



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO ASSISI
ON THE EIGHTH CENTENARY
OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT FRANCIS

**MEETING WITH THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE GENERAL CHAPTER
OF THE FRIARS MINOR CONVENTUAL
AND THE COMMUNITY OF THE SACRO CONVENTO
IN THE UPPER BASILICA OF ST FRANCIS**

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*To Reverend Fr Marco Tasca
Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual*

I greet you with great joy, Most Reverend Father, and all the Friars Minor Conventual gathered in Assisi for the 199th General Chapter. I am pleased to do so in this Papal Basilica in which splendid works of art tell of the marvels of grace that the Lord wrought in St Francis.

I find it providential that this should happen in the context of the Eighth Centenary of the conversion of St Francis. With my Visit today, in fact, I wished to emphasize the meaning of this event to which we must always refer if we are to understand Francis and his message.

Francis himself, as if to sum up his inner experience in a single word, found no concept more pregnant with meaning than that of "penance". "Thus did the Lord grant to me, Friar Francis, to begin to do penance" (*Testament*, 1).

So it was that he saw himself essentially as a "penitent", as it were, in a permanent state of conversion. Abandoning himself to the Holy Spirit's action, Francis was converted ever more

closely to Christ, transformed into a living image of him on the paths of poverty, love and mission.

Thus, it is your task to witness to his message with enthusiasm and coherency! You are called to do so with that ecclesial harmony which distinguished Francis in his relationship with the Vicar of Christ and with all the Church's Bishops.

In this regard, I am grateful to you for the prompt obedience with which, together with the Friars Minor and complying with the special ties of affection which have always bound you to the Apostolic See, you accepted the measures of the "Motu Proprio" *Totius Orbis* concerning the new relationship of the two Papal Basilicas, St Francis and St Mary of the Angels, with this particular Church which gave birth to the "Poverello" and played such an important part in his life.

I address a special greeting to you, Friar Marco Tasca, whom the trust of your Confreres has called to the demanding office of Minister General.

May the event of the 750th anniversary of St Bonaventure's election as Minister of the Order also be a good omen for you.

After the examples of St Francis and St Bonaventure, together with the elected Definitors, may you guide the great Family of the Order with wise prudence, faithful to the origins of the Franciscan experience and with attention to the "signs of the times".

The General Chapter gathers together Friars from many countries and different cultures to listen and speak to one another in the one language of the Spirit, thereby reviving the memory of Francis' holiness. This is truly an extraordinary opportunity to share the "marvellous things" that the Lord still works today through the sons of the "Poverello" scattered across the world.

I therefore hope that while the Chapter Fathers thank God for the growth of the Order, especially in the mission countries, they will make the most of this meeting to question themselves on all that the Spirit is asking of them, so that they may continue to proclaim passionately, in the footsteps of their Seraphic Father, the Kingdom of God in this first part of the Third Christian Millennium.

I learned with interest that "Formation for the mission" has been chosen as the principal theme for reflection during the Chapter Meeting, stressing that this formation is never imparted once and for all, but rather must be considered as an ongoing journey. In fact, it is a process with multiple dimensions but is centred on the ability to let oneself be moulded by the Spirit, to be ready to go wherever he calls you.

It cannot be based on anything except listening to the Word in an atmosphere of intense and ceaseless prayer. Only on this condition is it possible to understand the true needs of the men and women of our time and offer them responses drawn from God's wisdom, proclaiming what one has

experienced profoundly in one's own life.

The large Family of Friars Minor Conventual must continue to let itself be inspired by the words that Francis heard from the Crucifix in San Damiano: "Go and repair my house" (2 *Ce/I*, 6, 10).

It is therefore necessary for every Friar to be a true contemplative, his eyes fixed on the eyes of Christ. Like St Francis when he came face to face with the leper, the Friar must be able to see the Face of Christ in the suffering brethren, bringing to them all the proclamation of peace.

To this end, he must make his own the process of conformation to the Lord Jesus which Francis lived out in the various symbolic places on his journey of holiness: from San Damiano to Rivotorto, from St Mary of the Angels to La Verna.

Thus, for every son of St Francis may the firm principle be what the "Poverello" said with simple words: "The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Reg. B. I*, 1).

In this regard, I am pleased to know that the Minors Conventual too, together with the whole large Franciscan Family, are engaged in reliving the stages which led Francis to formulate his "*propositum vitae*", approved by Innocent III in about 1209.

Called to live "according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (*Test.* 21), the "Poverello" completely understood himself in the light of the Gospel.

It was precisely this that gave birth to the perennial timeliness of his witness.

His "prophecy" teaches us how to make the Gospel the criterion for dealing with the challenges of every epoch, including our own, resisting the deceptive fascination of fleeting fashions, to be rooted in God's plan and thus to discern the true needs of humanity.

My hope is that the Friars will be able to accept this "programme" with renewed impetus and courage, trusting in the power that comes from on high.

The Minors Conventual are called in the first place to be heralds of Christ. May they approach everyone with gentleness and trust in the attitude of dialogue, but always bearing a passionate witness to the one Saviour.

May they be witnesses of God's "beauty", which Francis praised as he contemplated the marvels of creation. Among the wonderful pictorial cycles which decorate this Basilica and in every other corner of that marvellous temple which is nature, may they have on their lips the prayer that Francis uttered after his mystical ecstasy on Mount La Verna, which made him exclaim twice: "You

are beauty!" (*The Praises of God Most High*, 4, 6).

Yes, Francis was a great teacher of the "*via pulchritudinis*". May the Friars imitate him in radiating the beauty that saves; may they do so in particular in this stupendous Basilica, not only by means of the art treasures preserved here, but also and above all in the intensity and decorum of the liturgy and fervent proclamation of the Christian mystery.

I express to the Chapter Religious the hope that they will return to their respective communities with the freshness and timeliness of the Franciscan message. I say to you all: take back to your Confreres the experience of brotherhood of these days as light and strength that can illumine the horizon which is not always clear of the clouds of daily life; to everyone take peace, received and given.

Thinking of the Immaculate Virgin, the "*Tota pulchra*", and imploring the intercession of St Francis and of St Clare, to whom I entrust the success of the work of this General Chapter, I impart as a pledge of my special affection to you, Most Reverend Father, to the Chapter Fathers and to all the members of the Order my Apostolic Blessing.

Assisi, 17 June 2007

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI