

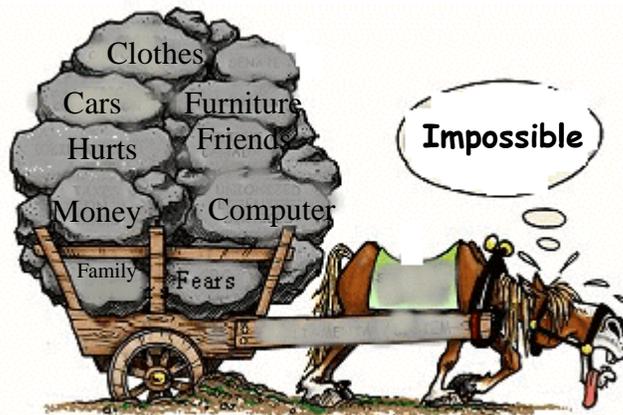
Capuchin Charisms



Jack Rathschmidt, O.F.M. Cap.

Thanks to my Capuchin Brothers: Charles Sammons, William Hugo, James Peterson, Joseph Yakimovich, and Arlen Harris, all of whom made many helpful suggestions to correct and improve this essay.

© Province of St. Mary of the Capuchin Order
30 Gedney Park Dr.
White Plains, NY 10605
USA



Hasidic Jews like to tell the tale of a wealthy merchant who so grossly overloaded his wagon with his “possessions,” that his horse couldn’t pull it. The fellow thought of removing some items, but then decided that they were all indispensable to his career and life. Stumped, he finally said to himself, “I know what to do. I’ll take the wheels off!”¹

In many ways this is the story of every person, group and, for our purposes, religious community. Determined to open our hearts to the love and will of God, we ask for help. Soon, however, we realize we have collected so many things which insulate us from God and one another that we can’t move. Wonderful and painful memories, friends and companions, hurts, adventures, possessions, wealth, weaknesses, clothes, furniture, computers, cars and so much more clutter and overwhelm the “wagons” of our lives. How, we wonder, can we let go of the “things” that have shaped and colored each moment of our existence? Fearful of losing everything, rather than empty our wagons of everything we do not need, we take the wheels off our lives and get stuck.

Almost fifty years ago, Pope John XXIII, convinced the entire church was stuck,

convened the Second Vatican Council to begin what he called an *aggiornamento* or renewal of life for all God's people. Beginning with a reform of the liturgy which ushered in the use of the vernacular at mass, and proceeding through a new understanding of the church's relationship with the modern world, the Council also charged all religious communities to begin their own *aggiornamento* with the publication of, *The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*. This document led professed religious to begin a major overhaul of their life, lifestyle and Constitutions both by reclaiming the vision and values of their founders and reading the signs of the times. This powerful exercise also challenged all religious men and women to acknowledge both the great work of their forebears, and honestly put aside unhelpful, even debilitating, practices that crept into their personal and communal life.

More important for our purposes, the work of *aggiornamento* helped the Capuchins rediscover, name and revitalize their most important charisms. By revisiting the vision of their founders, the charisms of **Fraternity, Minority, Contemplation, Ministry, Justice-Peace-Ecology** emerged, enabling them to bring into clearer focus why it was they were founded and how they might reshape their lives in the 21st century.

Finally and most significantly, it is how these five charisms interface and relate to one another that we will be the heart of this essay. Many religious communities value fraternity and minority, or contemplation and ministry. Some even focus on Justice-Peace-Ecology as a way to live the gospel. But it is my conviction that Capuchins will understand their unique place in the pantheon of religious communities only when they reflect and pray about each of these charisms in their relationship to one another. In other words, when Capuchins study **Fraternity, Minority, Contemplation, Ministry, and Justice, Peace and Ecology** as they relate to one another, they will discover what it is that makes them different (not better) than other religious communities, even other Franciscans. Furthermore, it will help them decide what it is that they need to take out of their wagons and what needs to stay for them to be faithful to their founders' vision

and the challenge of the church to read the signs of the times as a way to have an ongoing and authentic presence in the 21st century.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are you carrying around that makes it impossible for you to move from place to place?
2. What have you been able to let go of that has helped you move forward? What more do you need to leave behind?

Fraternity

Let's return to our opening story. Imagine that the rich fellow's wagon has four sides or walls, and four wheels. The bed of the wagon, that which allows it to carry any load, is **fraternity**, the central and foundational charism of the Capuchin Franciscans.²

Fraternal love is the heart of Francis' vision. In his Last Will and Testament, which Capuchins think of as important as the Rule itself, Francis writes: "And the Lord gave me brothers." This simple yet profound expression of gratitude, wonder and awe was Francis' way of saying that his band of brothers was God's work, not his. He was not alone. God gave him brothers, and now he not only had God as his constant companion and guide, he also had brothers with whom to walk the path of ongoing conversion.

Nothing was more important to Francis than the gift of fraternity. Like a bed upon which he could lie down, even during his most difficult journeys, fraternity protected and carried him when he was tired, hurt, lonely, or full of joy and gratitude. Simply put, fraternity is the charism upon which Francis built his life. Because he had rejected the idea of owning property, Francis needed something that would allow him to convince the Roman authorities to approve his way of life. Fraternity, his relationship with the brothers, was God's gift, and it would have to be enough. Though fragile by definition, his relationships with the brothers would be his anchor, his rock, his ground. Neither wealth, possessions, friaries, nor anything he or the friars did in service of others would make Franciscan life unique. Rather, it would be the quality of their relationships, rooted in their conviction that God was fully present whenever they gathered in twos or threes that would give them an identity. The Capuchin Constitutions say it this way: "Let us live in the midst of the world as a gospel leaven so that people, seeing our fraternal life centered in the spirit of the beatitudes, may realize that the Kingdom of God has already begun in their midst," (Constitutions 6, 98).

Leaven is usually imaged as a benign additive to water and wheat that produces bread.

But in fact yeast works as an irritant by breaking down wheat which produces carbon dioxide, a gas. Only then can the wheat rise and become bread, food for others. Similarly, our relationships with one another in fraternity, which are often irritating and difficult, allow us to become bread for others. A sign of hope because we never give up on one another, fraternal life invites people to know and love God deeply in the midst of their own often painful relationships. Far from destroying our fraternity, our differences enliven it and help others experience God not as distant and aloof, but as present as our last disagreement. Thus, fraternal life helps us become the bread which others can eat to gain the strength to heal their own relationships.

As a young friar I often heard our older friars speak of some of their brothers as *fratach*, an appellation that carried warmth, kindness and deep value. A *fratach*, I learned, focused his life on other friars. A *fratach* would go out of his way to speak highly of the friars, would visit a sick friar often even when he didn't have time, and never shied away from doing menial tasks. The *fratach* would be the last one to leave a party, not because he was having such a wonderful time, but because he wanted to clean up after the other brothers. *Fratach* were the brothers who sat with lost souls who came to our door for a meal and listened to their fantastic tales without an ounce of cynicism. *Fratach* were the brothers upon whom you could always rely. Not anxious to make a name for themselves in the "world," they were like our mothers, men who worried when we stayed out too late, and never failed to ask about our lives. More, *fratach* were and are our leaven. Their goodness challenges us, sometimes irritates us, and always makes us reflect more deeply about our call to the vowed life.

Peter Damien Preziosi, a friar who died in his mid forties (+1977), was a *fratach*. Tall, thin, intense and hilariously funny, Peter Damien could tell stories for hours in a dozen different accents. At fraternity and parish gatherings his rendition of, *Have you ever been across the Sea to Italy* kept his listeners laughing until they hurt, and his humor, which was never negative or hurtful, lifted the spirits of friars throughout our Province.

When I first had the opportunity to work with Peter Damien, I was startled and strengthened by his compassion. Knowing that at twenty-nine I was very young to be named his successor as the director of our college level formation program, Peter brought me into his office and pointed at a picture of Jesus on his wall. "Notice," he said, "how the picture is at eye level. That is for the brothers whom you will help God form. When they visit this office, I assure them that the picture is really a window, and that Jesus is looking at us all the time, reminding us to be good, to be kind, and to listen. And the picture is for you, too, Jack," he said. "This is your office and print now and you can go to the Lord at any time and he will always be there for you. Don't be afraid," he reminded me, sounding so much like Jesus wanting to console his disciples after he was raised from the dead. When, a few months later, I took that office as my own, seeing the picture of Jesus there assured me that I was not alone. More, I could never pass the image of Jesus without thinking of Peter Damien.

Capuchins, as Peter Damien witnessed and taught long before we formalized the notion, are first of all brothers. Brotherhood/sisterhood is the charism upon which all the other values of our life are built. We so value fraternity that in the early 1980's we renounced all titles in the church, not to diminish the call to priestly service, but to emphasize our brotherhood. While most ordained friars still choose to use the title Father in ministry in order not to confuse the people they serve, especially when they preside at Mass as priests, officially we are Brothers. Our Constitutions say it this way: "By reason of the same vocation, the brothers are equal. For this reason...let us all be called brother without distinction." (# 84, 3)

Being brothers without distinction humbles us both as a community and as individuals. Fraternity calls us not to seek any office, authority or jurisdiction for our own gain or reputation. We are brothers. We work together for the good of all. We listen to those we serve, and we listen to one another as wisdom figures. Reluctant to make decisions

that affect others without conversation and discernment, we strive to make our community strong by honoring the experience, skills and wisdom of all. Knowing that every decision worked out and executed together takes time and is often tedious, we nevertheless proceed in this manner trusting that God's Spirit is our guide and will help us.

Moreover, the process itself is a powerful witness of gospel brotherhood/sisterhood, that foundational value which identifies us as followers of Christ and Francis. At the same time, Francis insisted that we were not only brothers, we were *minor* brothers. Thus minority, the subject of the next chapter, becomes the first charism or value that moves the Franciscan fraternity forward and onward.

Questions for Reflection

What do you think are the most important elements of Fraternity?

What can you bring to a fraternity you want to join?

Have you experienced being "carried" by others? What was it like? How can you help carry others?

Minority

When St. Francis kissed a leper, who he reminds us had always repulsed and sickened him, he experienced a deep conversion. Convinced that he had to separate himself from his father's wealth and power, Francis went to the bishop of Assisi and took off the clothes his father had bought for him. Putting on the sackcloth of the poor, he assumed an entirely new identity. Rather than capitulate to the dreams of his father by acquiring even more wealth, Francis chose to identify with the "minors" or poor of his feudal village and world. Even today the Franciscan habit, pulled together by a simple cord or rope, continues to invite people to see Franciscans as men and women committed not only to solidarity with the "lepers" or underclass of every society, but to be in a relationship of minority with all people. The Franciscan robe is worn, therefore, not so much to distinguish us or give us a religious identity, but to invite others to see us as brothers committed to minority, that is, the life long desire to live among and walk with those who, like lepers, have no voice in our society.

At the same time, minority should not be confused with the vow of poverty Capuchins profess.³ Simply put, while poverty commits us to live "with nothing of our own" as a transparent sign of our desire to proclaim the gospel simply and without any self interest, minority is first of all about our relationships, both with one another and with all creation. Marked by humility and quiet listening, minority should be obvious in the lives of all friars, especially in their relationships with one another. Minority is also the reason we have rejected all titles in the church. Because we profess to walk with all people as brothers and sisters, we seek no power over them, but only with them.

For Franciscans, therefore, minority is the first wheel of our cart. It drives and steers us. It settles us and reminds us not to have too much, nor to carry too much. If we want to be seen as servants and companions to the poor, the weak and marginalized, especially, we cannot afford to have too much of anything, neither too much property,

nor too many cares. Rather, stripped of everything that gives us status, or as some say “unearned privilege,”⁴ we are and remain completely open to relationships of faith with every other pilgrim.

At the same time, minority as a commitment to relationships with everyone despite their social class should not signal that friars reject power together. Rather, while we seek no power over others, we do want power with and for the marginalized. This teaching is encapsulated in what the bishops of Latin America call a “fundamental option for the poor,” and what Pope John Paul II calls a preferential option for the poor.⁵

Minority as “power with” was crystallized and brought into sharper focus for Capuchins when friars from all over the world gathered in Assisi in 2004 for a Plenary Council of the Order (PCO VII). The delegates to PCO VII wrote that minority means we need to build an “authority without power which dominates; extend fraternal relationships to all creation; (and live)...on the social periphery.” Moreover, the brothers reminded us that to live minority fully we must seek:

- “Other centered relationships,
- A culture of peace based on the confident choice of vulnerability.
- Leadership and pastoral action based on service and participation.
- An ethic of justice based on the fact that we are all brothers and sisters.
- A new commitment to dialogue in the spirit of Francis.”⁶

In part because of our embrace of minority, you will often find Capuchins at the center of the struggle for basic human rights. In recent years, for instance, ***Franciscans International***, a non governmental UN organization, (NGO) works to put the stories of the poor and marginalized at the center of the world’s consciousness. Committed to the spiritual and ethical values that allow all people to access basic human rights, ***Franciscans International*** is a good example of brother and sister Franciscans

working together as minors to empower and give voice to the concerns of the poor.

Let me return again to Peter Damien Preziosi, not because he was the exemplar of all things Capuchin, but because he lived the charism of minority in a unique and humorous way. Conscious that his job as director of formation occasionally called him to correct the young friars he was asked to help form but not to dominate them, Peter Damien once invited a young friar, who was especially loud and brash, to come to his office. "Brother," he said, "make for me the sound of an egg." The young friar blanched and stammered. "But eggs are barely alive," he said. "Exactly," Peter replied. "Someday you will be able to break out of your shell and you will be very beautiful, but for now, try to be like the egg. Just sit there and don't say anything." The friar receiving the correction blushed a bit, but then began to laugh. Peter Damien's humor did not make him feel less. Peter Damien did not seek power over the young friar, but rather challenged him to think about all those he was disturbing when he was loud, brash, or domineering in conversation, especially when some were trying to study.

Clearly therefore, minority ought to be our first wheel, a gift or charism without which we cannot hope to live in the spirit of Jesus and Francis. While we must give voice to and celebrate the power given to us as gospel people, we cannot let it dominate others. Moreover, because we see ourselves as brothers and sisters to all creation, we protect and rejoice in all God's gifts, live among the poor and marginalized, and "joyfully accept the consequences of weakness, precariousness and vulnerability,"⁷ that this choice implies. Our minority, therefore, though not a good in itself, allows us to walk with all those whose voice is rarely heard.

However, while a wagon with only one wheel might be more useful to a merchant than a wagon with no wheels, our wagon will not be able to move easily from place to place without at least one more wheel, the wheel of contemplation.

Questions for Reflection

How do you understand the call to minority? What makes it different from the demands of the vow of poverty?

What can you do to live a life of minority more completely?

How do you live with your own weakness and vulnerability?

Contemplation

Contemplation is an essential dimension of Capuchin life, and for many, especially North Americans, it can be the most difficult. Contemplation demands discipline, quiet, and time. For Americans committed to production, consumption and accomplishment, contemplation is counter cultural. Nevertheless, contemplation marked the life of Francis, was central to the first Capuchins' self-understanding, and ought to be a regular part of our personal and communal life.

One aspect of St. Francis' life that is too often ignored in popular writing is the place where Francis begins his spiritual journey. Unlike other great figures in the history of the Christian West, Francis does not begin with sin and our need to overcome it, but with awe and wonder before God and all of creation. Full of hope and amazement at the goodness of God present in the smallest elements of creation, Francis faces his sin not so much as something he does wrong, but as failing to appreciate more fully how good God has been to him, how God continues to dazzle us with the gift of our Brother the sun, and the richness of Sister Water. More, while he admits that he has been cruel to Brother Body, he has no doubt that God overlooks his failures. The God Francis adores and kneels before continues to speak loudly through all that is despite our failure to appreciate God's gifts. God, in Francis' view, cannot stop giving us, like an adoring father, every good gift. From creation to friendship to consolation in loss, God loves us beyond measure. For Capuchins this realization can only be fully appreciated through the practice of contemplation.

G.K. Chesterton in his brief life of St. Francis helps us understand the spirit of Francis more deeply by reminding us that Francis imagined himself as "in debt" to God, indeed, to all creation. Being in debt meant that he could not fail to be humble. He owed God. He owed the brothers for walking with him. He owed creation itself for sustaining us with sun, water, earth and wind. And no matter what he did, Francis knew he could never repay his debt.

Francis' love for Lady Poverty and the acceptance of his weaknesses and failures becomes, in the view of St. Bonaventure, his crowning glory. Ewert Cousins, one of the foremost contemporary commentators on the work of Francis, calls this "the coincidence of opposites." Francis' embrace of the leper, the **poorest** of God's creatures, makes him **rich** beyond his imagination. **Shedding** the clothes of his father, he is **clothed** with what St. Clare calls the privilege of poverty. And **dying** to his dreams, he **lives** most fully in God. For Capuchins, all of this ought to be a source and font of their contemplative life. How startling, how remarkable it is to have nothing and everything; to be naked yet adorned with the fullness of grace; to be dead while living more authentically than ever before.

The Capuchin Constitutions call contemplation speaking "to God with the heart." Clearly, in order to do this, we need to take time every day to quiet ourselves so that we can hear what our heart says, how our heart is moved and thus speak to God about what lies deepest within us. Moreover, the 2nd Plenary Council of our Order on prayer tells us that our hearts should "break out in a chorus of adoration, thanksgiving, wonder and praise," whenever we stop to reflect on the graciousness of God's love.

St. Clare suggests a similar but slightly different path. Prayer consists in four movements. Paying attention or "gazing upon God" is followed by considering, contemplating and imitating. Thus, transformation into the poor and humble Christ is a result of all four movements of prayer acting together as one. Thus, "gazing upon God" through a sacred text or story, getting inside the story through our senses, sitting silently in the presence of God through the text or image, and responding to the needs of all people with acts of loving service makes us contemplatives.⁸

Again, I return to Peter Damien and his close friar friend Joe Testagrossa. Who of us that lived with Peter could forget his Advent concert with Joe T? Conscious that New

Hampshire, especially in the winter, could feel very isolated from Province life, Peter would invite Joe to visit and together they would sing Don Giovanni for the entire community. Now Peter and Joe had wonderful voices, but singing all the parts by themselves made for an hilarious afternoon. Their charm and wit helped all our worries fly out of the window.

No matter how cold it might be outside, Peter Damien's and Joe's humor warmed the room and renewed our spirits. These simple acts of what some today call "loving kindness," changed us who knew them. If we were distracted by our own faults or the difficulty of living our fraternal life, Peter Damien's and Joe's "concert" opened a new window with which to view our brothers.

I have no doubt that Peter Damien's care for us sprung from his daily meditation. Gazing with love upon the God who welcomed him eagerly, and asking God to gaze back at him with tenderness allowed Peter Damien to rest so deeply in the memory of God's love that he became totally other centered. His life was the fruit of his contemplation.

Now that we have two wheels on the front of our cart, we have to make sure they are balanced. Unbalanced wagons make going any place difficult, if not impossible. To make sure that minority is balanced with contemplation, we need to remember that minority is not a weakness, but strength. Strong wheels, smooth and round, need to stay balanced if we hope they will help us move over and among the rocky roads we surely will encounter.

At the same time, if either the wheel of contemplation or minority is much stronger or bigger than the other, our cart will bounce along unevenly making it likely that we will want to get out of the wagon of fraternity frequently for fear we will be injured or hurt. Moreover, in order for the wheels of minority and contemplation, though well worn, to

carry us to those communities and places where God wants us to serve, we must “practice” them diligently. Not unlike speaking another language, the practice of these charisms helps us grow more fluent over time. Committing ourselves to the ministry and practice of listening, a hallmark of every good and important relationship, and the basis for authentic minority, will draw us naturally toward contemplation. Since both minority and contemplation are rooted in active listening, both our lives and ministries need to be transparent witnesses to the value of silence and quiet. More important, listening will form the basis for knowing and discerning what the third wheel of our wagon, ministry, ought to be.

Questions for Reflection

1. When is it most difficult for you to listen?
2. What do you think it takes to live the contemplative life?

Ministry

Ministry, the third wheel on our wagon, has marked the lives of the friars from the beginning. Popular preachers of the reformation and chaplains to the army, the early Capuchins also greatly valued the eremitical life. But it was the awful horror of the great plagues that called the first friars out of their monasteries, established them as men of the people, and changed the course of the Capuchin Order. Challenged to respond to the sick and dying when everyone else was fleeing, the early friars rushed to the aid of the suffering and were hailed for their bravery and gospel commitment. Not only did they not run from the sick, they cooked their meals and nursed them. On one occasion, while gathered in chapter at Sienna, the friars postponed their gathering and business, and went into the streets to care for plague victims. As a result, more than forty of them died. A community that originally intended to live a more cloistered form of the Franciscan life, the Capuchins realized that service to the marginalized was a necessary aspect of their identity, and something that would make them beloved not only as popular preachers but as ordinary men doing extraordinary deeds.

In North America, the Capuchins were founded by two diocesan priests who came to the new world not only to establish the Order but to offer service to new immigrants. Slow to gain a foothold in the United States, eventually they grew rapidly, in part because they assumed responsibility for many parishes throughout the Midwest and in New York, especially in the service of German immigrants. This development, while organic and natural in some ways, radically altered the nature of Capuchin life in the United States. The work of parish priests is intense and demanding, and it often took the friars away from their common life and prayer. More important, it drew men to the Order who wanted first to be priests, to serve as priests, to live as priests. The life of our brotherhood, while important, almost always took second place to the pastoral outreach of the friars' ministries and the ministerial identity of priest friars.

The development of the Order in North America also fit very well with the emerging American culture. Committed to productivity and accomplishment, North Americans often think of those around them in terms of what they do. In fact, it is not uncommon for North Americans to ask others where they work or how they make their living, even the first time we meet them. Likewise, it is not uncommon for people to ask us what we do as friars, as if this will give them a real insight into who we are!

At the same time, because ministry and work are so central to how we define ourselves as North Americans; it can be a great danger for the Franciscan seeking to live an alternative life style. Work drives North Americans, gives us a sense of personal success, credentials us in the world, and often gives others a way to judge our success and even sometimes to measure our value. Can I design a web page? Can I edit others' writing? Can I offer mass, especially as a substitute for someone else who is away, sick or unable to perform this simple task? Can you see the danger in this?

Before long, if we are not careful, Capuchins will measure our personal and communal worth, not by the quality of our fraternal life and our commitment to live the life of a minor as a contemplative in the world, but through the lens of our ability to do a particular job or complete an important task in service of the local church and world.

Fraternities are not baseball teams. We do not search for clean up hitters or pinch runners because we want to win games. Rather, we want men committed to the fraternal life in such a straightforward way that their ministry will flow organically from their life of minority and contemplation. Nevertheless, ministry is an essential element of whom we are as friars and we should not be naive about this. Those coming to our way of life are most often attracted to us by what we do and how we serve those most in need.

In the Province of St. Mary, the friars have a long history of important, and sometimes,

dramatic service. We have brothers who work everyday trying to secure a home for children and young people trapped in the foster care system. Others preach, teach, and work in parishes, penitentiaries, and hospitals. Still others manage the bureaucracy of our organizational life. They keep our books straight, do our communications and promote our way of life to the world through newspapers, television and the internet. Good brothers all, they defy easy description, but they should not be reduced to what they do. No one should. That is not what it means to be a friar. If friars are not what we do, then how does ministry fit into our life?

Central to our self understanding, and leaving us unbalanced if we have none, the ministries of the friars need to be chosen through the twin lenses of minority and contemplation. While we offer a variety of services to our own fraternity and to the churches among which we serve, all our ministries ought to reflect our deep commitment to those who live on the edges of our societies, what some might call the underclass. Francis' choice not to seek an upwardly mobile path in his own society ought to be reflected in our communal choices.

More important, in whatever we choose to do in service to God's people, we ought not to have hierarchical positions as a matter of course. Rather, even though many of us are ordained priests with jurisdictional power in the church, we should never use this power as a weapon or threat against those coming to us, especially those preparing to celebrate sacraments.

Capuchins ought to call those they serve to be servants themselves. In preparing people for marriage, for example, we ought to emphasize the mutual service the married offer to one another, and remind them that they are to witness to the Christ who kneels to wash the feet of his disciples, not to a God who stands above and outside of us as judge. Marriage ought not be an arm wrestling contest to see who will be the stronger partner, but a transparent witness to the love of Christ for the whole church.

Capuchin ministries ought also to be marked by brothers who work together as teams. Although we empower one brother to be guardian or pastor, he should never exercise unilateral power over the others. Because a friar is named pastor of a parish does not mean that he is the boss. Rather, as Capuchins we choose different images and metaphors to speak about the authority given to us. Many have suggested that pastors and guardians ought to be like orchestra leaders. While they may have to correct the brothers from time to time and help us revisit our goals, they ought to do this in a manner that clearly demonstrates their desire for the entire fraternity/parish/ministry to make beautiful music and grow in the spirit of gospel brotherhood.

Likewise, Capuchin ministries ought to be transparently contemplative. Rooted in awe and wonder, our ministries should clearly witness to a common life rooted in contemplative silence. Though it is apocryphal, the saying attributed to St. Francis that we “ought to preach always, sometimes using words,” says much about our life of service. We should not be choosing ministries that leave no time for prayer and reflection. No doubt there is more needed to be done in our world than any of us could do in a lifetime, but that should not be an excuse for us to abandon the life of minority and contemplation which St. Francis and the early Capuchins held so dear.

Capuchin ministries, therefore, will often change in order to witness to the values of minority and contemplation. We should not be so locked into one way of building God’s reign that we cannot move from place to place in the service of God and the church. As a very young friar, I was always moved by the story of our English brothers who, hoping to expand into North America, purchased friaries in Providence, R.I., and Milton, Ma. In 1952, however, when the Province of New York/New England began, they gladly gave us their friaries in Providence, RI and Milton, MA in order to help us establish a Provincial headquarters and a novitiate. More remarkably, they left those friaries completely furnished. Taking only their personal belongings, they made it possible for our friars to move in and begin their life and ministry with very little expense or work.

Unattached to the friaries themselves, they moved to new friaries and ministries in the service of God.

A few years ago, in the midst of a challenging series of meetings to help chart our ministerial future, Zachary Grant, when confronted with the difficult question of which friaries we ought to keep and which to give away, made a startling proposal. He suggested that we give up all our inner city friaries, go to the bishop and the people of God and ask honestly and openly where we were most needed. Zachary insisted that this was not only a simple way of avoiding disagreements among the friars about which friaries needed to close, it was also very Capuchin.

Clearly, while ministry is an essential element of the Christian and Capuchin life, it should not drive our wagon. A well balanced wheel, ministry helps our wagon move more smoothly, especially when it reflects and enhances our call to minority and contemplation. In fact, our friars and province ought to be grateful for the opportunity to change ministries. No doubt “retooling” our skills is difficult, but when we see our wagon moving smoothly along the path of authentic gospel brotherhood/sisterhood, we cannot but be grateful.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think are Capuchin ministries? Why? What makes them Capuchin?
2. What ministries do you think you are called to? Why?

Justice, Peace and Ecology

The life and ministry of Justice-Peace-Ecology (JPE), the fourth wheel of our wagon, ought to emerge organically and simply from the others. For our wagon to move surely, constructively and authentically ahead, it needs to have four wheels in balance and JPE can help us do this. Always in rhythm with the other charisms of our Order, JPE demands that we and our Order do justice wherever we serve in the world.

The American bishops, along with many other environmentalists, taught this truth clearly. "Think globally, act locally," they wrote. Unfortunately, most of us seem content to act locally. We drink fair trade coffee, drive hybrid cars, and try to prepare only what we can and will eat. We might even avoid too much red meat, but that is where it stops. Our commitment to justice, peace and ecology needs to go beyond this. While not denying JPE is very difficult and easy to put aside, our challenge is to re-imagine the world as one community: animals, fish, plants, people, indeed all creation working together for the common good of a sustainable life on the earth.

Capuchins have done JPE from the beginning. Committed at first to contemplation and the eremitical life, the plague in Camerino, Italy, drew them out of their friaries. Confronted with thousands of people dying from an incurable disease, the friars responded. No doubt their commitment to a life of minority and contemplation made their decision easy. Their task was to walk with the underclass of the society and praise God as they journeyed. How better to do this than to care for the sick and dying. Today, I suggest, is no different. While minority and contemplation drive us and keep us on track, it is ministry and JPE that keep us real, engaged and understandable to others. A contemplative life without outreach might be good for some, but it cannot support the Capuchin adequately. We need to let our prayer and attitude toward others, especially the poor and marginalized, drive us into service for the entire cosmos.

In recent years especially, the works of justice, peace and ecology have become more important. On almost every front the Holy See has condemned war, reminding everyone who will listen that peace can only be built upon justice, and justice cannot emerge from offensive wars or wars that are waged to destroy other nations. Most Capuchins in North America both know and accept this teaching, but often feel powerless to do or say anything effective.

In part, this is the reason so many are involved in community organizing. Hamstrung by the complexity of international politics which are so often crafted in private between world leaders, they turn to the politics of the street. They organize the poor around issues of justice in the cities where they live and work. They work for health care for all, safety for our youth, the protection of inner city neighborhoods, the reform of immigration laws, and the proper care of the elderly in their homes whenever possible.

For those readers who have thought of these wheels simply as their own, let me offer a gentle corrective. The wheels represent, first of all, the commitment of the Capuchin Order. Not every friar will find within himself all our charisms alive at the same time. In fact, my experience is that some friars are especially drawn to and enjoy the life of fraternity as minors. Brothers with very little ego are drawn to the practice of minority. They seek no power over others. They do not have long preconceived agendas. They are not anxious to tell others what to do or how to do it. They are content to have reasonable and open conversations with others as they seek to live our life authentically.

Others are naturally contemplative. Quiet and frequently given to introspection, they regularly seek out the chapel, close the door and bathe themselves in God's presence. They also often love to read, reflect, and join groups doing *Lectio Divina* or mantric prayer. Even when they are in communal settings, they rarely find themselves having to speak. You can spot a natural contemplative Capuchin when you are in a group if you

ask him what he thinks and he is genuinely startled. A listener, he is not the type of person who, when listening, is already formulating his answer.

Of course, in North America, many brothers are doers. They seem never to sit down. They look for something else to do, even after a long day at work. I know brothers who naturally empty the dishwasher at 10:00 p.m. simply because the drying cycle is over and the green light says “empty me now.” Unfortunately, these are the same men who often fidget in chapel or are easily distracted from what others might call an interesting and animated conversation. They are also the types who might challenge the group by asking when we are going to stop talking about doing something in our neighborhood and act.

Again, when these three wheels are operating together, we have a reasonably smooth ride on our wagon. Moreover, a good local minister or guardian recognizes these skills and helps everyone to employ his charism for the good of the whole. When, however, the community stops here it is likely to have a fraternal life that rarely goes beyond itself or its own ministry in the parish, jail, hospital or agency. That is why the life and ministry of justice, peace and ecology help balance and challenge the friars to have a bigger lens and focus for building God’s reign.

The previous description, though brief, is a reasonably complete picture of the Capuchin life. Fraternity is the wagon into which we place ourselves and the “goods” we need for survival as Capuchins. They are common prayer, meals, time together as brothers and the vowed life itself. This wagon, immobile without wheels, is guided first by minority and contemplation--the commitment to live among and with those who live in the underclass of our societies and neighborhoods--and the willingness to take time each day for quiet and reflection. Strengthened and supported by these wheels of life and movement, we complete our wagon by choosing ministries that emerge from minority and contemplation, which naturally leads us to justice, peace and ecology.

Clearly, no one charism is adequate to describe Capuchin life. Rather, all the charisms working together for the good of all help the wagon of fraternity to move from place to place on what we call our itinerant journey. Indeed, that we are in the same wagon, guided by the wheels of minority, contemplation, ministry and JPE, is what makes us unique.

It ought to be obvious that Capuchins are not about competition. We do not claim to be better than any other Franciscan group or religious community. Rather, we name our identity with as much clarity as possible and let God work. For those reading this essay as a way to understand and perhaps discern a vocation to Capuchin life, be at peace. God will lead you to where you need to be. You have only to pray for openness to God's voice and will, and then follow.

Finally, authentic conversion is difficult. It is an ongoing process that does not happen over night. While the fundamentals of our life remain the same, how we live them in particular circumstances and places change continuously, not unlike our own bodies. Science tells us that our skin sheds and renews itself every thirty days. Why should we be surprised to learn that our congregational and spiritual life needs to renew itself over and over? Many of the practices that help some to identify us as Capuchins change, just like our skin. But the heart of Francis as a faithful follower of Christ does not. Follow Christ. Listen to Francis. The Lord will do the rest.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think is the place for Justice, Peace and Ecology in our faith life?
2. Who do you most admire for doing JPE? Why?

The Wagon Driver

While naming how it is that Capuchin Franciscans reclaimed their most important values is an important task, it is not enough. We also need to know who will drive our wagon, who is the source of its power. Faith leaves us only one answer. God not only drives our fraternal wagon, God is also our power, strength, ground, and help. Without God as our power and driver, we are only deluding ourselves. Unless we rely upon the Lord for direction and life every day; unless we depend on God's Holy Spirit with every breath we take, every step we walk, every choice we make, we will get nowhere. While we know this and believe it, it is difficult challenge to live.

Years ago at a 12-step meeting, I was struggling with concerns I had for some of our younger brothers. After the meeting, an older woman approached me and said very simply. "Jack, your friars have a higher power, and it is not you." Smiling, I knew she was right, but still I resisted. I wanted to let go into God, but did not want to be irresponsible. It was very difficult to discern what my responsibility was, and what God's task was. Slowly, however, I knew what I had to do. Each day, after asking for help, I had to trust God to do for me and for our Order what was best for God's reign and for the church. I studied, prayed, listened, discerned, entered conversations, prayed again, and then asked for the grace to let go.

This task, I think, belongs to all of us. Because we know that God does not drive our wagon directly, we must place our trust in the Spirit of God, the one promised by Jesus to the church, the one who is as present as "our own breath" in our fraternities and gatherings. Then we must let go. We can only see so far down the road, so much into others' hearts. We cannot see the end of the road nor every person's motivation, but we can see the signs that God is working among us.

No place is this clearer to me than when I am among friars praying together, eating

together, conversing honestly and openly together. This is what makes us who we are. When we gather in faith and listen openly to how God is working among and within us, we know, not just believe, that God's Spirit is with us. God drives us as a fraternity, but we must be alert. Surely, when we are actively seeking to be brothers, God is there. When we live as minors in a transparent relationship to all creation, especially with those on the edge of our societies, we know it is the fullness of God's grace driving us. When we stand in awe and wonder before one another as brothers and sisters, God's love is driving us to a deeper commitment to contemplation, ministry and the works of Justice, Peace and Ecology.

With God as the center of our lives, we can go anywhere, do anything and endure the harshest trials. With God as the One who drives us, there is nothing more to do or be. We have only to trust that our wagon will take us where it is that God would have us be, what it is that God would have us do. Trust in God's promise to be with us always, and the acceptance of each day as it comes to us will make our lives, our fraternities and our Order strong, confident and reflective of God's love and Francis' vision. Nothing else really matters.

¹Nicholl, Donald, *Holiness*, p 77, Paulist Press, 1987.

² This essay will not speak about the "walls" of poverty, chastity and obedience, prayer or time together. While vitally important, there are hundreds of books about the vows. Rather, this article is about how Capuchins live the vows and what makes them unique.

³ In fact, both poverty and minority are about relationships. St. Clare, for example, saw poverty as the path to equal relationships. Hence, her resistance to Cardinal Hugolino (Pope Gregory IX) who insisted that nuns like Clare and her "poor Ladies," be protected by dowries. Rather, Clare insisted, unless she was free to be poor like Francis she and her sisters would stand above others, especially poor women., and thus lose their counter cultural identity.

⁴ Cf. Eileen Reilly, *Unearned Privilege...*, NCR, Nov 9, 2001.

⁵The preferential option...for the poor...is an option, a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning our ownership and the use of goods . John Paul II

⁶PCO VII, #6

⁷PCO VII, #3.

⁸ Thanks to Bill Hugo, OFM Cap, and Ilia Delio, OSF (Franciscan Prayer, St. Anthony Messenger Press) for their insights about St. Clare.