



The Holy See

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

*To the Most Reverend Father Hermann Schalück
Minister General of the Friars Minor*

1. On the occasion of the Ordinary General Chapter, taking place at the shrine of the Portiuncula, a place dear to the heart of the Poor Man of Assisi, I am pleased to send the Order of Friars Minor my cordial best wishes. At this place Francis began his evangelical life (cf. 1 *Cel* 22) and there he ended his stay on earth (cf. 1 *Cel* 110), wishing to “give back his soul to God in that place where he first knew the way of truth perfectly” (1 *Cel* 108).

In addressing you, Most Reverend Father, my intention is to send my fervent greetings to the Capitulars and all the friars working in every region of the world, wishing each and every one of them, in the words of St Francis, “true peace from heaven and sincere love in God” (*EpFid* II, 1).

2. “The task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangeliium nuntiandi*, n. 14). This urgency is rightly perceived by your order, which has included it among the main topics of the Chapter, where you propose a vigorous reconfirmation of the commitment of the Friars Minor to following the poor, chaste and obedient Christ so as to be better able to announce the sublime truths of the Good News to all, remaining “steadfast in the Catholic faith” (*RB* XII) and fervent in communion with Holy Mother Church (cf. *Test. Si.*).

Apostolic and missionary work is indeed fruitful if carried out in agreement with the legitimate Pastors to whom Christ has entrusted the responsibility for his flock. The order ought, therefore, to guide its members towards an ever more effective collaboration with the local Churches in which they render their much appreciated service (cf. Phil 1:5).

3. In the footsteps of others among my revered Predecessors, and in particular of Pope Paul VI who addressed the Apostolic Letter *Quoniam proxime* (AAS 65 [1973], 353-357) to the Madrid General Chapter, I also intend to be spiritually close to the work of the Chapter as it looks afresh at the theme of the “Vocation of the Order Today” and seeks to deepen the understanding of it from the viewpoint of memory and prophecy.

When they consider their glorious past, rich in history, sanctity, culture and apostolic commitment, Franciscans cannot but feel the duty of measuring up to it, straining to write new and meaningful pages of their history (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 110). As we draw near to the dawn of the third millennium, how could we fail to highlight the vocation and evangelizing mission of the order, which stand, as it were, at the very heart of its identity?

The call to return to the order's origins and to its most important historical expressions should be taken as a paradigm for the current endeavour of the Fraternity. It is called to live in the present day the mission that God, through the Church, has entrusted to it by means of its profession of the Rule of St Francis.

The “memory” of the gift bestowed by God on the Church and the world in the person of the *Poverello* leads you to a new understanding of contemporary situations. It leads you also to be open to the expectations and challenges of the present in dynamic continuity with the past so as to prepare the future with constructive zeal.

4. The living unity between yesterday, today and tomorrow is a necessity if “memory” is to become “prophecy”. Indeed, “true prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 84).

Authentic “prophecy” requires, likewise, that the *Christi vivendi forma*, shared by the Apostles (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 14, 16) and made their own by Francis of Assisi and his first companions (cf. 1 *Cel* 22, 24), become the norm for the friars at the end of this century. In this way they will be able to pass on intact to the generations of the third millennium the spiritual inheritance received from the hands of the Seraphic Father himself through the mediation of so many known and unknown friars.

The reference back to its original experience, inspired by the Spirit of the risen Christ, will surely open your family to a future rich with hope. It will help you to discover in daily events the presence of God at work in the world and to promote that wise dialogue between faith and culture which is especially necessary today.

It should, indeed, never be forgotten that consecrated life, placed at the service of God and mankind, “has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is

announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 73).

In such a perspective your order also needs to undertake an attentive discernment, leading you to question yourselves about the meaning of your *munus* in the Church and the vocation of the Franciscan Fraternity at the present time.

5. The specific *munus* of the Friars Minor was indicated by St Francis when he wrote in the Letter to the Whole Order: Praise God, "for he is good; extol him in your works. This is the very reason he has sent you all over the world, so that by word and deed you might bear witness to his message and convince everyone that there is no other almighty God besides him".

This *munus* has since been explained in numerous documents of the Church, referring to the mandate to preach penance conferred upon the order by Pope Innocent III (1 Cel 33) and confirmed in the course of the centuries by my revered Predecessors.

The whole history of the Minors confirms that the proclamation of the Gospel is the vocation, the mission and the *raison d'être* of this Fraternity. The Rule itself, when it explains the vocation of the order in the Church, recalls that the friars are called to take their place with Christ and are mandated to preach, while caring for the sick (cf. Mk 3: 13-15; 1 Cel 24; Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 41). These clear guidelines from the founder require a unity and complementarity between the proclamation of the Gospel and the witness of charity. This is an apostolic and missionary task that involves all friars; cleric and lay. The Legend of the Three Companions recalls that, "at the end of the Chapter, [Francis] gave permission to preach to anyone, cleric or lay, who had the spirit of God and the necessary eloquence" (*Trium Soc.* 59), while the other friars offered their co-operation through prayer and charity.

6. This indispensable unity of the *apostolica vivendi forma* therefore requires that all the friars, each according to his proper condition and specific gifts, enter fully into the one evangelizing vocation of the order. And this demands a constant effort at the level of the formation which precedes and accompanies the commitment of the workers in the Lord's vineyard (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 15). You should therefore take care to ensure that all, cleric and lay, receive a suitable formation so that each friar may be able to enter into the vast field of evangelization and charitable work with an apostolic spirit and due professionalism (cf. Mt 10:7-8).

Furthermore, it is necessary that a constant spirit of prayer animate apostolic action and the work of human advancement, so that the commitment to "fill the whole earth with the Gospel" emanates from an experience of Christ. This is the profound meaning of the personal and interior knowledge of Christ that the order, in communion with the whole Church, is today called to promote among the People of God. As is well known, the unity between evangelization and contemplation is embedded in the Rule of the Friars Minor, which invites "not to extinguish the spirit of holy prayer

and devotion" (*RB V*). St Francis reminds us that "the preacher should first attain by secret prayer what he shall later pour out in holy sermons. He must first grow hot within so as to avoid speaking words that are cold" (2 *Cel* 163).

The apostolic and charitable life receives its content, coherence and dynamism from communion with Christ. From their experience of his life-giving presence, the strength and conviction of the proclamation that creates communion with God and with the Church will be poured also onto the Friars Minor. The Apostle John reminds us of this: "We declare to you that which we have seen and heard so that you also may be in communion with us; and truly our communion is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:3).

7. Most Reverend Father, I encourage this Fraternity to tackle the work of the Chapter with the evangelical style that animated St Francis and pray that the Lord will abundantly pour forth his Holy Spirit on every capitular. I entrust the reflections of these days to Mary Immaculate that she who is the Mother and Queen of the Minors may help each friar to proclaim the marvels that the Lord is accomplishing in the world and stimulate your entire order to respond to the call of Christ with renewed dedication.

I accompany these my sentiments with a special Apostolic Blessing, which I impart on you, on the Fathers Capitular and on all the Friars Minor scattered throughout the world.

From the Vatican, 5 May 1997.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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