



Message on the occasion of the Course on Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue

«Witnessing the Gospel through Dialogue:

A Franciscan Path for Interreligious and Ecumenical Engagement»

October 11th -24th, 2026

I. Initial Greeting and Introduction

To all of you, dear brothers, sisters, men and women religious and lay people gathered from various parts of the world to take part in this important course of formation, I extend my cordial and fraternal greeting: **"May the Lord give you peace!"**

We find ourselves in a time of extraordinary grace. We are in fact at the culmination of the celebration of the eight hundredth anniversary of Easter by our Seraphic Father St. Francis (1226-2026). Looking to his *Transitus* from this world to the Father does not mean yielding to a nostalgic memory but allowing oneself to be questioned by the vitality of his charism. Among the most luminous and demanding traits of his legacy is undoubtedly his vocation to be men and women of reconciliation and peace. The theme you are addressing in these days - *"Witnessing the Gospel through Dialogue: A Franciscan Path for Interreligious and Ecumenical Engagement"* - touches the very heart of our mission in the Today of history.

Dialogue, for the Franciscan Family, has never been a mere diplomatic strategy, nor a concession to cultural relativism or a refined academic debate. Dialogue is the very form in which the Gospel takes flesh in our daily lives; it is the Franciscan way of being in the world, announcing the Good News not with the force of imposition, but with the beauty of fraternity.

It is not without significance that you are gathering in this very city. For centuries, Istanbul has been the threshold between East and West and the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and its history bears the wound of divisions amongst Christians and, at the same time, the daily encounter with the world of Islam. The theme that brings you together finds here a terrain that resembles it.

II. The Charismatic Root: Dialogue as a Way of Living the Gospel

The greeting with which I opened these lines - *"May the Lord give you peace"* - is not a formula of courtesy. Francis receives it as a gift: in his Testament, he confesses that the Lord himself revealed to him that he should greet him in this way. The peace we proclaim does not come from us, and it is not simply the absence of conflict: it is the paschal fruit of the reconciliation brought about by Christ, who precedes us and whom we are sent to bring.



Those who dialogue in the spirit of Francis do not impose a truth: they offer and build this peace and learn to listen before speaking.

In the wake traced by the *Poverello*-the Poor Man of Assisi- every true encounter is born from having nothing of one's own (*sine proprio*) and therefore from *minoritas*. St. Francis understood that dialogue cannot be based on positions of power, superiority or pretended self-sufficiency. Dialogue requires the poverty of a listening heart, the inner freedom to strip oneself of one's prejudices and the sincere disposition to encounter the other as a gift from God.

There is an even deeper reason that makes dialogue not a tactic, but a vocation. The God that Francis contemplates is not a solitary God, but communion: the Father who gives Himself in the Son, the Son who responds in the love of the Spirit. If God Himself is dialogue, then dialogue is not a concession, but an entry by grace into the movement by which God communicates Himself to humanity. Ecumenism and the encounter between believers are thus not an appendix of Christian life, but a reflection of the action of God who gathers and reconciles.

Our early texts remind us of this with unsurpassed clarity. In Chapter XVI of the *Rule of the Bull*, the *Poverello*-Poor Man of Assisi outlines the twofold modality of mission amongst non-Christians:

The first way: "*Let them not quarrel or dispute but be subject to every human creature for love of God and confess that they are Christians.*" It is the way of an unarmed presence, of the witness of life that speaks even before words.

In this way the friar bears witness without expecting anything in return, not even that the other becomes a Christian. It is the freedom of the servant, who has already received everything and has nothing to defend; precisely for this reason, it can simply be a gift.

The second way: "*When they see that it pleases the Lord, let them proclaim the Word of God.*" Explicit proclamation is always born as the mature fruit of a welcoming relationship and discernment in the Spirit.

How can we forget Francis' iconic trip to Damietta in 1219? In the midst of the hatred and clamour of the weapons of the Fifth Crusade, he chose to cross the front lines, unarmed and defenceless, to meet Sultan Malik al-Kamil. There, St Francis wanted to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Saviour. The way was different: he did not seek victory or theological dispute, but, if he did not obtain the conversion of the Sultan, he saw the fruit of the fraternal encounter with him. That gesture remains an unsurpassed prophecy: to disarm the conflicts of the world one must first of all disarm one's heart.

A trait that often escapes us must be grasped: in Damietta, St Francis not only teaches but learns. He meets a man in search, and mysteriously understands him. After that experience, his outlook on the mission changes. The Rule - unique among the religious rules of its time - will devote an entire chapter to going among non-Christians: Damietta is like the laboratory of that page.



III. The Ecumenical Perspective: Reconciliation and the Common Journey

In this journey of dialogue, the first urgency concerns the recomposition of unity amongst all Christ's disciples. Ecumenism in the Franciscan style draws nourishment from the profound desire to mend the Lord Jesus' torn tunic through humility and mutual esteem.

Minority here offers a method, not just a sentiment. To become minor in the dialogue between the Churches means to recognise with truth one's own limitations and one's own historical faults, to put aside all ecclesial triumphalism, to learn to esteem the gifts that the Spirit has sown in other Christian traditions. Not the agreement at a little cost, but the truth sought in charity.

We are called to promote an ecumenism of life and prayer, interwoven with personal relationships, shared charity and listening to the Word. In a wounded and degraded planet, our immediate and urgent meeting point with the different Christian confessions also lies in caring for our Common Home. The echo of the *Canticle of the Creatures* invites us to walk together with all our Christian brothers and sisters to protect Creation, transforming ecological responsibility into an ecumenical workshop of hope and concrete action.

Alongside caring for the Common Home, unity is already anticipated today in another place: service to the poor. Churches and communities still divided in doctrine can serve the least together and, with the contribution of us minors, be poor among the poor. Christians who share the life of the least say more about unity than many documents.

And yet the ecumenical journey must not lapse into irenicism. In common prayer we have a foretaste of the promised unity; but the still-torn tunic remains a wound that does not leave us in peace. Francis made his own the "*holy restlessness*" for the "*not yet*": it asks each one for his own conversion, not just consensus on what already unites us.

IV. The Interreligious Perspective: The "Spirit of Assisi" in Our Time

Broadening our gaze beyond the boundaries of Christianity, our vocation impels us to believers of different religious traditions. This year marks the anniversary and therefore the vivid memory of the historic gathering called for by Saint John Paul II in 1986. The "Spirit of Assisi" continues to indicate a clear method: not to pray *against one another*, nor to give in to easy syncretism by all praying *the same thing*, but to stand **beside one another** to invoke the supreme gift of peace.

Our gaze towards other religions must be nourished by the certainty that the Holy Spirit works in ways unknown to us in the hearts of every man and woman. With an attitude of profound respect, we are called to see and value the *semina Verbi* (the seeds of the Word) present in every culture and faith. Today more than ever, in the face of the resurgence of fundamentalism, nationalism and the logic of identity conflict, interreligious dialogue is the evangelical response to break down the walls of hatred and build bridges of universal fraternity.



V. Current Challenges for the Franciscan Family

Dear friends, so that this Course does not remain a theoretical parenthesis, I would like to give you some concrete challenges for our lives and for our communities:

Overcoming the fear of the Other: We cannot bear witness to the Gospel if we allow mistrust or fear to guide our relationships. The other, whosoever he or she may be, is our brother, our sister. His face and his presence challenge us ever anew.

Investing in Ongoing Formation: Dialogue requires serious and rigorous preparation. It is necessary to know the roots of one's faith in depth in order not to fall into the oscillation between superficial relativism and defensive rigidity.

Living in the peripheries of encounter: Bring this passion for dialogue to the concrete contexts in which you live: in multicultural neighbourhoods, amongst migrants, in places of suffering and wherever human dignity is trampled on.

Finally, do not forget the movement that runs through our own Rule: it opens with the Gospel and closes with the sending. The Gospel is not lived closed in on oneself, but by giving it. You are here having been sent, and in turn being sent; you will return to your fraternities and your peoples.

VI. Conclusion and Blessing

As I wish you intense days of study, prayer, and fraternal discussion, I entrust the work of this course to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the true "Minister General of the Order" and the supreme architect of all dialogue and communion.

May the Centenary of 2026 help us to be renewed and eager to be true "instruments of peace" of God in the contemporary world. Upon each one of you, upon your communities and upon the people you will meet in your ministry, I cordially invoke the seraphic blessing of our Father St Francis:

"May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May He show you His face and have mercy upon you.

May He turn His gaze towards you and give you peace.

May the Lord bless you!"



Fraternally,

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