

CONTACT

QUARTERLY BULLETIN OF JUSTICE, PEACE AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION, OFM



**UCLAF IN BRAZIL,
MEETING IN
BRASILIA**



**FRANCISCAN
NETWORK OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN**



**ENGLISH-SPEAKING
JPIC MEETING**



A LETTER TO POPE FRANCIS

IN THE TEN YEARS OF YOUR PONTIFICATE, TEN GIFTS FOR WHICH TO THANK YOU

Dear Pope Francis, whom the cardinals as your brothers went to seek "almost to the end of the world":

May the Lord give you peace!

Ten years have passed since your election and your presentation in St Peter's Square, that was so cold but crowded, where you showed yourself as the bishop of the Church of Rome who 'presides in charity over all the churches'. Ten years you have done so many things good to the world and to humanity.

On this commemorative and heartfelt date, I would like to say our gratitude to you on my own behalf and on behalf of so many men and women in the Church and others, on the gifts you have given us during these ten years at the head of the Church. There are many other things you have done, and thank you for that, but the number of them in this case works more as a symbol than an adjective. I present them below.

1) Your name Francis, just like that

The day after that 13 March 2013, people wondered whether your name referred to St Francis Xavier, the great Jesuit missionary of the 16th century, or to St Francis of Assisi, the medieval saint. The answer came quickly. The chosen name was related to the saint of Assisi. The words 'Pope' and 'Francis' together seemed a paradox, but in these ten years, you have transformed them into an ecclesial harmony through your gestures and words.

At the same time, the question arose whether you would call yourself as Francis or Francis I. The answer was coming without postponing. You would have called yourself Francis, without adding either the ordinal or the Roman numeral. Among other things, we noticed that you decided to sign yourself without the small episcopal cross preceding your name and without the pontifical PP (pope) behind it.



2) Your humility and simplicity

How can we not be grateful for your gestures of the profound simplicity and the depth human. You present yourself as the humble Bishop of Rome and you ask for prayers for you. You constantly remind us to the young man from Assisi who renounced his wealth and luxurious clothes. You like sobriety and your vestments are sober. Your mitres have no gold or precious stones. The cross you wear on your chest is simple. Your language is the language of the people, so it is easy to understand, even if it is difficult to accept.

On Holy Thursday you liked to visit the Italian prisons to wash and to kiss the feet of inmates, some of them are of other religions. You have left the Apostolic Palace to live in the simplicity of the Vatican guesthouse or Casa Santa Marta. Every day of your pontificate you have lived with the conviction of your choice of simplicity.

3) Return to the centrality of the Gospel

In this, you are very similar to the Poverello who, precisely 800 years ago, began his Rule by saying: ‘The rule and life of the Friars Minor is this, that is, to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’. This was also your horizon of life and that of your being as a pastor in the Church. You showed us that all the rest of Christian life flows from the beauty of this Gospel life.

The first Apostolic Exhortation that borrows your signature begins precisely with this exclamation: ‘The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who encounter Jesus’. All the ecclesial reforms you have promoted were born out from the desire to bring us back to Jesus and to turn us away from which draws us away from Him.

4) The tenderness and vigour with which you govern the Church

Like St. Francis of Assisi, your Petrine ministry is carried out with tenderness and vigour. Many of your gestures are full of tenderness. Your commitment to the ethics of care reminds us to God’s tenderness. Your greatest weakness is in the face of human and ecological pain. That is why war hurts you and makes you a pastor who is seeking peace. You write or phone to the people in distress in order to comfort them. The question of communion for the divorced and remarried is certainly a constant concern in your inner dialogue.

In recent years you have sought out co-workers to help you in the governance of the Church.

Never we have seen before so many women working in the Roman Curia. As you say, when women arrive, things change for the better. You are a Christian with freedom of spirit.

At the same time, you have been demanding in terms of the living Gospel values in the Vatican Curia, but also in terms of the Church’s authority in the world. Your hand did not tremble in demanding economic transparency and sobriety in the use of Church goods. You are convinced that all renewal begins at home. You have dealt with the abuse of power, and you have not given pause to the problem of pederasty in the Church. Certainly, the wear and tear were great, but, undoubtedly, the consolation of the spirit was never lacking.

5) The gift of a year dedicated to mercy

In the third year of your pontificate, you did this. How good is that it has done to the Church to focus more on God’s mercy than on human sins. Your ministry is full of mercy. You speak about an open Church where there are no VIP seats. You recognize that the Church is made up of the sinners who need forgiveness and mercy. Therefore, the Church is for all. You have the special gift of bringing those who feel distant from the Church to be closer to it.

6) You have made the peripheries the centre of the Church

With your prophetic gestures you have

made the ‘discarded’ of society is visible. We remember you in Lampedusa when you criticized the European refugee policy. But you did not just want to make them visible, you wanted to bring them from the existential and social peripheries to the centre of the Church. Because you told us, ‘...true reality is seen from the peripheries... the periphery makes us understand the centre’. You work for a Church being closer to the poor and marginalized. In short, you work for a simple Church, with the poor and for the poor. How much resistance you must have encountered on this path, which was the same as that of Jesus and Francis of Assisi. That is why your concern is not so much that the Church accumulates the wealth, but that the Church actively fights the poverty.

7) Wanting a fraternal world and a fraternal Church

Fraternity is one of the key interpretations of your pontificate. In your first speech, on the day of your election, you said: ‘Let us pray for the whole world, that there may be a great fraternity’. You thus remind us of the dream of Francis of Assisi, the universal brother.

The backbone of your thinking is therefore in *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), in *Laudato si’* (2015) and in *Fratelli tutti* (2020). You seek to build a fraternal Church inwardly and outwardly. Likewise, you expanded this

fraternal horizon when you wrote in the first paragraph of *Laudato si'*: 'Our common home is also like a sister, with whom we share our existence'. Furthermore, in your last encyclical, you insisted on the need to build fraternity and social friendship "because St Francis, who felt himself brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, knew that he was even more united to those who were of his own flesh" (*Fratelli tutti*, n. 1). You are brother pope who seeks fraternity.

8) *Entering into a synodal process*

From the very beginning of your pontificate, you started a synodal path between the bishop and your people. "A path of brotherhood, of love, of trust between us," you said. This is nothing other than the acceptance of the Second Vatican Council, of which you are a faithful son. The Synod of the Amazon is a clear example of a synodal Church. You wanted to govern with others. You wanted to bring about the reform of the Roman Curia with a group of cardinals from all over the world. You know that the great changes take a time and are achieved through the processes. That is why you do not do violence to the times.

Moreover, you put us in a dynamic of synodality. 'Listen to the people' is your slogan. Not only the people of the Church, but also those who are or feel outside of the Church. The next synod will be a new Pentecost for the Church. May God continue to give you the lucidity and strength to carry it forward.

9) *The recognition of martyrdom in Latin America and other continents*

Who better than you can know to what the Latin American Church experienced in the second half of the last century. Many children, men and women bore witness to their faith in times of fierce persecution. Some of them have been raised to the altars as the beatified or as saints. St Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador is at the top of this list of witnesses.

10) *You challenge Franciscans to live their charisma and mission*

Finally, dear Francis, thank you for helping us with your witness of life and your words to reinterpret and to update the fundamental Franciscan charism. Your encyclicals are the texts for posterity and have worked so much good to us. They are a real gift for us.

Knowing you, if we asked you what gift you would like to receive, I am sure you would say that the best gift we can give you is to pray for you. I assure you that we will. But please give us your blessing and pray for us as well.

With appreciation and gratitude,

Br. Daniel Rodríguez Blanco, OFM.
Cover Photo: Vatican News.



UCLAF: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST PAUL. CHALLENGES FOR THE FRIARS MINOR

São Paulo, 25 January 2023. On the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, Ministers Provincial and Custodes continued the work of the General Assembly of the Union of Latin American Franciscan Conferences (UCLAF).

During the Eucharist celebration, Br Daniel Alejandro Fleitas Zeni, Minister Provincial of the Province of Saint Francis Solanus (Argentina) and President of the Conference of Brazil and the Southern Cone, emphasised how every friar minor is sent to announce the good news of the resurrection of the Lord, sowing his message of hope and life in the provincial fraternities and communities. “The content of the proclamation is clear. It heals wounds and illnesses; the Risen One is new life and a source of joy,” he said, continuing: “What does Paul mean in the Order’s path of evangelisation today and here in Latin America? St Paul took the message of Jesus to the ends of the known world. He never tired of preaching, even when imprisoned in Rome. [St Paul’s words] encourage us, Friars Minor of Latin America, to continue to proclaim hope and the Kingdom, to encourage us to take practical steps of renewal, transformation, and change in favour of a new evangelisation in its forms and methods”.

500 years of Franciscan presence in Mexico

Br Flávio Chávez opened the proceedings in the Saint Damasus Hall by talking about the Franciscan Jubilee in Mexico. In his account of Franciscanism in “New Spain” at the time, the first Franciscan friars to arrive were Br Pedro Melgarejo and Br Diego Altamirano, two military chaplains and not missionaries. The first really

structured mission arrived in Mexico on 13 May 1524 with twelve friars led by Br Martín de Valencia, superior of the Spanish Franciscan Province of San Gabriel, who, at the request of the Minister General of the Order carefully chose the so-called “twelve apostles” for the expedition.

Towards a new testimony to our times

Br Francisco Gómez Vargas, General Secretary for Missionary Evangelisation of the OFM, recalled that the 2021 General Chapter mandated the Secretariat to prepare a Ratio Evangelizationis for the Order. It must be “in harmony with the teaching of the Church’s Magisterium and the Order’s documents, through a fundamental process of Conferences and continental areas, based on the work already undertaken by the SGME”.

Formation and Studies

Br Darko Tepert, Secretary General for Formation and Studies, spoke in particular about initial formation in the Order. “Listening is essential for Formation at this time. We must listen to the candidates who express their desire to walk the path of this life with us. We must listen to their life situation, the social climate, and the cultural conditions, which in today’s world are changing rapidly. Listening also involves being open to change,” he added. “If we lack vocations in some areas, perhaps it is because we are no longer living our identity”.

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Br Daniel Nicolás Rodríguez Blanco, head of the General Office for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC), presented the 2022 Annual Report of the Franciscan Network for Migrants of the Americas. Then he explained that the JPIC Office must work to link, develop and support projects on integral ecology, paying special attention to formation in the different contexts of the Order. He also outlined the Order’s upcoming commitments, including participation

in WYD in Lisbon together with the Laudato Si’ Movement, while also asking the Pontifical Antonianum University and the Order’s Study Centres to promote formation in integral ecology in different languages and in collaboration with other institutions.

The complete account of the day in Portuguese on the website of the Province of the Immaculate Conception

Information: ofm.org



MEETING OF THE SECRETARIES FOR FORMATION AND STUDIES, MISSIONS AND EVANGELIZATION, AND JPIC ANIMATORS OF THE FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE OF BRAZIL – SOUTHERN CONE



With the aim of deepening the collaboration between the animation efforts of the provinces and custodies, the Conferences and the Order, Br. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM, Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, convoked the Secretaries for Formation and the Studies, Evangelization and Mission and JPIC Animators of the Franciscan Conference Brazil – Southern Cone to a meeting on January 27 and 28 of this year in the city of Brasilia, capital of Brazil.

The more than thirty brothers summoned were joined by the Secretary General for Formation and Studies, Br. Darko Tepert, OFM; the Secretary General for the Missions and Evangelization, Fr. Francisco Gómez Vargas, OFM; and the General Director of the Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, Fr. Daniel Rodríguez Blanco, OFM.

These three friars presented their work based on the mandates and guidelines outlined in the General Chapter of 2021. They offered some proposals for the entities and the Conference, such as the commitment to the elaboration of the Ratio Evangelizationis of the Order, support for the Franciscan Network for Migrants in Latin America (RFM), and the course for formators that is about to materialize.

Secondly, the two Secretaries and the JPIC Animator of the Conference presented the projects prepared the previous year. Then, each entity described the hopes and obstacles that they had encountered within the work entrusted to them. Br. Fernando dos Santos, Custos of the Custody of the Sacred Heart of Brazil and vice president of the Brazilian Conference, the Southern Cone, presented the results of the meeting of the Union of Franciscan Conferences of Latin America

and the Caribbean that had just ended at the Sao Paulo city.

With everything completed, work was done in groups and then the plenary session that resulted in concrete actions to be carried out collaboratively between Formation, Evangelization and JPIC. It is worth mentioning that, among them, is the creation of theoretical and practical contents for each of the stages of the Initial Formation in the areas of evangelization and JPIC, an Ongoing Formation project that includes mission experiences and in which the Under Ten friars are emphasized. Furthermore, there is a commitment to the strengthening of the work of the Franciscan Network for Migrants from Latin America.

Br. Daniel Rodríguez Blanco,
OFM

TEN YEARS WITH... FRANCIS



Br Massimo's words on the 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' pontificate. On the 10th anniversary of Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election to the papacy, the Minister General of the OFM, Br Massimo Fusarelli, shared a brief reflection on Pope Francis and these **ten years of his pontificate**.

"The Order of Friars Minor joins in the joy of many on the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis' pontificate. On 13 March 2013, we were the first to be struck by the bold choice of St Francis' name. Over these years, we have recognised more and more in the magisterium of Pope Francis' gestures and words the traces of the Christian vision of the Poverello of Assisi: **the centrality of the Gospel, love for the little ones and the poor, fraternity as social friendship in a time of war and inequality, reverence for creation, our common home**.

The Minister General with the General Definitory, on the **800th anniversary of the Rule**, with "Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Honorius and his canonically elected successors and to the Roman Church" (LR I:2) and remembers Pope Francis in prayer of praise and intercession for his intentions".

We recall some words from the greeting of Pope Francis on the evening of Wednesday, 13 March 2013, immediately after his election, "And now, let us begin this journey: Bishop and people. This journey of the Church of Rome, which is the one that presides in charity over all the Churches. A journey of brotherhood, of love, of trust between us. Let us always pray for each other. Let us pray that there may be a great brotherhood for the whole world. I hope that this journey of the Church, which we begin today and in which my Cardinal Vicar, here present, will assist me, will be fruitful for evangelising this beautiful city!"



MEETING BETWEEN FRANCISCAN MISSIONS AND THE JPIC GENERAL OFFICE

On Wednesday, March 15, at the OFM General Curia, Br. Daniel Rodriguez Blanco, OFM and Br. Taucen Hotlan Girsang, OFM of the JPIC General Office received the representatives of Franciscan Missions based in the United States of America, Br. James Gannon, OFM (Minister Provincial), Br. Andrew Brophy, OFM (Executive Director) and Br. Gil Noriega, OFM. It was a fraternal rather than a formal visit.

Franciscan Missions provides direct financial support to the Franciscan Order's missions around the world. The funds support orphanages, soup kitchens, medical clinics, sustainable water projects, and the development of farms to feed and teach others to farm.

Br. James shared the types of services they are carrying out and explained various challenges they are currently facing, as well as the number of supports and projects being handled, including some related works of JPIC.

Br. Daniel and Br. Taucen also explained what they are implementing for JPIC Rome according to the decisions of the General Chapter, which were then translated by the Animators of the International Council in Brazil into the Declaration of Petropolis 2022.

In the final part, the JPIC friars presented the priority issues related to the needs of migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean and in Latin America, as well as the formation, works and services of JPIC in Rome, in the USA and in other continents. For the Office, the important thing is always collaboration and good communication with the Franciscan JPIC Animators of the Order.

Br. Taucen Girsang
Br. Daniel Rodriguez Blanco

ENCOUNTER AND DIALOGUE ON "JUSTICE, PEACE AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION" AMONG POSTULANTS AND NOVICES

The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Commission of the Custody of the Holy Land initiated recently encounter and dialogue, first, among the postulants in Montefalco on January 28, then, among the novices in La Verna on January 30-31.

As part of its task to promote and animate among friars the values of JPIC as essential to Franciscan vocation, the Commission directed its attention to collaboration with the houses of initial formation through fraternal encounter and dialogue.

The commission's delegation, headed by its president fr. John Luke Gregory and joined by its members fr. Carlos Molina and fr. Mark Vertido Palafox (other members of the JPIC commission are fr. Mario Hadchiti and fr. Samhar Ishak) started each meeting with an introduction to JPIC values and activities at the different levels in the Order of Friars Minor. In connection

to this, fr. John Luke and fr. Carlos shared their experiences and the reflections from the JPIC International Council of the Order in Petropolis, Brazil (November 21-27, 2022).

Talking about the JPIC activities in the Custody made clear that the vocation of each friar in the Holy Land is not limited to the guarding of the holy places, which remains the essential component of the mission in these territories, but is also a life immersed in the daily pursuit of justice and peace through the various social and charitable services like housing, education, or elderly home, and through ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.



Aside from these, the Custody is also engaged in welcoming migrants and refugees in Rhodes or in spiritual assistance to migrant workers in Tel Aviv and in places. In the context of war and conflict, the Custody, through the initiative of the friars in Aleppo, founded in 2017 the Franciscan Care Center’s post-traumatic war treatment program for children, which was recognized by Petropolis Council urging the establishment of such center in other parts of the world.

After the general introduction and a deepening of the JPIC, a small-group sharing was included allowing the active participation of everyone was included. This

aimed to identify social or environmental problems in the local level and to find possible solutions. A presentation to the bigger group followed after.

To complete the general introduction to JPIC, the postulants and novices were also invited to read the prepared summary of the two encyclical letters of Pope Francis, which are Laudato si’ and Fratelli tutti.

In the following period, the other houses of initial formation will be visited by the Commission to continue to promote and raise awareness of JPIC.

Fra Mark Vertido Palafox
Secretary of Commission GPIC

Sources: custodia.org

MEETING JPIC ANIMATORS OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING CONFERENCE

On February 9, 2023, JPIC Animators came together in a virtual meeting organized by Russell Testa as the president of the English-speaking Franciscan Conference. Br. Daniel Rodriguez Blanco, OFM and Br. Taucen Hotlan Girsang, OFM from JPIC General Office in Rome, have participated.

Besides having to converge each other, it was a special time to share the activities that JPIC animators have been in charged. The orientation and directions of the General Chapter 2021, the Petropolis Statement, the expectations of JPIC Office in Rome, the upcoming plans and concrete actions as well as the programs for the future, were presented.

During the sharing session, several themes emerged such as migrants, racism, climate crisis, and engaging to the young people. The question was how to figure out our role as Franciscans in this time.

It becomes clear that the friars have been working hard to help migrants through preparing shelter and sharing the foods. One friar said “Living with migrants is our great challenge. Only through such way, we will be able to understand them better”.

Although awareness has been raised about the climate crisis and environmental degradation, more attention is needed to practice and concretize some direct actions. Solidarity of resources, collaborations and networks, links and connections are going to be very useful to help some countries in real critical situation.

Finally, it was seen as a challenge for the friars to keep in touch and engage more with young people. And so, this year young friars will be able participate in World Youth Day in Portugal.

Br. Taucen Hotlan Girsang, OFM



THE NEW CHAIRPERSON OF THE ROMAN VI

On Wednesday, February 15, 2023, The Inter-Franciscan Commission for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation held a meeting in General Curia of the Capuchins in Rome.



The Commission, which is called “Roman VI”, is composed of the representatives of the Franciscan family. The representatives are Br. Daniel Rodriguez Blanco, OFM and Br. Taucen Hotlan Girsang, OFM (new members), Fr. Joel de Jesus, OFM Cap, Br. Michael Lasky, OFM Conv, Sr. Nancy Celaschi, OSF and Pietro Ferri, OFS (new member).

Br. Joel de Jesus, OFM Cap, as the chairperson of the Commission, opened the meeting and welcome the new members. He reinforced firstly the meeting’s agenda. He explained about the Commission such as its brief history, statement identity, structure, operational procedures, and the valuable collaboration with Franciscans International. He underlined the roles, the responsibilities, and the services of the Commission’s structure. He reminded that the Commission chairperson’s role is the contact person, the one who is responsible to prepare the agenda for the meetings, but he/she will be assisted by another member of the Commission as secretary.

Further, the Commission selected its new officers for the next two years. Br. Michael Lasky, OFM Conv was elected as the new president of the Commission. And Sr. Nancy Celaschi, OSF will continue to serve as secretary.

After the election, the new president scheduled the date for the next meeting which will take place on February 24-26, 2023, in Assisi, with its agenda “A Convivial for Itinerary of Peace”.

Then, Br. Benedict Ayodi, OFM Cap and Br. Markus Heinz of the Franciscans International presented a matter of collaboration between “Roman VI” and Franciscans International in accordance with Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In responds, all members agreed that there is still a need to look for new forms of concrete collaboration. To close the meeting, the members of the Commission were invited fraternally to have lunch together by Capuchin’s friars.

Br. Taucen Girsang

MEETING OF THE MEDITERRANEAN FRANCISCAN NETWORK COORDINATION COMMITTEE. ORGANISED BY THE GENERAL JPIC OFFICE

Rome, 22 March 2023. From 22 to 24 March, the meeting of the Coordination Committee of the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean, organized by the General Office for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC), is being held at the General Curia in Rome.

It began with a prayer led by Br Taucen Girsang (Deputy Director of the General JPIC Office), centred on the Gospel of Matthew 25:35 (“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you gave me hospitality”). Then Br Daniel Rodríguez Blanco, Director of the Office, presented the objectives of the meeting. “In general,” said Br Daniel, “it is important to take up the path of the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean to implement a short- and medium-term work project that will allow its consolidation. Specifically, we should approach the current reality of the Mediterranean, which offers input for



making decisions based on the needs and opportunities that arise in this part of the world. Furthermore, knowing the recent history of the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean, we could create a continuity with the previous work and thus trace out a path to follow for the coming months, specifying the steps and preparing the next meeting of the Committee”.

Br Ignacio Ceja Jiménez, Vicar General, welcomed the participants with a message of hope and realism: “This meeting takes place a few days after the 10th anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Francis, who chose this name so as not to forget the poor. His first trip outside Rome was to Lampedusa to denounce the world’s culture of indifference towards migrants and the poor. The 2021 General Chapter of the Order wanted to emphasise how we friars must let ourselves be challenged by the challenges of today. Our task is to develop this Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean and encourage projects concerning migrants: it must not be a commitment only of some “special” brothers and sisters. It must be part of our Franciscan evangelising mission. We must all become aware of this issue”.

The conference is being attended by representatives of the Mediterranean NGO Saving Humans, Sr. Miriam Oyarzo, FMSC, working in Turkey; Br. Fabio L’amour, OFM, working in Morocco; Pedro Fernández, OFS, from Valencia (Spain); Br. Fausto Yudego from Pamplona (Spain); Br. John Luke, OFM, from Greece; Br. Francesco Zecca, OFM, from the OIKOS Project; Br. Markus Heinze, OFM, Executive Director of Franciscans International.



The Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean was born in 2019 in Malta on the occasion of the 8th centenary of the meeting of St Francis with Sultan Malik al-Kamil, and encouraged by the Minister General at the time, Brother Michael Perry.

The Network wants to make the Franciscan presence in the Mediterranean fruitful, promoting the culture of encounter, dialogue and fraternity and triggering practical projects. The Friars Minor, who are present in all the Mediterranean countries, accepting the invitation of Pope Francis to listen to the cry that comes from the waters of the mare nostrum, intend to launch practical processes to transform the Mediterranean into a Common Home, following the paradigm of integral ecology.

This objective will be achieved by the Friars Minor through the Office of Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation, in collaboration with the Pontifical Antonianum University, the Pontifical International Marian Academy, the Muslim-Christian Marian Commission and other partners.

“The Mediterranean is precisely the sea of mestizaje – if we do not understand mestizaje, we will never understand the Mediterranean – a sea geographically closed to the oceans, but culturally always open to encounter, dialogue and mutual enculturation” (Pope Francis). From www.retefrancescanamediterraneo.org

Source: ofm.org



TRIGGERING A DIFFERENT CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER, OF INTEGRAL ECOLOGY, OF DEVELOPMENT

During the meeting of the Coordination Committee of the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean, we interviewed Br Francesco Zecca, OFM, of the Oikos Project and JPIC coordinator of COMPI (Conference of Minister Provincials of Italy and Albania).

Br Francesco, tell us about Oikos. Why the choice of Taranto?

Oikos originated in Taranto, in our friary, in an environmentally and socially wounded city.

From there we want to start again and trigger a process on integral ecology not only for the city of Taranto, but for the whole Mediterranean. For five years now we have been collaborating with the Pontifical Antonianum University, the Taranto Chamber of Commerce, a group of entrepreneurs and a group of young lay people who have been working on civil economy for 10 years: this has triggered a process on integral ecology that can be a model for other contexts. From a place that has been socially, environmentally and economically wounded and “violated”, an alternative proposal for a different economy, a different culture, which is not only for the city but for the entire Mediterranean, can be launched. In 2026 the Mediterranean Games will be held in Taranto: this is a good opportunity to trigger a different culture and a different way of thinking.

Doesn't the industrial model of the Ilva steelworks seem obsolete in the 21st century?

Ilva continues to produce, but not at the same pace as in the past: while it used to produce 8 million tonnes of steel a year, it now produces three million, so it is in underproduction, not least because the process is still ongoing, and some plants have been seized. It is a very complex situation, because we are talking about an industry that is two and a half times the size of the city, redundancies are continuing, and many workers are already laid off. There is a social problem as well as an environmental one, but there is a city that is trying to give alternatives to big industry. Big industry in the 20th century was presented as the miracle of southern Italy, but it turned out to be a big bluff, because it did not enhance the territory, on the contrary! Suffice it to think how the city has lost its link with its sea. We must therefore re-establish this link with the sea, recover the entrepreneurial capacity in young people that has been destroyed, and make paths to enhance the territory, culture, and the story of small business.

It is often said that “you either die of hunger, or you die of pollution”. What do you think of this combination?

Unfortunately, for many years Ilva was the only source of work for thousands of people. When I talk about the need to trigger a new entrepreneurial mentality I am talking about precisely this: if business generates income but is not attentive to life, it is not real business. The risk is that we continue with old industrial policies, which are not those of integral ecology. This is why we need to start from Taranto to say that we need a different vision, which does not only concern that city: it is a global problem on how to connect enterprise, society, environment and health, on how to hold things together. It is a problem of integral ecology, of a different outlook and culture.

The meeting of the Franciscan Mediterranean Network takes place a few weeks after the tragedy of the migrants in Cutro (KR, Italy). My personal impression is that today we are more moved by the photo of an abandoned kitten than by such tragedies. What is your impression?

When Pope Francis was elected, the first trip he made was to Lampedusa, a few days after a tragedy at sea. There he spoke of the globalisation of indifference, which is a tragedy: I believe that it is a cultural problem that needs to be tackled seriously, we need to change the model of thinking that envisages first-division lives and second-division lives, lives

that are not worthy of mourning, that can die and that cannot even be mourned, that are reduced to being a code or a number. What the Pope has triggered over the last 10 years with his journeys in the Mediterranean, with the document on human brotherhood, with the two encyclicals, *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, and thus with the construction of the Mediterranean as a “Common Home”, can become the hallmark of all this: how to transform these waters of death into waters of brotherhood.

How do the Franciscans respond to this appeal?

We Franciscans are present in almost all the countries of the Mediterranean, but we need to move from a local commitment to a more global vision that connects all the groups involved. This means working together, changing structures that perhaps no longer respond to today's needs. History asks us to do this: in 10 years, 25,000 people have died in the Mediterranean: this cannot leave us indifferent, it must challenge us and trigger pathways that are not just assistance to those people, but must help deactivate processes that are criminal. We must promote the language of peace, of dialogue, of fraternity.

You are not alone in this process.

No, there has been a lot of work and collaboration also with Muslims. A few days ago here in Rome an energy community agreement was signed between the General Curia of Rome, the Grand Mosque and the Pontifical Antonianum University, but behind it there is a lot of collaborative work also with the Pontifical Marian Academy. The role of Mary, who connects and unites Christians and Muslims, tells us that the role of women can also be thought of differently. Indeed, Mary is the gateway to rethinking the role of women, which is one of the tragedies of so many countries in the Middle East or North Africa.

The Oikos Project (“home” in Greek) involves universities, businesses, monasteries, youth, culture, to truly make the Mediterranean a “common home”.

It is important to trigger networks between all these entities: with the monasteries of the Poor Clares, who

have a contemplative look at reality, we are creating a network of Marian shrines throughout the Mediterranean, to trigger networks of peace dialogue in even complicated places like Lebanon. We are working on how to create groups of young people educated in the “common home” through a musical tour in 10 Mediterranean cities, with the collaboration of Giovanni Caccamo. A group of young people has already been set up in Taranto, which is training on how to convert the classical enterprise into a new enterprise from the perspective of integral ecology: profit should not be the end, but the means to achieve the welfare of the community. We are collaborating with universities, at PUA there is already a diploma in Integral Ecology. It would be nice one day to have a change of mentality and, for example, to offer young people the possibility of a Mediterranean Erasmus, which would change the vision of the Mediterranean from a frontier, from a sea of death to a place of encounter and fruitful mutual exchange.

Melania Bruno
OFM Communications Office



CONCLUSION OF THE MEETING OF THE MEDITERRANEAN FRANCISCAN NETWORK COORDINATION COMMITTEE. "WE WANT TO BE LIKE A GRAIN OF SAND IN THE GREAT MEDITERRANEAN"

Rome, 24 March 2023. From 22 to 24 March, the Coordination Committee of the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean meeting, organised by the General Office for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC), was held at the General Curia in Rome.

Br Daniel Rodríguez Blanco, Director of the General Office of JPIC, commented on the event: "The objective of this meeting was to reactivate the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean. We did it with great enthusiasm and hope. We have a programme that we have already begun to develop with the three components of the Network, namely Migrants and Refugees, Youth, Dialogue and Peace. We want to be like a grain of sand in the great Mediterranean".

During the conference, there were many ideas to take up the Committee's journey and plan future meetings. Br Daniel retraced the "history" of the Committee in 14 stages, starting in 2018 when those in charge of the Evangelising Mission and JPIC of COMPI (Conference of Minister

Provincials of Italy and Albania) proposed to the General Curia to create a Mediterranean Franciscan Network, to coordinate all the Franciscan entities in the Mediterranean area. Since then, the journey has had its ups and downs (also due to the pandemic), but in 2021 the General Chapter emphasised the importance of this Network in its Mandate: "The Minister General and his Definitory, in collaboration with the JPIC Office and the SGME, must continue to implement the Franciscan Network of the Mediterranean and the Franciscan Network for Migrants in Latin America, and will continue to promote and accompany similar projects and processes in favour of migrants in Africa, Asia and all the border areas of the Order".

The Network is engaged in three major areas (Migrants, Dialogue and Youth) that are interconnected. Br John Luke, an Englishman from Sheffield and now a friar of the Custody of the Holy Land working on the island of Rhodes (Greece), tells us: "I remember a Syrian boy of about four years old: he arrived as a migrant in Rhodes with his father and brother, while his mother and sister died under the bombs. We are talking about migration, but also about future young people who bear great wounds".

The theme of "healing inner wounds" was touched on several times by the participants: Br Francesco Zecca recalled how in Ukraine, a Capuchin friar and a Conventual friar use theatre to heal the wounds of war victims; Sr Miriam Oyarzo, FMSC, stressed the importance of "animating and promoting a culture of peace, dialogue and healing".

Among the challenges facing the Committee is a "change of mentality": Br Ignacio Ceja Jiménez spoke of this in his welcome address, and many pointed it out. "We must

have a single vision", said Pedro Fernández, OFS, born in Andalucía but "migrated" to Valencia, where as a lawyer, he offers his service to migrants free of charge. "We must not disperse or divide, but unite and work together in the three directions". Br Fabio L'Amour, a Brazilian working in Morocco, said: "We must have a new vision, a new way of working. Let us think of the future, of those who will have to give continuity to this work after us".

Br Markus Heinze, OFM, Executive Director of Franciscans International, emphasised the importance of mapping the different Franciscan entities working in this field in the Mediterranean: "We must connect with all the Franciscan identities working in the area, we must network and understand how to do it".

The project concerning Migrants and Refugees aims to involve all the Franciscan entities of the Mediterranean within the Network to propose a meeting for them to define a joint project, also at the financial level.



For the Dialogue and Peace area, it is proposed to animate, promote, connect, communicate and dialogue with the other Franciscans (friars and sisters) who already have the task in the various dialogue commissions: the need to bring the message of Peace through a methodology specific to the Mediterranean Network, for example through music, culture, meetings and cultural exchanges, is emphasised.

In the context of Youth, they are to be the “leaven of change for a new humanism in the Mediterranean, to make it a Common Home”. Therefore, the Network will support OIKOS courses for young people, in particular in associated universities; a tour in different Mediterranean cities from September 2023 to September 2024, promoted by Giovanni Caccamo

and the Andrea Bocelli Foundation, will be carried out; the setting up of youth groups (inclusive and interreligious) will be supported; and the Network will be present at WYD Lisbon as part of JPIC activities (July – August 2023).

The conference was attended by Sr. Miriam Oyarzo, FMSC, working in Turkey; Br. Fabio L’Amour, OFM, working in Morocco; Pedro Fernández, OFS, from Valencia (Spain); Br. John Luke, OFM, from Greece; Br. Francesco Zecca, OFM, from the OIKOS Project; Br. Markus Heinze, OFM, Executive Director of Franciscans International; Fausto Yudego, from Spain.

Melania Bruno
OFM Communications Office



FRANCISCAN MEDITERRANEAN NETWORK (FMN) COMMITTEE MEETING

Taking place at the OFM General Curia, the meeting lasted for three days from March 22 to 24, 2023.

This FMN meeting was a form of coordination and cooperation of brothers and sisters working with migrants and refugees, youth and peace-dialogue in the Mediterranean. Coming from different places, the committee members who participated in this meeting were: Br. Daniel Rodriguez Blanco, OFM as director of the JPIC General Office (Rome), Sr. Miriam Oyarzo, FMSC (Istanbul-Turkey); Br. Fabio L’amour, OFM (Marrakech-Morocco); Br. Fausto Yudego, OFM (Spain); Br. Francesco Zecca, OFM (Taranto-Italy); Br. Markus Heinze, OFM (Executive Director of Franciscans International-Geneva-Switzerland); and Mr. Pedro Fernández, OFS (Valencia-Spain).

The FMN in brief

March 22, 2023. The morning session was marked by presentations led by Br. Daniel to familiarize the participants by answering the following questions: what is your name and where do you work, what are your fears and what are your hopes for the future. He also presented the objectives of this meeting.

Then, Br. Ignacio Ceja, OFM, Vicar General of the Order, welcomed all the participants. He argued that serving migrants is an important mission of the Franciscan Order and that it is not a specialization for a few interested friars. Rather, he said, this mission is carried out as a form of concern for the Church so that many parties can be actively involved in it. The morning session concluded by listening to and dialoguing with Father Mattia Ferrari and Luca Casarini who work with the organization Mediterranean Saving Humans, who shared their experience of caring for migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean.

In the afternoon session, some of the participants were asked to share their experiences in the field. The aim was to bring the committee members closer to the current reality in the Mediterranean. The sharing began with Br. Fabio explaining his work in Morocco and continued with Mr. Pedro who works for the legal rights of migrants in Valencia-Spain. Br. John Luke shared his concerns for migrants in Greece and spoke about feeding and helping migrants peculiarly children and youth. After a short break, the participants listened to Sr. Miriam’s testimony about serving with migrants in Istanbul-Turkey. Br. Francesco then explained the OIKOS project in Italy in which he works together with other friars.

From the field experience, it became clear that the reality of ministry with migrants is dynamic because Franciscan brothers and sisters have to face a number of challenges, especially those related to the policies of a country and the laws in force there. Of course, there are other problems in general, such as sickness, hunger, abandonment, alienation, unemployment, undocumented status, violence, etc.

FMN Service Areas

March 23, 2023. After listening to the participants exchange experiences the previous day, the first session began this morning with a presentation



by Br. Daniel. He described a historical overview of FMN at the beginning, the meetings that have been held and the agreements made, then the project stopped for a while during the pandemic, and reappearing in the mandate 28 of the OFM General Chapter 2021.

From the meetings that have been held, the FMN focuses on three areas: migrants and refugees, dialogue-peace and youth. What is needed then is how these three areas of ministry are operated on the ground. After a brief dialogue, the participants entered into groups for a more serious and in-depth discussion. The groups were divided according to the themes of migrants and refugees, youth and peace-dialogue.

The afternoon session consisted of a plenary where each group presented its conclusions. Based on these results, the meeting reached a conclusion that will later be converted into agreements. It is expected that the FMN will have a good collaborative system with a common vision of service.

Next FMN Meeting

March 24, 2023. The plenary went on to outline a work path for each of the sections, i.e. migrants and refugees, youth and dialogue-peace.

In the first session the participants conveyed their plans, thoughts, opinions, hopes and so on. All ideas and suggestions were then collected. In the second session, each participant returned to the group and discussed service projects for immigrants and refugees, peace-dialogue and youth. After a short break, the committee members moved to the plenary for the development of one-year work schedule from March 2023 to March 2024.

From the meeting it can be concluded that the FMN rises with a new perspective, a new spirit and a new hope. Because the same network will surely emerge in other continents.

Br. Taucen Girsang, OFM

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE 56TH WORLD DAY OF PEACE

No one can be saved alone.

Combatting Covid-19 together, embarking together on paths of peace

“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians, 5:1-2).

1. With these words, the Apostle Paul encouraged the Thessalonian community to remain steadfast, their hearts and feet firmly planted and their gaze fixed on the world around them and the events of history, even as they awaited the Lord's return. When tragic events seem to overwhelm our lives, and we feel plunged into a dark and difficult maelstrom of injustice and suffering, we are likewise called to keep our hearts open to hope and to trust in God, who makes himself present, accompanies us with tenderness, sustains us in our weariness and, above all, guides our path. For this reason, Saint Paul constantly exhorts the community to be vigilant, seeking goodness, justice and truth: "So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (5:6). His words are an invitation to remain alert and not to withdraw into fear, sorrow or resignation, or to yield to distraction or discouragement. Instead, we should be like sentinels keeping watch and ready to glimpse the first light of dawn, even at the darkest hour.

2. Covid-19 plunged us into a dark night. It destabilized our daily lives, upset our plans and routines, and disrupted the apparent tranquillity of even the most affluent societies. It generated disorientation and suffering and caused the death of great numbers of our brothers and sisters.

Amid a whirlwind of unexpected challenges and facing a situation confusing even from a scientific standpoint, the world's healthcare workers mobilized to relieve immense suffering and to seek possible remedies.

At the same time, political authorities had to take measures to organize and manage efforts to respond to the emergency.

In addition to its physical aspects, Covid-19 led to a general malaise in many individuals and families; the long periods of isolation and the various restrictions on freedom contributed to this malaise, with significant long-term effects.

Nor can we overlook the fractures in our social and economic order that the pandemic exposed, and the contradictions and inequalities that it brought to the fore. It threatened the job security of many individuals and aggravated the ever-increasing problem of loneliness in our societies, particularly on the part of the poor and those in need. We need but think of the millions of informal workers in many parts of the world left without a job and without any support during the time of the lockdown.

Only rarely do individuals and societies achieve progress in conditions that generate such feelings of despondency and bitterness, which weaken efforts to ensure peace while provoking social conflict, frustration and various forms of violence. Indeed, the pandemic seems to have upset even the most peaceful parts of our world, and exposed any number of forms of fragility.



3. Three years later, the time is right to question, learn, grow and allow ourselves to be transformed as individuals and as communities; this is a privileged moment to prepare for "the day of the Lord". I have already observed on a number of occasions that we never emerge the same from times of crisis: we emerge either better or worse. Today we are being asked: What did we learn from the pandemic? What new paths should we follow to cast off the shackles of our old habits, to be better prepared, to dare new things? What signs of life and hope can we see, to help us move forward and try to make our world a better place?

Certainly, after directly experiencing the fragility of our own lives and the world around us, we can say that the greatest lesson we learned from Covid-19 was the realization that we all need one another. That our greatest and yet most fragile treasure is our shared humanity as brothers and sisters, children of God. And that none of us can be saved alone. Consequently, we urgently need to join together in seeking and promoting the

universal values that can guide the growth of this human fraternity. We also learned that the trust we put in progress, technology and the effects of globalization was not only excessive, but turned into an individualistic and idolatrous intoxication, compromising the very promise of justice, harmony and peace that we so ardently sought. In our fast-paced world, the widespread problems of inequality, injustice, poverty and marginalization continue to fuel unrest and conflict, and generate violence and even wars.

The pandemic brought all this to the fore, yet it also had its positive effects. These include a chastened return to humility, a rethinking of certain consumeristic excesses, and a renewed sense of solidarity that has made us more sensitive to the suffering of others and more responsive to their needs. We can also think of the efforts, which in some cases proved truly heroic, made by all those people who worked tirelessly to help everyone emerge from the crisis and its turmoil as best they could.

This experience has made us all the more aware of the need for everyone, including peoples and nations, to restore the word “together” to a central place. For it is together, in fraternity and solidarity, that we build peace, ensure justice and emerge from the greatest disasters. Indeed, the most effective responses to the pandemic came from social groups, public and private institutions, and international organizations that put aside their particular interests and joined forces to meet the challenges. Only the peace that comes from a fraternal and disinterested love can help us overcome personal, societal and global crises.

4. Even so, at the very moment when we dared to hope that the darkest hours of the Covid-19 pandemic were over, a terrible new disaster befell humanity. We witnessed the onslaught of another scourge: another war, to some extent like that of Covid-19, but driven by culpable human decisions. The war in Ukraine is reaping innocent victims and spreading insecurity, not only among those directly affected, but in a widespread and indiscriminate way for everyone, also for those who, even thousands of kilometres away, suffer its collateral effects – we need but think of grain shortages and fuel prices.

Clearly, this is not the post-Covid era we had hoped for or expected. This war, together with all the

other conflicts around the globe, represents a setback for the whole of humanity and not merely for the parties directly involved. While a vaccine has been found for Covid-19, suitable solutions have not yet been found for the war. Certainly, the virus of war is more difficult to overcome than the viruses that compromise our bodies, because it comes, not from outside of us, but from within the human heart corrupted by sin (cf. Gospel of Mark 7:17-23).

5. What then is being asked of us? First of all, to let our hearts be changed by our experience of the crisis, to let God, at this time in history, transform our customary criteria for viewing the world around us. We can no longer think exclusively of carving out space for our personal or national interests; instead, we must think in terms of the common good, recognizing that we belong to a greater community, and opening our minds and hearts to universal human fraternity. We cannot continue to focus simply on preserving ourselves; rather, the time has come for all of us to endeavour to heal our society and our planet, to lay the foundations for a more just and peaceful world, and to commit ourselves seriously to pursuing a good that is truly common.

In order to do this, and to live better lives after the Covid-19 emergency, we cannot ignore one fundamental

fact, namely that the many moral, social, political and economic crises we are experiencing are all interconnected, and what we see as isolated problems are actually causes and effects of one another. Consequently, we are called to confront the challenges of our world in a spirit of responsibility and compassion. We must revisit the issue of ensuring public health for all. We must promote actions that enhance peace and put an end to the conflicts and wars that continue to spawn poverty and death. We urgently need to join in caring for our common home and in implementing clear and effective measures to combat climate change. We need to battle the virus of inequality and to ensure food and dignified labour for all, supporting those who lack even a minimum wage and find themselves in great difficulty. The scandal of entire peoples starving remains an open wound. We also need to develop suitable policies for welcoming and integrating migrants and those whom our societies discard. Only by responding generously to these situations, with an altruism inspired

by God’s infinite and merciful love, will we be able to build a new world and contribute to the extension of his kingdom, which is a kingdom of love, justice and peace.

In sharing these reflections, it is my hope that in the coming New Year we can journey together, valuing the lessons that history has to teach us. I offer my best wishes to Heads of State and Government, to Heads of International Organizations, and to the leaders of the different religions. To all men and women of good will I express my prayerful trust that, as artisans of peace, they may work, day by day, to make this a good year! May Mary Immaculate, Mother of Jesus and Queen of Peace, intercede for us and for the whole world.

From the Vatican, 8 December 2022
Francis



POPE LAUNCHES "BORGO LAUDATO SI" PROJECT IN CASTEL GANDOLFO

Pope Francis establishes an education center on integral ecology in the papal residence of Castel Gandolfo, near Rome, to promote "ecological conversion" as called for in his Encyclical *Laudato si'*.

Since the publication of his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, on *Care for Our Common Home* in 2015, Pope Francis has insisted on the crucial importance of ecological education for an authentic "ecological conversion", defined as the "transformation of hearts and minds toward greater love of God, each other, and creation".

Educating to integral ecology

As a concrete contribution to this effort, the Holy Father has launched the "Borgo Laudato Si'" Project, an education center on integral ecology hosted in the beautiful setting of the pontifical residence in Castel Gandolfo, 24 kilometers south of Rome.

A statement by the Vatican Governorate explains that the centre will be open to all people of good will and that "The activities and initiatives to be implemented in the coming months aim to combine training in integral ecology, circular and generative economy, and environmental sustainability".

Establishment of the the Laudato Si' Centre for Higher Education

The Pope has entrusted the implementation of the project to the Laudato Si' Centre for Higher Education, which he formally established with a Chirograph issued on Thursday as "a scientific, educational and social organization, working for integral formation", with its own Statute.

According to the papal decree, the Centre will also gradually take over some of the competencies of the Directorate of the Pontifical Villas of Castel Gandolfo, including the Papal Palace and the Pontifical Gardens.

Caring for creation and for the least of our brothers and sisters are inseparable

In the introduction to the decree, Pope Francis recalls *Laudato Si'*, reiterating that "Caring for our 'Common Home' is a way of taking responsibility for our neighbour, and at the same time recognizing the infinite beauty of God and contemplating the mystery of the universe". The creative work of God, he stresses citing the Encyclical, is "inseparable from caring for the least of our brothers and sisters and those who have been abandoned".

In a second Chirograph, the Holy Father the members of the Laudato Si' Centre for Higher Education. They include: Fr. Fabio Baggio (Director General), Sr. Alessandra Smerilli t FMA, and Ms Francesca Romana Busnelli, (members of the Board of Directors) and Mr Antonio Errigo(Secretary).

By Vatican News staff reporter



PROPHETIC SPEECH OF POPE FRANCIS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

On January 31, 2023, Pope Francis, during his apostolic journey to the Democratic Republic of Congo, offered a prophetic speech that we present in its entirety because of its strength and value.

Mr President,

Honourable Members of Government and the Diplomatic Corps,

Eminent Religious and Civil Authorities,

Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society and the World of Culture,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I offer you a cordial greeting and I thank His Excellency the President for his kind words. I am happy to be here in this beautiful, vast and luxuriant land, which embraces, to the north, the equatorial forest, in the centre and towards the south, plateaus and wooded savannas, to the east, hills, mountains, volcanoes and lakes, and to the west great bodies of water, with the Congo River that flows into the ocean. In your country, which is like a continent itself within the greater continent of Africa, it seems that the entire earth breathes. Yet if the geography of this verdant lung is so rich and variegated, its history has not been comparably blessed. Torn by war, the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to witness within its confines conflicts and forced migrations, and to suffer from terrible forms of exploitation, unworthy of humanity and of creation. This country, so immense and full of life, this diaphragm of Africa, struck by violence like a blow to the stomach, has seemed for some time to be gasping for breath. Mr President, you spoke of this forgotten genocide that the Republic of the Congo is suffering.

As you, the Congolese people, fight to preserve your dignity and your territorial integrity against deplorable attempts to fragment the country, I come to you, in the name of Jesus, as a pilgrim of reconciliation and of peace. I have greatly desired to be here and now at last I have come to bring you the closeness, the affection and the consolation of the entire Church and to learn from your example of patience, courage and struggle.

I would like to speak to you using an image that nicely symbolizes the luminous beauty of this land: the image of the diamond. Dear women and men of the Congo, your country is truly a diamond of creation. At the same time, you, all of you, are infinitely more precious than any treasure found in this fruitful soil! I am here to embrace you and to remind you that you yourselves are of inestimable worth, that the Church and the Pope have confidence in you, and that they believe in your future, the future that is in your hands and for which you deserve to devote all your gifts of intelligence, wisdom and industry. Take heart, my Congolese brothers and sisters! Arise, take once more into your hands, like a pure diamond, all that you are, your dignity and your calling to preserve in harmony and peace this home in which you dwell. Revive the spirit of your national hymn, dreaming and putting into practice its message: "Through hard work, we will build a country more beautiful than before, in peace."

Dear friends, diamonds are usually rare, yet here they are abundant. If that is true of the material wealth hidden in the soil, it is even more true of the spiritual wealth present within your hearts. For it is from hearts that peace and development are born, because, with God's help, men and women are capable of justice and of forgiveness, of concord and reconciliation, of commitment

and perseverance in putting to good use the many talents they have received. Here, at the beginning of my journey, I want to appeal to you: may every Congolese feel called to do his or her part! May violence and hatred no longer find room in the heart or on the lips of anyone, since these are inhuman and unchristian sentiments that arrest development and bring us back to a gloomy past.

In the light of arrested development and regression to the past, it is a tragedy that these lands, and more generally the whole African continent, continue to endure various forms of exploitation. There is a slogan that emerges from the subconscious of many cultures and peoples: "Africa must be exploited". This is terrible! Political exploitation gave way to an "economic colonialism" that was equally enslaving. As a result, this country, massively plundered, has not benefited adequately from its immense resources: paradoxically, the riches of its land have made it "foreign" to its very inhabitants. The poison of greed has smeared its diamonds with blood. This is a tragedy to which the economically more advanced world often closes its eyes, ears and mouth. Yet this country and this continent deserve to be respected and listened to; they deserve to find space and receive attention. Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo! Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: it is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered. May Africa be the protagonist of its own destiny! May the world acknowledge the catastrophic things that were done over the centuries to the detriment of the local peoples, and not forget this country and this continent. May Africa, the smile and hope of the world, count for more. May it be spoken of more frequently, and have greater weight and prestige among the nations!



Room needs to be made for diplomacy that is authentically human, for a diplomacy where peoples are concerned for other peoples, for a diplomacy centred not on control over land and resources, expansionism and increased profits, but rather on providing opportunities for people to grow and develop. In the case of this people, one has the impression that the international community has practically resigned itself to the violence devouring it. We cannot grow accustomed to the bloodshed that has marked this country for decades, causing millions of deaths that remain mostly unknown elsewhere. What is happening here needs to be known. The current peace processes, which I greatly encourage, need to be sustained by concrete deeds, and commitments should be maintained. Thank God, there are those who are contributing to the good of the local population and to a genuine development through successful projects: not merely through handouts but through projects aimed at an integral development. I express immense gratitude to the countries and the organizations that are providing substantial

aid in this regard, helping to combat poverty and disease, supporting the rule of law and promoting respect for human rights. It is my hope that they can continue to carry out these efforts courageously and to the full.

Let us think again of the diamond. Once polished, its beauty also derives from its shape, from the harmonious arrangement of its many facets. In the same way, this country, with its precious legacy of pluralism, has a "polyhedral" character. That richness must be preserved, avoiding any form of regression to tribalism and hostility. A partisan spirit that stubbornly promotes one's own ethnic group or particular interests, thus nurturing spirals of hatred and violence, is detrimental to everyone, since it blocks the necessary "chemistry of the whole". Indeed, from a chemical standpoint, it is interesting that diamonds are made up of simple atoms of carbon which, if differently bonded, form graphite: in effect, the difference between the brilliance of the diamond and the darkness of graphite comes from the way the individual

atoms are arranged within the crystalline network. Leaving aside the metaphor, the problem is not human nature or the nature of ethnic and social groups, but the way in which they choose to live together: their willingness or not to encounter one another, to be reconciled and to start anew makes the difference between the grimness of conflict and a radiant future of peace and prosperity.

Dear friends, the heavenly Father wants us to accept one another as brothers and sisters of a single family and to work for a future together with others, and not against others. Bantu bantu: thus one of your proverbs eloquently states that true wealth is found in people and in their relationships with one another. In a particular way, the religions, with their patrimony of wisdom, are called to contribute to this richness, in the daily effort to renounce every form of aggression, proselytism and constraint, for these are means unworthy of human freedom. When people stoop to imposing those means through deceit and force, in an indiscriminate attempt to collect followers, they severely wound the conscience of others and turn their backs on the true God, because – let it never be forgotten – “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17) and where there is no freedom, there is no Spirit of the Lord. In the effort to build a future of peace and of fraternity, the members of civil society, some of whom are here present, also have an essential role to play. Often they have demonstrated the ability to stand up to injustice and social decay at the cost of great sacrifice, in order to defend human rights, the availability of a quality education and a more dignified life for everyone. I am deeply grateful to the women and men, and particularly to the young people of this country, who have suffered in various degrees for this, and I pay them homage.

The diamond, in its transparency, marvellously reflects the light it receives. Many of you are similarly “illustrious” for the role you play in society. Those holding civil and governmental offices are called to operate with crystalline clarity, experiencing the charge they have received as a means of serving society. Power is meaningful only if it becomes a form of service. How important it is that civic responsibilities be carried out in this spirit, avoiding authoritarianism, the quest for quick profit and the greed that the apostle Paul defines as “the root of all evils” (1 Tim 6:10). Likewise, that free, transparent and credible elections be promoted; even greater participation in the peace processes be allowed to women, to young people, to different groups and to socially marginalized groups; that the common good and people’s security be pursued, rather than personal or group interests; that the presence of the state in every part of the territory be strengthened; and the many refugees and displaced persons be cared for. May no one be manipulated, much less bought, by those who would foment violence in the country, and exploit it in order to make shameful business deals. This leads only to discredit and disgrace, together with death and misery. It is better to stay close to people, be aware of how they live. People are trusting when they feel the closeness of those who govern them, not out of expediency or for show but to serve others.

What dims the light of goodness in a society is often the darkness of injustice and corruption. Centuries ago, Saint Augustine, who was born on this continent, asked: “If there is no respect for justice, what are states if not a

great confederacy of thieves?” (De civ. Dei, IV, 4). God is always on the side of those who hunger and thirst for justice (cf. Mt 5:6). One must never tire of promoting law and equity everywhere, combating impunity and the manipulation of laws and information.

A diamond emerges from the earth valuable, but rough and needing to be polished. The most precious diamonds of these lands are the sons and daughters of this nation; they need to have access to an education that enables them to make their innate talents shine brightly. Education is fundamental: it is the path to the future, the road to take for achieving the complete freedom of this country and of the African continent. It is urgent to invest in education, in order to prepare societies that will be unified only if they are educated well, autonomous only if they are aware of their own possibilities and capable of developing them with responsibility and perseverance. Yet many children receive no schooling. How many of them, instead of receiving a good education, are exploited! All too many of them die, subjected to servile labour in the mines. No effort should be spared to denounce and finally end the scourge of child labour. How many girls are marginalized and their dignity violated! Children, young girls and all young people are the “now” of hope, they are hope: let us not allow that hope to be stifled, but instead cultivate it with passion!

The diamond, as a gift of the earth, recalls our responsibility to be good stewards of creation, to protect the natural environment. Situated in the heart of Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is host to one of the great green lungs of the world, which must be preserved. As with peace and development, also in this area there needs to be an ample and fruitful

cooperation that can permit an effective intervention without imposing external models that are more useful to those who help than to who are helped. Many have offered Africa help in the effort to combat climate change and the coronavirus. While these are certainly opportunities to be welcomed, the greatest need is for healthcare and social models that do not simply respond to pressing needs of the moment, but help improve the life of society: through sound structures and honest and competent personnel, so as to overcome the grave problems that block development from the outset, like hunger and disease.

The diamond, to conclude, is the hardest of the minerals found in nature; it is highly resistant to chemical agents. Repeated violent attacks and so many situations of unrest could weaken the resistance of the Congolese people, undermine their resolve and lead to discouragement and resignation. Yet in the name of Christ, who is the God of hope, the God of every possibility, who always gives us the strength to begin anew, in the name of the dignity and worth of the most precious diamonds of this land, which are its citizens, I would like to encourage everyone to undertake a courageous and inclusive social renewal. This is demanded by the splendid yet wounded history of this country, and by its young people and children in particular. I stand with you and I accompany with my prayers and closeness every effort made to achieve a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous future for this great country. God bless the entire Congolese nation!

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8 MARCH, INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY THE FRANCISCAN SISTERS' COMMITMENT TO MARGINALISED WOMEN

On International Women's Day, we collected the testimonies of Sr Miriam Oyarzo, Franciscan Missionary Sister of the Sacred Heart (FMSC), and Sr. Stella Balthasar, Franciscan Missionary of Mary (FMM), both of whom are committed to serving the most marginalised women.

Since 2015, Sr Miriam Oyarzo has worked with women in Bakirkoy prison, Istanbul, Turkey. "I would like to say that these women are not criminals: they are just victims of a very powerful criminal system, which exploits their poverty and vulnerability," she says on the phone in a voice full of love for them.

In fact, in 80-90% of the cases, these women were arrested at the airport for drug trafficking. "I am Chilean, and when asked to join this service to assist South American and Spanish-speaking female prisoners, I admit I had many doubts. But when I met these women, these mothers, these desperate and lonely old ladies, I thought it was a discernment of my whole life. So I trusted in Providence and said yes".

The team of which Sr Miriam is a member is called to "be presence" in the Bakirkoy maximum security prison: "We must first of all listen. Ours is a community of presence, our missionary congregation has an international charism, and this is an ecumenical service. Therefore, a Franciscan friar, Brother Eleuthere Makuta, a Protestant pastor, Ali Kalkandelen, and an Armenian nun, Sr Kayiane Dulkadiryan, also accompany us to the prison. Our task is to be close to the women and to help them practically inside and outside prison".

The project started about 15 years ago, when the then Director of the prison, showing a genuinely open mind, decided to allow spiritual assistance not only to Turkish or Islamic women but also to foreign women and women of other religions. The Apostolic Vicariate of Istanbul seized this opportunity and, after some refusals by other churches, turned to the Latin Church, particularly the Franciscans.



"It sounds like a platitude, but the first thing that struck me was the loneliness of these women: they are in a high-security prison in a foreign country, and their families can neither see nor hear them. A letter written to their loved ones takes a long time to reach their destination. So they send it to us [in prison, it is forbidden to pass items to visitors], we scan it and email it to their families. In this way, we create a bridge with their families of origin, a more direct dialogue, and we can also show photos of family members, perhaps of their children, to the women prisoners".

The support does not stop within the prison walls because when the sentence has been served, there is uncertainty about the future. "Behind us is a big network of benefactors: thanks to them, we have managed to get many women back home, or we can assist them here in Istanbul. We welcome them in our convent, and my superior, Sr Zita Gutang, who works in Caritas,



greatly helps us. Rehabilitating a person who has come out of prison is very difficult, also because charity cannot be improvised: if a woman ended up in the drug racket or prostitution, it was only out of "need", out of poverty, out of vulnerability. Often pregnant women are taken because they cannot pass under the scanner, but very often, at the end of a very long journey in which they can neither drink nor eat, they are intercepted anyway, and their freedom stops as soon as they land in Turkey. At the end of their sentence, they have to recreate a new life for themselves, starting with their documents, and we are not afraid to welcome them into our convent, to live with them, to be a living presence at their side because by now they are part of us, and we are part of them".

Sr. Stella Balthasar lives in India, in the province of Ooty (state of Tamil Nadu), where she is involved with her sisters in the "Empowering Widows" project, which aims to



support and help widows, otherwise stigmatised by society because they are considered the bearers of misfortune.

"Indian society regards widows as bad omens: it sees them as ridden with a curse from God. So a widow has to swim through the current of prejudice and overcome obstacles to establish her identity and claim her dignity," writes Sr Stella.

The project started in 2016 and, in a short time, has involved over 1,500 people in western Tamil Nadu. Supported by the Missionaries of Mary, the widows first became aware of their condition, which was certainly not their fault. They began to oppose the unjust practices to which they were subjected.

"On 23 June 2017, International Widows' Day of the United Nations, a ceremony was organised by the Nazareth Neela Widows' Association. During a ceremony at her husband's funeral, the lady mayor of the city of Ooty gave



back to the women what had been taken away from them because of their widowhood. As a result, the people there began to see her no longer as a widow but as a person with full human potential and wealth to contribute to the growth of humanity. This sense of freedom brought great self-confidence and enabled many women to take initiatives to improve their economic condition through small trades, savings for the future, courage to defy harassment in the workplace, and collective strength and mutual support. They also performed communal services such as cleaning the streets, planting trees in public places and spreading ecological awareness among the public. The movement is gradually and steadily growing”.

Melania Bruno
OFM Communications Office

“WE INVITE PRESIDENT PUTIN AND PRESIDENT ZELENSKY TO ASSISI TO RESTORE PEACE”.

The first EcuFilm Fest, Cinema for Interreligious Dialogue, was held from 23 to 25 February 2023, in Meanza, the Province of Latina, Italia. At the end of the festival, Fr. Gianmaria Polidoro, OFM – a Franciscan friar who in 1984 met Reagan at the White House and also went to the Kremlin to plead for an end to the Cold War - sent letters to the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents, and to the Patriarchs of Moscow and Kyiv, to invite them to the Umbrian city.



Almost forty years ago, in February 1984, from the International Centre for Peace among Peoples in Assisi, Fr. Gianmaria, with three other Franciscans, including Conventuals and Capuchins, made a pilgrimage to Washington and Moscow to ask, in the name of God, for an end to the cold war. They met President Ronald Reagan at the White House and Vasily Kuznestov at the Kremlin who was to act as the head of state (because Andropov had recently died and his successor Chernenko had not yet been appointed).

Today, Fr. Gianmaria, 90 years old, a friar who is still animated by the spirit of Assisi, who in 1997 founded The Assisi Pax International Association, during the first EcuFilm Fest, Cinema for Interreligious Dialogue, wrote letters to the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine, Putin and Zelenski, but also to the Patriarchs of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill, and the Patriarch of Kyiv, to invite them to Assisi to “restore peace in the world” as Saint Francis did with the Porziuncola and the Church of San Damiano.

Like Reagan and Gorbačëv, the appeal to Putin and Zelensky

“I ask them to come to Assisi to meet - this is how Fr. Gianmaria summarises his message to Vatican Radio - Vatican News - to be able to say to the world: we dream of a peace that can be extended to the whole of Europe, to the whole world”. And Fr. Gianmaria asks the Italian President to guarantee that the political and religious leaders of Russia and Ukraine will be welcomed in Assisi so that “they can find peace that the whole world is waiting for at this moment”.

In November 1985, Fr. Gianmaria, with the group of four friars and with his Association which rewards every year personalities from all over the world who committed to peace with the Golden Palm of Assisi Pax, met the delegations of Reagan and Gorbačëv in Geneva.

And as a man of faith, he turns to the representatives of the Churches of Moscow and Kyiv so that they may help in prayer and exhortation, so that all of us, men of this world, may obtain peace that our Lord Jesus Christ preached when he said: “My peace I give you, not as the world gives peace, but as God gives it”.

The Round Table of Religions for Peace Education

During the three-days event in the medieval castle of Maenza, conceived by the Kosovan director Gjon Kolndrekaj and CrossinMedia as part of the Faith and Media festival, alongside screenings of films with a strong spiritual message presented by the directors and actors, the round table was held on Friday afternoon, on the sad anniversary of the start of the war in Ukraine, between representatives of different faiths on the “possible role of religions for peace education”, organised in collaboration with the Religions for Peace Association. At the beginning of the meeting, Fr. Gianmaria Polidoro signed the letters to be sent for the invitation to Assisi. The president of the Italian Jewish Communities (Ucei), Noemi Di Segni, stressed that “as religions we cannot solve the enormous geopolitical problems, but with our actions, even small ones, we can instil a deep belief in civilization, in life, in peace”. Imam



Ataul Vasih Tariq, national vice-president of The Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, recalled that ‘love for one’s neighbour is the path to an authentic life of faith’. While the abbot of the Zen centre l’Arco in Rome, Dario Doshin Girolami said he was convinced that ‘looking at the other with humanity and respect awakens trust’. And Guido Morisco, of the Baha’j National Assembly, said that ‘religions in their diversity contribute to promoting the common good within societies’. During the round table, passages from Pope Francis’ encyclical Fratelli Tutti were read out.

Mogol’s aphorism and Pope Francis’ letter

On Thursday, 23 February, on the festival’s opening night, lyricist Giulio Rapetti, in art Mogol, received the keys to the town from Maenza, Mayor Claudio Sperduti. Mogol dedicated an aphorism on interreligious dialogue to the event: “As two little brothers draw the same mother in two different ways, so men draw God”. Words already sent to Pope Francis, who in a short letter of thanks to the artist wrote: “Thank you for the portrait drawn by the two little brothers, it is good for me”. Along with Mogol, awards were also presented to directors Pupi Avati and Liliana Cavani, who launched an appeal for a cease-fire in Ukraine, actors Kim Rossi Stuart, Massimo Wertmüller and Vittorio Viviani, writer Luca Caruso and composer David Scillia, while for the foreign section the mezzo-soprano Orit Gabriel and Miriam Meghnagi, with actor Timothy Martin.



The films of the festival, from “Chiara” to “Biagio”

The films chosen by director Gjon Kolndrekaj, screened every morning also for schools, were “Brother Where Art Thou?” by the Cohen brothers, the odyssey of three convicts, including George Clooney, who find a blind man who will enlighten them in their search for a hidden treasure. Then “Biagio” by Salvatore Scimeca, the touching story of Brother Biagio Conte, the lay missionary from Palermo who died just over a month ago, “Chiara” by Susanna Nicchiarelli, a beautiful portrait of an incredibly modern medieval saint who walked in the footsteps of Saint Francis. Then “I giardini dell’eden” by Alessandro D’Alatri, the story of the “unknown” Jesus, in the years between adolescence and early youth, and “Rose del deserto” by Mario Monicelli, a poetic evocation, in the wake of Mario Tobino, of the contrasting Italian events in North Africa during the Second World War.

Text and photographs: Vatican News

International days – April to June, 2023

April 22 International Mother Earth Day

May 1 International Laborer's Day

May 12 World Fair Trade Day

May 22 International Day for Biological Diversity

May 22-29 Laudato Si'. Week

June 5 World Environment Day

June 8 World Ocean Day

June 12 World Day against Child Labor

June 17 World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought



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