



**MEETING OF THE FRANCISCAN CONFERENCES OF ASIA-OCEANIA
WITH THE MINISTER, CUSTODIES AND THE GENERAL DEFINITORY**

**Brothers and minors today in Asia and Oceania:
living and witnessing to the Gospel in a pluralistic context.**

Manila, April 9th, 2024

We have been together for a few days now in this meeting listening and getting to know each other. We give thanks to the Lord for the richness of our charism present in the multiple and pluralistic realities of Asia and Oceania.

Brothers and minors in a pluralistic context

We recognise that we are only a tiny presence in this ocean of peoples, languages, cultures, and religious traditions. If Christians are a minority, we are even more so. From a faith perspective, we seize this fact as an opportunity. We cannot boast of numbers or of positions of power, we should not seek to be influential or dictate agendas. We could be *pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility* (RegB 6:2). Following the Lord Jesus in his humility as brothers and minors today can mean becoming capable of remaining open, listening and being in dialogue, without pretension, and ready to praise the Lord Most High for the good that is sown everywhere and returning to Him ourselves and the lives and different expressions of many.

On this path, the multiple challenges that Christians and religious in Asia face, ranging from cultural differences to poverty, from access to education to religious pluralism, from ethnic and social tensions to the impact of modernisation, do not frighten us, but rather invite us to rethink and revitalise our life in mission. Adapting to cultural transformations and preserving religious identity are often problematic. Rapid economic growth can lead to social changes and values that conflict with the ideals of consecrated life. In this context, finding a balance between tradition and change is a constant challenge for those who lead a religious life in this diverse region. However, many religious face these challenges with commitment and adaptability, seeking to promote spiritual and social values in their communities.

Brothers and minors in a synodal context

The life of the Friars minor in Asia and Oceania today is characterised by a wide range of realities. Many brothers are engaged in ordinary pastoral work, as well as in charity activities, education, and social assistance, trying to respond to the needs of the population.

I would say that this very context invites us to respond together as *brothers and minors* to our wounded world. I recall Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which starts from the



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fundamental principle that all individuals are called to fraternity. The Pope shows in the very form of the text how we can speak - and operate - with 'other believers' without hiding the particularities of our witness. *Fratelli Tutti* then calls us to live as brothers in a world marked by war, political division, and inequality. This means becoming a symbol of the fraternity and "social friendship" suggested by the encyclical. Does not this great openness echoes strongly in your context?

Again, learning the practice of synodality helps us discover ourselves as *brothers* and *minors* with so many others, as the people of God sharing the same Spirit through baptism. Synodality requires active listening, perception, and communication-dialogue.

The journey of the Order towards the Chapter of Mats 2025, with Chapters held at entity level, seeks to educate us about the synodal mentality and practice. This is because we believe that consecrated life can open the way to synodality. If consecrated people from different institutes work together, they can become powerful instruments to transform society. We are encouraged as individuals, communities, and congregations to carry out our different ministries through cooperation and co-creative collaboration. It seems to me that in the pluralistic context of Asia and Oceania, this possibility is particularly strong and is a real calling for us *brothers* and *sisters* today, in this geographical and cultural space.

Becoming *brothers* and *minors* reminds us of the importance of growing as *persons in relationship*: This is the cornerstone and essence of synodality. As brothers we can become mystics (upward), servants (downward), ascetics (inward) and prophets (outward) by following four relational paths: 1) upward, which involves a relationship with God, 2) downward, which involves a relationship with creation, 3) inward, which involves a relationship with self, and 4) outward, which involves a relationship with others. Developing mature relationships with God, creation, self, and others is a challenging task; and at the same time, it is also full of promising opportunities, because it helps us grow in the spirit of synodality. In this way we also grow in the practice of the charism.

Brothers and minors on the path of the Order

It is within this framework that I wish to briefly present the worldwide Order's journey. We are experiencing a very accelerated change in the configuration of our international fraternity, starting from the design of the Entities, down to the Conferences and the entire structure of our fraternity. We increasingly need a broader vision to guide it. Or there has been a vision, especially at the local level of Provinces that have united, in COTAF, ESC, COMPI and CONFRES. Unions of Provinces have been a reality since the mid-1990s and continue even in contexts we did not think of until recently, such as Croatia and Latin America. The process continues in Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, the English-speaking area.

In other realities, new entities are being created, such as in Asia, India, and the Philippines, and in Africa, from the east to the Congo to the west. The union or creation of new Provinces today cannot simply recreate the same Province model that we left behind. If the paradigm does not change, the problems will reappear as they were. We are seeing more and more clearly that we need to change the provincial model, that is, the way we organise our presence and distribution over a territory. What is at the centre is the life and



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mission of the brothers, and the Province is only a tool to foster this: it cannot become an objective and weigh down life, as seems to me to be happening today.

The General Chapter 2021 has asked us to review the current structure of the Conferences, the General Curia, and the Order. We are working on this in dialogue with the Presidents of the Conferences. The essential criteria must favour greater interaction and co-participation, overcoming more individual mindsets and ways. It is important to foster, especially among the young brothers, places of encounter and exchange for a common path.

The African Conference is being restructured into English-language and a French-language conference, and we have initiated the project of a conference for entities bordering the Mediterranean and living in a Muslim context.

The English-Speaking Conference is challenged to rethink its structure after the merging process of the Provinces in the US.

What a review is appropriate today for the reality of your two Conferences, to rethink how to sustain the Franciscan presence today and into the future in such a large and significant territory. Let us walk together, it is a path that will be valuable for the whole Order. Collaboration is the key word, and you are already experiencing it. I see with great satisfaction your ability to help, dialogue and arrive at concrete decisions. Thank you also for responding to the appeals of the General Curia to support certain presences. Now we need to go one step further to make this collaboration become stable, as a style of presence and mission, going beyond national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Religious life, and Franciscan life in particular, wants to respond to the Spirit and be an alternative reality, which allows us to see the Kingdom of God already present in our midst, In a world that is increasingly mistrustful of foreigners and migrants, increasingly violent and at war, we can be a different word with our openness, our readiness to go to different lands, to recognise ourselves as brothers with so many. Please find, together, ways to consolidate this collaboration. It will also be an example for other regions of the Order, and I believe we should put this point among the most important topics of the General Chapter. it is important for the very future of the Order.

Brothers and minors in some paths of the Order today.

The Ratio Evangelizationis of the Order is being written according to the mandate of the General Chapter 2021. Seventy per cent of the Entities have responded and this allows us to share a vision and the fundamental lines of evangelisation today.

We are following up and rethinking some **missionary presences**, also entrusting them to Provinces, according to the request of the General Chapter. I thank the two Provinces of the Philippines for welcoming the presences in Thailand and Myanmar. I thank Vietnam for the presences in Laos and Cambodia and all the brothers who support the mission in Asia (PNG, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) and beyond. I think of the presence of some brothers from your Conferences in Africa, Europe, and North America. What is more important today is to have brothers integrated in the fraternities or engaged in new projects, such as that of the International Fraternity of Stratford in London (UK). it is preferable not



to have more presences of one Province in the territory of another, without a connection and integration. Let us find ways for this type of collaboration together.

Your entities are already capable of collaboration to support or initiate presences. I believe it is necessary to coordinate these paths better and better, to proceed with an ever more united vision in the sense of the charism, therefore of fraternity and minority.

In the area of formation, the celebration of **Lay Brothers' meetings** in the Conferences and next year for the international one, again thanks to the mandate of the 2021 General Chapter, is animating attention and dynamic reflection on our identity as Brothers and minors and on the specificity of the charism, which concerns all the friars. I am confident in this process, which is also very important in your contexts.

The meeting with the temporarily professed of Europe which will take place in Assisi and La Verna in July, is a sign that we are listening to these brothers about our future, of which they are protagonists and not just *doers*. In the years to come, could we think about something similar in your context?

Chapters of Mats are being held in different entities and we have begun the organisation of the international one in June 2025. There are positive reactions and even the effort to sit at the same table with lay people and consecrated women is bearing fruit, considering different cultures and mentalities. We expect important elements from this journey for the Plenary Council of 2025 and the General Chapter of 2027.

In Europe, Latin America and just two months ago in Africa, we returned to the subject of the "**New Forms of Presence and Evangelisation**", according to the 2017 document *Ite Nuntiate*. These are the fraternities in which to take up again in a dynamic way the essential elements of our life in mission as contemplative brothers and minors with and among the poor. We wish to give an international scope to this project, and I therefore ask your Conferences to find a way to activate this journey, verifying the both new and already existing fraternities, and those that could be initiated. The aim is to generate a renewed enthusiasm for our charism, which can be lived today with creative fidelity.

Conclusion

Thank you for your attention, dear brothers, and let us continue to walk together for the good and the future of our fraternity, attentive to what the Spirit is asking of us for this time, in the light of the signs of the times.

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