



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE GENERAL CHAPTER
OF THE ORDER OF THE FRIARS MINOR CONVENTUAL**

Saturday, 17 February 2001

Dear Friars Minor Conventual!

1. It is a great joy to me to meet you today on the occasion of your General Chapter. I extend a special greeting to Friar Joachim Anthony Giermek, your new Minister General, the 118th successor of St Francis, and I thank him for the words he spoke to me on behalf of you all. I extend my cordial greetings to the new General Council as well as to Friar Agostino Gardin, who has led the order for the past six years: I express to him my grateful appreciation for all he has done in these years of service to the Church as Minister General of his religious family and as President of the Union of Superiors General.

Through you, dear brothers, I would like to extend a greeting filled with esteem and affection to all your communities throughout the various continents. I cordially wish the new Minister General and his Council generous and fruitful service in guiding your entire religious community at this beginning of the third Christian millennium.

2. The General Chapter, held a few weeks after the close of the Great Jubilee, has felt the effects of the present historical moment in a significant way. In the life of a religious institute the Chapter is an important occasion for reflection and planning, spurring its members to turn their gaze especially to the future. In meeting you, I would naturally like to repeat the invitation which I addressed in my Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* to all the Ecclesial Communities: "Now is the time for each local Church to assess its fervour and find fresh enthusiasm for its spiritual and pastoral responsibilities, by reflecting on what the Spirit has been saying to the People of God in this special year of grace, and indeed in the longer span of time from the Second Vatican Council to the Great Jubilee" (n. 3).

3. "*Starting afresh from Christ*" (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, chap. III): this must be your first task, dear Friars Minor Conventual. Only by firmly relying on Christ will you be able to implement the various guidelines for action which you identified during your Chapter in response to urgent challenges and apostolic priorities. This love for Christ must be first expressed by *fidelity to personal and community prayer*, especially the liturgy, which has characterized your order since its beginning. St Francis wrote to the General Chapter and all the friars: "Therefore, I implore the Minister General, my lord, as best I can, to see that the Rule is inviolably observed by all and that clerics say the Office with devotion in God's presence, paying no heed to the sound of their voice, but to the conformity of their mind, in order that the voice may be in harmony with the mind and the mind, then, in harmony with God, so that they may please God through purity of heart" (*Letter to the General Chapter and All the Friars*, 6, 51-53, in: *Fonti Francescane*, 227). Your fraternal life and your evangelizing mission will bear abundant fruit if they flow from a "praying community" which finds in its encounter with God the meaning and inner energy for daily fidelity to its commitments.

4. From an intense relationship with the Lord, you will draw spiritual strength to *foster fraternal life*. In this regard, it is a question of being faithful to your specific Conventual Franciscan charism, which has always seen in the sharing of the community journey its own specific character within the vast Franciscan movement. May you find encouragement in what I wrote on this subject in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, stressing the theological dimension of fraternal life lived in a spirit of authentic communion: "More than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord (cf. Mt 18: 20)" (n. 42).

The first biographer of the *Poverello* of Assisi, Friar Thomas of Celano, presents in a certain sense the ideal image of the order, describing the group of Francis' first companions as filled with a love that is not only joyful but also enlivened by true fraternal affection (cf. *First Life of St Francis of Assisi*, 38, in *Fonti Francescane*, 387, 393). Do not forget that "the Church urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the "new commandment" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 45; cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, nn. 43-45).

5. During your Chapter the *call to a simple and intense spirituality* was often heard; in a word, Franciscan spirituality. If you are men of profound dialogue with God, you will also be witnesses and teachers of authentic spirituality. Therefore, safeguard and promote the *spiritual life*, making yourselves available to offer guidance on this path to the faithful who make you their reference-point. Our age shows more and more evident signs of a deep thirst for spiritual values, paths and goals. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* cited above, I remarked: "Is it not one of the 'signs of the times' that in today's world, despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in large part as a renewed need for

prayer?" (n. 33).

This new yearning for the spiritual world must find a valid and fruitful response in your Franciscan communities. Through docile listening to the word of God, personally accepted and shared in the traditional practice of *lectio divina*, and through the exercise of personal and community prayer, you will become effective traveling companions for the many people who wish to follow Christ and his Gospel "*sine glossa*". In this way you will respond to the requests you receive in different ways from the men and women of our time, and will succeed in drawing souls to the ways of spiritual growth and of rediscovered inner vitality.

6. Providence offers you many opportunities. We need only recall the ministry of hospitality at the various shrines entrusted to your order's care. I am thinking, for example, of the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, which I have had the joy of visiting on various occasions, where we can see first-hand how the *Poverello* still fascinates and draws to God countless throngs of those devoted to him.

I am also thinking of the Basilica of St Anthony of Padua, a great spiritual son of Francis of Assisi. Nor can I forget the valuable pastoral service of the praiseworthy confessors in the Vatican Basilica, who especially during the Jubilee spent themselves with laudable effort and dedication in receiving the throngs of penitents from every part of the world. I know that many of the order's religious came to Rome from different countries to assist their brothers who ordinarily carry out this ministry, as hidden as it is necessary for the good of souls.

Dear Friars Minor Conventual, continue your work with the popular style that distinguishes you. The people to whom God sends you to serve are asking you, as the Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover asked the Apostle Philip: "We wish to see Jesus" (*Jn* 12: 21). It is up to you to make God's merciful love visible and, I would say, almost tangible: a love that welcomes and reconciles, that forgives and renews the hearts of believers, clasping every man and woman, all children of the one heavenly Father, in a comforting embrace.

7. The guidelines resulting from your reflections during these days will certainly help the order to continue on its way in the footsteps of the founder, faithfully following his Gospel insights. With prophetic discernment you will be able to adopt, in the light of the Spirit, "the best ways to preserve and adapt" your charism and your spiritual patrimony "to changing historical and cultural situations" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 42), without ever disregarding the Rule of life left by St Francis.

You have before you the heroic example of your various confrères who gave their lives for Christ and his Church in the last century. I am referring to your seven Polish brothers, some of whom collaborated with St Maximilian Mary Kolbe, a victim of Nazi ideology. I had the joy of beatifying them over the last six years. Looking at the shining ranks of your order's saints and blessed, do not be afraid of following the Lord with total dedication. May the Virgin Mary, "Holy Lady, Most

Holy Queen, Mother of God" (*Greeting to the Virgin*, 1, in *Fonti Francescane*, 259), protect you and help you to carry out the resolutions of the General Chapter.

With these wishes, I willingly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to each of you here, to your communities and to all the Friars Minor Conventual throughout the world, as well as to the lay people who work with you in your various activities.