

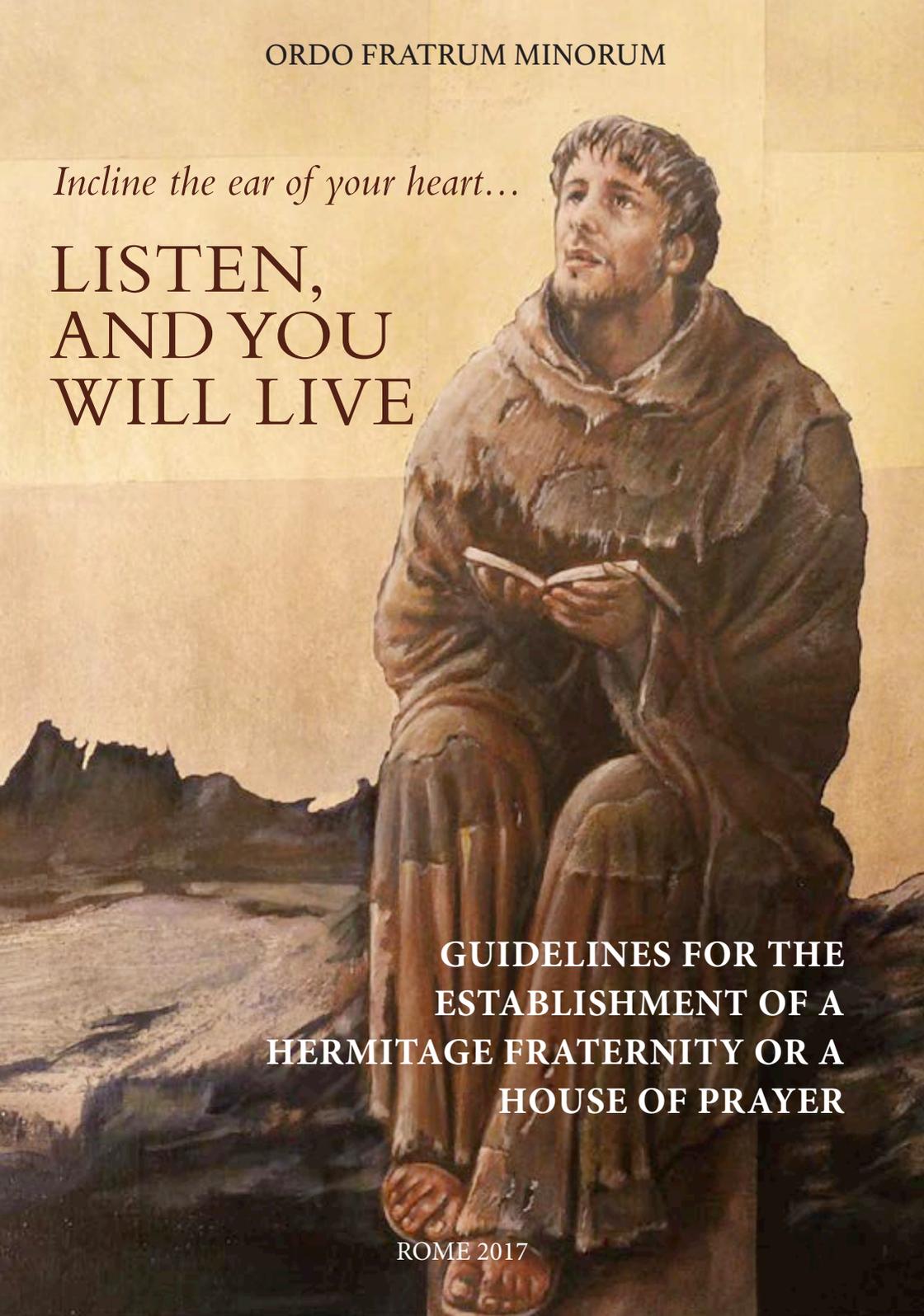
ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM

Incline the ear of your heart...

**LISTEN,
AND YOU
WILL LIVE**

**GUIDELINES FOR THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF A
HERMITAGE FRATERNITY OR A
HOUSE OF PRAYER**

ROME 2017



ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM

LISTEN, AND YOU WILL LIVE

Incline the ear of your heart...

(LtOrd 5-6)

GUIDELINES FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A HERMITAGE FRATERNITY OR A HOUSE OF PRAYER

(2015 GENERAL CHAPTER — DECISION 7)

ROME 2017

Cover Art: Ivo Batocco (oils)
“St. Francis in Contemplation”
Missionszentrale der Franziskaner, Bonn, Germany.

OFM Communications Office
Via di Santa Maria Mediatrice, 25
00165 Rome, Italy - www.ofm.org
© 2017

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	5
INTRODUCTION.....	7
I. PRELIMINARIES AND METHODOLOGY	9
1.1. Some Clarification	9
a. Contemplation.....	10
b. To have the Spirit of the Lord.....	11
c. The Spirit of Prayer and Devotion	11
d. The Hermitage Fraternity	12
e. Houses of Prayer	13
1.2. The text that has inspired us (RH)	13
II. THE CONTEXT OF THE EREMITICAL LIFE OF FRANCIS: AN ORIGINAL PROPOSAL	17
2.1. The Reception in the Order of the Eremitical Life Proposed by Francis: Alternating between Hermitage and City.....	20
III. SOME ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE RULE FOR HERMITAGES	25
A. The Fraternity and the Individual Friar	25
B. A Way of Life.....	26
C. Welcoming and Listening to the Lord.....	27
D. Begging Alms as Poor Little Ones	28
E. A Liberating Alternation/Taking Turns	28
F. Overview	29
IV. PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR HERMITAGE FRATERNITIES OR HOUSES OF PRAYER.....	31
4.1. Hermitage Fraternities	31
4.2. Houses of Prayer	34
SOME QUESTIONS	37
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	39

PREFACE

Francis, the servant of Christ, “firmly claimed that the grace of prayer must be desired above all else by a Religious...and [he] used whatever means he could to arouse his brothers to be zealous in prayer. For whether walking or sitting, inside or outside, working or resting, he was so focused on prayer that he seemed to have dedicated to it not only whatever was in his heart and body, but also his effort and time.” (LMj 10:1)

The example of St. Francis of Assisi, as described above by St. Bonaventure, is a reminder of the centrality of prayer in the Order of Friars Minor. While we well know the importance of prayer in the lives of all Christians and of every Religious, we also recognize issues such as the difficulty of finding a balance between work and prayer, the reality of how personal prayer may end up being neglected, and the tendency towards living a faith life that is too individualistic. But we approach these issues in the context of a felt need for better forms of prayer and spirituality in the Order, which is shown in the responses from the survey on the State of the Order (cf. *Summary Report*, Rome 2014) that expressed a desire for more resource material on prayer.

We accept *that no one can prosper in the life and service of God, without the grace of prayer* (cf. LMj 10:1). This is the motivation behind the 2015 General Chapter’s decision to adopt a specific approach — “*Hermitage Fraternities or Houses of Prayer*”. It is hoped these will be established, or further strengthened, at the level of the Order, of the Conferences, or of the Entities. May all those involved work together in fraternal and corporate way, thus helping to keep the Order’s contemplative dimension alive, for the good of individual Religious and of God’s holy people.

It is with great pleasure that I present these guidelines *indicating concrete steps for setting up a community as a Hermitage or a House of Prayer* (2015 GENERAL CHAPTER, *decision 7*). They express the conviction of the Chapter members that there is an urgent need to make space in our daily lives for meaningful times and places devoted to our personal relationship with God and dedicated to building fraternity, which is the source from which the friars can derive joy and experience the beauty of our vocation.

Rome, March 19th, 2017
Feast of St. Joseph

BR. MICHAEL A. PERRY, OFM
Minister General and servant

Prot. 107179

INTRODUCTION

“*Listen, and you will live.*” “*Incline the ear of your heart.*” The words of St. Francis of Assisi in his *Letter to the Entire Order* are an invitation to listen to Christ, “true Wisdom of the Father” (2LtF 67), whom the Friars Minor follow more closely through Religious Profession (CCGG 1§1). The invitation to *listen* is the way of salvation, the Word calling us both to physical listening and to obedient interior listening — the journey of the disciple called to *incline the ear of the heart*. This way, when undertaken by each Friar and Fraternity, leads us to *live* the Gospel, praising God and witnessing to him in word and deed.

It is against this background that the General Definitory, working with the Order’s “Commission on Prayer and Devotion” and with the help of various Friars, has prepared *Guidelines for the Establishment of a Hermitage Fraternity or a House of Prayer*, in accordance with *Decision 7* of the 2015 General Chapter. This resource material does not claim to be a comprehensive and definitive work on the subject of hermitages and houses of prayer, or on Christian and Franciscan approaches to prayer and contemplation. It does not offer directives regarding methodology, or give an historical study of hermitages in the Order, nor does it attempt to meet all the needs of the Entities in this area. Instead, it is a first approach to the topic, with the intent of starting a discussion, in individual Entities or at Conference level, which might lead to the establishment of a fraternity that gives first place to prayer.

Aware that the Order is a fraternity and in it, “the friars, as followers of St. Francis, are bound to lead a radically evangelical life, namely: to live in a spirit of prayer and devotion...” (CCGG 1§2), the content of the *Guidelines* tries to:

- a. provide a resource that will stimulate a deepening of the priority of prayer, so that “*the spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute*” (LR 5: 2) might be more evident in the lives of the Friars Minor;
- b. find concrete ways so that, in accordance with the legislation of the Order (cf. SSGG 15§1), a Hermitage Fraternity or a House of Prayer might be established. For this reason, some worthwhile elements from the *Rule for Hermitages* are provided, which have the potential to enrich the prayer life of every Friar and Fraternity.

While, in harmony with the faith of the Church, we believe that “in His goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself”, and that “out of the abundance of His love, He speaks to men and women as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite them and take them into fellowship with Himself” (*DV 2*), nevertheless, as well as in *words*, God is also revealed in *silence*. Scripture attests to this in the passages concerning Elijah the prophet (cf. *1 Kgs 19:11-13*) — God is revealed to the prophet in a voice of *silence*, not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the silence, in the “whisper of a gentle breeze”. Thus, the prophet Elijah learns that the living God is also the God of silence and hiddenness.

In short, *word, silence and solitude* are essential for *Religious Life in Hermitages*, just as it was for Francis of Assisi and throughout the fertile history of the Order. Today, too, we need to ensure that priority is given to these qualities in the *life of the Friars Minor*, wherever it is lived. For this reason, these *Guidelines* are addressed to all the friars of the Order. In fact, it is essential to “maintain silence” (*RH 3*) in order to enter into a place of communication and communion with God. It is only by means of outward and inner silence, both of which require times and places of solitude, that we can listen and receive not only the Word, but also the presence of the One who speaks, so we may obey the voice of the Son of God and bear witness to all people that “there is no one who is all-powerful except Him” (cf. *LtOrd 7-11*).



PRELIMINARIES AND METHODOLOGY

These *Guidelines* seek to help the universal fraternity deepen “the spirit of prayer and devotion”, so that each entity may arrive at concrete recommendations leading to the establishment of a Hermitage Fraternity or House of Prayer. In addition, we hope that this resource can be a general guide, stimulating in all the friars a rediscovery of the beauty of prayer which is a fundamental dimension of our Order.

Decision 7 of the 2015 General Chapter specifies the content of this resource material:

“By means of the publication of Guidelines and an indication of concrete steps to be followed, the General Definitorium is to encourage each Entity, or at least each Conference, to set up a community as a hermitage or a house of prayer (cf. SSGG 15, §1), particularly devoted to the life of prayer and devotion. The Friars are to be given permission to dedicate time and formation to a style of Franciscan prayer that may also be of assistance to other fraternities.”

The work required is not easy; in fact, difficulties immediately present themselves in regard to understanding, diversity, and plurality. These aspects influence our lives, the Gospel, and the experience of living our charism, expressed in different ways and informed by individual culture and personal formation.

1.1. *Some Clarification*

To begin, we consider that it is important to offer some clarifications, and seek more precision in our terminology¹. In this way, we will be clearer about

¹ The content of points a, b, and c is taken from the Order’s booklet, *The Spirit of Prayer and Devotion; Topics for Study and Reflection*, edited by the General Secretariat for Formation and Studies, Rome, 1996.

what we mean when we speak about matters that affect our lives, and about what we understand as *Hermitage Fraternities* or *Houses of Prayer* specifically dedicated to a life of prayer and devotion.

a. *Contemplation*

In the Latin text of the writings of Francis, one finds the word *contemplation* by itself only once, in the first Admonition: “*they contemplated him with their spiritual eyes*” (Adm 1,20). The apostles could recognize the Son of God, Christ, in his human flesh only by contemplating with their spiritual eyes. To *contemplate* — in this precise context of recognizing Christ in the man Jesus — means to see, beneath human flesh, the real presence of God among humans in Jesus Christ. For Francis, *contemplation* in this text takes on the meaning of seeing beyond external appearances, seeing the living sacrament of God present among us, both in the person of Jesus as well as in the Eucharistic signs of bread and wine.

If one enlarges this precise meaning of contemplation in the *First Admonition*, one can say that contemplation becomes a way of looking, of observing, of discovering and of recognizing with the spiritual eyes of faith the real presence of God in this world. External material and bodily appearances become potential means of profoundly seeing and believing the mystery of God. The created world becomes transparent, and thus the traces of God can be recognized in it. The sole premise for contemplation is “spiritual eyes”, that is, the ability to see everything with the eyes of the Spirit. This premise leads us to the necessity of “*having the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*” (LR10,8).

Saint Clare of Assisi in her *Letters to Agnes of Bohemia* uses this terminology more frequently than Francis does. She uses the word *contemplation* to show how to live in close relationship with the mysteries of the human life of Jesus Christ, looking at and imitating these mysteries in order to transform oneself completely into a visible image of his presence. Clare’s vision of contemplation is close to that of Francis, closer than that of his biographers who maintain the traditional view of contemplation as a withdrawal from the world to approach the heavenly mysteries

Summarizing the meaning of contemplation in the Franciscan writings, one can note that Francis and Clare give *contemplation* a meaning that is

very practical and dynamic; through their life of faith, they discover the reality of God and the Incarnation within the world and in the flesh.

b. To have the Spirit of the Lord

In the first Admonition, Francis affirms that the Spirit of the Lord dwells in the faithful to the extent that they share in it. It is the same Spirit which accomplishes every good in the brothers, who can be recognized as servants of God (Cf. Adm 12). The Spirit of the Lord desires for us the greatest possible participation and sharing in the virtues of the Trinity (ER 17:16), and so we partake in the life of the Trinity. With the help of the Spirit, the friar becomes part of the love and communion of the Trinity (2 LtF 48 ff).

This communion of love and peace is expressed in the daily life of the friar. Opening oneself to this intimate communion, and living it profoundly, means that the friar's conduct, words and deeds are the work of that same Spirit who lives in the faithful penitent (2 LtF 48). When Francis, in the Later Rule, admonishes his brothers to always have "*the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity*" (LR 10:8), he invites them to live in this intimate relationship with God — who is simple unity and perfect Trinity — in such a way that this relationship expresses itself in good works, brought about by the same Spirit of the Lord in the life of the friars.

In fact, in the writings of Francis, the expression *activity* expresses in most cases the saving presence of God in the action and in the practical attitudes of the friar. Thus, the life of the entire Brotherhood will be oriented to the saving action initiated by God, with people and creation as its object. Living as a dwelling place of the Spirit, allowing Him to work, the individual friar and the entire Brotherhood should become living signs of the world's salvation. With this vision of the spiritual person, Francis distances himself from every kind of dualistic vision, seeing each person and all of creation as "animated" by the Spirit and by His holy manner of working

c. The Spirit of Prayer and Devotion

With his use of the expression *the spirit of prayer and devotion* Francis deepens his vision of the *lesser brother* as a dwelling place of the Spirit. This expression is used both in the Later Rule (5,2), when he speaks about the

work of the brothers, as well as in his Letter to Brother Anthony, where he explains how theology should be taught and studied, and refers to the same passage of the Rule. Any type of work, including the study of theology, should not be an obstacle to living in the spirit of prayer and devotion. Neither work nor studying theology is seen in opposition to this spirit; rather it is clear that all of life — and therefore work and study too — must be lived in a spirit of familial connection to God.

A life of prayer, which is an expression of the spirit of prayer, has priority in the lives of the brothers, who always orient themselves and everything else (including work and study) towards God. Right and proper devotion then, is an expression of an attitude of loving relationship towards God sustained in every single moment of life; one not only prays devoutly but also works devoutly. The spirit of prayer and devotion ensures a continuity in the conversion of the penitent in following Christ. Always and everywhere, with full heart and unreserved energy, the penitent seeks the Most High and Supreme Eternal God, who has created and redeemed us, in order to thank and adore Him (ER 23:11).

d. The Hermitage Fraternity

The Franciscan Hermitage is a fraternity established as a living part of the Province (cf. SSGG 15§1), distinguished by life organized according to the *Rule for Hermitages*, set in an isolated location, and with a sober and simple lifestyle. The experience of contemplation in solitude is part of our Franciscan heritage and is a means of deepening our life with God. Going apart to pray presupposes a radical search for *the kingdom of God and His justice* (RH 3).

Our Franciscan chronicles and hagiographies reveal a preference for secluded places (mountains, caves, forests, islands). These places witness to a privileged experience of prayer in an austere environment, in close contact with creation. According to the Order's earliest hagiographers, the call to a radical prayer life became a dilemma for St. Francis and his brothers (cf. *I C* 35; *LMj* XII, 1). Their conflict was an expression of a necessary tension between withdrawal into solitude and going forth in the service of evangelization.

In terms of lifestyle, the Franciscan experience of *those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way* (RH 1) is an innovation in Christian

eremitism. What is proposed is a life spent apart in a small fraternity, based on a double model of reciprocal care (Gospel-based as in ‘Martha and Mary’, and familial as in ‘mothers and sons’); with roles and responsibilities alternating regularly; with priority being given to the Divine Office and seeking the things of God; in an environment of poverty (begging) and solitude (enclosure).

e. Houses of Prayer

A *House of Prayer* is a fraternity specially dedicated to prayer, whose mission is *to have the spirit of prayer and devotion*. It is a community open and welcoming to people of all backgrounds and genders.

Prayer fraternities are open to the world, wishing to make these *havens of intimate prayer* (SSGG 13) accessible to people. They welcome the faithful in search of space and of an atmosphere of silence and recollection. We can offer an evangelizing service to those who wish to withdraw into solitude, and be ready to meet with people and groups who ask to be initiated into the mystery of God in personal and communal prayer. The *House of Prayer* accompanies these people in their search for God through prayer as a pastoral ministry, while also giving some input in the Franciscan pedagogy of prayer (cf. SSGG 15 §2).

Our time is one of profound secularization and a weak sense of immanence, a time in which openness to the transcendent is not widespread among people (depending, of course, on the places in which the Friars live). Therefore, the needs of those to whom this ministry is offered should be kept in mind, distinguishing between those who have had a deep spiritual experience and those who do not have a developed life of faith.

1.2. The text that has inspired us (RH)

Faithful to their Profession, the friars, wherever they are, in the location and the service entrusted to them, prayerfully follow Christ and the footprints of Saint Francis (cf. CCGG 19). Fraternity has a sacramentality that is not limited by space and time, and it includes all the friars wherever they are found. Mutual trust is fostered by safeguarding the Presence of the Lord, and thus fraternity is created. To the extent that we distance ourselves from this deep

spiritual awareness, we become separated from “grace” and from communion with our brothers. We can do so many things in terms of work, service and activities, but at the risk of not developing our own specific vocation and mission. If we can draw out the core elements of the *Rule for Hermitages*, then we will have a resource that can enlighten us and help us live the way of life we profess in the Rule.

From historical studies of the life of the Order, we know that Francis and his friars, reflecting on the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, managed to bring the difficult balance between active and contemplative life into harmony. In this way, Francis responded to the demands that the fraternity itself was faced with: being with and among the people, being called to penance, being called to retreat to lonely places of prayer that nurture direct conversation with God. This is the perpetual dilemma, as real today as then. Because of this, both at the methodological and practical levels, we think it crucial to focus on the Francis’ own words² which are always relevant and life-giving. The *Rule*³ for *Hermitages* says:

¹Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be “the mother” and have two “sons” or at least one. ²Let the two who are “mothers” keep the life of Martha and the two “sons” the life of Mary and let one have one enclosure in which each one may have his cell in which he may pray and sleep.

³And let them always recite Compline of the day immediately after sunset and strive to maintain silence, recite their Hours, rise for Matins, and seek first the kingdom of God and His justice. ⁴And let them recite Prime at the proper hour and, after Terce, they may end their silence, speak with and go to their mothers. ⁵And when it pleases them, they can beg alms from them as poor little ones out of love of the Lord God. ⁶And afterwards let them recite Sext, None and, at the proper hour, Vespers.

2 Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (FA:ED), Regis J. Armstrong, J. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (Eds), Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY, 1999, Vol. 1, The Saint, page 61.

3 The Latin text does not refer to a “Rule” and says, “*Illi qui volunt religiose stare in eremis ...*”. For this reason, it should simply be called “*Of those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way...*”. The title “*Regula pro eremitoriiis*” was given only recently by K. Esser: cf. K. ESSER, *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, Padua 1982.

⁷And they may not permit anyone to enter or eat in the enclosure where they dwell. ⁸Let those brothers who are the “mothers” strive to stay far from everyone and, because of obedience to their minister, protect their “sons” from everyone so that no one can speak with them.

⁹And those “sons” may not talk with anyone except with their “mothers” and with the minister and his custodian when it pleases them to visit with the Lord’s blessing.

¹⁰The “sons,” however, may periodically assume the role of the “mothers,” taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided. Let them strive to observe conscientiously and eagerly everything mentioned above.



THE CONTEXT OF THE EREMITICAL LIFE OF FRANCIS: AN ORIGINAL PROPOSAL

For Francis and his friars, from the very beginning of their shared experience, the Person of Jesus and his Gospel was their ultimate criterion and point of reference — the *Rule* of their lives. Almost at the end of his life, Francis recalls this, reiterating that the Most High Himself revealed to him that he should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel (Cf. *Test* 14). From the early years - to him *in primis*, and then to his companions – different difficulties presented themselves as to how the friars were to live and what was to be their relationship with the world, since they had decided on a change of life, leaving the logic of the world behind.

In the time of Francis, medieval society underwent a critical change; the transition from feudalism to city states. How people related to each other began to change, moving away from a feudal mentality (a more or less vertical relationship of master-subject), to the new reality of the municipalities which (albeit limited to certain groups) encouraged a more horizontal relationship, brother to brother. This change had an impact on the thinking of people of that time, including Francis and his Friars.

What kind of life, therefore, was the first fraternity to lead? And more importantly, what should be the times and the manner of their presence among the people; when should they retreat to the wilderness, in order to nurture direct conversation with God? Francis and his companions were able to untie this difficult knot, through their reference to the Gospel account of the life of Jesus.

Thomas of Celano in his first *Life* says that, immediately after having received oral approval by Pope Innocent III, Francis had decided to live according to the Gospel. He was, however, still faced with the question of what this way of life should be. Celano relates: “following their blessed father, they

entered the Spoleto Valley. These true proponents of justice conferred together about whether they should live among people or go off to solitary places⁴”

We know that the first Franciscan Fraternity came to adopt a particular form of life, alternating between Hermitage and City⁵. This can be seen in an account written by Jacques de Vitry in 1216. In this letter, de Vitry indicates that Francis and his brothers lived an interesting alternating pattern: “By day they go into cities and towns, actively working to win others to the Lord; by night they return to a hermitage or some isolated place to attend to contemplation.”⁶”

The witness of the early years of this new “religion”⁷ helps us to understand the style, the *modus vivendi*, the growth, and the ideal that Francis and his companions were concretely establishing. While on the one hand the primitive Fraternity had chosen a life of humble manual labor and of courageous testimony among people, among whom they preached penance as *lesser ones* (cf. ER 9:1-2) — on the other hand, we see from the above testimonies that the Gospel ideal of the friars involved more than their contact with people, and that they spent periods of solitude, during which they cultivated intense prayer. We know that, for some Friars, the search for a solitary life dedicated to prayer soon became one of the ways in which to practice the Word of the Lord Jesus⁸.

We can guess that this decisive direction was adopted because the *sequela Christi* was the sole point of reference for the friars. The *sequela* is not a ‘new doctrine’, something static and rational, but instead is simply the result of reflecting on the mystery of the Incarnation, and on the way of life itself of Jesus and his disciples⁹.

The *Earlier Rule* is fundamental text for an understanding of this alternating pattern. In it we see mention made of progressive growth, and of the maturation in understanding that the brothers experienced in their first

4 1C 35

5 Cf. S. BORTOLAMI, *Minoritismo e sviluppo urbano fra Due e Trecento: il caso di Padova*, in *Esperienze eremitiche nel Veneto del Due-Trecento. Atti del Convegno nazionale di studi francescani* (Padova, 28-30 settembre 1984), Padova-Vicenza, 1985 [*Le Venezie francescane*, n. s., II/1-2], 84; G. G. MERLO, *Tentazioni e costrizioni eremitiche*, in *Tra eremo e città. Studi su Francesco d'Assisi e sul francescanesimo medievale*, S. Maria degli Angeli-Assisi, 1991, 114-15, 120, nota 25; P. MESSA, *Tra vita eremitica e predicazione*, Assisi, 2009.

6 1Vitry 9

7 Cf. 1Vitry 11

8 Cf. G. G. MERLO, *Tentazioni e costrizioni eremitiche...*, op. cit., 114-132

9 For the first fraternity, living according to the Holy Gospel meant imitating the poverty and humility of the Lord, and following his footprints (Cf. 1Pt 2:21)

years of life in the Community. Reading this text, the following may be noted: the group of Friars led a dynamic religious life which was active rather than static or predetermined — personal characteristics aside. Therefore, from a reading of the *Earlier Rule*, it is clear that:

- a. at the beginning all the Friars worked, and all of them proclaimed penance to people (cf. *ER* 7);
- b. there were some brothers who were occupied in preaching, others in prayer, and others in labor (cf. *ER* 17);
- c. all the friars could address an ‘exhortation with the blessing of God’ to all people (cf. *ER* 21).

The first point emphasizes the importance of work in the early Franciscan Fraternity, while the third point suggests the content that the early preaching (or exhortation) allowed to all friars should have. Our attention, however, is drawn to the second point, since we see clearly a functional division, typical of society in the ‘high Middle Ages’, which maintained subdivisions between those devoted to prayer, those dedicated to the use of weapons, and those dedicated to manual labor¹⁰.

It is interesting to note in the *Earlier Rule* (cf. *ER* 17) that in relation to the terms and concepts used — preaching, prayer, and work — there is some continuity with the tri-functional division of life in the society of the high Middle Ages. It could be said in this regard that within the first fraternity, diversification was more and more taking place, where groups of friars lived their various ministries differently: “Preachers [...] now represented a separate group; even the laborers were taking shape as a specific group, since no they longer accounted for all of the brothers, but only a part of them —still a major part, of course, but gradually declining. And the “oratores”? I believe that here reference is being made to those Friars who chose to live in hermitages, and for whom Francis wrote a specific Rule.^{11”}

Some friars, therefore, were more inclined to prayer, others to work, and others to preaching; despite this, all lived together in a fraternal manner. Francis himself is described by biographers as a man who lives this alternating

10 Those who were dedicated to prayer were Religious and clergy; those dedicated to arms were usually the nobles; and those who were dedicated to manual labor were the common people, such as peasants. Cfr. G. DUBÿ, *Lo specchio del feudalesimo. Sacerdoti, guerrieri e lavoratori*, Roma-Bari, 1981.

11 F. ACCROCCA, *Francesco e la sua “fraternitas”: Caratteri e sviluppi del primo movimento francescano*, in F. ACCROCCA - A. CICERI, *Francesco e i suoi frati. La Regola non bollata: una Regola in cammino*, Milano 1998.

way of life. He is dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel to crowds of people, but is always in search of a place of solitude so as to devote himself to prayer and contemplation. The holy man of Assisi, like a mother caring for the necessities of his children and the needs of souls, wished that the places where the friars lived be close to the City, but outside populated areas, so as to ensure quiet places for silent prayer (in *eremis*)¹².

2.1. *The Reception in the Order of the Eremitical Life Proposed by Francis: Alternating between Hermitage and City*

The life of Francis of Assisi has been described as a pattern of alternating between Hermitage and City¹³ and, according to the saint's hagiographers, the *Fraternitas* of lesser ones had to address the question of how to live early on. In fact, Thomas of Celano in the *Vita beati Francisci* states that they wondered what kind of life they should choose; "whether they should live among people or go off to solitary places." St. Francis "chose not to live for himself alone, but for the one who died for all. For he knew that he was sent for this: to win for God souls which the devil was trying to snatch away."¹⁴ From this it appears that there was no tension between contemplation and preaching, but that these alternated — and this not only as a *fraternitas*, but personally in the life of the saint: "That is why he often chose solitary places to focus his heart entirely on God. But he was not reluctant, when he discerned the time was right, to involve himself in the affairs of his neighbors, and attend to their salvation."¹⁵ The wish of Francis was "to divide the time given him to merit grace and, as seemed best, to spend some of it to benefit his neighbors and use the rest in the blessed solitude of contemplation" and he used to take "with him only a few companions—who knew his holy way of living better than

12 For further material on St. Francis' approach to prayer and his search for isolated places, see the work of O. SCHMUCKI, «*Secretum solitudinis*». *De circumstantiis externis orandi penes sanctum Franciscum Assisiensem*, in *Collectanea Franciscana*, 39 (1969), 5-58; O. SCHMUCKI, «*Mentis silentium*». *Il programma contemplativo nell'Ordine francescano primitivo*, in *Laurentianum*, 14 (1973), 177-222; O. SCHMUCKI, *Luogo di preghiera, eremo, solitudine. Concetti e realizzazione in S. Francesco d'Assisi*, in *Le case di preghiera nella storia e spiritualità francescana*, (a cura di F. Mastroianni), Napoli, 1978, 31-53.

13 Cf. F. ACCROCCA, *Dall'alternanza all'alternativa Eremo e città nel primo secolo dell'Ordine francescano: una rivisitazione attraverso gli scritti di Francesco e le fonti agiografiche*, in *Via spiritus* 9 (2002), 7-60.

14 1Cel 35

15 1Cel 71

others—so that they could shield him from the interruption and disturbance of people, respecting and protecting his silence in every way.¹⁶

Bonaventure, in the *Vita beati Francisci* (the *Legenda Maior*), took up what was said by Thomas of Celano about the question of whether Francis should give himself to contemplation or to preaching, but concludes by saying that Francis' response was that it should be preaching: “[...] the will of God was that he, the herald of Christ, should go out and preach.” A different position is taken by Peter John Olivi, who expresses himself in very balanced terms and in fidelity to the substance of what was the original inspiration for the original *Fraternitas* of *lesser ones*. He declares that the more perfect life is that of Christ, the Apostles and of St. Francis, in which some of the time is dedicated to eremitical solitude, and some to preaching¹⁷.

Bernardine of Siena says of St. Francis: “Christ took on a mixed life, attending to God and to neighbor. [...] So likewise did St. Francis [...] who considered both God and man, giving part of the time to one and then to the other.¹⁸” The way of life attributed by Bernadine to Francis was the model of life for the Friars Minor of the Observance, so it is not surprising that in 1457 Girolamo da Udine wrote about John Capistran, his preaching companion, following the latter's death the previous year: “the whole of his life was transformed into action. It was expressed either in prayer, preaching, reading, or worthwhile activities. Nothing can convince me that a more blessed man could be found, being able to practice contemplation in activity, or taking action during contemplation.¹⁹”

While discussing the way of “alternation”, we should also make reference to Peter of Alcantara (1499-1562), who successfully promoted reform in the Order, recalling the friars to their Franciscan origins. His numerous writings, the best known of which is a *Treatise on Prayer and Meditation*, are proof of his exceptional holiness of life. Peter is known for the extraordinary example of his life, and the very high degree of contemplation, personal austerity and

16 1Cel 91

17 P. G. OLIVI, *Lectura super Matthaeum*, cit. in G. L. POTESTÀ, *Storia ed escatologia in Ubertino da Casale*, Milano, 1980, 214.

18 BERNARDINO DA SIENA, *Predica XLIV*, 47-48.56-57, in ID., *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena 1427*, a cura di C. Delcorno, II, Milano 1989, 1324-1327.

19 G. DA UDINE, *Vita di fra Giovanni da Capestrano*, 11, Curia Provinciale dei Frati Minori - Convento S. Bernardino, L'Aquila 1988, 31-32.

mystical gifts with which God favored him.²⁰ He says in the *Treatise* that “the servant of God must consecrate some certain time of the day to recollection. But now, besides the ordinary course, they must sometimes liberate themselves from all business and employments, as much as is possible, and give themselves over wholly to devotion, the better to nourish their soul with the abundance of spiritual food, recovering the daily losses due to their shortcomings, and gaining a new force to go forward on the spiritual journey.”²¹

The Capuchin Mattia Bellintani da Salò in the *Life, Death and Miracles of the Blessed Felice da Cantalice* says that “he was an intermediary between the world and religion, taking to one the needs of the other, and bringing the provisions of the other in return. Thus, he was an intermediary between God and human beings, offering their needs to God, and bringing graces from Him to them”²². For the hagiographer, being an intermediary or “go-between” also characterizes the personal lifestyle of St. Felix of Cantalice: “He shared out nighttime and daytime; the night he gave to God, the day to his neighbor, and in both he was similarly sanctified.”²³

The example of these saints not only influenced the lifestyle the friars adopted, but also colored the stories told by hagiographers. For example, Pacifico da Rimini narrates *The Life and Heroic Virtues of the Venerable Father Leopold da Gaiche* who, following St. Leonard of Port Maurice, popularized the Way of the Cross, desiring that through it people be brought to new life. Pacifico writes that Leopold “had the occupations of the day and night wisely arranged” and remarks on how he fulfilled the different offices of the sisters Martha and Mary to their mutual advantage.²⁴

In the twentieth century, the practice of alternating between contemplative life and preaching is seen as a crucial aspect of Franciscan life. For example, Gerardo Cardaropoli, writing of Fr. Gabriele Allegra, says: “What is the essential charism of the Franciscan vocation? Fr. Gabriele has spelled it out often: the relationship between its contemplative roots and its embodiment in

20 POSTULAZIONE GENERALE OFM, *Frati Minori Santi e Beati*, a cura di Silvano Bracci e Antonietta Pozzebon, Roma 2009, 233-235.

21 SAN PEDRO DE ALCÁNTARA, *Tratado de oración y meditación*, Ed. Comunidad Franciscana del Palancar, El Palancar 2009, II parte, V capitulo, V aviso.

22 MATTIA DA SALÒ, *Vita, morte e miracoli del beato Felice da Cantalice*, 8, a cura di V. Criscuolo, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Roma 2013, 66. C. CALLONI, *Gli «stati» della riforma cappuccina (1528-1596)*, in *Italia Franciscana* 84 (2009), 445-476 gives an account of the context of that work.

23 MATTIA DA SALÒ, *Vita, morte e miracoli del beato Felice da Cantalice*, 13, 96.

24 *Della vita e delle eroiche virtù del Venerabile padre Leopoldo da Gaiche [...] del p. Pacifico da Rimini dell'ordine stesso e alunno della medesima provincia*, Tipografia Tommassini, Foligno 1835, 86

the apostolate — contemplation, understood as seeking the will of God, and the apostolate as a concretization of the mandate received.” A prayer to Blessed Leopold da Gaiche speaks of his seeking the Lord in solitude and working for salvation in the midst of God’s people. This prayer, according to Fr. Gabriele Allegra, indicates “his life plan”, or “the four graces” of the Franciscan charism — that is, holiness; the apostolate; wisdom; martyrdom. “*In solitudine Deum quarere et in medio populi tui salutem operari ...*”²⁵

25 G. CARDAROPOLI, *P. Gabriele Maria Allegra un francescano del secolo XX*, Ed. Porziuncola, Assisi 1996, 35-37.



SOME ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE RULE FOR HERMITAGES

Some important points emerge from a reading of the *Rule for Hermitages* (cf. above 1.2):

- It is both the *Fraternity and the individual Friar* who have the experience of prayer;
- St. Francis offers *a way of life*, as “mothers” and “sons,” using the Gospel image of Martha and Mary as an essential reference point;
- His brilliant and fascinating insights are centered on ‘*welcoming and listening to the Lord*’;
- He exhorts each Friar to *beg alms as poor little ones* and to live as a child, as a “lesser one”;
- He speaks of a *dynamic and fruitful alternation* (taking turns in being *son* and then *mother*) that leads to a deeper understanding of mutual care, and forms part of a liberating process which, through the practice of interdependence, makes us more open to a relationship with the Other — the Lord.

We will now try to develop the above points.

A. *The Fraternity and the Individual Friar*

The fraternity and each individual friar, are not just a potential gift of the Lord, but they are “the mystical place” in which the Gospel is lived, the place where prayer and an encounter with the Lord is found. Fraternity is a dimension that is much wider than we think. For Francis himself, right from the beginning, the Lord revealed that he should live the Gospel together with his brothers. In the *Testament*, he says: *And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.* (Test 14-15). Without brothers, things become poorer, less fruitful and less joyful; most importantly, there would not be the precious

gift of fraternity in the Lord, nor the sharing of His Word. In Francis' thought, we can speak of an *integral simultaneity*. He speaks firstly about the importance of the relationship between the friars but, at the same time, his insight is that it is precisely in this way that one learns to live out one's relationship with God, involving everyone and all of oneself. In this *simultaneity*, one cannot separate the experience of one's relationship with the other and with the brothers from the experience of one's relationship with the Lord. We are speaking of something 'integral', unified and inseparable. This is the way revealed by the Lord to St. Francis and his friars; an invitation to live out the spiritual experience of Bethany in the fraternity — being like Martha and Mary, being “mothers” and “sons.”

B. A Way of Life

We can see that Francis is practical, and proposes something quickly achieved. In this short text on life in hermitages, we note a feature that is typical of him; using the Gospel image of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:39), he employs feminine metaphors and images to talk about himself and the life of the friars.²⁶ That the friars who lived in hermitages at that time were disturbed and distracted by contact with people is suggested by the exhortations in which Francis asks the friars who are in hermitages to beware of contact with people, and the invitation made to the “mothers”, to protect their “sons” from everyone so that no one can speak with them. In view of this, Francis stresses the important role of “Martha”, the mother, whose presence allows the son to live in solitude and prayer, in order to receive Life. The mother gives life; this is her calling, she is dedicated to this living offering.²⁷ True brotherly love contains qualities of maternal love — a trusting sensitivity, and an active generosity. Maternal love generously nourishes, protects and sacrifices itself for its children (cf. *ER* 9:10,11). These roles coexist; one does not exclude the other. The home of Bethany is spiritually recreated in this relationship of respectful, maternal care — a place of welcome and of sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to him. And so, the relationship that Francis speaks about is full of affection and mutual care.²⁸ This way of life, this 'living place' is the mediation by which

26 O. VAN ASSELDONK, *La Regola 'pro eremitoriis data'*, in *Studi e ricerche francescane*, 8 (1979), 12-14; J. Dalarun, *Francesco: un passaggio*, 45-47.

27 The spiritual meaning of *dedicate* and *offering* is found in the passage in which St. Paul writes: “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (*Rm* 12:1). Offering life is a constitutive aspect of the Spirit of the Lord given to us.

28 Cf. *2LtF* 49-53; *LtL*.

the praying friars are brought to Bethany — to prayer and to a dialogue with the Master. Put simply, the goal of this spiritual place is to meet with the Lord and spend time with him.

C. *Welcoming and Listening to the Lord*

Those who are the “sons/Mary” are called to *welcome the Lord, to sit at his feet and listen to his voice* – all of which is an invitation to get to know the Lord. Spending time in prayer ensures and protects the primacy of our relationship with God. In this short text Francis quotes the Gospel: *seek first the kingdom of God and His justice* (cf. Mt 6:33; Lk 12:31; ER 22:26; LR 5: 2). Seeking the *kingdom of God* is both an internal and external reality; it is the manifestation of God’s reign in us that becomes an experience of divine grace. This gift is something that cannot be bought or achieved by oneself, because it comes from God, but we are called to welcome it and practice it. The meaning of *justice*, in a Franciscan context, means *restoring beauty to that which has been deformed*,²⁹ that is, restoring beauty as God wished it and thought it, because all beauty comes from God. In restoring beauty to some situation or some relationship that has been broken or “deformed” by loving in the wrong way, we live and experience the Presence of God. It is this grace that restores an inner spiritual order, a *sacred order*.³⁰

For St. Francis, this inner process of *seeking the kingdom of God and His justice* requires a period of solitude and inner work, which can be defined as *solitude in fraternity*. This is a typically and uniquely Franciscan feature, in that it is a departure from the classical way of thinking about hermitages and from established ways of living in them. The solitude spoken about by Francis in “*Of those who wish to stay in hermitages*” (RH 1), is not the life of a hermit in the desert, but an invitation to solitude protected by the presence of the fraternity. This experience of course, if done properly, does not harm or diminish silence, but is a solitude that implies deeper communication and language, where “sons” pray in solitude knowing that they are being silently safeguarded by “mothers”. All of this is concretely expressed in the organization of space and time, the opportunity of staying

29 Cf. BONAVENTURE, *Collationes in Hexaemeron* I, 34.

30 *Sacred order; putting in sacred order* (from the Greek: διατίθημι ἀρχή). This refers to what we experience in a variety of relationships — with ourselves, with others and with God. If we do not seek first this *justice*, in the deeply spiritual sense, our ministry and mission may not amount to anything. (cf. 1Cor 13:2).

in isolated places, and the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours. These are the necessary means to facilitate both our listening to the Lord, and his *lordship* and *justice* in us. The tradition of the Church itself has always safeguarded and proposed this “peopled solitude” as a privileged way of meeting with the Lord.

We move now to consider some aspects of poverty and minority that progressively lead us to live as “sons / disciples”, listening to the Master.

D. Begging Alms as Poor Little Ones

A further interesting aspect emerging from this brief Rule of Life, is Francis’s ability to harmonize seeking the primacy of God with the friars’ human and mutual relationships. The Saint, who well knew the richness of being poor, seems to highlight the “mother-son” relationship as an existential paradigm in which the poverty of the son is experienced in his gratitude towards the “mother” — a providential sign of care from the *great Almoner*. This means living as needy and ‘lesser’ sons, trusting in the Lord, who uses the mediations of the brothers and the “Book of Creation” to manifest divine solicitude for his creatures (cf. 2 C 77). The “sons”, says Francis, are called not to make claims, but to “depend on” the ‘mothers’ as *poor little ones*, and to beg *out of love of the Lord God* (cf. RH 5). Seeing oneself as needy and dependent on the other is not easy, especially when we are used to living an autonomous and independent life, yet it is an essential part of Franciscan life: being poor and dependent so as to be “children”, simple and free from any worldly concerns (cf. Mt 6:24-34). In this sense, we might say that the “sons” have an awareness of being beloved creatures, something which leads to spiritual rebirth and being captivated by the wonder of living life’s most important relationship, that is, spending time with the Lord.

E. A Liberating Alternation/Taking Turns

A very important point is the ‘taking turns’, or alternation, which Francis asks of the friars: The “sons” may periodically assume the role of the “mothers,” taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided, and trying to observe all the things mentioned in the Rule (cf. RH 10). Francis’ insight is unique and original. On the one hand, this taking turns is a profound expression of a Franciscan style of being “lesser ones”; the role of being “mother” to the “son” is not a role of domination or possession, but

always has more feminine and maternal characteristics. For Francis, mater has the sense of taking care of others in a very practical way (nurturing and cherishing). This is similar to how he sees the minister who serves the brethren with a “love that is free”, seeking to serve with a real love for the other (cf. ER 9:10-11). On the other hand, in this alternation, at the discretion of the friars, Francis invites the “sons” to concretely experience the role of “mother”. This means that the friar has an opportunity to apply the Golden Rule to his brother who will now be called to be a “son”. In this way, the alternation functions to ensure a free, fraternal, and maternal, relationship that is empowering — empowering the “mother” who does not dominate, but serves, and the “son”, who avoids an infantile, dependent relationship in which he is not allowed to grow in responsibility.

F. Overview

From what we have said, the text, in its various expressions, has as its focal point the *experience of encounter*. This consists in welcoming and in seeking the Lord, his kingdom, and his justice, the source of all beauty and of every final good. It is a dynamic process of alterity (relating to the other), which is not without its suffering but which in the end leads to the realization that alone we can do nothing. A journey, then, of freedom from our illusion of autonomy which often leads us away from our true vocation: to be with the Lord. The core elements found in the text of “*Those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way*” are united in their harmony and indissolubility. This is advice offered to us by Francis, rooted in his deep experience of the Lord. We can also note this stress on consonance in the *Salutation of the Virtues*, which the Poverello of Assisi wrote having welcomed and contemplated the divine light: *Whoever possesses one and does not offend the others possesses all. Whoever offends one does not possess any and offends all.*³¹

If the Gospel is considered the *rule of love*, we must affirm that love cannot be divided. This indissolubility is part of the harmony of the core elements which, if we live them in one aspect without offending the others, we live them all.

31 SalV 6,7. According to scholars, the following quotation from the letter of St. James throws light on this prayer; “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” (Jas 2:10)



PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR HERMITAGE FRATERNITIES OR HOUSES OF PRAYER

The core elements that we have spoken about recall features that we find in the *Rule* of the Friars Minor. The friars are called to live the Lord’s call and safeguard it as a gift received from the Most High. Often, Saint Francis in his *writings* exhorts his brothers to safeguard the Lord’s presence in our lives, urging them to be careful that “*above all things they should desire to have the Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity* (LR 10:8).

We can immediately see that this vocation can be lived out the proposals Francis makes in the *Rule* for “*those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way*” (RH 1) — being “mothers” or “sons”, seeking first the kingdom of God and his justice. This has implications, not only for the experience of the individual Friar, but is also a dimension of the deep communion we share with our brothers who live the same Profession and the same call from the Lord.

The following suggestions are made not in a rigid way, but more in the nature of opening windows that might enrich our way of life and our sense of belonging to the Lord. First of all, these “core elements” may be of help to those who are committed to living in *Hermitage Fraternities*, or *Houses of prayer*, in places where we dedicate ourselves to prayer and devotion, or in the Franciscan forms of life not intended solely for the friars.

4.1. *Hermitage Fraternities*

Those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way ... The aim of this section is to see how the “core elements” we have spoken about might suggest practical means for the establishment of a fraternity intended as a Hermitage.

1. *Discernment.* The Friars are called to discernment, continuously practiced so that it becomes a *habitus*.³² As regards Hermitage Fraternities, those who are willing to live this life of prayer are called to be aware of “sitting at the Lord’s feet”, in a poor and mendicant style of life, taking turns in the service of *Mary* (the son at the Lord’s feet) and *Martha* (who, as a mother, cares for and protects the son).

Those who ask to live this experience must not be the only ones to be part of the discernment process. Most importantly, it is the Provincial Ministers and Custodes who must discern responsibly before God, in the knowledge that the Hermitage Fraternity should not become a therapeutic fraternity for friars in difficulty. Discernment must clarify whether the friars are truly inspired by the Lord in seeking first the kingdom and his justice, or instead are looking for a life choice that separates them from their vocation and the realities of their life (cf. *ER* 16:4).

2. *A fraternity.* The gift of fraternity characterizes our life more than anything else. From what has emerged thus far, we can say that is the fraternity that constitutes a Franciscan Hermitage. A single friar can live as a hermit, but not in the Franciscan sense. The Hermitage Fraternity is not separated from the rest of the Provincial fraternity but, because of its participation in the communion of the Trinity, shares in fraternal communion with the Province. The Hermitage Fraternity should be small, according to the Rule (*RH* 1). Since it has a family dynamic, care must be taken to be aware of the misunderstandings and immature behavior which may arise when the dynamics of the friars’ families of origin are operative in the fraternity; Delarun’s study of the term *mater* helps shed light on this point.
3. *Minority.* Our understanding is that the style of life of the fraternity, and its location, should be safeguarded by a simple, poor and sober life — in order to better foster the dynamism that taking turns calls for.
4. *The Hermitage is for the Kingdom of God.* The Hermitage Fraternity, living in an isolated place, in solitude, with a sober and simple lifestyle, is not an end in itself, but finds its purpose in its search for silence so as to encounter the Lord in prayer. Both the hermitage and the prayer itself are simply mediations, serving the search for the centrality of God, for

³² The *Rule* has many references which stress a way of life that is in a process of continuous discernment. The friars are to live “spiritually”....

- his kingdom, and his justice (cf. *RH* 3) — and therefore, they always have an ecclesial dimension.³³
5. *A Holy Place*. The location is not a secondary consideration, since there is a grace attached to place. But what makes the place holy is not bricks and mortar, but the people who live there, and the way they live. Bethany is a model of a place filled with affection and trust, listening and caring, a place of familiarity with the Lord! In many ways, Bethany is a location or school in which one learns to live the *sequela Christi*. (There are many places, such as La Verna, and others in our tradition which seem to answer to what the *Rule for Hermitages* suggests).
 6. *A Cloister for the Friars*. The Hermitage is a place reserved solely for prayer. Therefore, it is a place dedicated exclusively to the friars. The cloister is firmly guarded by the “mother” in the dynamic of alternation (cf. *ER* 7:13-14).
 7. *Time, Continuity and Taking Turns*. There are three criteria that are crucial requirements in the Hermitage. *Time* is important for the friars who will be called to be the “stable” fraternity (a minimum of two Friars to act as *mother - son*), in order to start the new fraternity and ensure *continuity*. In this way, the *Hermitage Fraternity* can offer space to host other friars (e.g. two others) who wish to live as part of the Hermitage for a relatively long time, but not as part of the stable fraternity. After a certain period, the brothers who have lived as *sons*, at an appropriate time are invited to experience the dynamic of *alternation* — entering with simplicity into the role of *mother*.
 8. *The Life Plan*. The Hermitage Fraternity, after an introductory phase, must draw up a life plan (times, schedules, deadlines, taking turns etc.). This plan should include appropriate deadlines for an evaluation process, undertaken together with the Provincial Ministers and Custodians, with a focus on our spirituality according to the *Rule for Hermitages*. The fundamental characteristic of the Fraternity is this: prayer is primary and exclusive.
 9. *Not an Alternative, but Alternation*. Francis did not live an exclusively apostolic life, nor did he live the life of a hermit exclusively. His was the way of an *alternation* between prayer and simple witness among

33 Cf. P. MARTINELLI, *La riscoperta della vita eremitica e la famiglia francescana*. Atti della Giornata di studio in occasione di venticinque anni di presenza del Romitorio delle Stigmate (Verna, 27 settembre 2008), in *Studi Francescani* 106 (2009), 339-342.

the people. Similarly, it seems important to point out that the proposal of living in a Hermitage Fraternity, or having a Hermitage experience, should not be just an *alternative* for the friars, but an *alternation* that can help individuals and fraternities to find that inner harmony and order which comes from God, and to revitalize its centrality for them so that they can then return to their mission³⁴.

10. *Service and Mission.* We believe that the *Hermitage Fraternity* is a valuable and fruitful service to the brothers and to the Province itself.

4.2. *Houses of Prayer*

The “core elements” can give a strong direction and bring enlightenment to those initiatives or places where there are Fraternities dedicated as Houses of Prayer. We realize that they are different to Hermitage Fraternities in the strict sense, but they can provide a strong and typically Franciscan spirituality, and thus be open not just to friars but to other people who are willing to live along the lines that we offer in accordance with our charism .

1. *Discernment.* As already mentioned above, the friars who wish to live a life dedicated to prayer must not be the only ones to be part of the discernment process. The Provincial Ministers and the Custodes are called to see a fraternity dedicated to this priority of the Order as a gift. It is a vital gift for the entire Provincial fraternity and, because of this, it must be supported and accompanied by the Province. The Provincial Ministers and Custodians must discern this priority responsibly before God, not just in a theoretical way, but actively encouraging friars who may be truly inspired by the Lord to devote themselves to a life of prayer (cf. *ER* 16: 4). The Friars who feel a call to devote themselves to prayer must be aware that like *Mary* they “sit at the feet of the Lord”, and like *Martha*, they should look after and protect the *sons and daughters* that are given to their care.
2. *A Fraternity Particularly Dedicated to Prayer.* In addition to making the necessary distinctions between it and the Hermitage Fraternity, it is only right to point out that to be a *House of Prayer* is to be a fraternity particularly dedicated to prayer. Given the dynamics that arise in simple family relationships, we believe it is best to have a small fraternity.

34 Cf. P. MESSA, *Tra vita eremitica e predicazione*, Assisi 2009, 141.

Similarly, the number of people who are welcomed should ideally be proportionate to the small size of the fraternity.

3. *The Vocation and Mission of the Fraternity.* Like other fraternities, it has a Life Plan with the distinctive characteristic of its mission being to *have the spirit of prayer and devotion*. The friars assigned to this form of life have a simple and very important role: it is they themselves, firstly, who are called to live prayer. This aspect is a strong witness in itself — simple and authentic. It is the priority given to the search for the Kingdom of God which first determines being called to live like *Mary* sitting at the Lord's feet, as "sons". The second stage is the *mission*: they are called to be "mothers" to those who ask and wish to be accompanied in their encounter with the Lord. In contrast to the Hermitage Fraternities, these 'Houses of Prayer' are open to people from all backgrounds and genders.
4. *Time and Continuity.* The friars who will be chosen to be part of the fraternity must be "stable" for some time in order to get the new fraternity going and to ensure *continuity*. We think this is a good criterion as to whether a fraternity dedicated to prayer can be established. Frequently it happens that when a friar is changed the project is weakened and loses momentum. Faith is necessary — a belief that such a fraternity is vital for the Province.
5. *The Place.* The location, as we have already remarked, is not a secondary consideration; *there is a grace attached to place*. We seriously propose and encourage that the House of Prayer be located in or near a holy place. There are many examples — in any case, the location is important. The place must be set apart, ensuring solitude with a sober and simple lifestyle, a place where the friars can live apart and dedicate themselves to prayer and to the welcome of those seeking an experience of solitude. There may be certain places made holy by the holy lives of the Friars who have lived their vocation there; these are places that speak.
6. *The Life Plan.* A fraternity dedicated to prayer, after an introductory phase, must draw up a Life Plan (times, horariums, deadlines, etc.) in conjunction with Provincial Ministers or Custodes. This means organizing, scheduling, planning, and putting in place evaluation processes for the fraternity lifestyle so that it can draw possible spiritual approaches from the richness of our spirituality, in line with our rich Franciscan tradition.



SOME QUESTIONS

To conclude, we offer some questions to aid personal reflections on the Franciscan dimension of prayer and devotion, which can then be shared in fraternity. This resource can thus become a tool to help us to live our “*forma minorum*” in an authentic way, as well as to find practical means for the establishment of a *Hermitage Fraternity* or a *House of Prayer*.

- *We must strengthen, nurture and deepen our prayer life!* What does such an exhortation actually mean at this particular time in my personal story, and in that of my fraternity? How can this life of prayer be deepened in practice?
- Does our life as Friars Minor as it is lived out (with such a diversity of mission and evangelizing activities) lead to a convincing life of prayer — or is it perhaps masking an emptiness?
- In order to live out our vocation, is it important to occasionally withdraw into solitude?
- Among the services that we can give as friars is a welcome to those who wish to pray with us and among us, seeking God before everything else. Is our fraternity able to offer this service in even a minimal way? Do we have a meaningful prayer life to offer?
- Have we ever considered the possibility of establishing a *Hermitage Fraternity* or a *House of Prayer* in our Franciscan Province or Custody?
- From the *Rule for Hermitages*.
 - How can the experience of prayer and solitude become a living reality in my fraternity, following the spiritual model of Bethany?
 - What has St. Francis’ proposal of a style of life as *mothers* and *sons* to say to us about mutual caring in an experience of solitude?

- Is our vocation founded on *welcoming and listening to the Lord* so we can welcome his reign and its justice within us?
- Do I know what it means to *beg alms as poor little ones*, to live as a *child/son*, and as a *lesser one*?
- Am I living in a *liberating process* that is the result of living in *interdependence* with others — which is a gift that opens up my relationship with the Lord?

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A. Scripture

<i>1Cor</i>	First Letter to the Corinthians
<i>Lk</i>	The Gospel of Luke
<i>Mt</i>	The Gospel of Matthew
<i>1Pt</i>	First Letter of St. Peter
<i>1Kgs</i>	First Book of Kings
<i>Rm</i>	The Letter to the Romans
<i>Jas</i>	The Letter of James

B. Writings of St. Francis of Assisi

<i>Adm</i>	The Admonitions
<i>LtAnt</i>	A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua
<i>2LtF</i>	The Second Letter to the Faithful
<i>LtL</i>	A Letter to Brother Leo
<i>LtOrd</i>	A Letter to the Entire Order
<i>ER</i>	The Earlier Rule (1221)
<i>LR</i>	The Later Rule (1223)
<i>RH</i>	A Rule for Hermitages
<i>SalV</i>	A Salutation of Virtues
<i>Test</i>	The Testament (1226)

C. Biographies of St. Francis of Assisi

<i>1C</i>	The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano [Celano's First Life]
<i>2C</i>	The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul [Celano's Second Life]
<i>LMj</i>	The Major Legend, by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.

D. Other Works Cited

2015 General Chapter Document:

*Going to the Peripheries with the Joy of the Gospel.
Fratres et Minores in Nostra Aetate.* Rome 2015.

CCGG *General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor.*
Rome, 2010.

DV *Dei Verbum.* Dogmatic Constitution of the
Second Vatican Council on Divine Revelation, 1965.

SSGG *General Statutes of the Order of Friars Minor.* Rome, 2010.

IVitry Jacques de Vitry, A Letter written from Genoa, October 1216.

CURIA GENERALE DEI FRATI MINORI
Via di Santa Maria Mediatrice, 25
00165 Roma
www.ofm.org