers and sisters, as well. Thinking of Jesus, who liked to stay with the poor, the sinners and other categories of people considered as being accursed and only worthy of human disdain (cf. Jn 7:49), Francis demanded that the friars "must rejoice when they live among people who are considered of little value and who are looked down upon, among the poor, the powerless, the sick, the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside" (ER IX 2).



The abasement of Christ revealed to them that serving is the essential element of Christian living. The need to become minor was essential to relive everything in the attitude of the Master: “The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28) (cf. Adm 4:1). Christ both as a servant of God and of man, becoming a poor and humble person, is a unique reality even if he is presented in two aspects. St. Francis and St. Clare built their respective communities using this fact as the cornerstone of their minority. This was the model on which the brothers and sisters were required to replicate their own personal life.

St. Francis and St. Clare lived this aspect of the life of Christ (humble service) in its fullness. St. Clare presents this new form of life, chosen by her, as the way of perfection in serving Christ (cf. RCI 13). It set them apart from a simple association of women, who lived together and made them into a community that was “Christocentric” following a Gospel format. They were to serve and continually make self-offerings of themselves to God. The Gospel of Christ is the essence of this form of life; one of St. Clare’s big preoccupations was to ensure that the form of life, that she and her sisters lived, never left the way of the Lord (cf. TestCl 74-75). In virtue of this truth, St. Clare wrote to St. Agnes of Prague: “I judge you to be a co-worker of God himself and support for the weaker members of his ineffable body” (3LAg 8).

“The Son of man came not to be served,
but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”
(Matt 20:28) (cf. Adm 4:1).

This deep attitude of humility made it possible for the “minors” and the “poor sisters” to live in the middle of the world in a spirit of submission and humble service to everyone (cf. SaIV 17-18.); it is the characteristic of that servant who is aware of doing nothing else, but only fulfilling his own duty (cf. Lk 17:10). The minority wants to designate the evangelical attitude of not seeking the first place or considering themselves superior to others. They will not seek power. They will serve everyone, and they will be available to carry out work without requesting payment. They will show gratitude and respect for all. Such an attitude is a sign of minority, and it requires submission to everybody, washing the feet of everyone. St Francis began serving everyone, not because he underestimated himself, but because he understood that the attitude expressed in the evangelical Beatitudes is essential for any leader. Jesus had proclaimed this requirement as being fundamental to understanding the Kingdom of God: “never to desire to be above others, but instead, we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake” (2LtF 47).

The model that St Francis had in mind and on which he formed his brotherhood, was that it should be a community in which fraternity and service are so closely united that they cannot be separated without the brotherhood being destroyed: “I want this fraternity to be called the Order of the Lesser Brothers” (1C 38). In fact, he recommends that “everyone, in general, should be called a lesser brother” (ER VI 3).



The image of Christ at the Last Supper, where the leader washed the feet of his followers, had a huge impact on Francis and inspired him to choose the name “lesser” - namely minor. This act of Jesus was one of immense love. He knelt in front of each apostle and lovingly completed the work which would normally have been carried out by a slave not by a leader. It caused Saint Francis to take this witness as the form of life for himself and for his friars: “If I, then, the Master and Lord, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet” (Jn 13:14) (cf. ER VI 3); by washing the feet of each other, everyone can become a “friar minor” and a “poor sister” and, of course, a true leader. The secret of such a life lived in fraternity and service was the fulfilment of the new commandment of love, in conformity with the formula which Saint Francis used to repeat so often: “Always treat others as you would like them to treat you” (Matt 7:12) (ER IV; LR VI 9). According to Saint Francis, they will indeed be friars minor if they know how to serve others; and they will remain faithful to their vocation as far as they will know how to serve and obey each other: “Let no brother do or say anything evil to another, on the contrary, through the charity of the Spirit, let them serve and obey one another” (ER V 13).

For St. Francis, to be a friar minor meant to be a servant to everybody (cf. LtOrd 3). One must be the last, namely a “worthless and weak man” (LtOrd 3), a “little and looked-down-upon servant” (LtR 1), “subject” (2LtF 1), “the least of the servants” (LtCus 1), who “in his humility, would rather obey those subjects than be their minister and servant” (LMn III 4). The consequence of this was that St Francis wanted the brothers to live in the world without privileges.

It is from this divine inspiration that the Franciscan charism was born, which had in St. Clare, a courageous and zealous disciple; “a woman, obedient to the word and teaching of St Francis, who offered herself to Christ, the task of her life. She concentrated the whole of her being to the glory and love of Him, whom she wanted to serve and whose unworthy servant she considered herself to be”.^[1] She expressed herself in the terminology of St Francis naming herself: “an unworthy servant of Jesus Christ and useless handmaid” (1LAg 2; cf. 2LAg 2), “a most lonely and unworthy handmaid of Christ and servant of the Poor Ladies” (3LAg 2; cf. 4LAg 2; RCI I 3; TestCI 79). St Clare shows herself through these descriptions to be the servant to both the Lord and her sisters.

[1] G. Iammarrone, *La cristologia Francescana. Impulsi per il presente*, Messaggero, Padova 1997, 98.

AUTHORITY AS SERVICE

Francis, touched by the example of Christ, has reshaped authority by defining it as service in the bond of charity. This is evident from the constant juxtaposition of the term “service” with that which somehow indicates a responsibility of authority. Rather, he wants to abolish, even in words, anything that might refer to pride, so for superiors he uses the term ministers and servants (cf. ER 4:1; 5:13). He wanted to determine legal competencies as well, if one considers that he stipulated that “none shall be called prior, but all shall simply be called lesser brothers. And let one wash the feet of the other” (ER 6:3). In this way the opposition between freedom and law is overcome, not simply by an interiorization of the norm but by its cancellation in the bond of charity: “Let he who is greater be like the lesser and a servant” (2Ltf 8:42-43).

Therefore, he severely admonished: “Woe to that religious man who is set by others on high and by his own will does not wish to descend. And blessed is that servant who does not set himself on high of his own will and always desires to put himself under the feet of others” (Adm 19:3-4). This has been the danger for superiors, especially, because they could be tempted “to consider the ministry of the brothers as their property” (ER 17:4); “Let those who are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers. And if they are more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a money bag to the peril of their soul.” (Adm 4:1-3).

The superior is “a father and not a tyrant” (2C 177) and must have requirements diametrically opposed to worldly pride and glory: “He must be someone who does not create sordid favouritism toward others, but will take as much care of the lesser and simple brothers as of the learned and greater ones ... He should not enjoy honours, or delight in approval more than insults ... he must be one who would never allow the desire for preserving honour to weaken the strong figure of justice, and he must feel such a great office to be more a burden than an honour” (2C 185-186). The superior should not exercise his service too long lest he run the risk of claiming it as an inheritance. Finally, Francis recommended to all regular superiors “not to change customs except for the better, not to beg nor to curry favour, not to exercise power but to fulfil a duty” (2Cel 188).

He rediscovers the genuine meaning of authority as fraternal service because one is the Father of all and “you are all brothers” (Matt 23:8) in the spirit of justice and peace. He requires this disposition of ministers and of his brothers, and Clare does the same for the abbesses, Francis also inculcates it in the rulers of the peoples as an evangelical service of power.

In Clare's Rule, authority is above all an example of affability, hospitality, service to keep everyone in the communion of love with Christ and to stimulate free obedience, urged by love rather than authority. St. Clare showed a special love in serving her sisters and her biographers mention this attitude: "Three years after her conversion, declining the name and office of abbess, she wished, in her humility, to be placed under others rather than above them and, among the servants of Christ, so that she might serve more willingly, rather than be served" (LCI 12). For St Clare to be the servant of Christ meant to serve as Christ had served. She assumed that concrete attitude which easily shows her desire of living again the sentiments of Christ servant, who humbled himself washing the feet of his apostles. Sister Bonevenuta of Perugia states: "St. Clare was so humble she washed the feet of her sisters" (PC II 3).

THE EUCHARIST

A fruitful aid and true support in his new leadership role was the holy Eucharist. Francis was in awe of this mystery where Christ's presence is perpetuated through the centuries. He realized that Jesus is attracted to the suffering of humankind and, taking on suffering, seeks out and sympathizes with sinful man like the Lord who loved them to the end (cf. Jn 13:1).



Contemplating the Eucharist, Francis desires to be a servant (cf. Test 41), actually a little one, (LOrd 2); namely, to do good by submitting to all, to offer a service without being noticed, like the little piece of bread in which the Lord Jesus hid himself. Since he saw in Christ not only the glorious Lord, but also the Servant who, out of love for mankind, placed himself under their feet, and who still gives himself in the Eucharist, Francis' attitude was one of compassion and love: "O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!" (LOrd 27).

The Eucharist is also seen by Francis as another incarnation and therefore another humiliation. Just as in Bethlehem He manifested Himself in the frailty of the human being, so in the Eucharist He gives Himself in the humble species of bread and wine, with the same purpose of mediating, revealing, and sharing the goodness of the Father (cf. Adm 1:10-12). Francis expresses this movement of Christ, which appears as humility and annihilation of the Son, by saying: "Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of a priest ... And in this way the Lord is always with His faithful" (Adm 1:16-22).

Francis sees in the Eucharist that Jesus who one day descended into the Virgin's womb to show us the Father's mercy; now, in a certain sense, repeats the same movement every day, realised through the hands of the priest. In this way, Christ remains humbly present among his faithful until the end of the world, and Francis cannot remain silent before this immense love. He clearly has before his eyes the daily celebration of the Eucharist, which is as important for his soul as daily bread for his body: "Give us this day: in remembrance, understanding, and reverence of that love which [our Lord Jesus Christ] had for us and of those things that He said and did and suffered for us. our daily Bread: Your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ" (PrOF 6).

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Therefore, the daily bread that Francis asks of the Father is his beloved Son given in the Eucharist. He asks it in order to remember, understand, and venerate the love he had for us; in this way Francis nourishes his own soul.

Clare feels that she has received as a gift from God existence and life, faith, justification (cf. PC III 20; XI 3; XIV 7) and continual nourishment through his sacraments, particularly from the Eucharist (cf. PC II 11; III 7; IX 10). But if Francis' Writings are rich in expressions concerning the Eucharist, unfortunately we cannot say the same thing about Clare's Writings; she seems to be obstinate in not giving us any information about this great mystery of God's love for mankind. Therefore, the intensity of Clare's devotion to the Eucharist cannot be known except through her actions (cf. LCI 28).

The poor Ladies, at Clare's canonisation process, testify to the devotion with which the Saint approached the Eucharist. Sister Benvenuta of Perugia states how "Lady Clare frequently confessed, and, with great devotion and fear, frequently received the holy sacrament of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, trembling all over as she did so" (PC II 11); and Sister Philippa adds that "she shed many tears when she received the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ" (PC III 7). The same attitude towards the Eucharist is also witnessed by Sister Francesca da Messere, who states how "the holy Mother received it with much devotion and tears, as she was always used to" (PC IX 10).



Clare was aware of the transcendence of God who made himself present in the Eucharist; therefore, she was concerned that even the material things pertaining to the Eucharist were worthy and for this she made corporals and cloths, which she then had distributed in the churches of Assisi (cf. PC I 11; II 12; VI 14; LCI 28). Her sisters also took care to reveal the strength and security Clare found in the Eucharist, before which she raised the intercessory prayer that freed the monastery and the city of Assisi from the siege of Frederick II's troops (cf. PC III 18-19; IV 14; VII 6; IX 3; X 9; XII 8; XIII 9; XIV 3; XVIII 6; LCI 21-23).

Christ's presence in the Eucharist is the same as it once was among the apostles: “and as he showed himself to the holy apostles in the true flesh, so also now he shows himself to us in the consecrated bread” (Adm 1:19). In the presence of this mystery, we must behave like the apostles before the Christ-man (cf. Adm 1:20-21) and see with the light of the Holy Spirit the Son of God present, alive and true among us, since the Eucharist (cf. Adm 1:22) is the means by which the Lord can be with his own forever: “in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood” (Test 10).

If the apostles, seeing Jesus of Nazareth with the help of the Spirit, believed that He is the Son of God, we too, before the consecrated species, with the help of the same Spirit, are called to believe that they are His true body and blood. The merciful love of the Father is revealed in the Son who was born and who offered himself as a victim on the altar of the cross not for himself, but for our sins. This sacrifice represents for Francis a sign of the Father's love. Through holy communion he partakes in the work and fruits of the passion that are commemorated in the Eucharistic celebration.



CONCLUSION

“The titles of authority, of leadership, used in the Franciscan family are: ministers, custodians, guardians, vicars; all are evangelical names that express the spirit of fraternal service and vigilance with respect to one another. In Clare's Rule, authority is above all an example of affability, acceptability, and service to keep all in the communion of love with Christ and to stimulate free obedience, urged by love rather than authority. St. Clare showed a special love in serving her sisters, and her writings as well as her biographers mention this attitude. For St. Clare to be the servant of Christ, it meant that she was to serve as Christ had served. She assumed that concrete attitude which easily shows her desire of living again the sentiments of Christ servant, who humbled himself washing the feet of his apostles. Sister Bonevenuta of Perugia states: “St. Clare was so humble she washed the feet of her sisters” (PC II 3).

The image of Christ, who out of love became a humble servant by kneeling to wash the feet of those who were going to betray him and decided to remain with them in the Eucharist, touched Francis deeply and transformed him into a new leader; one who has not ceased to love and lead those who were willing to enjoy life in its fulness (cf. Jn 10:10). Love can take several forms in the life of a person, and it does, actually, during a life span. People would always like to recognise it under the image of romantic love, tender behaviour, and compassionate attitude, but most of the time love needs to express itself through service. Saint Francis' followers have willingly chosen to be available and to reflect that image of love which expresses itself as service.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH A BROTHER OR SISTER OR IN FRATERNITY :

- How does the example of servant leadership shown to us by Francis and Clare serve us both in our personal life and in our fraternity life?
- What are the characteristics of the servant leadership of Francis and Clare that reinforce my service in the OFS and YOUFRA?