

## FRANCISCAN FAMILIES OF ASSISI

# FRANCISCAN FRIARS IN CHAPTER

### A Path for Walking Together and Growing in Common Vocation and Franciscan Mission (2015/2018)



*I ask you, therefore, Lord Jesus Christ,  
Father of mercies,  
not to consider our ingratitude,  
but always be mindful  
of the abundant mercies  
which you have shown to it [this city]  
that it always be a dwelling place  
for those who truly acknowledge you  
and glorify your name blessed  
and most glorious forever and ever. Amen*  
(*The Mirror of Perfection*, 124: FF 1824)

#### 1. Peace and All Good to each and every one of you!

With this Franciscan greeting, Pope Francis began his homily during his pastoral visit to Assisi on October 4, 2013. He received the gift of a “blue crucifix” and a faithful copy of the Rule offered by the entire Franciscan family represented by the Ministers General and the guardians of the Portiuncula and the Sacro Convento. Responding to the greeting and gifts we gave him, the Pope said to us: “Good, you should stay united.” Those words are often echoed among us friars of the Franciscan Families.

2. Since Vatican II onward, our four Orders have taken important steps to find a common line together, especially thanks to the driving force of Friar Ernesto Caroli, OFM, who in 1972 founded *Franciscan Movement* (Mo.Fra.). This movement aims at fostering unity and collaboration among all the religious and lay people dedicated to the ideal of the Poverello of Assisi. Over the years, *Franciscan Movement* has managed to increase knowledge and mutual respect among the different Franciscan families by arranging meetings to exchange views, and opportunities to have dialogue (this culminated in the Chapter of Mats, April 15-18, 2009 which nearly coincided with the death of Friar Ernesto). Its efforts were advanced by the publication of *Franciscan Sources* on the 750th anniversary of the death of St. Francis, and, subsequently, by publishing different dictionaries and volumes (e.g. the book series *Franciscan Mystics*).

3. In Assisi, then, the inspiration to collaborate continues, through incentives from the “City,” as well as local and regional institutions and also thanks to the pastoral plan developed by Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino to coincide with the St. Francis-related centennial (cf. “A Church in Mission with Francis of Assisi”, Assisi 2009).

The approach of two significant anniversaries in our history, the eighth centenary of the “Pardon of Assisi” (2016) and the fifth centenary the Bull “*Ite vos*” of Pope Leo X (2017), also add to our inspiration to *walk together and grow in common vocation and mission*.

4. So here, the idea of a “synod” of the *Franciscan Families*, i.e. sharing a common path, gets its start from historical memory, passes through reconciliation, dialogue and fraternal discernment and leads us to make choices together and work in unison to carry out projects of evangelization. We think in the coming years, 2015 to 2018, these experiences of fraternal communion will continue to help us enjoy the enriching plurality of the various families of the First Order and Third Order Regular. From this, we can lay the groundwork to keep encouraging this process. We hope it will be further developed in the future as it has been in the recent past.

5. The ultimate goal is *growth in creative fidelity to the charism through more incisive and constructive joint witness*. For this we have proposed a four-year program. (The first year is a year of preparation which, happily, coincides with the Year of Consecrated Life):

- **2015: “Enlighten the darkness of my heart”** (*PCr: FF 276*): This is a year of preparation for “remembering” and “understanding.” It will be about developing deeper insights into the historical-critical events of the Order and its multiform development, interpreted in the light of the theological vision of consecrated life and through various topics of common interest to the friars today (fraternity, authority, freedom , etc.). One key event will be the convocation of a fraternal assembly to officially start off on this multi-year path. As Franciscan Families, we should come to share a document/documentary that will form the basis for highlighting the meaning of certain events and conflicts. We should also collect the reactions of the friars through a questionnaire.
- **2016: “What we do not completely forgive, make us, Lord, forgive completely”** (*Pater 8: FF 273*): 2016 is the centenary year of the Pardon of Assisi, during which, in addition to celebrating the occasion, we will invite the friars and the fraternities to once again embrace the visit of the Risen Lord and His salvation. We will propose that the communities implement penitential ways of raising awareness, of asking for forgiveness and joyfully accepting the mercy that will be expressed in mutual gestures of goodwill, the result of a renewed Pentecost. Thus, on **July 11**, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the brief *Romanum Pontificem* (July 11, 1517)<sup>1</sup>, we can arrive at a demonstration of reconciliation among ourselves and bear witness to our fraternal love. During this event, we will celebrate pardon and announce the most significant appointment of 2017: the “Great General Chapter”.
- **2017: “And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians”** (*Lmin 7: FF 234*): The centenary year of *Ite vos*, also known as the *Bulla unionis*, which actually

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<sup>1</sup> With this letter, Pope Leo X summoned the “Great General Chapter” for Pentecost of 1517, with the goal of putting an end to all of the in-fighting among the Franciscans of the First Order, after he received appeals from rulers and civil authorities asking that these quarrels be definitively resolved.

produced the separation, will be dedicated to fraternity. There will be an in-depth exploration of relational aspects from the point of view of minority, with particular attention given to various dimensions: inter-subjective, witness, institutional relations and asymmetric dimensions in general. We would like to explore the style of fraternal life as our theme and have an event from **May 29** (the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Ite vos*) through **June 2**, *ad instar Capituli*, to discuss, discern and listen to the Spirit. The year will reach its culmination when we, as pilgrims, go before Pope Francis on **November 29** (the anniversary of the publication of the Rule), to be reconfirmed in the charism we received from God eight hundred years ago and receive once more from the Church, as the Fraternity of the First Order, the Rule which will be returned to the Ministers General.

- **2018: “I want to send you all to Paradise!”** (*The Diploma of Theobald: FF 2706/10-11*): The final year will be dedicated to evangelization, with the intent of opening our horizons to the future, joyfully announcing salvation. The mission, driven by compassion, by a rediscovered and recharged passion for the salvation of one’s brothers—of every man, will translate concretely into the realization of projects discussed and selected in “Chapter”, projects which express the beauty of the entire Franciscan family united by the same original inspiration and single purpose. The drafting of some kind of post-synodal document, that is, subsequent to the path of faith we have taken together, will lead to reflection and a synthesis of the experience, yielding possible developments for “future generations”.

## I - 2015: “Enlighten the Darkness of My Heart” (PCr: FF 276) A Year for “Remembering”

6. 2015 is a year of preparation. During this year we would like to *develop deeper insights into the history of the Order and its multiform development*. We make no claim to be exhaustive in this, but we hope to start a process that can be developed and to make further study of our historical-critical character in the years to come. This is a two-fold proposal being put forward.

7. First we need the work of historians who, starting from existing documentary material and lectures offered by various historiographical sources, can provide a picture of the places, dates, people and fraternities, with a description of the actions and activities that were undertaken and their consequences, whether or not they were recognized as factors of success or failure or had affected the progress or decline of the Franciscan movement (Order).

8. Secondly, it is necessary to re-propose the current theological vision of consecrated life with its special vantage point for reviewing past events. Some issues of common interest among the friars of our own day could be interpretive of the past. In this way, the material, which inevitably contains conflicts that have characterized Franciscan history, will form the basis for a *dialectical exchange aimed at reaching a comprehensive point of view*.

9. This historical-critical phase should, by the summer of 2015, lead to the first edition of a document/documentary by proposing that the friars collect their impressions and reactions, even through a questionnaire. We can assume their reactions will be different from those of our “fathers”. To give this path its official start, during the year, a fraternal assembly could be called of the Ministers and Vicars Provincial with the Minister General and/or the Assistant General of the area where the event takes place.

10. The next step, which could be developed in the years to come, will be *processing the information*: trying to reach common ground through dialogue, or arriving at a single set of interconnected common areas (the “histories” of individual Franciscan families), to understand the many points of view present in the different families by studying their character, their relation or opposition to one another in contrasting family histories and in their different interpretations.

11. Of course, in this process, viewpoints of the past or present will emerge that result in *conflicts*. These viewpoints emerge from the works of scholars, but also from the traditions transmitted within the Franciscan families or by clichés often unwittingly embraced by individuals and communities. Talking about them and deepening their meaning should take one “beyond the fact to the reasons for conflict.” The comparison of these viewpoints “will bring to light just where differences are irreducible, where they are complementary and could be brought together within a larger whole, where finally they can be regarded as successive stages in a single process of development” (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 129).

12. In this way, through constructive criticism that highlights incongruent positions, one can challenge faulty reasons behind conflicts, and *clichés* that generate suspicion, resentment and hostility. Similarly, irreducible differences can be examined with the aim of maintaining that “series” and eliminating superficial ones. Thus, *even conflict, through reconciliation, can become an opportunity for growth* for the entire Franciscan family of the *Friars Minor*.

## II - 2016: “What We Do Not Completely Forgive, Make Us, Lord, Forgive Completely” (*Pater 8: FF 273*)

*Embracing the Visit of the Risen Lord and His Salvation*

**13.** 2016 is the *centenary year of the Pardon of Assisi*, the first year on our three-year path. In the wider context of the 2016 Jubilee of the Pardon of Assisi, which celebrates the eighth centenary of the Indulgence granted to Friar Francis by Pope Honorius III, we pause to contemplate the centrality of the theme of reconciliation, so vital in the process towards fraternal communion. Without mutual Pardon, in fact, nothing appears genuine or effective. Everything gets lost in mere historical consideration, without regard for the current reality or the spirit of conversion.

**14.** *Friar Francis’ insistence concerning the theme of reconciliation* is well-known, especially his decisive nature regarding fraternity in the Order. This is exemplified in his words addressed to a superior: “And love those who do those things to you and do not wish anything different from them, unless it is something the Lord God shall have given you. And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. And let this be more than a hermitage for you. And if you have done this, I wish to know in this way if you love the Lord and me, His servant and yours: that there is not any brother in the world who has sinned—however much he could have sinned—who, after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not looking for mercy, you would ask him if he wants mercy. And if he would sin a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him to the Lord; and always be merciful with brothers such as these” (*Lmin 5-10: FF 234-235*). On our path, which focuses on the formation of fraternal communion, we cannot overlook reconciliation.

**15.** *One of the celebratory dimensions of the Jubilee of the Pardon of Assisi, largely developed at the Shrine of the Portiuncula*, will play out through more systematic events such as an International Studies Conference, a critical edition of an ancient hagiographic text of indulgence, or some study volumes, or art exhibitions and educational activities to help understand the value of forgiveness in the life of the Church and the meaning of the Portiuncula Indulgence in history.

**16.** *In particular, however, some ways will be proposed for the “purification of memory”*, in order to help the friars and fraternities embrace a new visit by the Risen Lord and his salvation. Finally we would like to experience the Pardon event together, through a celebration open to the Franciscans in general but aimed especially at our four Orders, which share the same beginnings and perspective. On July 11, 2016, a grand celebration will be held at which our religious Orders, in addition to experiencing a time of fraternal reconciliation, will ask the Lord of all mercy to Pardon us for all these centuries, as St. John Paul II realized during his Jubilee, when he asked forgiveness for all that Catholics had done to tarnish themselves<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> “*The purification of memory*—asserted at the time by the International Theological Commission in *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*—is a process which aims at liberating personal and communal conscience from all forms of resentment and violence that are the legacy of past faults, through a renewed historical and theological evaluation of such events. This should lead—if done correctly—to a corresponding recognition of guilt and contribute to the path of reconciliation. Such a process can have a significant effect on the present, precisely because the consequences of past faults still make themselves felt and can persist as tensions in the present. As such, the purification of memory requires “an act of courage and humility in recognizing the wrongs done by those who have borne or bear the name of Christian”, and is based on the belief that “because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgment of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us.” (John Paul II, *Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*, 10).”

### III - 2017: “And Love Them in This and Do Not Wish That They Be Better Christians” (*Lmin 7: FF 234*) *The Style of Fraternal Life*

17. 2017, the centenary year of “*Ite vos*”, also known as the “*Bulla unionis*”, is the second year of our three-year course. After a year of purification of memory, accompanied by gestures of goodwill, we would like to delve into the theme of fraternity from the point of view of minority as the specific style of Franciscan fraternal life.

18. *Friar Francis’ insistence concerning minority is also well-known.* The words of the Earlier Rule are clear and decisive regarding fraternal relations in the Order and its various dimensions: inter-subjective, witness, institutional relations and asymmetric dimensions in general: “Let no one be called ‘*prior*,’ but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother. Let one wash the feet of the other” (*Rnb VI, 3-4: FF 23*).

19. In a climate of cultural diversity and pluralism, it seems important, in this year dedicated to the style of fraternal life, to propose some clarification of terms and content, to re-establish a *vocabulary of understanding*. We have considered, in fact, that some of today’s recurring terms such as freedom, unity, fraternity, poverty, penance, conversion, etc., have many shades of meaning, making them forerunners of misunderstanding: for example the term freedom in a culture very much linked to the French Revolution (*liberté*) is seen as “freedom from” (freedom from totalitarian regimes, from religious dictates, traditions, etc.), while in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as in the Franciscan tradition, it is “freedom to” (freedom to serve, to obey, to believe, etc.). The exodus from such misunderstandings, which most people aren’t even aware of, will allow us to “get out of Babylon and live a new Pentecost”. If we come together humbly, through cultural, spiritual, community and inter-obediential meetings, if we listen to the Spirit, we will learn to understand each other, to communicate, to speak “one single language” that translates the values of the Christian and Franciscan *traditio* into terms for the present day: freedom, unity, fraternity, poverty, minority, service, hospitality, authority, authorship, etc.

20. During this year, from May 29 to June 2, we will be having an *ad instar Capituli* event, to discuss and discern with a view toward making decisions together on various approaches to develop new activity in evangelization. On that occasion, it would be nice to try to define, besides a shared orientation, issues that deal with charism, even legal forms that could allow for an inter-obediential experience and/or joint management of various activities: educational, missionary, pastoral, charitable, at the local, Provincial or Conference level, similar to what happens in the Conferences of the OFS Assistants. In this way, it would become even easier to choose joint initiatives for evangelization.

21. The year will reach its culmination when we, as pilgrims, go before Pope Francis on November 29 (the anniversary of the publication of the Rule), to be reconfirmed in the charism we received from God eight hundred years ago and receive once more from the Church, as the Fraternity of the First Order, the Rule, which will be returned to the Ministers General.

## **IV - 2018: “I Want to Send You All to Paradise!”** *(The Diploma of Theobald: FF 2706/10-11)* *Joyfully Announcing Salvation*

**22.** *2018 is the closing year of this four-year path.* After a year of purification of memory and having redefined the vocabulary of Franciscan fraternity in the style of minority, we believe that Grace itself will move us to open our horizons to the future, joyfully announcing salvation.

**23.** “I want to send you all to Paradise!” Thus, in 1216, Friar Francis made his joyful announcement from the square of the Portiuncula. This speaks of the *passion our founder had for the salvation of every man* and needs to be the purpose that motivates our choices when identifying areas for growth and action, in collaboration among the various minorite obediences.

**24.** In this year, therefore, we want to stake everything on mission driven by compassion, by a rediscovered and recharged passion for the salvation of one’s brothers—of every man. Let’s think concretely about the realization of projects discussed and selected in “Chapter”, projects which express the beauty of the entire Franciscan family (the three Franciscan families of the First Order and the TOR, but with implications for the Second Order and for the Secular Franciscan Order) united by the same original inspiration and single purpose. If possible, we would work for a “*new*” *fraternal reality with a “mission” of witness*, which better expresses, without having to explain, the beauty of fraternal life itself—filled with mutual charity and fellowship. These become the primary source and first form of evangelization, according to the heart of Friar Francis. It was he who discovered, recognized and really pointed out that the beauty of being together in the name of Jesus was the first and most effective form of apostolate. (An inter-obediential form: a local fraternity inserted into diocesan program? an *ad gentes* missionary fraternity? a fraternity engaged in a specific charity, however, in social work? Another form?) We hope that further ideas and proposals emerge from the Chapter.

**25.** The *drafting of some kind of post-synodal document*, that is, subsequent to the path of faith we will have taken together, will lead to reflection and a synthesis of the experience, yielding possible developments for “future generations”.

**26.** We members of the organizing committee are convinced that we friars of Franciscan families are communicating something when we gather together in our common vocation of holiness, love, fraternal life, simplicity, and Franciscan joy, all of us following the same lifestyle of minority. We are convinced that this can have a profound effect in the heart of our neighbor, in this time rampant with self-centeredness and individualism. Far be it from us to think of ourselves as experts, but our common intention is to do the best we can to joyfully spread the best news in the world: “*Christ is risen!*” We will give our all to accept, with love, whatever God wants.