



# CONFERENCE OF THE FRANCISCAN FAMILY

## LIVING ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL

A letter of the Conference of the Franciscan Family  
in preparation of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of the approval of the Rule

The Franciscan Family – First, Second and Third Orders, in their diversity and many different forms, the Secular Institutes and other Movements which refer to Francis – are preparing to celebrate a particular historical event in 2009. It is not a question of commemorating a figure, a Francis, Clare or any other person, but rather the calling to mind of the origins of the franciscan charism. In 2009, in effect, it will be 800 years since a dozen men presented themselves before Pope Innocent III to ask for recognition and approval of their gospel life project. Twenty years later, in 1226, the inspirer and guide of the group, Francis of Assisi, would describe what happened when, in his *Testament*, he says: “and after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me” (*Test* 14). The men gathered around Francis asked themselves *what they should do*, and no one was able to point it out, and so God himself called them, through His Word, to live the Holy Gospel of Christ. Convinced that this was their vocation, they wanted to submit their resolve to the discernment and approval of the Church, represented by the Holy Father in Rome. Prudent and originally oral, the text was not without its faults. The text presented to the Pope, the *proto-rule*, was a plan and a description of a life-style, rather than a regulation. It was revised, detailed, and enriched down through the years, first under the form of the *Regula non bullata* (1221), in its different versions, and then definitively confirmed by a pontifical text (*Regula bullata*, 1223) and recalled by Francis in his *Testament* (1226). Although it concerned, primarily, the group of Friars, as can be seen immediately, it is open to all states of Christian life.

### ***The heart of the vocation: life according to the Gospel.***

When it is a question of presenting the Rule in a general manner, of pointing out briefly its core content, of giving it a title, it is always the word “Gospel” which stands out: to “live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (*Test* 14); “This is the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (*Rnb* 2); “The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rb* 1:1). A few years later (1253), when Clare adapted the Rule of Francis to the life of the Poor Clare Sisters, she would utilise the same expressions (*RCI* 1:1). In the *Second Letter to the Faithful*, which presented a way of life, Francis asks the penitents to observe “the commands and counsels” given by Christ in His Gospel (*2LIF* 39). It is understood that the term “Gospel” denotes the heart of the Franciscan vocation, it is the key which opens the door to the immense scope of “the Good News” of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. But what content does Francis give to this word and how can and must we, today, understand it and put it into practice?

When we read the Rules, taking account of the entire collection of the texts written by Francis, we see that the Gospel is not only taking seriously the requirements of fraternal life lived in radical poverty – the renunciation of collective and personal property and money and the recourse to begging -, but is, above all, the assumption of the vision of authority which Francis proposed – of masters who become servants, the washing of feet – with his invitation to make our-

selves “minors”, smaller, subject to all creatures, brothers and sisters to all men and women. Here, for Francis, is the heart of the gospel message.

Therefore, rather than the “poverty, humility and Holy Gospel of our Jesus Christ” (*Rb* 12:4; *RCl* 12:12), the friars take the humility of God, of the Word of the Father, holy and glorious, who became flesh in our frail humanity and chose poverty as the model for their behaviour (cf. *2LtF* 4-5). We, therefore, discover that the vision of Francis reveals both the face of God and of man, precisely as they are offered in the Gospel, to us.

As a matter of fact, this “good and joyful news” brings us to the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity, which, through Its holy love opens up access for us to Its life of communion and becomes the primary goal of all our searches and steps. In addition, It then gives us *that self-knowledge* of being the “most worthy of all creatures” (*3LtAg* 21), the image and likeness in the intimacy and body of God and of His Christ, of great loftiness and, paradoxically, of being limited, poor, diminutive, sinful and, because of that, of being called to a never-ending, always to be begun again, “penance” or conversion to the Gospel. The *Love of Neighbour*, whoever he may be, “friend or enemy, thief or felon, Christian or not” is, through the love of God and in parity with Him, another radical gospel feature. Love needs to be concrete, effective, the result of humble service, marked by “maternal” care, devoid of all forms of domination. This allows for the creation of a true “fraternity”, the name which Francis gave to the first group of brothers. Lived among the brothers, first of all, it must be open to extending itself to all men and women and even to all the beings and elements of the world.

These are, broadly speaking, the basic elements drawn from the Gospel, which Francis proposed as a way of life. Recognizing these as its own and by approving the Rule eight centuries ago, the Church gave origin to the Franciscans movement. These are the values which we are called on to live at the beginning of the third millennium in our strengths and weaknesses. Faced by a technical and computerised world, by its crises of creeping wars, terrorism, poverty and globalization, the Christian faith is exposed to all the questions and challenges about God, about His entering into history in the Person of Jesus, about the diversity of religions and their relationships, about the nature of the human being and about the meaning to be given to life and death. This situation of crisis is, at the same time, a great challenge to the Church to live the new evangelisation and for the Franciscan Family to live its own identity, aware that its place and influence have become fragile and questioned. Our Franciscan Family has been weakened, particularly in the European world, because of its numerical reduction, of the uncertainty of our identity and through the temptation to turn in on self and to become discouraged. The same Franciscan identity, however, is still a challenge to the world! It is our reference of self to the Gospel, of which the Rule is like a summary, which alone can help us to respond with trust, imagination and courage to the many and multiple challenges.

### ***Gospel for all***

The celebration of the 8<sup>th</sup> centenary of the approval of the primitive Rule (or proto-rule) is first of all a celebration for the Friars of the First Order, who, through their profession, commit themselves to making it the basis of their personal and fraternal life. But the core of this text - its reference to the Gospel is, in fact, its continued richness – is addressed to all Christians and, in a special way, to the children of Francis. The call to radically live the message of Jesus, its promises and demands, which Francis and his companions intended and followed, it still current for all times and states of life.

In fact, barely one year later, in 1212, Clare of Assisi was touched by it and later (in 1252), took the Rule of Francis almost in its entirety in order to set up the Order of the Poor Clares. Besides, very soon some individuals and groups of men and women, while living their own state of life in family or profession, were attracted by the franciscan gospel proposal, as is witnessed to in some writings of Francis addressed to them: the two *Letters to the Faithful* as well as the contents of Chapter 23 of the *Regula non bullata*, which constitute the basis and spiritual reference for what would become, in time, *The Franciscan Third Order*. The Franciscan Family, right up to the present time, consists of these three branches: the Friars Minor (distributed in three obediences), the Poor Clare Sisters, and the more numerous group called the “Third Order” composed of the religious Brothers and Sisters of the TOR and of the secular Brothers and Sisters of the SFO. We must also add to this the many secular Franciscan institutes which have appeared in recent centuries. All explicitly refer to the gospel inspiration of Francis and accept his spiritual texts as the basis of their legislation. A sign of the universality of the Franciscan gospel proposal is the existence among the Anglican and Lutheran churches, outside communion with the Catholic Church, of communities of men and women who claim to be, and are, of a franciscan inspiration. Many men and women beyond these defined juridical confines are interested in the franciscan charism, study it and are inspired by it. All are friends of Francis.

The spirit which Francis and his Friars gave rise to continues to animate the Church and touches all Christians and “all men of good will”. This centenary concerns them all.

### ***Three ways to prepare for the centenary***

We are all directly invited to make an *Act of Thanksgiving* for the gift which God gave us and His Church by calling Christians, through the intercession of Francis and his companions, to accept the totality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through a new life. This call – the grace of our origins – has not ceased to echo, to be understood or to be expressed in life and now, after eight centuries, it reaches out to a countless number of men and women of every condition and state of life. Through it, many men and women, illustrious and unknown, have borne fruit of holiness, wisdom, knowledge, closeness to the poor, service to the Church and humanity, and given testimony by shedding their blood. The franciscan spiritual current, like a river, broadening and being enriched in the course of centuries through a variety of contributions, never ceases to irrigate us and the Church itself. Today, as we begin the third millennium, and thanks to a greater knowledge of the writings of Francis, to a more accurate and broader vision of what is at the centre of his original project, his message is presented to us as a stimulus, encouragement and food for a journey.

To this joyful act of thanksgiving it is also necessary to add the humble *recognition of the distance* between the gospel proposal and the way in which it was lived during the course of our long and tumultuous history. Despite the ongoing efforts at beginning again and of “reforms”, our movement is not yet up to the demands of the Gospel. Though we should neither accuse or condemn our predecessors, we must recognise, before the Church and the world, that our history and our patrimony carry with them some shadows of the past and of the present.

This dual movement, the act of thanksgiving for being called to live the Gospel and the purification of our memory as a recognition of the shadows present in our Family, should lead us to *face the challenge of re-foundation*. The experience of eight centuries has taught us that, like Francis, we always need to begin again our journey of gospel penitence, which is conversion, to put into practice something of the newness and youth of the Gospel and to incarnate these in our daily personal and fraternal life through concrete gestures. From the first century of our history we have not stopped being “reborn” (*Jn. 3:3*), as is testified by our different branches and hundreds of Institutes even today. It is because of this that we must find the roots, the “foundations”, that is to say,

discover in wonder the “power of God”, the Gospel (*Rm.* 1:16), the Good News of the Love of God for us and of the communion with Him offered to us. Only on such a foundation can a solid structure be built, a true community in mission in the Church and in the world. This moment of grace, a *kairos*, which we are experiencing at the present, tests us by revealing weaknesses to us, but it also invites us to rely on the power of God.

### **Conclusion**

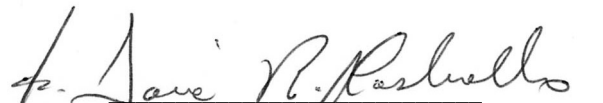
This letter wishes to be a first announcement. We are sending it out three years in advance in order to state that the event we are preparing to celebrate concerns us all: we cannot live this without each other. It is also an invitation to begin immediately the giving of thanks for the gift which God gave to the Church and the world since the project of Francis and of his Friars to live “according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ” was approved, in 1209, by Pope Innocent III. We have, at a distance of eight centuries, the grace to be the inheritors of this project and of the serious task of being those who must continue it.

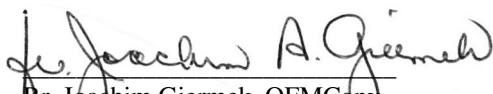
Brothers and sisters, “let us refer all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, from Whom all good comes for everything” (*Rnb* 17:17).

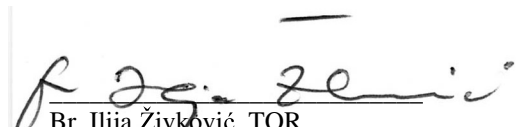
Rome, 29<sup>th</sup> November

***The Feast of All Saints of the Seraphic Order***

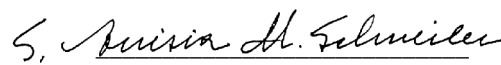
  
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