

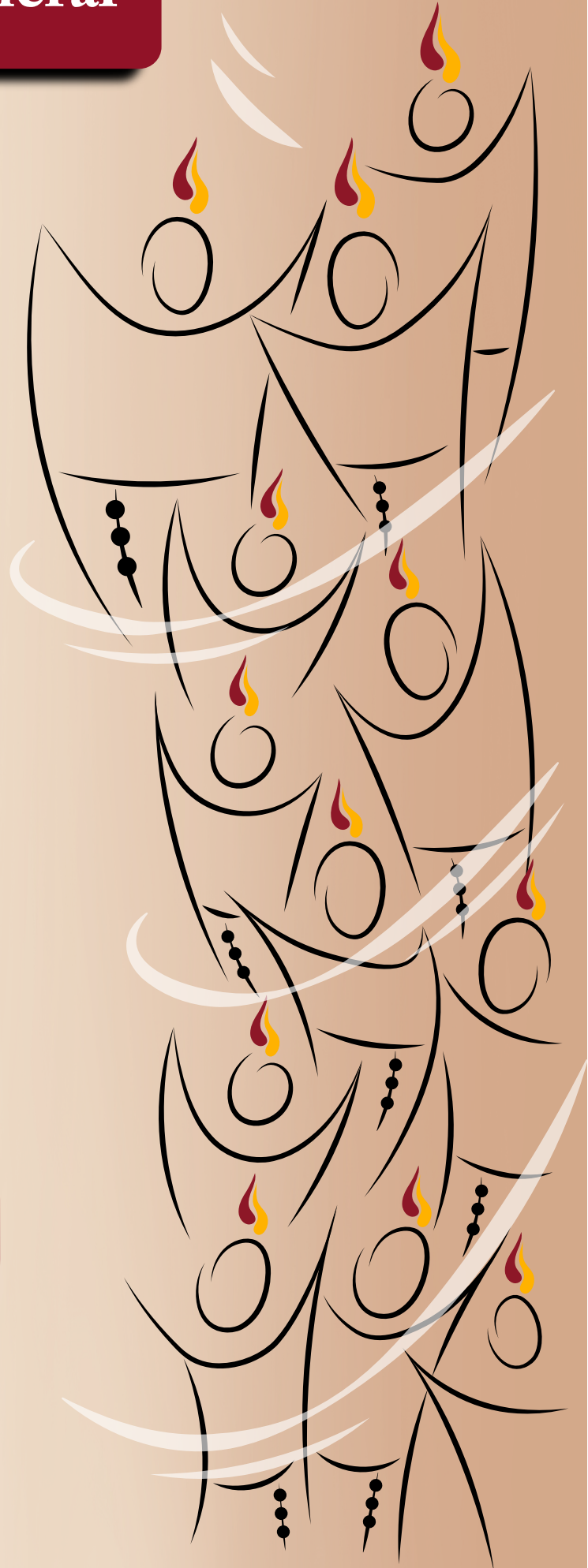


## Pentecost Letter 2024

*‘And now, compelled  
by the Spirit, I am  
on my way ...’*

*Acts 20:22*

500th anniversary of the  
coming of the first Friars  
Minor to Mexico



## Foreword

In his address to the elders of Ephesus, the Apostle Paul sums up his life as mission. He recognises that the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Lord is the central figure in his long journey — the very soul of his mission. It is He who guides Paul, directing him, always pushing him beyond himself and beyond many boundaries.

While Pentecost is always a reminder to listen to the Spirit's gentle breeze, this year's breath of Pentecost has a particular emphasis because we also recall the Stigmata of Saint Francis. Remembering this brings us back to the heart of our charism — to live the Gospel by following in the footprints of the poor and crucified Christ. Today, the 13th of May 2024, we also recall the 500th anniversary of the arrival in Veracruz, Mexico, of the first twelve missionary friars. The Minister General, Fray Francisco de los Ángeles Quiñones, sent these friars in the freedom of the spirit, which is at the heart of every missionary vocation. This event is a singular and important fact in the Order's history, and one that has received insufficient attention. In fact, although the historical record contains both light and shadows, it became the most comprehensive and important project for the evangelisation of the peoples of America and can be considered a true response to the gift of the Spirit.

## Living according to the Holy Gospel

Many friars set sail for the Americas driven by the desire to live and proclaim the Gospel, and strongly motivated by a desire for reform of Franciscan life, and reform of the Church in a new world. The 'Twelve First Franciscans,' and many of the friars who came after them, came from Spanish reformist movements of their time. They were members of the Province of St Gabriel, from which the most rigorous movement of 16th century Spanish Franciscanism originated. The missionary ideal of these friars was rooted in the context of a struggle to live a life based on two fundamental emphases — evangelical radicalism and contemplative eremitism — all within the climate of the freedom of the spirit that continuously calls us to live the Gospel. The intellectual formation of some of these friars also played an important role in their understanding of their evangelising mission.

At its beginnings, the practical objective of the missionary ideal was somewhat vague. It included missions to the peoples of the East as well as outreach to the peoples newly discovered in mysterious America. But there was also clarity, as we can see when we recall that in 1524, the reform of the Church promoted by the Augustinian Martin Luther was already underway, and that one of the friars who tried to come to Mexico, Fray Juan Glapión, had participated in the Diet of Worms in 1521. Indeed, the first plans for the organisation of the Church in Mexico (in 1526) give us an idea of the kind of ecclesiastical reform that these early Franciscans were devising.

In the instructions that the Minister General, Fray Francisco de los Ángeles Quiñones, gave to the first Twelve, he clearly sees Franciscan life as mission. "*Since*

*you are going to plant the Gospel in hearts that have not yet received it, see to it that your way of life does not depart from it. And this you will do if you diligently watch over your observance of the Rule, which is founded on the Holy Gospel, observing it purely and simply, without interpretations and dispensations”* (cf. Instructions).

Encouraged by the directives of the Minister General, the first Franciscans in Mexico rethought the model of life practiced by their confreres in Spain — based on hermitages and small communities — and devoted themselves to evangelisation and the pastoral care of the indigenous communities in the recently conquered cities of Mexico. Within a short time, the Franciscan presence was widespread. This happened, in part, because initially the friars’ lifestyle was very close to that of the indigenous people; simple, humble, and unpretentious.

It is evident, then, that the foundation for this renewed mission was the contemplative and penitential dimension of the Franciscan charism.

### **Continuous conversion, proclamation of the Gospel, and aspiration to martyrdom**

In the two missionary documents by which the Minister General sent Franciscans to Mexico, the “Obedience” and the “Instructions”, three elements are very clear: an exemplary life, the work of conversion, and the desire for martyrdom. For the Minister General, our *form of life* is the priority in mission. This has been true since the origins of the Order; over the centuries, the cultural circumstances in which missionary projects were formed have changed, but the above-mentioned elements are always present.

In the “Instructions”, the specification that the missionary’s form of life should not be based on external features, ceremonies, and customs, but on “observance of the Gospel and the Rule” stands out. This explains the evangelical freedom of spirit with which the friars acted in Mexico. Convinced of the importance of their witness of life, the Minister General asked the friars to live in communities and cities “*so that the good example they would see in your life and way of living would be as much an aid to conversion as words and preaching.*” These are very valuable insights.

Again, in the text of “La Obediencia”, the Minister says that the sending of the friars to Mexico takes place “*when the day is already ending, at the eleventh hour.*” There was therefore a strong sense of a particular time in history that demanded an urgent call to conversion and decisiveness.

### **The Encounter between different cultures**

Apart from the hermitical and contemplative life of the first friars, another important aspect in our understanding of the Franciscan mission in Mexico is the influence that the religious and cultural environment of Renaissance humanism had on these ideals, as well as on the cultures to which the mission was directed.

In its long missionary journey, the Franciscan Order had already had contact with great cultures before arriving in Mexico. The significant difference was that the cultures of China were already known in medieval Europe, but there was no such knowledge of the great cultures of Mexico and parts of Central America in contemporary Europe. It was therefore a completely new encounter, and not without its difficulties — an entry to an unknown, ‘totally different’ world. This gave rise to a somewhat new reality, bringing with it a desire for a different kind of Franciscan life and even a different Church. This was also possible thanks to the fact that, apart from the witness of their lives, not a few of the first friars to arrive in Mexico had a sound academic background. This was thanks to the varied contributions that the Renaissance was making to the humanities, generating an interest in the arts, languages, and ethnography. Remarkably, the friars’ understanding of the indigenous world sometimes included an appreciation of its religion, recognised by some friars as an asset and not just something to be eliminated.

Their minds were open and sensitive to what they encountered, even those who were dedicated above all to the hermitical-contemplative life. That is why they could also imagine seeing the birth of a new Church, close to the primitive Church in its poverty and simplicity, free from the weight of riches and pomp in its life and liturgy. A Church capable of living among the indigenous, transcending European models of bishoprics and privileges. Religious Life truly lived was the model by which they wished to be inspired.

There is no shortage of shadows on this path. The risk of placing a “spiritual conquest” alongside the colonial conquest; seeing local religions only as something demonic to be extirpated; considering the native peoples to be “infants”, “uncouth,” and as “barbarians” who had to be corrected; a certain haste in evangelisation, which did not allow for a more complete inculturation. One effect of this was religious syncretism with its lights and shadows. The intersection of these two worlds was far from simple and often seems to have been a case of the imposition of European ways to the detriment of local ways. A particularly painful memory is that of the millions of indigenous people who died. A renewed history can arise from a re-reading of these complex events, and thus from the purification of memory. We are helped in this by what the Supreme Pontiffs have repeated and what Pope Francis made his own in his letter of 27 September 2021 to the President of the Mexican Episcopate: *‘For this reason, on various occasions, both my predecessors and I too have asked forgiveness for personal and social sins, for all actions or omissions that did not contribute to evangelisation.’*

### **The Order’s contemporary missionary activity**

Remembering the first friars in Mexico can throw light on our present situation. Indeed, we are rediscovering more and more that a renewal of our life of discipleship is interlinked with mission. Mission cannot be seen solely as the activities and services that are asked of us and in which we find fulfilment. Indeed, the action of evangelisation springs from a life lived according to the Gospel, *as contemplative friars, and lesser brothers in mission among and with the poor.*

If we desire a renewal of our missionary action today, it is necessary to renew our lives. This means that the friars choose our relationship with God above anything else, living a truly fraternal and simple life, and doing work that does not distance us too much from the most humble. It means a mission lived together with passion for peace and our common home. It is not an option, but an imperative for today and for the future.

Out of a Franciscan life in continuous reform, we can also find the joy of stepping out of our comfort zones, of going beyond the security that numbs us and makes us forget the beauty and passion of our vocation as friars and lesser brothers.

More and more, I ask myself whether the scarcity of missionary vocations in the Order today is due to a weakening of our passion for Franciscan life, which is often reduced to pastoral ministry alone. The desire to renew it profoundly — and not just in words, but by being more daring — will be a source of missionaries everywhere.

To those who keep asking me how the Order is going, my answer is that it's going well wherever I meet friars who are inspired by these ideals and willing to make them a reality, and it's going badly wherever we are content to just carry on with the present way of doing things, without a renewed vision of life and the future. We cannot ask our younger friars and sisters simply to continue what history has left to us, something we often passively preserve, convinced that it is still the best means for the proclamation of the Gospel today.

In my heart, I am certain that the Spirit is urgently asking something else of us — to have the courage to allow ourselves to be pushed beyond our securities, including the security we find in our pastoral activities. To imagine and begin to live a Franciscan life that is “new” in ways and means and is sustained by adequate preparation for our mission. The goal of everything continues to be communion with the poor and crucified Christ, proclaimed to all as the Saviour who makes his humble and redeeming love shine forth in every language, culture, and creed.

The Spirit is urgently calling us to engage in the relaunching of the so-called “New Forms” of life and evangelisation, in the revival of some of the Order’s missionary presences, and in reflection on new ways of organising ourselves in territories where existing juridical structures are inadequate. In addition, there is a need to set in motion new initiatives at the level of the entities which could lead to the green shoots of rebirth.

May the memory of the first twelve friars of Mexico and those who followed them spur us to overcome boundaries and obligations that may seem insurmountable to us. May we allow the breath of the Spirit to circulate among us — the Spirit who makes all things new not only on the day of Pentecost, but always, because without his “holy operation” we would be nothing, just sad guardians of museums. Instead of this, we wish for much more at this time of history, which is a grace for us!



Together with the renewal of our life wherever we are, I recall that the Order is in urgent need of missionaries at this time, especially in Morocco, Turkey, and Russia, and undoubtedly in the Holy Land. I am also reminded of our mission in the Amazon and the value of our presence with the indigenous people of several countries. I make a heartfelt appeal to the friars who feel the call to go these countries to proclaim the Gospel with their lives and, when it pleases the Lord, with their words: respond generously and with confidence!

Several friars are doing this in other places, with a resulting resurgence of life.

Wishing you a Pentecost of light leading to a new lease of life in mission, I greet you with the Blessing of St Francis.

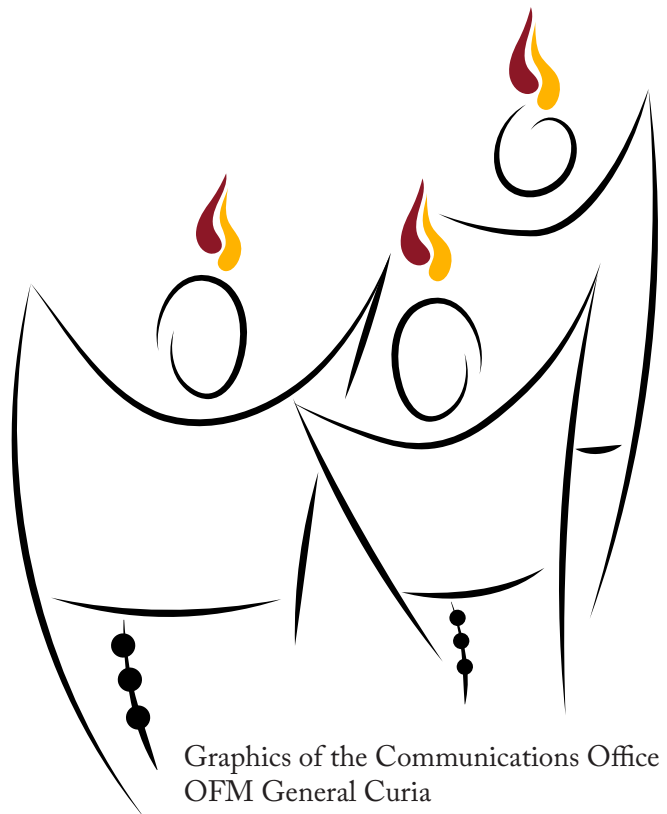
Fraternally,



*Fr. Maximus Fusarelli ofm*  
Br. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm  
*Minister General*

Rome, 13 May 2024

*Prot. 113139/MG-19-2024*



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OFM General Curia