

PARISH MINISTRY:



A CAPUCHIN CONTRIBUTION

PREAMBLE

The ideas in this paper were first given to Capuchin friars in 1997. They come from the basic insights of St Francis of Assisi, who was called to “rebuild the house of God” – the Church – of his day. Because these insights come from the Gospel, they never lose their value and force – as Pope Francis is showing us. (He didn’t choose the name by chance!).

As we embark on a new stage in the life of our Parish, it may be useful to outline the basic vision again. I hope it will inspire all of us, brothers and sisters of this parish fraternity, to pray, reflect and discern, so that together we see what the Lord is calling us to be, and to do, and respond as fully as we can.

1. *A “Capuchin” parish*

The question “What makes a Capuchin parish different from a diocesan one?” is not new, although it was never easy to answer. Sometimes the answers we gave amounted to little more than saying “the people appreciate us because we are approachable; there is a variety of preaching and liturgical styles, not the same man every day or every week”, etc.

Apart from these still desirable features, there was not much difference in practice between our parishes and those of the diocese. We tended to follow the diocesan model, and we took on parish ministry as we would take on any other, although in most cases it quickly became the dominant factor in the life of all the friars of a community which had a parish - whether they were directly involved in it or not. The parish tended to condition the lifestyle and prayer times of the whole fraternity.

2. *Brotherhood is key*

In the last few decades, things have begun to change, because the Church and the Order have changed in the ways in which they understand their nature and purpose in the world. Programmes for parish renewal are being adopted by dioceses in England and Wales. In the Order, suffice it to say that the *fraternal character* of the Order, whose mission in the Church it is to give flesh to the Gospel by being first and above all a brotherhood, is becoming ever clearer, and the practical consequences are beginning to be seen.

Since the (Capuchin Order) was founded as a brotherhood, it is brotherhood that will determine the nature, spirit and character of its ministries” (Br. John Corriveau, former Minister General, 1997).

Today we are much better placed than a few years ago to ask the question: "What is the specific contribution that Capuchins can make to parish ministry, *by the very fact of being first and foremost a brotherhood, formed in order to give flesh to the Gospel?*" Thanks to the process of the last 30+ years, we are beginning to see some of the answers.

3. *“Friars Minor” or “Lesser Brothers”*

Also, in 2004, our Order held a Plenary Council which focused on the second part of our title: "Minor". What is Franciscan "lowliness", where does it come from and how does it show itself in practice? In our case, how does it show itself in a Capuchin parish?

For example, what does it mean for a friar to exercise the ministerial priesthood as a “lesser brother” – exercising it in the person of a Lord and Master who washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper and showed his lordship by lowering himself in service – just a few hours before giving his life on the cross? This leads us to reflect deeply on how we as brothers exercise the power we have in our ministries – whether in a parish or otherwise.

The question therefore is: *"How does lesser brotherhood determine the nature, spirit and character of our parish ministries?"*

4. *The example of Pope Francis*

This is a time of grace for the Church. We have a Pope who has taken the name Francis. We can clearly see that his ministry as Pope is inspired by St Francis. In his Letter “The Joy of the Gospel”, he calls the whole Church to be renewed by the joyful Good News of Jesus, to look beyond itself to its mission for the world. Clearly he is calling the Church to move from what we could call the "medieval" structure of the Church, with a clericalised hierarchy structured in terms of power, with titles, prestige, influence, to a simpler, gospel presence based on joyful faith and humble service. For many of us, this will be a painful period, as we learn to let go of habits and styles that have been familiar for centuries. It calls for profound faith and trust that the Lord knows what He is doing, here and now, in and for His Church.

No-one can foresee the new shape of the Church that will arise out of the death of the old, but we can surely rejoice to be part of the process, now under way, by which the Church - meaning we ourselves - is being remade! We need a new vision of faith to believe that the death of one form is not the end of the Church!

As a branch of the Franciscan family, Capuchins believe they have a vital contribution to make to this process. How do we do this? Simply by trying always to live as “little brothers” of everyone, in every aspect of our parish (and all other) ministries. We try to plant the seed, and let it grow. Not that we are the only ones doing this, but if we Capuchins fail to do it, we lose our reason to exist in the Church as a distinct family.

THE PARISH AS BROTHERHOOD

I. The friars themselves witnessing to their brotherhood

In the context of parish ministry, how far does brotherhood influence the parish, and how? Is it clear that we are called to be:

- a) servants of everyone; contemplative and prayerful; poor and austere; inserted among the poor; dedicated to justice, peace and respect for nature; a brotherhood rich in human and gospel values? (cf. Capuchin Constitutions).
- b) Men who give priority to prayer together:
 - is there among us a sense that God is the priority of our search;
 - do we find new ways by which to invite others into our prayer?
 - do people see us as men of God?
 - Do our liturgical celebrations awaken a thirst for the experience of God?
- c) *Fraternal ministry.* With due regard to the canonical appointment of the parish priest, we aim to have a real fraternal ministry in our parishes, in the sense that all the brothers in the fraternity - even those not directly assigned to the parish - are seen to be involved with it, especially by their witness of brotherhood and prayer, and sharing as much as they are able in whatever ministries are going on in the parish (not just clerical ministries).

Also, we know that the Church has a well-defined programme of formation and training for its clerical ministers. Programmes for the training of lay ministers are not yet available everywhere. As a religious Institute in which clerical and lay members are equal, Capuchins in their parishes should surely be

in the forefront of providing solid training and experience in a rich variety of lay ministries, equal in stature though different in kind from those ministries that require ordination.

d) *Brothers first.*

“By reason of the same vocation the brothers are equal. Therefore, according to the Rule, the Testament and the earliest custom of the Capuchins, all of us are called brothers without distinction”. With these words, our Capuchin Constitutions give us a simple tool for fostering brotherhood, which can be very effective in portraying what we are striving to be, especially in a parish context. Sometimes even friars object that if this were adopted in the parish “the people would be confused” and would not know who was a priest and who was “a brother”. As with St Francis, “Brother” is not a title of honour, but a statement of fact: St Francis grasped intuitively that the basic dignity among God's people is the dignity of being children of the one Father, and hence brothers and sisters of each other. (“Call no-one on earth your father, for you are all sons and daughters of your Father in heaven”). The use of “Brother” as a title is a one-word sermon. Brother/sisterhood is the fundamental relationship for all members of the Church, and it is what we are striving, most of all, to live and to build up through our parish ministry. When this is properly explained to the people, they generally accept it without difficulty.

II. *Brotherhood spreading outwards*

- a) What are the first contacts of people with the parish fraternity, at the door, on the phone, in church? Is there an atmosphere of welcome, or do we close our doors, or subtly make people feel they are not welcome? How to get the balance between privacy and open house? Do parishioners ever share our meals? Could someone come and share our life for a while, “come and see” how we live? Shouldn't this aspect be part of our contribution to building up the brotherhood of the parish?
- b) Striving for a basic attitude whereby the various sub-groups and societies in a parish become genuine fraternities within the greater brotherhood of the parish as a whole:

- even territorially: districts, zones, regions in a large parish, based on a number of streets, each with their local representative(s); house liturgies;

their representation on the parish council... It would be important to hear of various experiences already under way in different places;

- organizing the existing parish groups as true fraternities, in which the members relate as brothers and sisters to each other and to "outsiders"; the special role of the Secular Franciscan Order and Young Franciscan groups in fostering this wider brotherhood.

c) *The parish Council.*

The friars' experience of their own local chapter or house meeting as a process of discernment, dialogue and coming to a consensus, can be extremely useful here, and could be applied to

-- *the Parish Council* and the decision-making process: collaborating willingly as equals with lay brothers and sisters. Canon law says that "*The parish council has only a consultative vote...*" (can. 536,2) What does it mean to "consult" the laity, in a spirit of "minority", not seeing them as a threat or a limitation to our "power"?

Perhaps the parish council, especially in a Capuchin parish, could become less of a business meeting and more a moment of spiritual sharing and discernment. Applying to the Parish Council what a former Capuchin Minister General said of the local chapter, we get an interesting result:

The Parish Council is important as an instrument of fraternal understanding and contemplation, whereby the brothers and sisters on the Council read with faith the signs of the times, seeking to place themselves and their parish at the disposal of the Spirit of God erupting in our world. We cannot claim to be a gospel parish if we never read together the Word of God and consciously reflect upon the demands of that Word in our common and individual lives. If the new ecclesial movements of our day have anything to teach us, it is the power of the Word of God in creating, sustaining and shaping the local parish.

-- fostering the giftedness of everyone in the parish, encouraging each person to make his/her contribution.

d) Encouraging an attitude of "stewardship" and sharing in the use of the good things we enjoy; not seeing our gifts and material goods as our "property" to be used simply as we see fit.

e) Is the parish a *just* community? Are we treating any of its members unjustly? Are we instruments of reconciliation, and are our parishes catalysts for peace in the neighbourhood? Are there practical schemes to raise awareness of environmental issues?

5. MINORITY / "LITTLENES" IN MINISTRY

"The great ones among the gentiles lord it over them...this is not to happen among you" (Mt 20,24)

Amongst other things, this will mean:

-- most of all: do the "little ones" feel at home in our parishes? Are they welcomed, or subtly excluded? Are there initiatives to reach out to the various categories of people who are on the fringes of Church and society? What is the proportion of poor, outcast, new immigrant, homeless, discriminated etc. parishioners in our churches? If that proportion is habitually very low --- or perhaps we do not even know -- then it is time to ask WHY, and to see what is to be done.

--- being ready to co-operate in what is good and already up and running, without wanting always to start something of our own. (e.g. food banks, credit unions, drop-in centres....). Also, small can be beautiful!

---Take as a principle: "never do myself what should normally be done by someone else".

--- especially in liturgical ministry: knowing how to preside in a way that lets other ministries be!

If, as presider, I usually find myself performing many ministries, it's time to look again and ask WHY?

Also, as a lay minister, do I resent it when someone takes over "my" ministry?

--- Not clinging to a ministry or a place long after it's time to be gone... being happy to see "our" project or ministry being joined (and changed) by others.

--- Never being too quick to invoke my "authority" as parish priest, assistant, as presbyter, as friar.

--- Never assume priority just because of "who I am" - this can be a subtle tendency, easy to miss that we do this!

CONCLUSION

If our "lesser brotherhood" conditions the nature and style of all our ministries, we will need to look at each of our apostolates to see how this is to be done. A Capuchin brotherhood must do more than minister, it must *evangelise*. Our way of evangelising is to live as "friars minor"; all of us, whether we are friars or not, have much to offer to the Church in this regard. In fact, if we are really trying to live as "lesser brothers and sisters", this will be our way of responding to the call of Christ – addressed to Francis and addressed to us – to “go and rebuild my Church, which as you can see, is falling into ruin.”
