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Letter of the Holy Father to the Custos of the Holy Land for the 800 years of the Franciscan presence

The Holy Father Francis has sent to the Custos of the Holy Land, Fr. Francesco Patton, O.F.M., a letter on the occasion of the 8th centenary of the Franciscan presence in the Holy Land.

The Letter was delivered by the prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, during his visit to the Holy Land from 16 to 21 October on the occasion of the celebrations, including the solemn Pontifical Mass at which he presided this morning at the Church of Saint Saviour in Jerusalem:

Letter of the Holy Father

To the Most Reverend Father
FRANCESCO PATTON, O.F.M.
Custos of the Holy Land

I have learned with joy that this Custody, on the occasion of the 800 years of the Franciscan presence in the Holy Land, wished to celebrate this important and happy occasion with a number of religious, pastoral and cultural activities, all orientated towards the rediscovery of the commendable contribution of the “brothers of the cord” – as they were known – in the places where the Son of God was made flesh and lived in our midst (cf. *Jn* 1: 14). On that occasion, I was glad to address a special greeting to you and to all the friars, who kept the Christian witness alive, study the Scriptures and welcome pilgrims.

The seraphic Father Francis, in the Chapter of Pentecost of May 1217, opened the Order to the “missionary and universal” dimension, sending his friars to all nations as witnesses of faith, fraternity and peace; and in this way the Province of the Holy Land was created, initially referred to as “Overseas” or “of Syria”. This broadening of the horizon of evangelisation was the beginning of an extraordinary adventure, which eight centuries ago led the first friars minor to disembark at Acri, where last 11 June you began your centenary celebrations, renewing your

adhesion to Jesus' calling, faithful to the Gospel and the Church.

Assiduous in contemplation and in prayer, simple and poor, obedient to the bishop of Rome, you are engaged also in the present in living in the Holy Land next to brothers of different cultures, ethnicities and religions, sowing peace, fraternity and respect. Your willingness to accompany the steps of pilgrims from every part of the world through welcome and guidance is known by all. You have dedicated yourselves to research on archaeological evidence and the detailed study of the Sacred Scriptures, taking to heart the famous affirmation of Saint Jerome, who for many years lived in retreat in Bethlehem: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ Himself" (*Comm. in Is.*, Prol.: PL 24, 17).

I do not wish to forget, aside from the guardianship and enlivenment of shrines, your commitment to the service of the local ecclesiastical community. I encourage you to persevere gladly in supporting these brothers of ours, especially the poorest and weakest; in the education of young people – who often risk losing hope in a context that is still without peace – in welcoming the elderly and the care for the sick, living out the works of mercy in a concrete way in daily life.

Joining with my venerable Predecessors, starting from Clement VI, who with the Bull *Gratias agimus* entrusted to you the custody of the Holy Places, I wish to renew this mandate, encouraging you to be joyful witnesses of the Risen Christ in the Holy Land.

You are ambassadors of the entire People of God, who with liberality you have always sustained, especially through the "Collection for the Holy Land", which contributes to ensuring that in the Land of Jesus, faith is made visible in works. In a special way you are supported, on behalf of Peter's Successor, by the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, which in these very days is celebrating its own centenary.

Finally, I wish to recall to you the words of your Founder: "Indeed, I counsel, warn and exhort my friars in the Lord Jesus Christ, that when they go about through the world, they are not to quarrel nor contend in words, nor are they to judge others, but they are to be meek, peaceable and modest, meek and humble, speaking uprightly to all, as is fitting". (*Regula Bullata*, 3, 10-11: FF 85)
