

PRESENTATION OF THE DOCUMENTS BY THE THREE FRIARS

The publishing of the entire documentation concerning a delicate and complex case of conscience that has by now been drawn out over quite a number of years has the purpose of clarifying, with the greatest objectivity possible, the *significance*, the *motives*, and the *circumstances* of a decision that has matured in us very slowly and that we have made in fidelity to our conscience: the decision to place our liberty in *total, unconditional, and direct* dependence on the divine Will, surpassing the natural framework of the structured reality in which we are inserted, a reality we do not intend to disown, to which, rather, we give credit in part for having brought us to this point, but which now, as a result of this new coming-to-consciousness, manifests its essential limitations.

The decision made is not, on our part, a separation from our confreres in the Custody and in the Order, nor is it an attempt at reform. It is an act of surrender to the One who has called us precisely as Franciscans of the Holy Land to place ourselves at the exclusive disposal of His Will. Just as in following our vocation in our youth we separated ourselves materially from our parents and had to release ourselves from their authority without there having been any break in relations because of this, so too do we hope the same will now happen with those who feel responsible for us. We believe that this new vocation, fulfillment of the first, is due to the same interior voice that calls us from within to a more complete surrender of ourselves to God, in which the *reality* of the religious profession and of the priestly ministry, so we think, precisely consists.

In good conscience we have repeatedly requested that the liberty necessary for such unconditional submission to God be acknowledged by the authority. Now we realize that the

consent of our superiors would have indeed immensely facilitated our leap into the void, legitimizing it in the eyes of men, but would have unloaded the responsibility and the consequences upon those who might not be in the position to assume them for lack of personal conviction. It was up to us, therefore, to draw out the practical consequences of the convictions we have come to, without expecting from *another creature* – no matter who it might be – the solution to our personal problem. In the presence of a clear call from the Lord, all else must take second place (Mt 10:37-39), and we are convinced that it is precisely from Him that the invitation to a radical *conversion*, to a reversal of our orientation, comes to us: “*If you turn to the Lord with all your heart . . . direct your heart to the Lord and serve Him alone. . .*” (1 Sam 7:3). What we have recently come to know and experience is one with the message of Christ and of the whole Biblical revelation; it is its concrete actualization for us...

Our request for “liberty-for-God”, because of its novelty, has created – in those who on both sides have had to confront the problem – an objective conflict of consciences apparently unsolvable.

From our point of view, an understanding is possible on the basis of mutual respect for the conscience provided that the human authorities who represent the institution – conscious of the nature and purpose of the latter – were to come to a collective awareness of its subordination to a Will that manifests Itself as in Its proper place, in the intimate depths of personal conscience. The task of the institution – of the religious one as well – the purpose of the legislation that sustains it, and the function of the human authorities who embody it, is essentially, so we think, one of preparing individuals to the point in which they may be in a position to follow spontaneously and freely what they intuit to be the Will of God, no longer external and heteronomous but an inner dynamic impulse, creative principle of new life (Jn 3:3-

11), the only one capable of bringing to fulfillment the exigency of the Law (Rom 8:1-12). Whenever a similar case presents itself, the institution must yield its place to Life which urges and presses forth, and do so without regret, what is more, with the satisfaction of having fulfilled its own mission.

At any rate, we do not intend to judge anyone. We believe that each may have done and might be doing “his part” according to his own conscience. Our part is that of not being unfaithful, of not allowing ourselves to be unfaithful, to our profound inner conviction. Between the risk of an illusion and the risk of not doing everything that is within our possibilities in order to follow that which has all the signs and all the probabilities of being truly, with respect to us, the Will of God, we prefer to run the first risk, which at worst might bring as consequence a healthy humiliation that we accept in advance.

The publication for which we assume the responsibility is not a defense or an accusation of anyone; we have only wanted to present a *complete* documentation that might serve as a serious point of reference for anyone who might want to form a personal idea about this *case of conscience*....

We are confident that the experience of faith that today moves us to take this serious step – which, because of the complete reversal of values that it implies, may appear absurd and aberrant – will someday be seen and understood in its proper light by anyone who might find himself living the same experience. Our step is meant to be a “leap inwards”, a leap towards the vital center of our being.

JOSE BARRIUSO
RAFFAELE ANGELISANTI
GIUSEPPE NAPOLI

ENCOUNTER WITH THE MESSAGE

...The encounter with the Message – as doctrine that flowed forth limpid, luminous, and gratuitous like water from a spring, and as lived life that embodied all my ideals, by now considered unattainable – had the power to bring me back to faith, a genuine faith, the faith that believes in the impossible because it has “seen” the Spirit of God in action.

All at once, the best of what I had learned and of what I thought I had assimilated in my studies of theology, of philosophy, of Islamic mysticism, ceased to appear to me like a beautiful ideal, fruit of the authors’ dreams or literary capacities, and became a life lived before my unbelieving eyes, a concrete and palpable reality.

All at once I “understood”, but with my whole being, the truth of Plato’s “myth of the cave”: it is necessary that someone turn us in the opposite direction so that we may begin to see the reality without confusing it anymore with the shadow or the image.

All at once I realized that I had never truly believed in Christ’s absurd message: it is necessary to die to one’s self in order to find Life.

All at once I found myself again before the tremendous present-day relevance of St. Francis of Assisi and of his most personal and not-understood path. I felt a rekindling within my breast of an ancient and dormant enthusiasm, as if before the only state of life of which I would not be

ashamed – the only way to hush my conscience which screamed against the inauthenticity of my whole being. I knew that I did not have the strength to carry forward such a thing alone, but I also knew that this is a grace and that God was offering it to me in that moment. I realized that what I had received, no one could any longer take away from me. Fortunately, it was in line with what I had always chosen. I did not have to disavow anything essential; on the contrary, it seemed to me that only then I really began to understand the Gospel and St. Francis...

Father Napoli's Note

(from the chronicle of the Documents, pp. 220-221)

DOCUMENT 8

The letter that follows is the first presentation of the Message to the Discretorium made jointly after four years of contact with the person who transmits it.

The letter manifests their first reactions to this mysterious as well as unexpected encounter with a reality of a superior order.

[Bethlehem], May 1, 1976

Most Rev. Fr. Maurilio Sacchi
Custos of the Holy Land
Very Rev. Fr. Discrets of the Holy Land

Very Reverend Fathers,

For some years now, we have been in contact with a person by the name of Josefina Chacín, who states that she has special mystical experiences that she has come to express in various writings, the publication of which Fr. José Barriuso took charge.

As a result of a long series of encounters during the space of several months, a new book entitled *The New Earth* has come to light. The book means to be the presentation and explanation of the author's mystical experience and of a divine Message to be communicated, by express command of God, to all humanity, starting out from the Holy Land.

This person is perfectly aware of the weight of such an affirmation and of the repulsion it can stir up in many readers, even the well-disposed. Given its intrinsic value, the book could have been presented as a personal con-

quest, which would have been much more acceptable; nevertheless, she has felt it her duty to confirm the fact that the book is fruit of a divine communication, even at the cost of seeing it discredited. This total fidelity to the voice of conscience on the part of a normal person uncommonly endowed cannot fail to pose a problem, and demands maximum respect....

We believe that the book represents, among other things, a brilliant and original conquest of a philosophical nature that answers the most profound questionings of contemporary consciousness.

We have the impression that many intuitions more or less fragmentary, which we are familiar with in the most qualified thinkers, here find their synthesis based on a unitary intuition that illumines the whole.

It is a metaphysical-theological fathoming that recaptures and presents anew the content of our faith in the light of a unitary vision of all reality.

The interest aroused in us by her thought has grown little by little as we have been able to verify the perfect coherence of her life with what she affirms...

Father José Barriuso
Father Raffaele Angelisanti
Father Giacinto [Giuseppe] Napoli

DOCUMENT 9

Before presenting to the Discretorium the request for publishing the manuscript, the Custos, Father Sacchi, requests the advice of the renowned theologian Fr. Vittorino Joannes, O.F.M., of the Lombardian religious province. Father Joannes, after meeting with Fathers Angelisanti and Napoli – Father Barriuso having left for Mexico a few days before – immediately understands the true sense of the problem as he expresses in his letter to the Custos, here reproduced, a copy of which he kindly left with us.

Jerusalem, May 15, 1976

Most Rev. and dear Father Custos,

... the person and the work in question are beyond all suspicion of pettiness, of personal interests, of heterodoxy that could cause concern. However, it is a matter of a spiritual “experience” more than a question of theological orthodoxy; the behavior, the expressions, the language of this person strongly remind me of similar experiences in the history of Christian spirituality (I could easily mention names and episodes). It is an experience and a message that enters the “furrow” of the most genuine Christian tradition; it is, therefore, a matter of “charisms” that, as such, are to be approached and perceived beyond the normal measuring criteria of a censorial nature. On the other hand, to accept the message proper to a spiritual “charism” never means to make of it an object of dogmatic adherence, provided that (as in this case) it opposes neither the contents of divine Revelation nor the authority of the Church; and in this case adherence and fidelity to the Church and love for it seem to me to be very marked.

It may even be said that this spiritual theology, in the measure in which it is a “reviving” – with its own accentuations and colorations – of the fundamental message of the Gospel, has at least a right of asylum alongside so many other theologies and spiritual experiences....

It seems to me, as you had already stated and as I am fully convinced, that in such a step, the fact that should be strongly underlined is the ticklishness and the “historic” responsibility of a refusal and a total closing-off to experiences that are multiplying in the Holy Land lately, and that should induce one to reflect on the duty and responsibilities of the Custody precisely in this moment, so difficult yet so alive for the history of the Church. I submit all this to you because you have questioned me about it, and the matter interests me very much. I think, however, that it is necessary to act with a great sense of surrender to the Divine Providence and without excessive fears...

Friar Vittorino Joannes

DOCUMENT 16

In the following letter the three religious again present their joint spiritual experience, no longer only as an enrichment of intellectual cognitive order, but above all as an incipient concrete participation – even though only from the outside – in the Message translated into life by a group of people, for whom official authorization from the Discretorium is now requested so that they may continue to reside at Milk Grotto Shrine.

Bethlehem, August 29, 1977

Most Rev. Fr. Custos
Fr. Maurilio Sacchi and
Very Rev. Fr. Discrets of the Holy Land
Most Rev. Fr. Custos, very Rev. Fr. Discrets,

On May 1, 1976, we communicated to the Discretorium of the Holy Land our request to be authorized to publish, in the name of the Custody, the book *The New Earth*, written by Señorita Josefina Chacín....

The request was discussed by the Discretorium on the following May 28th.... Things now – following the authorization granted by the Discretorium – are at the point in which the printing of the book is about to be finished....

In over five years of contact with the people committed to living the “Message”, we have been able to verify with our own eyes that it is not just a matter of words or abstract principles, but rather of an experience lived to the fullest that bears witness of itself. It is a living reality, evangelical and Franciscan, that has become deeply engraved in our consciences and which we feel the need to make known to our confreres and to all who are thirsty

for eternal life.

Perhaps there has been born, or has been given to us as a gift, that something which we all, more or less consciously, have long desired and which in the last Custodial Chapter, when spiritual themes were being discussed, we sought with the anguished question so often repeated in the meeting hall: “What are we to do?” We are deeply convinced that spiritual realities are not “created” by human decisions and measures but are “born” and are received “as a gift”, as is everything that is life and divine life. The one thing that is being asked of us is that we take care of this sprout of life and help it to grow there where it is....

Here is our request: in conscience we feel it our duty to ask that this group be officially granted permission to continue living at our Milk Grotto Shrine and at the same time that we, too, be given the possibility of going deeper, together with these people, into the experience initiated....

Trusting in your understanding, we present our fraternal greetings.

Fr. José Barriuso

Fr. Raffaele Angelisanti

Fr. Giacinto [*Giuseppe*] Napoli

DOCUMENT 17

Owing to the foregoing request for official authorization in favor of the Milk Grotto Group, the Custos, Father Sacchi, met with Señorita Josefina and requested that she herself make the written request for this authorization.

Señorita Josefina, after having spent a day in prayer in order to understand what God's Will might be, even though she herself intended to simply follow the directions given her by the Father Custos, felt, to her surprise, interiorly compelled to write a letter, the contents of which went far beyond her intentions and, what is more, addressed not to the Father Custos or to the Discretorium but to all the friars of the Custody of the Holy Land, in the conviction that such was the Will of the Lord.

The letter was sent to all and each one of the religious of the Custody with the letter of presentation dated December 1, 1977.

Bethlehem, Milk Grotto
August 31, 1977

To the Franciscans
of the Custody of the Holy Land
Jerusalem

Dearly beloved brothers in the Heart of Christ,

According to the request of the Father Custos, fulfilling the Will of the Lord at whose service I find myself since August 22, 1954, when by His grace I came to consciousness of the unconsciousness in which I was living, I am addressing all of you in order to tell you:

In this coming-to-consciousness, the Lord has made known to me at different moments the “Message” that through several writing I have tried to express:

That the hour is coming and is now! in which the *true* worshiper must worship God in spirit and in truth, submitting themselves unconditionally to His Divine Will, after the example of Jesus of Nazareth, because the moment of His Justice is coming.

That the time of mankind’s “evolution” in the knowledge of good and evil is coming to an end, and man must freely and consciously affirm his decision in the Being or in the “non-being”: in “being” or in “doing”; in God or in the creature; in Love or in Power: in God Will or in His Permission. And that, in order for man to know and come to consciousness of these realities, it is necessary that His “Message” be spread from this Holy Land, Scripture thus becoming fulfilled.

And it is to the Franciscans, custodians of the Holy Places, to whom this mission is first offered, mission which must be accepted or rejected freely and consciously by each one, for this is not a Message that can be preached by word alone; rather, along with the preaching of it goes the committing of one’s life in order to be transformed by the force of the “living word” which the Message contains, bringing about in each one the coming-to-consciousness necessary for his personal decision.

It is for the purpose of transmitting this knowledge, more with my life than with my words, that the Lord has repeatedly sent me to this Holy Land over the course of more than ten years, and during this time I have been in contact with some Franciscan Fathers who already know the “Message” in the form that the Lord has gradually presented it to them, and which is already beginning to be an experiential reality for them.

.....

In 1976, while in Venezuela, I received a letter from Father Raffaele, dated May 30th of the same year, in which he informed me that the book of the Message of the Lord, “The New Earth”, presented by him, would be edited by the Custody of the Holy Land, over which fact I rejoice with all my heart since this means an initial opening up to the Lord’s Word contained in His Message; but this is not enough. To be able to “savor” the life of liberation that this Message contains, it is necessary to be thoroughly acquainted with it. As I said before, it is not for preaching by word alone but by the commitment of one’s life in order to be transformed by the force of the “living word” that it contains. Only in this way will it be possible for each one to come to the consciousness necessary for the personal decision that the Lord requests, and which I have expressed at the beginning of this writing.

It is required, therefore, that there be a place in the Holy Land, according to the Lord’s Will, destined to “gather” the experience lived by the people who come to have contact with the Message, where the persons who seek to live the same ideal may meet, just as we have been doing here at the Milk Grotto in a provisional way without official acceptance by the Custody for said purpose.

It seems to me that it is the request the Lord is making of the Franciscans, custodians of the Holy Land, following their acceptance of the mission that is being offered to them. It is to ask for “lodging” for those who have “conceived” the Word of the Lord and want to “give birth” in themselves to the “New Creature”, born not of carnal will nor of the will of men, but of the Will of God.

On you, brothers, depends whether this “New Creature”

is born within or without the Custody of the Holy Land.

I ask that this letter be published for the knowledge of all the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land.

May our Lord Jesus Christ, together with his Most Holy Mother and St. Joseph, enlighten your decision according to the Divine Will.

the slave of the Lord

DOCUMENT 38

In the month of August of 1979 Father Angelisanti has a copy of The “New Earth” delivered to the Holy Father, accompanied by the following letter.

Bethlehem, August 29, 1979

Holiness,

.....

What I am about to say is not fruit of long and complicated reasonings; it is the simple manifestation of a reality that with time has gradually become present to my conscience as a Christian and a follower of Francis of Assisi.

Through reading and meditating on the book “The ‘New Earth’ of the new man”, the publication of which I have taken charge, I have discovered and encountered Someone who, I hope, will transform my life. I am convinced that the contents of the book concern Your Holiness, both as a person and as Vicar of Christ....

It is a matter of a “Gift” that the Lord has granted to the Franciscans of the Holy Land so that they, after seven centuries of custodianship of the Holy Places, may communicate to the world the genuine message of the Gospel....

Consider me as a son who, having discovered the greatest treasure of his life, cannot refrain from offering it to his “Father”, so that he may place it at the disposal of all his other “children”.

I ask your blessing.

Friar Raffaele Angelisanti, O.F.M.

DOCUMENT 42

The letter that follows is the terminal point of a long and slow process of an inner maturing and the necessary point of reference for subsequent letters to the Father Visitor and to the Discretorium, which are a resumption and an explanation of it.

It is in this moment that we have for the first time, all together and in a clear and concrete way, perceived that which we dare to designate as a special joint “call” from the Lord. The letter, though at this moment appearing to be a “petition” to the authority, is already on our part – as to what is essential – a decision: it manifests our yes to the invitation received with the acceptance beforehand of all the consequences. Nevertheless, we have considered it just – and this also in conscience – to first exhaust all the possibilities at our disposal so that the Superiors might recognize and accept our vocation, at least on the basis of respect for conscience, convinced that such an acceptance would have had a great significance.

October 30, 1979

Most Rev. Father Maurilio Sacchi
Custos of the Holy Land
Jerusalem

Most Reverend Father,

At various times, either orally or in writing, individually or all together, we have addressed you in order to manifest our most profound aspirations or to communicate our experiences of a spiritual nature which have appeared to us as so many invitations from the Lord.

A combination of internal and external circumstances

has led to a maturing in us of some fundamental convictions and makes us converge in a well-defined petition which to us seems to be what the Lord wants of us at this time.

The following passage of the Gospel can express, as perhaps no other, our situation and that to which we feel called: *«The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field; he who finds it hides it, and in his joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field»* (Mt 13:44).

The treasure we have found is not anything new but the rediscovery of a reality that lies more or less dormant in every man, and of which we had caught a glimpse – perhaps in image – at the time when our early vocation to the evangelical and Franciscan ideal blossomed, and which gave us the strength to leave everything in a sincere act of faith in the One who was calling us. It is a going deeper into the same vocation with greater awareness and greater impetus because the glimpsed treasure is by now almost within easy reach.

For some of us, as is known to all, the immediate stimulus for this coming-to-consciousness has been our encounter with a person whom the Lord has sent us – we are convinced of it – and who has transmitted to us a message of life that has profoundly stirred our conscience about the realities of the Spirit, confirming us in our original and genuine Franciscan vocation, and making us ever more sensitive to the inner voice of the Shepherd and Father who leads us along His ways which are not man's ways.

Until now, we have benefitted from the experiences of others through more or less continuous contacts and in a more or less intense manner, according to the circumstances in which each one of us has found himself, with the people who for approximately five years have been

staying at the Milk Grotto, people who, even without officially professing a religious life, live the evangelical Franciscan ideal (cf. Mt 6:25-34) completely dedicated to the Will of the Lord.

Today a new and unpredictable situation presents itself to us which bears for us the full weight of an intervention by the Lord that imposes upon us in conscience a personal decision: Señorita Josefina has communicated to us that on the 26th of the present month of October, she “received from the Lord” the order to leave the House at the Milk Grotto.

Taking into account all the circumstances that have preceded this fact, we see in this order of the Lord’s an explicit and concrete invitation for us to continue – by ourselves, at this same place, with the necessary liberty – the experience begun from the outside and with these persons, assuming all the consequences of insecurity that this decision of ours entails.

We request, therefore, that we may live at the Milk Grotto as soon as the persons who presently reside there have left, so that the Lord may carry forward what He Himself has initiated, granting it to us as a gift.

We insist on repeating what we have many times expressed by word of mouth, and that is, that what has been recently discovered by us – each one in his own way and at his own level – is only a conscious and personal rediscovery of the ideal of St. Francis to which we intend to remain perfectly faithful, and it is in this sense that we desire to carry out this experience, surrendering ourselves to the Will of God, even as to our sustenance.

In the certainty that this petition of ours, expression of an exigency of fidelity to the Will of the Lord to which we have all consecrated ourselves, will find your paternal

understanding and support, we greet you affectionately.

Friar Raffaele Angelisanti

José Barriuso

Friar Giuseppe Napoli

Friar G. Costantin

DIARY PAGES

In order that the chronicle may be complete, we reproduce in this documentation some diary pages in which Father Napoli has set down a colloquy he had with the Custos, Fr. Ignazio Mancini.

Wednesday, 19 August 1981

A few days ago, the Father Custos called me, and today I have had a long colloquy with him.

.....

He says that our matter [*our petition of liberty for a life of total surrender to the Will of God at the Milk Grotto*] has taken up a good part of the Capitular Congress and that all were concerned about resolving it in order not to have troubles afterwards, but they have wanted to make it fit into the framework of the General Constitutions. . .

He confronts me with the usual objection (not easy to refute) that doing God's Will is, first of all, an interior attitude that can be realized in the place and in the circumstances in which one finds oneself. . . Who is stopping you, he says, from living poorly and detached, and from observing the other virtues in the place that has been assigned to you under obedience?

I answer that it is not always so, as is attested by our own experience of the religious vocation, when as children we felt called by God to leave our families, our environment. . . I ask him what he thinks of one who would have advised St. Francis to live the ideal he was perceiving as an impelling call from the Lord by continuing as a merchant in the house of his father, Pietro Bernardone, perhaps even under the pretext that he would have had

better possibilities for doing good works and aiding the needy. . . And then, is not God's voice in the Bible a continuous invitation to come out from our own shells ("Go forth from your country, etc.")?

He insists, saying that we could, in effect, accept the conditions set without making it a question of conscience. . . in practice, we would have been free. . . and then, for the saints, the true liberty of spirit consists in living out of love what is required by the laws. . . he reminds me of St. Francis' submission to the Church. . .

I ask him to put in brackets for a moment the usual moral and ascetical schemes in which we think sanctity consists. . . there is nothing saintly about us, I tell him, we know it all too well; it is only a matter of faith, and faith is not a virtue of ours, a human perfection that may be considered one's own. . . it is, rather, the recognition of our radical insufficiency, a consciousness of one's own poverty. . . I add I would have much to say about the intuition of St. Francis and how, in my opinion, he did not submit himself to anyone in what he perceived to be for him the Will of God, even though – it not being in his power to force the mass of recalcitrant friars to follow him – he has allowed things to go their way, he himself withdrawing. . . Having understood "through revelation" that "living the Gospel" was anything but "becoming a religious" by entering one of the Orders of his time, he carefully guarded against following the authoritative advice of those who were unable to see anything more perfect. . . At any rate, I conclude, I am not resorting to anyone as example, not even to St. Francis himself, for I do not intend to demonstrate a thousand disputable things. . . the example of Christ is enough for me.

The liberty we are asking for, I explain to him, is not a liberty "de facto", the kind of liberty, for example, that I already enjoyed in Jaffa where I could really do what I

pleased. . . , but a liberty “de jure”; it is a question of principle, and we cannot descend to compromises. On the other hand, it is not a matter of the “easy” liberty that would be obtained with the dispensation of vows or with a secularization decree that would break all our ties with the Order, and which would be reduced to an individual “solution” without meaning. We want to be free for God while remaining Franciscans. . . It is something altogether original that perhaps finds no comparison anywhere in the Church today. But it is something new and unheard-of only if compared with the “status quo” presently existing – with the forms that we human beings have given ourselves; it is not at all new if compared with the exigency of Biblical revelation from the first page to the last.

He listens in silence, but one can see that he is not convinced. Vigorously, he throws in my face our “intransigence”, especially mine. We do not want to yield in anything. . . we have made it a question of principle. . . we absolutize too much. . .

I answer that the term “intransigence” better suits their attitude. As for us, it is rather a matter of “fidelity to conscience”, which we cannot play around with.

He rejoins that his is not intransigence but “prudence”.

A tight skirmish begins over the life of “liberty” or of unconditional surrender to the Will of God which we intend to undertake. He says it is impossible to be part of a society (in this case the Custody) and live in this way. . . On the other hand, it would be something that cannot last, as is demonstrated by some examples of the past and by the beginnings of Franciscanism itself. . . What will happen, for example, when people who no longer have its spirit begin to form part of our “group”?

I explain to him that the problem arises when the group or society gives itself a juridical configuration; only

in this case can one “juridically” form part of the group without having its spirit, with all the painful consequences that we well know. . . But we are not an institution; we are nothing. . . the phrase “to form part of our group” makes no sense if its spirit is not shared. . .

He objects that what we are asking for goes beyond the Constitutions.

I answer him by distinguishing between the letter of the law and its spirit. . . I strive to make him understand the difference between “vital relationship” and “juridical relationship”, demonstrating that the first can subsist without the second. I give him the example of family ties; I narrate with many details the experience of my religious vocation: my father, aloof from the faith and instinctively distrustful of the ecclesiastical world, had the strength to sacrifice me to the Lord, despite the fact that I was his only male child, solely on the basis of his respect for my conscience and liberty. The only words that came forth from his mouth when at the age of twelve I tremulously asked him to allow me to leave in order to follow the call of the Lord, were: “You must follow your path. . . you are free. . . I cannot hold you. . .” Eleven years later, he was saying: “You are a priest . . ., I have consummated the sacrifice. . .” The apparent separation from my father – the fact that I was no longer at his disposal – has not meant a break; rather, it has tremendously deepened our relationship. . . Something similar, I conclude, is what we expect today from our new family which is the Custody: suspension of the juridical ties without breaking the spiritual ties. I remind him of the example of the primitive Church which “renounces” Barnabas and Saul in order to offer them “as a gift” to the Spirit who reserves them for Himself, for the Work to which He has destined them. . . emphasizing the special meaning that this verse had for us when we thought of quoting it in one of our letters.

I have the impression that the comparison does not displease him.

I continue for a while on the same tone with reflections that I do not now remember. It seems he has nothing more to answer, but at one point, pulling himself together, he says that I am “a metaphysician . . .” that the argumentation is too subtle, that it barely holds up, that it almost gets to be convincing. . . but that the reality is something else. . .

I answer that if by metaphysician he means something that coincides with faith, as it has been for me, I accept it; in me, I tell him, the inner light shone forth when I succeeded in making the two worlds that divided me coincide – the world of philosophy and the world of faith. If, on the contrary, he means quibbler, rationalist, and philosopher in a pejorative sense, I reject it altogether, because here it deals with a very, very concrete attitude of faith.

He again attacks our “sophisticated” letters. . .

I retort in a fiery manner that we have written those letters with our blood. . . We have done everything in order to render intelligible, acceptable, “reasonable” what, instead, because of its being pure faith, cannot but go beyond the criteria of “reason”. This perhaps has been our mistake. I know well, I tell him, that on the basis of “reason” any affirmation can be criticized and contradicted, and that one could go on arguing from here to eternity, both sides repeating the same things over and over again. . . One of you has already said that “we are on two parallel lines, and it is now useless to continue talking”.

He concurs. . . I then cut it short and take him to another plane. There is only one problem, I tell him, do

you or do you not believe that for us it is a matter of a true conviction and of an imperative of conscience in which we cannot fail without feeling gravely responsible? Do you personally believe it, yes or no? Or do you think rather that we are playing around with the word conscience?

Yes, he says, I believe it, but it is a “deformed, false” conscience; it cannot be the way you say. . . And he again cites the saints.

I ask him to go slow with certain categorical affirmations. We have sufficient elements for believing that we are not mistaken but we don’t believe we’re infallible. . . But if we are mistaken, the one responsible for this is God Himself who has placed us before this problem of conscience, and He cannot fail to intervene as He did with Abraham. . . I ask him what he would do if he were in my place.

He is quite taken by surprise, then replies: “No, I couldn’t be in your place; I couldn’t have this conscience. . .”

I share a personal confidence with him about my recent understanding of the faith, speaking to him –I tell him – not as my superior but rather as “between friends or former friends”. He listens with more and more interest, now and then insisting with nostalgic regret that, in substance, we could have accepted the conditions that had been set for us. . . Why don’t we, he says, accept that one of us be responsible for us? What impedes us from keeping an administration account book to present to the responsible persons of the Custody, even though we do not want to receive anything from them?. . .

At a certain point, he seems to begin to yield. In short, he asks, how should we answer? Simply say that we grant

you permission to live according to conscience? But shouldn't we all live according to conscience? What exactly is your petition? Could you repeat it?

I tell him that in our letters we have, in general, synthesized it as a request for permission to live in a total, unconditional surrender to the Will of God, which is equivalent to a life of pure faith.

He asks: "Only this? Without our having to add anything more?"

We think for a while and find absolutely nothing to add. Any addition, I bring out to him, would be placing conditions on God . . .

What seems to be an insurmountable mountain can at one stroke be reduced to a most simple thing: it is enough to answer *yes*. For us, I tell him, it's a question of faith and conscience; for you, it's simply a matter of believing in the sincerity of our affirmation and of respecting our conscience.

He listens without answering. Then I let myself get carried away by inspiration, and fiery words pour forth from my mouth, words which I am utterly incapable of repeating: Do we really believe God? . . . the living God? . . . the One who is capable of creating new unheard-of things? the One who, when He intervenes, casts to the winds all our structures? Why do we have the presumption to think His action should fit into our narrow mental schemes? Why do we not trust Him? When will we really place our liberty at His disposal? He "puts up with us", submitting Himself to all our decisions. . .

There are a few moments of intense silence. Then he exclaims, almost as if talking to himself: "But this life is not of this earth. . ." and immediately adds with a smile: "But then, neither is the Gospel of this earth. . ."

DOCUMENT 65. 67, 68

The following individual letters of the three friars express the last attempt of each one to cry out his own problem of conscience in order to be at least believed and taken seriously, if not understood.

Emmaus, October 29, 1981

Most Rev. Fr. Ignazio Mancini
Custos of the Holy Land
and Very Rev. Fr. Discrets

Dear Brothers,

Your decision to send me to Mount Tabor to be part of the religious family there gives me the immediate opportunity to address you again, this time individually, in order to repeat and stress the same unalterable request which for almost three years now I have been reiterating orally or in writing, alone or with other confreres, and which up to now has not been heard; rather, with the last decision it seems to have been altogether filed away.

.....

This letter is not meant to be a sterile, bitter letting-off-steam by one who seeks to pose as a victim, but yet one more attempt to get those to reflect who are not the *absolute* masters of the lives and consciences of their confreres just because they have received a temporary commission of service in the bosom of the community, but who do have the precise duty to foster the realization of what God asks of each in the innermost of his conscience

according to the basic principle – which seems to be growing dim in the minds of many – that *the institution is at the service of man and man at the service God* and not the other way around. . . .

The obedience promised by me to the superiors of the Order, which has been first of all a total and irrevocable consecration to God and not a simple juridical contract with the authorities of the Franciscan institution, contains an exception already contemplated in our Rule itself: to obey in everything except “*in that which goes against the soul or against the Rule*” or form of life wanted by Francis which is the Gospel. Against my soul, in this moment, would be not to follow the voice of God who is calling me with such clarity to undertake *a form of life of direct, total, and unconditional surrender to His Will without tying my conscience to any creature*, but at the same time without breaking the spiritual and vital ties with my Franciscan family. This is not a “seeking the cover of the institution”, as someone has insinuated, but a rediscovering in the bosom of the Franciscan fraternity a more profound tie than the juridical one, with the painful desire not to break it. Can a Franciscan, as a Franciscan and while remaining one, follow the call of the Lord freely and above every condition set by men? Here is the problem. I am personally convinced that this is indeed the deepest meaning of Franciscan poverty and of obedience correctly understood.

As for the authenticity of my coming-to-consciousness which I dare to define as a “call from the Lord”, I deem it useless in this letter to descend to arguments or clarifications in order to render it rationally intelligible, although these would not be lacking. For me, it has the ineffable nature of an act of faith (luminous, not blind faith); on your part, perhaps all that is needed is an attitude of respect for the conscience, which is the place where the

voice of God becomes present.

Fraternal greetings,

Fr. Giuseppe Napoli

Most Rev. Fr. Custos Ignazio Mancini
and Very Rev. Fr. Discrets of the Holy Land

Dear brothers,

The present letter, in addition to being a personal reaffirmation of everything written previously together with other confreres, intends to express to you the internal state in which I presently find myself. Such a state is fruit of a long and slow inner evolution that, initiated with cognitive and affective exigencies, has terminated in the realm of conscience understood as the intuiting of Someone who has overturned my life.

The goal to which this evolution has taken me does not entail my repudiating anything of the past, but it requires me to continue the path according to a new dimension about which I know nothing. One thing alone presents itself to me with all clarity: the inner necessity to place my liberty in direct and total dependence on God's Will. Acting in this way, it could be thought that I am retracting my Franciscan vocation. I don't believe this. I am convinced that the one who has accompanied me on this path has been Francis, the saint whose life of unconditional and absolute response to God's call I have always not only admired but also loved.

.....

I ask you to attentively examine the request in the light of the faith brought to us by the Christ, and not in the light of simple reason. May the Lord illumine you and me regarding what He wants from each one of us individually in this present grave hour which the whole of humanity is going through.

Affectionate greetings in St. Francis.

Friar Raffaele Angelisanti, O.F.M.

Bethlehem, 2 November 1981

Bethlehem, November 8, 1981

Most Rev. Father Custos Ignazio Mancini
and Discrets of the Holy Land Jerusalem

Most esteemed in the Lord,

I am writing this letter with regard to the petition presented to the Custodial Congress of 1980, signed by four religious belonging to the Custody of the Holy Land, in which it is requested:

*that freedom to live according to the form
of the Holy Gospel in direct and uncondi-
tional submission to the Will of God be
recognized.*

The petition has not been considered according to what was requested in it. Since the reasons that moved me to sign it still hold, I feel obliged in conscience to renew it, personally insisting with all the energy I can muster.

I could close this letter right here, since on this subject we have written as a group many times. Nevertheless, I take the liberty to call your attention again to the fact – which I consider decisive – that what is being requested is completely in accord with that which constitutes my supreme Franciscan aspiration, and which with the very same words is contained in the Scriptures.

It is said in Psalm 40: *“Behold I come; in the roll of the book – referring to all Scripture – it is written of me: To do thy will, O my God”* (Ps. 40: 8-9). This is precisely what is requested. St. Paul’s re-reading of this same passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews makes explicit and clarifies the motivations that justify this conclusion, fundamental for the understanding of existence, and having universal value.

After having described with the words *“shadow”* and *“image”* of the *“good things to come”* and *“not the true reality of things”* all that which is included in the Law or born of it – institutions, rites, observances, cult, etc. – incapable of liberating because God does not accept any of this, he says, reaffirming the Psalm, in order to establish the absoluteness of the Will, *“He abolishes the first in order to establish the second”* (Heb 10: 9).

By *“the first”* he means the whole make-up of Jewish religious life centered on the Law and the Temple. By this, one has to understand, too, everything that has come to replace it, that is, Church precepts, observances, cult, institutions, etc., although on another plane but still on the level of *“shadow”* and *“figure”* of the true realities that are to come. It follows, as the psalmist’s consciousness already perceived it, that *“to do God’s Will”* is the only thing that can save: *“It is in this ‘will’ that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”* (Heb 10:10). By sanctifying, he means,

according to the genuine Biblical sense, to sever from the world of the profane, to liberate from the submission to the creatures in order to enter the domain of the holy.

St. Paul's teaching is quite clear and if he, moved by the Holy Spirit, directed it to Christians in his day, it is valid for us as well. I must confess that, although this has been in the deposit of faith since Christianity's first steps, it has not always been something alive for me, in my Christian experience. It is something of which I have become conscious – more keenly each day – through an evolution.

.....

Francis was advised that in order to satisfy his eagerness to surrender to God, he should enter one of the then existing Orders. Francis could not do this. And it was not because of a moral judgment on persons or institutions, but because he saw, in the clarity that had emerged in his consciousness through the Lord's light, that all this, because it was work of the creatures, was itself a creature, and it subjected one to creatures instead of liberating from them, impeding in this way the possibility of living according to the "form" of the Holy Gospel, the Will of God.

I confess that there was a time in which this language of Francis', when he speaks of a revelation for living according to the form of the Holy Gospel, was displeasing to me, and it seemed to me to be inexact and naive since, I told myself, haven't we all been enjoined to live the Gospel? I didn't understand it until the Lord gave me the understanding. Today I'm convinced that no one to whom the Lord does not reveal it can come to understand it.

Now, how could St. Francis – having reached the state of consciousness in which it is understood that only the Will can liberate and sanctify, and that in the fulfillment

of this Will consists the living according to the form of the Holy Gospel – take the initiative to found any new institution in order to live the Gospel? His consciousness of the radical incapacity of all creatures to transmit the life of the Gospel prevented him from doing so. History may perhaps be able to disprove the validity of this affirmation – even with documents; it seems even possible to me, but what history may be able to prove to the contrary is certainly outside the “spirit” of Francis. This was Francis’ torment in the last years of his life, and this has been the on-going drama of all those who throughout eight centuries have continued to ask themselves: What does it mean to live the Gospel? In what form is it to be lived? ...

I have attempted to express how I understand the subjection to creatures under which we all find ourselves and how necessary the “liberty” is in order to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel – the Will of God – which manifests itself as the “Good News”, Word of Life, for the Word of Jesus Christ is life for those who believe in it:

This is the request which I renew once more with this letter.

I wish you all the best in the Lord.

José Barriuso

END OF THE THREE FRIARS' CHRONICLE

These our last letters have fallen into the void. For the first time, no answer has been received, no reaction – infallible sign of total refusal.

This sign has had the power to spark in us a new coming-to-consciousness: all our possibilities having been exhausted, we no longer have any human hope left of obtaining a consent – the consent and support of our superiors for which we had been struggling for several years; it is not a matter of insisting any longer; perhaps we have not even the right to do so; neither is it right for us to make judgments in advance, to think that it is a matter of stubbornness; perhaps it is the problem itself that transcends the persons involved; perhaps that which to us appears to be a call from the Lord that goes beyond the constituted order and which has the characteristics of an explosion of consciousness, of a direct intervention by God, of a new creation, is not so except for those who, altogether gratuitously, have had this opening-up of consciousness; it is therefore not right to wrench a consent from those who have not arrived at such a consciousness; it is not right to discharge on others the responsibility of our leap into the void, thus escaping the judgment of men, under the covering of the authorization received.

The time has come for us to assume personally and with serenity the full responsibility of our act of “*obedience to God rather than men*”.

THE LEAP INTO THE VOID
BEYOND THE INSTITUTION

DOCUMENT 71

Jerusalem, April 9, 1982

To the Custos, Fr. Ignazio Mancini
and to all the Franciscan Friars
of the Custody of the Holy Land

Very dear brothers,

We believe that the moment has come to inform you about an event that, for us the undersigned, takes on a decisive significance for the rest of our lives as persons consecrated to the realization of the good news of the Gospel.

After long meditation and prayerful reflection on our inner exigency for liberty in order to depend only on the Will of God, as we have repeatedly made known to our superiors orally and in writing, and after having exhausted all means for obtaining their understanding, we feel obliged in conscience to take on our own initiative the step that we would have liked to have taken with the approval or at least the assent of our superiors.

In deciding to take this step, we consciously assume all the responsibility of our decision, trusting that the Lord will not let us fall into error, since we are not moved by any motive other than fidelity to our conscience: to consecrate ourselves directly – without the mediation of any creature – and totally to His Will as a continuation of our religious and priestly consecration to the evangelical

and Franciscan ideal.

We inform you, therefore, that by the time you receive this letter, we will have already moved to a house that the Lord has provided for this purpose in order to live together with the persons with whom we were sharing our experience in the house at the Milk Grotto.

We do not renounce nor do we repudiate – in any way – our religious Franciscan vocation which we will live more intensely depending only on the Will of God.

We do not renounce nor do we repudiate our vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity; on the contrary, with our obedience to a profound exigency of conscience, we confirm them by submitting ourselves unconditionally to the Will of God so that they may be at His disposal and not at the disposal of ourselves or of other creatures.

We would not want the step we are taking today – moved only by the desire to be faithful to an inner exigency that obligates us in conscience before our very selves, before God, and before men – to be a motive for separation from our brothers who in the same righteousness of conscience remain at the service of this same Will through the superiors, being dependent on the Institutional Authority as we too have been up to now. We hope, rather, that in our new state, which demands from us a greater fidelity to our vocation, we may be able to offer, besides our personal and direct donation to God, the fruits of our sacrifices for the benefit of all.

Along with this letter, we are sending the documentation that makes up the history of how we have arrived at this coming-to-consciousness and this individual and collective decision so that all of the Franciscans of the Holy Land may know the truth of the facts and be able to form an opinion as personal as possible of the events.

The current eighth centennial of the birth of the Seraphic Father Francis offers us the opportunity to present to all, without distinction, our fraternal greetings united to the Franciscan wish so profoundly evangelical of Peace and Good in Christ the Lord.

José Barriuso

Raffaele Angelisanti

Giuseppe Napoli