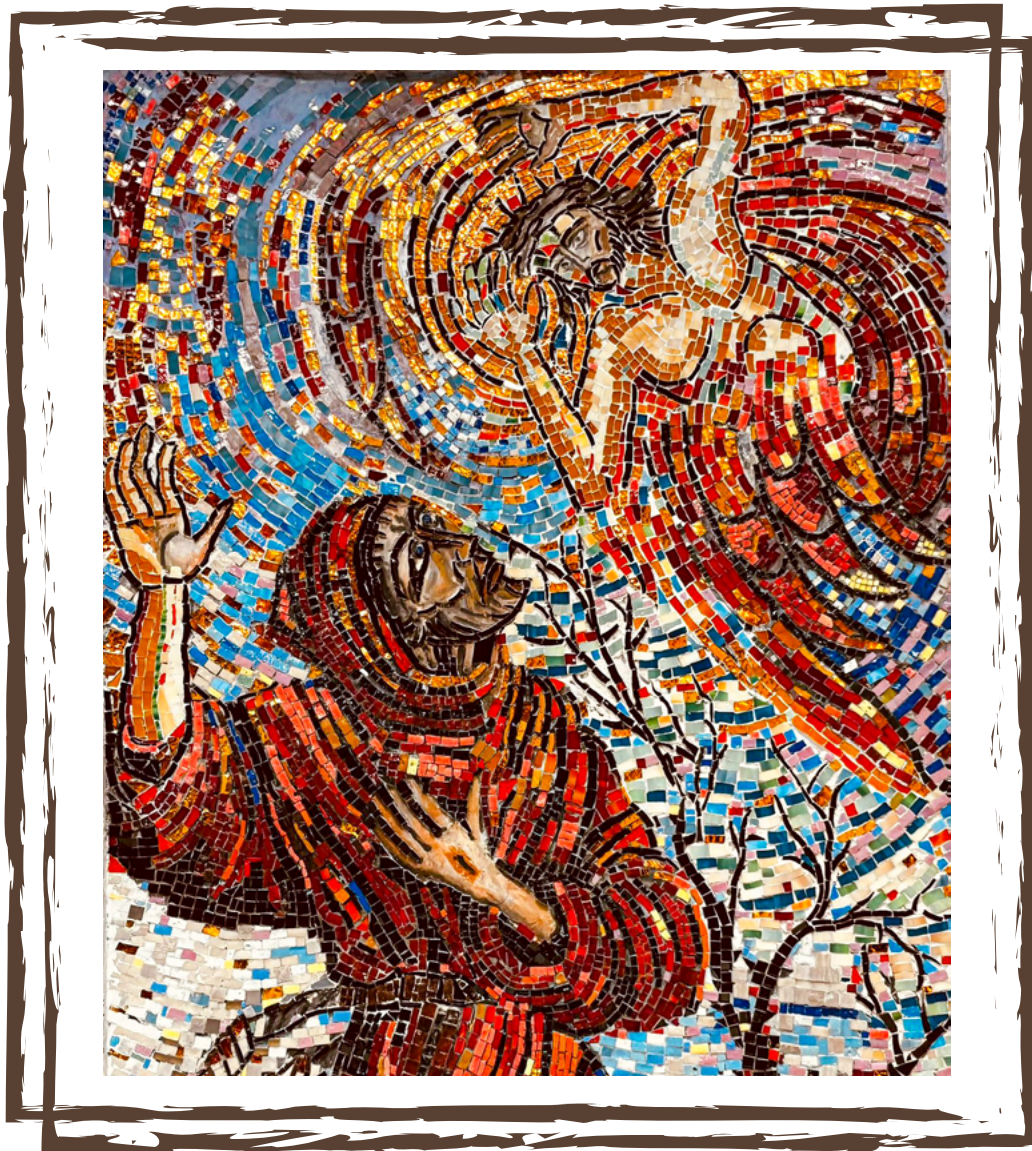




The Minister General and the General Definitory

Solemnity of St. Francis 2024



To the Entire Order
on the Eight Centenary of the Stigmata



Dear Brothers and Sisters,
May the Lord give you peace!

The feast of St Francis always occurs close to that of the Stigmata, which precedes it by a couple of weeks. This year, we are particularly aware of the close connection between these feasts, given that it was precisely eight hundred years ago that Francis ascended La Verna to spend a period of retreat and prayer among the rocks and woods. As he put it, he spent a ‘Lent’ there from the feast of the Assumption to the feast of the Archangel Michael.

Giving time to an encounter with the Lord

Francis’ decision to do this is noteworthy. He considered it necessary to alternate times of work, activity, and preaching with other periods devoted exclusively to prayer and contemplation. As we can see, those periods were lengthy — from 15th August to 29th September is about 45 days!

The first question we ask ourselves and suggest to you is this:

How much time do I devote primarily or even exclusively to prayer, to going on retreat, to separating myself a little from my commitments and ‘normal’ contacts (the mobile phone!) so as to dedicate myself ‘exclusively’ to God?

Everyone knows their own honest answer, in the depths of their conscience. Our invitation is to compare this answer with the model that Francis offers us, as he climbs La Verna for his ‘Lent of St Michael’.

And let’s not think that Francis went up to La Verna on a wave of mystical enthusiasm, moved by something that happens only to saints. No, Francis was going through a difficult period that the *Assisi Compilation* calls ‘a most serious temptation¹’, which lasted more than two years. This extended testing period arose from the problems he experienced in the Order after his return from the East, which led to his resignation as Minister General. Another factor was the contentious struggle regarding the final text of the *Regula bullata*, which had been approved only a few months before his ascent to La Verna. Consequently, the man who climbed La Verna is a worn-out, suffering Francis, who has experienced difficulties in his relationships with his brothers and is well aware of his own frailties. During his time of retreat, he brings all those experiences and hands them over to the Lord.



¹ AC 63

Should we not also do the same, bringing our entire life to prayer and entrusting it to the Lord — with its frailties and joys, as well as the difficulties we experience in fraternity and in ministry?

A merciful gaze

Sometimes, we might ask ourselves what the subject of our meditation should be. Francis teaches us that the raw material for prayer is our life, in all its aspects. We place that life under the merciful gaze of the Lord, who welcomes us and heals us.

Francis encountered that same gaze on La Verna, in the mysterious vision of the crucified seraph. The first account of the event is found in the biography of Thomas of Celano, where the distinctiveness of the figure seen by Francis is emphasised. This figure possesses both the attributes of suffering (the crucified one) and the attributes of glory (the seraph, highest of the angelic hierarchies), in a union of death and glory that, for believers, evokes the paschal mystery of the resurrected Crucified One. In addition, the description of the effects of that vision on Francis also emphasises that dual quality:



«When the blessed servant of the Most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe but could not decide what this vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph's beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart.²»

Both the singular vision of the crucified seraph and the effects of that vision on Francis speak to us of the paschal mystery, which is never either death alone or resurrection alone, but an inextricable interweaving of death and life, of pain and glory.

² 1Cel 94

At La Verna, Francis bares himself, with his joys and frailties, before the gaze of the Risen Crucified, and in this relationship of truth, ‘something’ happens. Christ acts, and his message is ‘I am with you’. The stigmata are the challenging sign of this close intimacy of Jesus with Francis; they are ‘the proof of Christian wisdom ploughed into the dust of [Francis’] flesh’, as Bonaventure would say³.

From Francis Stigmatised to the Stigmatised of today

The encounter with Christ transforms Francis; he descends from La Verna with a renewed capacity to recognise the mystery of both the cross and glory manifested in history. He will go on to renew his contact with the stigmatised of history — the poor and the lepers to whom he will continue to be close — but he will also recognise the glory of the cosmos, expressed in the Canticle of Brother Sun that he will compose a few months after his descent from La Verna.

A true encounter with the crucified and risen Christ also has its effects within us, just as it did in Francis, and leads us to recognise the stigmatised of our time, urging us to approach, console and care for them. Such an encounter also invites us to consider the cosmos at this point in history, in which we see death and life in travail. The cosmos bears the stigmata of brutal exploitation but still reveals the power of life, imprinted by its Creator.

Each one of us is invited to give a name to the stigmatised of our time and to recognise the signs of death and life in creation, all of which demand our commitment. May the Lord also imprint in us, in our hearts, hands and feet, the readiness to recognise the real-life calls to work for his Kingdom.

As Pope Francis said when he received the friars of the La Verna fraternity for the centenary year, «Christians are called to have a special relationship with the “stigmatised” people that they encounter. Those who are “marked” by life, who bear the scars of suffering — of injustice suffered or of mistakes made. And in this mission, the Saint of La Verna is a companion on the journey, supporting and helping those people not to let themselves be crushed by difficulties, fears and contradictions, their own and those of others. This is what Francis did every day, from the encounter with the leper onwards, forgetting himself in gift and service.⁴»

How do we cultivate an awareness that our mission is to bring to the stigmatised of today the same message that Jesus addressed to Francis, and that he also addresses to each of us — ‘I am with you’?

³ LMj 13,10

⁴ Address of his Holiness Pope Francis to the Communities of the Friars Minor of La Verna and of the Tuscan Province. Clementine Hall Friday, 5 April 2024

We proclaim with our lives and words the certainty that Christ is with us and with those we meet, especially those who suffer. This is the foundation of Christian hope that animates our journey.

Grateful to God for the great gift he has given us in Francis, a man transformed by the Spirit, we wholeheartedly wish you to celebrate the feast of our Seraphic Father with joy and with the renewed grace of being, like him, witnesses to the mystery of the Crucified and Risen Lord.

On this unique Feast of the Stigmata and the Feast of St Francis, we greet you fraternally!



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Br Massimo Fusarelli, OFM

Ignacio Ceja Jiménez, OFM

Br Ignacio Ceja Jiménez, OFM

Grzegorz Cholewa

Br Konrad Grzegorz Cholewa, OFM

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Rome, General Curia, 17th September 2024
Feast of the Stigmata of Saint Francis

Prot. 113546



ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM