



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MINISTER GENERAL OF THE FRIARS MINOR
ON THE OCCASION OF THE REOPENING
OF THE PORTIUNCOLA IN ASSISI**

*To the Most Reverend Fr Giacomo Bini
Minister General of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor*

1. The reopening of the Basilica and Chapel of the Porziuncola after completion of the repairs occasioned by the damage sustained in the earthquake of 1997, gives me a welcome opportunity to send warm greetings to you, beloved Brother, and to the Franciscan Community in Assisi. There you do a much-valued service to the Church in caring for the places dear to the memory of the *Poverello* of Assisi, as also in caring for the faithful and pilgrims who flock to the home of Francis and Clare to enjoy a deep spiritual experience. The faithful tread their way to the gates of Assisi, deservedly named the "special city of the Lord" because of the many wonders of compassion worked there.

Today the doors of the Porziuncola Chapel and the Patriarchal Basilica open once more to receive great numbers of people drawn by their yearning for God and the charm of his holiness, made abundantly plain in his servant Francis.

The *Poverello* knew well that "divine grace can be lavished on God's chosen ones in any place. Yet he also found that the location of St Mary of the Porziuncola was rich in more abundant graces ... and he was accustomed to say to the brethren: "This is a holy place, and the dwelling of Christ and his Virgin Mother" (*Speculum perfectionis*, 83).

The poor, humble little church had become for Francis an icon of the Holy Virgin, the "Virgin made Church" (*Salutation of the BVM I*) herself unassuming and a "tiny portion of the world" (1 Celano, XII, 18), yet the indispensable means by which the Son of God should become man. For this reason the saint addressed Mary as: Tabernacle, House, Vesture, Handmaid, and Mother of God

(*Salutation of the BVM I*).

It was in the Chapel of the Porziuncola, restored by the work of his own hands, that Francis reached a decision on hearing the words of chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel. He decided to abandon his brief period of eremitical life in order to preach in the midst of the people, "with simplicity of words and generosity of his heart" as his first biographer, Thomas of Celano, attests (1 Celano, I, 23). So began his characteristic itinerant ministry. It was at the Porziuncola that Clare received the religious habit, and thereby founded the Order of the "Poor Ladies of San Damiano". Again it was here that Francis begged Christ, through the intercession of the Queen of Angels, for the great pardon or "indulgence of the Porziuncola", confirmed by my revered Predecessor, Pope Honorius III, on 2 August 1216. Thence sprang the missionary activity that took Francis and his brothers to some of the Muslim countries and the many nations of Europe. And at the end, it was here that the saint greeted with song "our Sister bodily death" (*Canticle of the Creatures*, 12).

2. The little church of the Porziuncola preserves and hands on a message and a special grace deriving from the actual experiences of the *Poverello* of Assisi. Message and grace still continue, and form a powerful summons to any who will allow themselves to be drawn by his example. This is borne out by the witness of Simone Weil, a daughter of Israel who fell under the spell of Christ: "Alone in the tiny romanesque chapel of St Mary of the Angels, a unique wonder of purity in which Francis had often prayed, I experienced a force greater than myself that drove me, for the first time in my life, to my knees" (*Spiritual Autobiography*).

The Porziuncola is one of the most venerable Franciscan places, dear not only to the Order of Minors but to all Christians who find themselves overwhelmed by its wealth of historical memories, finding light and inspiration for a renewal of life, a deepening of faith and a more genuine love. I like to underline the specific message that comes from the Porziuncola and its indulgence. It is the message of pardon and reconciliation, that is, of the grace that God's goodness pours out on us when we are willing to receive it, because God is truly "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4).

How could we fail to stir up in ourselves, every day, a humble and trusting prayer for the redeeming grace of God? How could we fail to be aware of the great gift he has given us in Christ "once for all time" (Heb 9:12) and continues to offer with unchanging goodness? It is the gift of free pardon that brings us to peace with him and with ourselves, inspiring new hope and new joy in living. In the light of all this it is not difficult to understand the austere life of penance embraced by Francis. We are encouraged to hear the call to a continuing conversion of life that detaches us from the pursuit of selfish aims and directs our spirit instead to God, who himself gives focus to our whole existence.

3. Being the *Tent of Meeting of God with men*, the sanctuary of the Porziuncola is a house of prayer. Having experienced it himself, Francis loved to repeat the saying: "Whoever prays here with devotion will receive what he asks for" (1 Celano, I, 106). Within the ancient walls of the tiny

church anyone may taste the sweetness of prayer in company with Mary, Mother of Jesus (cf. Acts 1:14) and know the power of her intercession.

In that sacred building restored by the work of his own hands, the new man Francis used to listen to Jesus' invitation to shape his own life "according to the form of the holy Gospel" (*Testament*, 14) and, in poverty and joy to go through the world proclaiming the kingdom of God and conversion. That holy place had become for Francis a *Tent of Meeting* with Christ himself, the living Word of salvation.

The Porziuncola is in a special way the *meeting-place* with the grace of forgiveness, deriving from a particular experience of Francis. St Bonaventure writes: "One day, while he wept bitterly over the memories of his past life, Francis felt himself overtaken by the joy of the Holy Spirit, from whom he received the assurance that all his sins were completely forgiven" (*Legenda Major* III, 6). He wanted everyone to enjoy such an experience of God's mercy, and so he requested and obtained a plenary indulgence for all who would come as pilgrims to the tiny church to receive remission of their sins and an abundance of divine grace (cf. Rom 5:20).

4. It is my sincere wish that all those who follow in the footsteps of the *Poverello* of Assisi in an attitude of penance and reconciliation and duly receive the Porziuncola indulgence with the proper interior disposition, shall likewise know the joy of meeting God and the tenderness of his merciful love. This is the "spirit of Assisi", the spirit of reconciliation, of prayer, of mutual respect that I heartily wish may prove a stimulus driving each one to communion with God and with all brothers and sisters. It is the same spirit that marked the meeting of prayer for peace with the representatives of the world religions, called by me to the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels on 27 October 1986, a meeting of which I treasure a vivid and grateful memory.

With these sentiments I join in spiritual pilgrimage with today's celebration of the Porziuncola indulgence, taking place in the restored Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of heaven, as the great Jubilee of the incarnation of Christ looms near.

To Our Lady, chosen daughter of the Father, I entrust all those in Assisi and elsewhere throughout the world who wish to receive today the Pardon of Assisi, in order to make of their hearts a dwelling-place and Tent for the Lord who is coming.

To all, my blessing.

Given at Castel Gandolfo, 1 August 1999, in the 21st year of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II

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