



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MINISTER GENERAL OF THE ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR

To the Reverend Father Giacomo Bini

*Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor*¹. I am pleased to express to you, Reverend Father, and the whole Order of Friars Minor, my cordial good wishes and greeting on the occasion of the Ordinary General Chapter, meeting in the town of Sts Francis and Clare. It is being celebrated at the Portiuncula, reviving the joyful memory of the origins of the Order, which developed under the gaze of Santa Maria degli Angeli, whom you venerate as your special Patroness with the title of the "Immaculate". The "Pentecost" Chapter Assembly, prescribed by the Rule (cf. n. VIII), highlights the fundamental role of the Holy Spirit, as St Francis recognized, and whom he liked to describe as the "Minister General" of the Order (cf. Celano, *Vita Secunda*, CXLV, 193). The Holy Spirit purifies, enlightens and inflames hearts with the fire of love, leading them to the Father in the footprints of the Lord Jesus (cf. *Lettera a Tutti i Frati*, VI, 62-63). On this significant occasion, I am pleased to renew my gratitude to this religious Family for its service to the Church for so many centuries, continuing the work that was begun by Francis of Assisi and his disciple, Clare. I would also like to take advantage of this opportunity to offer to the members of the General Chapter and, through them, to all the Friars Minor, some useful elements for a community revision of the ground covered so far, and for a more effective apostolic action in the contemporary world.² At the end of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, with the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, I wanted to remind the entire Christian people of the spiritual priorities of the third millennium, and I did not hesitate to say that all pastoral initiatives must be based on *holiness* (cf. n. 30). I emphasized that in every evangelization programme pride of place must be given to the "primacy of grace...", "the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness" (n. 38). Moreover, the Institutes of consecrated life are also called to play a special role since their specific mission is to bear a prophetic witness to the Kingdom of Heaven. This entails ceaselessly striving for holiness. It helps us to understand better the passage in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: "Today a renewed commitment to holiness by consecrated persons is more necessary than ever, also as a means of promoting and supporting every Christian's desire for perfection" (n. 39). If it is true that "the ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 31), the *Rule* and *Constitutions* of your Order "provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 37). This journey has been made by many of your Confreres, Franciscan Saints and Blesseds, who observed with heroic fidelity until death the commitments they freely assumed on the day of their religious profession. It will be a great help to you to turn constantly to these masters and models of holiness, drawing inspiration from their example, deepening your knowledge of them, calling upon them devoutly and commemorating them on their liturgical anniversaries.³ The General

Chapter is being held in the town of Assisi, vibrant with the eternal echo of the voice Francis heard three times speaking to him from the Cross: "Go, repair my house which, as you see, is all in ruins!" (Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, II, 1). In recent years too, marked by considerable social changes, the Order has undertaken to bring up to date this unique call, deepening its meaning in order to live the charism consistently. This reflection has encouraged your religious Family to give greater prominence to the missionary and ecclesial service entrusted by Christ to the young Francis, and, subsequently, confirmed by Pope Innocent III with the words: "Go with the Lord, brothers, and as the Lord will see fit to inspire you, preach penance to all" (Celano, *Vita Prima*, XIII, 33). It is important that the Order preserve its own missionary style, expressed in poverty and fraternal life and animated by a spirit of contemplation and the sincere search for justice, peace and respect for creation. It is likewise indispensable that each member and all the fraternities cooperate to build the one Church of Christ, of one accord and in full communion with the Pastors of the local Christian communities. Your Order, in agreement with the diocesan Ordinaries, will thus help "consolidate and expand the Kingdom of Christ, bringing the proclamation of Christ even to the most far-off regions" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 78), thanks to a renewed spirit of obedience and a sincere desire for ecclesial communion.⁴ Your only objective, in every choice and apostolic decision, should be the *salus animarum* (salvation of souls), as it was for the Poverello of Assisi who was always and only motivated by zeal for the salvation of his brothers. Since "the Only-begotten Son of God saw fit to hang on the Cross for souls, [St Francis] could not consider himself a friend of Christ unless he loved the souls that Christ loved" (Celano, *Vita Secunda*, CXXXI, 172), and "chose to live for the One who died for all. For he knew well that he was being sent by God to win souls that the devil was bent on stealing" (Celano, *Vita Prima*, XIV, 35). The *salus animarum* even spurred him to promote the dignity and rights of the person, created and formed "in the image of his beloved Son according to the body, and in his likeness according to the Spirit" (*Francis, Admonitions*, V), as well as to safeguard creation, since all things have been created through Christ and for Christ, and all subsist in him (cf. Col 1: 16-17). Francis' life was marked above all by a constant spiritual tension, which brought him to see and understand all things in the light of the "definitive happiness found in God" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 33). From his love for God flowed his burning passion to preach to the faithful "vices and virtues, punishment and glory" (*Rule*, IX). This, dear Friars Minor, should continue to be your apostolic "style" in the Church. I hope that the Chapter's work will produce appropriate guidelines to meet the challenges of modern times.⁵ "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few!" (Mt 9: 37). These words of Christ come to mind as we face the vast field of action and the scarcity of available workers. To speak of missionary dynamism seems hardly realistic even for your Order, given the reduced number of its members and the increase in their average age in recent years. However, instead of making you feel disheartened, it must challenge you on the one hand to intensify your prayer to the Lord of the harvest "to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9: 38), and on the other, to devise new pastoral and vocational policies. Why lose faith, if Jesus himself assured Francis that it was he who was "principally responsible" for the Order? Did he not promise Francis: "I have called, I will preserve and I will tend, and I will raise up others to make up for the loss of some, so that, even if they have not been born, I will have them born" (Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, VIII, 3). Knowing this, encourage and accompany vocations with prayer and with the witness of your lives, trusting in that "God who can raise Children of Abraham even from stone... and make sterile wombs fruitful" (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, n. 16). The Order has done well to put much energy into the pastoral care of vocations and the formation of aspirants to the consecrated life, in collaboration with other Institutes of Franciscan inspiration and with the dioceses. Francis and Clare of Assisi have a great fascination for young people, and this should be used to propose to the generations of the third millennium "a more attentive reflection on life's essential values. These reach their fulfilment in the response which each person is invited to give to God's call, particularly when the call implies the total giving of self and of one's energies to the

cause of the Kingdom" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 46). In this regard, the celebrations proclaimed by the four Ministers General of the Franciscan Family for the 750th anniversary of the death of St Clare could also be a particularly appropriate opportunity to make better known the Franciscan-Claritian vocations to the contemplative, apostolic, eremitic and secular life.⁶ May you yourselves be men who are passionately in love with Christ and with the Gospel, men of ceaseless prayer, joyful witnesses of the radical choice of the Kingdom of Heaven. Your work will be all the more effective the greater your efforts to offer eloquent signs of "the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel have in the Christian life" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 84). The traditional habit that you normally wear at first sight refers to the style of penance and poverty, of docility and acceptance, of simplicity and total consecration to God that must distinguish you. Be faithful to your typical charism, at the same time opening yourselves with wisdom and prudence to the needs of the apostolate in our time. May the Holy Spirit, with his light and power, make you capable of bearing Christ "in your heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience", and of giving birth to him "through a holy activity, which must shine before others as an example" (Francis, *Lettera a Tutti i Fedeli*, X, 53). May St Francis, St Clare, and all your holy Patrons accompany the work of the Chapter and make it fruitful for the good of the Order and of the Church. May the Virgin Mary, "Star of the New Evangelization", help you stay faithful to the missionary commitment to which Francis continues to exhort you with his beautiful words: "Cast your care upon the Lord and he will sustain you" (Celano, *Vita Prima*, XII, 29). Address every day the "Virgin made Church" (Francis, *Saluto alla B. V.M.*), Queen of the Apostles and "Advocate of the Order" (Celano, *Vita Secunda*, CL, 198), with the recitation of the Rosary, that exquisitely evangelical and Franciscan prayer. With these sentiments, while assuring each one of my constant remembrance to the Lord, I cordially impart to you, Reverend Father, to the Chapter Members and to all your Confreres throughout the world, a special Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, 10 May 2003* **JOHN PAUL II**