

Order of Friars Minor Conventual

Following Christ with Francis Today

A Program for Celebrating as a Fraternity the Eighth Centenary of the Origins of the Franciscan Charism (2005-2009)

*The Most High Himself revealed to me
that I should live according to
the pattern of the Holy Gospel
(Test 14)ⁱ*

1. Dearest brothers, may the Lord give you peace!

The year 1205 represents for Francis, son of Pietro Bernardone, the beginning of a wonderful human and spiritual adventure which would conclude the evening of October 3, 1226, after “all the mysteries of Christ were accomplished in him.”

Francis’ choice of the Gospel as his norm for living rendered him a faithful and transparent presence of Christ, a presence which attracted more and more brothers around him. Together they constituted a fraternity founded upon the Gospel. For both himself and his brothers Francis desired that Holy Mother Church approve the “form of life” that identified them as men of penance—friars minor—nourished by the Word and by the paschal mystery. In the year 1209 Innocent III recognized and approved Francis’ way of life, and the story of the Franciscan movement began—in all its various institutional, historical, and cultural expressions.

It is due to these beginnings of the Franciscan charism, spread throughout the world, and for the sake of us Franciscans in particular, responding to the eternal love of the heavenly Father, that we wish to commemorate this quadrennium 2005-2009. We do this with minds and hearts open to the gift of salvation and grace which the Lord wishes to pour out upon us through reflection upon the gospel path of Francis and his first brothers.

This quadrennium will constitute, moreover, a journey of “memory,” of reflection, and of prayer so that all of us who recognize Francis as the father of our charism will be renewed in our fidelity to live the gospel life, to witness to Christ in truth and sincerity, and to be consistent in our mission to announce to all people the Gospel of Love of our heavenly Father.

2. It is fundamental that this celebration of the remembrance of our beginnings be shared by all branches of the Franciscan family—all those who draw life from the pattern of Francis of Assisi’s “conversion” and “conformity to the poor, crucified Christ.” To this end the Conference of the Franciscan Family has decided to appoint an inter-familial Commission to organize shared moments of celebration during the next three years (2006-2009) for the purpose of witnessing within the Church and to society at large the

fraternal communion that unites all the Orders and Institutes who claim the Franciscan charism. Together these communities manifest the richness of diversity that has characterized and continues to characterize the charism in history. In addition, a joint letter, which is being prepared for the feast of St. Francis in 2006, will be signed by all the members of the Conference.

The Journey of Memory

3. This journey as Conventuals over the next four years is part of a larger journey all Franciscans share in common. By its nature, therefore, our own journey is flexible and open to the choices which the Franciscan family (Secular Franciscans, Poor Clares, and other Franciscan Institutes), whether Roman Catholic or not, will propose to undertake together. We believe it necessary, nevertheless, to set forth a program of prayer and reflection specific to our Order as a response to the questions which it is facing and the realities it is experiencing at this point in history. It is in the concreteness of history and of everyday life that our response to our divine vocation unfolds as we are called to welcome the movements of the Spirit for the renewal of our life at the level of the individual friar, the local community, the province, and the entire Order. This renewal takes place within the parameters that constitute the overarching structure of our life according to the Rule of St. Francis and the Constitutions of our Conventual Franciscan Order: *the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*, our form of life; *the profession of vows* as the means to be truly human and live as men of the gospel; *fraternity expressed in minority and poverty* as a specifically Franciscan way of being for the sake of the kingdom; *our common mission* as the foundation for witnessing to and announcing the Good News of the reign of God.

4. To “remember” for us is not simply to call to mind but also to “celebrate” the meaning of the events by which the Order began to grow and spread. Across time and history these humble beginnings reached many cultures and societies which the charism of Francis must in turn both confront and take root in: ideas, values, attitudes, behaviors, and worlds of meaning which are born and evolve differently from continent to continent and people to people.

To “remember” is for us to “celebrate,” guided by the Spirit of the Lord, in order to work toward that renewal of our life as Franciscans according to the charism and the inspirations of our beginnings. For this the Church has already indicated certain parameters: a return to the sources and a recognition of and attentiveness to the signs of the times. This is all the more important at the start of the third Christian millennium, in which the voice of the successor of Peter invites us to “begin again from Christ” in order to “confront the vast field” of the Kingdom of God—present, active, and on the rise in history.

To “remember beginnings” is for us to adopt St. Francis as an icon who teaches us. In his *Testament* he “remembers” in sentiments of praise, thanksgiving, and adoration of the Triune God, his search for meaning in life, his conversion to Christ and the Gospel, the beginnings of *fraternitas* among the penitents from Assisi who wanted to be known as “friars minor” among themselves, and his encounters with all creatures acknowledged as

brothers and sisters in a stance of mutual understanding and welcome as gifts of the Father.

In such a way does Francis “commemorate” his own journey, both personal and communal, that has led him and his friars, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to articulate a “form of life” approved by Innocent III and subsequently confirmed by Honorius III. Our celebratory path of commemoration, therefore, will follow the significant moments of the personal and communal experience of St. Francis and his first companions, from the rise of his inner restlessness to the welcoming of a plan of life inspired by God and approved by the Church.

5. We will embrace the journey lived by Francis and his followers as a teaching moment to help us recognize anew the path of our own vocation and thus deepen the meaning of our being “lesser brothers” in a communion of life and spirit, to sharpen awareness of our vocation and of our faithfulness to the Rule and the spirituality left to us by Francis. All of this is meant to renew our choice for the radical nature of the Gospel as a response to the relativism, inner restlessness, and the search for meaning that pervade this world of the third millennium.

For our Order the focal point of “commemoration” will be the **Ordinary General Chapter** (2007). This gathering will be organized so as to provide an experience which we can help us recover and realize more strongly the charism at the heart of our religious family. This celebration of General Chapter will be a point of departure toward interior renewal and missionary zeal at the level of the individual friar as well as the local, provincial, and global levels of the community.

6. The proposals which follow constitute the principal outline for a program common to the whole Order. Such a program, however, necessitates adaptation in the life of every friar, of each local community, and of each circumscription and Conference. What is required is that it be appropriated in this general outline and then adapted to various levels (individual, communal, etc.) and environments in which our family expresses, witnesses to, and announces the Gospel (diverse cultures, initial and ongoing formation programs, missions, youth ministry, vocation promotion, pastoral work with various groups and movements, etc.).

It is likewise strongly desired that this journey of prayer, reflection, and above all, continual conversion to the Gospel and to the charism of St. Francis, be shared with all who have Francis as their fundamental point of reference, whether directly or indirectly (Poor Clares, Secular Franciscans, Militia of the Immaculate, various Franciscan institutes, etc.). This is so that the newness of life that we await as a gift of the Spirit in this time of grace be fraternally shared and thus render the entire Franciscan movement more transparent as a way of gospel living. This journey will also strengthen our mission and witness to the unity of the charism in the midst of diverse cultural expressions, all of which lead to the kingdom in the communion of the church.

Each of the four years of celebration will begin on November 29, 2005, the Feast of All Saints of the Seraphic Order, and close on the same date of the following year. Generally speaking, this date also coincides with the beginning of the liturgical year. The Letters of the Minister General, which will introduce the reflection on the particular themes of each year, will also be issued on November 29th of each year.

The Four Phases of the Commemoration

Phase I 2005-2006: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (L3C 6) From Restlessness to Conversion: Searching Along with Francis for Meaning in Our Life

7. The young Francis questioned and searched for what could offer fullness of meaning in his life. In his detachment from family, possessions, and the world, he discovers the Fatherhood of God and welcomes it definitively into his life.

He encounters Christ crucified in the icon of San Damiano and in the leper and draws inspiration from them, along with strength to go on, as a new “good Samaritan of the Gospel” (cf. *LegM* 2,6) who reaches out to all the “crucified” of the world. In the discovery of God as Father and in the encounter with Christ in the Spirit, Francis shapes his sentiments, his attitudes, and his behavior:

Shortly after he had embarked on his journey and had gone as far as the neighboring city, he heard the Lord speaking to him during the night in a familiar way: “Francis, who can do more for you, a lord or a servant, a rich person or one who is poor?” When Francis replied that a lord and a rich person could do more, he was at once asked: “Why, then, are you abandoning the Lord for a servant and the rich God for a poor mortal?” And Francis replied: “*Lord, what do you want me to do?*”... *When morning came*, then, he returned in haste to Assisi, free of care and filled with joy, and, already made an exemplar of obedience, he awaited the Lord’s will. (*LMj* 1:3)

Moreover, drunk with remarkable fervor, he even took off his trousers, and was completely stripped naked before everyone. He said to his father: “Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, ‘*Our Father who art in heaven*,’ since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him.” (*LMj* 2:4)

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and *I showed mercy* to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world. (*Test* 1-3)

From there the lover of profound humility moved to the lepers and lived with them, serving them all most diligently for God’s sake. He washed their feet, bandaged sores, drew pus from wounds and wiped away filth. He who was soon to be a physician of the Gospel even kissed their ulcerous wounds out of his remarkable devotion. (*LMj* 2:6)

Application

8. The existential restlessness of Francis is the restlessness of every person; Francis’ search, the search of every person. Our vocation is the response of God to our questionings and to our personal search for meaning. Does our vocation still lead us to meaning and fullness of life? How do we discover and experience God as our Father who is in heaven? Is our love for the poor, crucified Christ so efficacious as to radiate

outward toward love for the neighbor who is alone and forgotten? Is the contemplation of the face of Christ still the litmus test of our asceticism and our vocation to be-for-others rather than just for ourselves? What do people expect from a son of St. Francis today? What does the Church expect?

Symbolic Action

Presentation to every friar of the *Testament* of St. Francis.

Communal Initiatives

A pilgrimage of friars to the “Rivotorto’s”—national, provincial, or at the level of Conferences (according to the decision of each circumscription). Why not hold a conference or local chapter on the social and religious circumstances in which we find ourselves and on the necessary choices such circumstances call forth from us as Franciscans?

N.B. From November 29 to December 3, 2005, the assembly of European Conferences will be held in order to reflect on the renewal of Conventual Franciscan presence and witness in Europe. In January 2006, the International Congress for the promotion of a renewed consciousness of mission and missiology in our Order will appropriately take place.

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Phase II 2006-2007: “The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way...” (Test 1)-- Francis and the Following of Christ: Asceticism and the Gospel in the Path to Conformity with Christ

9. Francis discovers in the Gospel the Word that guides him in the path to conformity to the poor, crucified Christ. The Gospel, read in churches and also in the living Crucified One, whom he meets in every poor person and leper whom he serves, is the “book” that he devours in order to understand and live the call to “*rebuild the Church.*” In the **Testament** he remembers the stages and the dynamics which, together with his brothers, led him to full conformity to Christ and rendered them a witness to the gift of salvation:

Poverty as the freedom to follow with more agility the footprints of Christ;
Penance as the instrument of an asceticism which recognizes a filial relationship with God as central;
Prayer-contemplation as a filial and continuous dialogue, in complete docility to the Holy Spirit, tending toward the search for the face of God revealed in Christ;

Fidelity to the Church: Fundamental for Francis is the mediation of priests who offer the Eucharist and the Word, and that of theologians who live according to the Church, in so much as they ensure authentic interpretation of the Word and of the mysteries of the Church;

Service to lepers as an expression of love for God which translates into true service to those brothers and sisters most forgotten:

One day the gospel was being read in that church about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after celebrating the solemnities of the Mass to explain the gospel to him. The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ's disciples should not *possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics*, but that they should preach *the kingdom of God and penance*, the holy man, Francis, immediately *exulted in the spirit of God*. "This is what I want," he said, "this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart...." As for the other things he heard, he set about doing them with great care and reverence. For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter. (IC 22)

Application

10. What place do poverty, penance, asceticism, and contemplation occupy at the level of our personal lives? Are we compelled to give our entire selves to living the Gospel? Are we disposed and even compelled to live in solidarity with the poor? Do we experience ourselves as Church? Do we love the Church?

N.B. *Proposal for the General Chapter in 2007* (toward the conclusion of the second phase of the commemoration): The Ordinary General Chapter (May-June 2007) will take place in Assisi. The following would be most appropriate:

- a) To prepare days of recollection during the course of the Chapter in which the chapter delegates can experience the four stages of the "commemoration" in reflection and prayer; such days would conclude with a moment of pilgrimage to Rivotorto to reconnect with the formative experience of fraternal life in minority and poverty and to serve as symbolic point of departure for the journey of the entire Order.
- b) Before the election of the Minister General, to organize a day of recollection and pilgrimage to the Portiuncula to ask the intercession of the Our Lady of the Angels for the gift of the Holy Spirit;
- c) After the election of the Minister General, to organize a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Francis to base the journey of the Order on his personal example;
- d) To experience the General Chapter and see it as a point of departure for responding with a decisive "yes" to the demands of growth in our charism that comes from the word of St. Francis: "I have done my part; may Christ teach you yours" (*LegM* 14,3).

Symbolic Action

Entrust the **Gospel** to the chapter delegates, representatives of all the friars of the Order, as the essential nucleus of Franciscan life which will then be carried symbolically to all the friars.

Communal initiatives

Why not rediscover the value of *lectio divina*, whether personal or communal, as a privileged place for renewal of our life?

After the General Chapter, every circumscription should organize a gathering for the purpose of carrying back to the friars the directions which emerged from the General Chapter. During the course of this meeting, the Gospel will be entrusted to all the friars.

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Phase III 2007-2008: “The Lord gave me some brothers...” (Test 14)-- The Beginnings of Life in Fraternity and Apostolic Mission Founded on the Gospel: The Evangelical Fraternity as the Locus and Sign of Newness of Life in Christ

11. The personal experience of Francis becomes the experience of a group. Franciscan *fraternitas* is born from and founded upon the command of Jesus, “*Love one another as I have loved you,*” on the Gospel, and on the Word himself: Christ--incarnate, poor, and crucified.

From this central focus arise the dynamics which render fraternity an efficacious place of human and spiritual growth for all the friars: life in communion, the sharing of the gifts of the Spirit, listening to the example and the guidance of Francis, giving thanks to God for the gift of brothers, and experiencing joy of the interconnectedness of the fraternity and interpersonal relationships. Poverty, minority, the life of contemplation and prayer (whether expressed liturgically or in simple and spontaneous personal prayer), humble work, the mission of witnessing to and announcing the gospel, all build the essential foundation of communion and of meaning in the Franciscan fraternity:

Blessed Francis gathered with the others in a place called Rivo Torto near the city of Assisi. In this place there was an abandoned hut.... As the saint said, “It is easier to get to heaven from a hut than from a palace.” All his sons and brothers were living in that same place with the blessed Father, *with great labor*, and lacking everything. Often they were deprived of the comfort of bread, content with turnips they begged in their need here and there on the plain of Assisi. (IC 42)

They loved one another from the heart and each one served and took care of the other, as a mother serves and cares for her son. The fire of love burned so intensely in them, that they would have willingly sacrificed their lives not only for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, but also for one another. (AP 25)

Since they looked down on all earthly things and never loved themselves selfishly, they poured out all their loving affection in common, hiring themselves out for wages to

provide for their brothers' needs. They gathered together out of desire and were delighted to stay together.... [They] never dared to put anything before the orders of obedience.... As followers of most holy poverty, since they had nothing, they loved nothing; so they feared losing nothing.... During the day those who knew how worked with their own hands, staying in the houses of lepers or in other suitable places, serving everyone humbly and devoutly.... They never or hardly ever stopped praying and praising God.... They strove to retrain the burning of the flesh.... (IC 39, 40).

The blessed father with his sons were staying in a place near Assisi called Rivo Torto where there was a hut abandoned by all.... The man of God would write the names of the brothers on the beams of that hut, so that anyone wishing to rest or pray would know his place, and so that any unusual noise would not disturb the mind's silence in such small and close quarters. (L3C 55)

The man of God then gathered with his companions in an abandoned hut near the city of Assisi.... [T]hey did not yet have liturgical books from which to chant the canonical hours. In place of these they had the book of Christ's cross which they studied continually day and night, taught by the example and words of their father who spoke to them constantly about the cross of Christ. (LMj 4:3)

While the brothers were still staying in the place already mentioned.... About midnight... *a fiery chariot* of wonderful brilliance entering the door of the house moved *here and there* through the little house three times.... As they looked into each other's hearts, they all understood together that the holy father, *while away from them in body, was present in spirit*.... When the holy man returned to the brothers, he began to probe the secrets of their consciences... and to make many predictions about the growth of the Order.... [T]he brothers completely realized *the Spirit of the Lord had come to rest* upon him in such fullness that it was absolutely safe for them to follow his life and teaching. (LMj 4:4)

Application

12. What place in our fraternal relations does the command of Jesus have: *Love one another as I have loved you*? Can we say that we truly love one another? Can we say that our fraternities are evangelical and apostolic? Do our fraternities place themselves in a stance of listening to the Word? Do we allow ourselves to be guided by St. Francis and by the love which inspired his companions? What place do poverty, minority, contemplation, work, and concrete solidarity with the least in world occupy in our fraternities and in our apostolic work? Does our mission arise from fraternity and manifest an ecclesial face? Are our fraternities meaningful for the people and the Christian communities that surround us?

Symbolic Action

At the conclusion of the "*Chapter of Mats*," entrust to the friars a volume of the **Admonitions** (translated in the principal languages used in the Order) as a means to

remind ourselves of the concreteness of a life centered in God, of fraternity and of gospel mission.

Communal Initiatives

In every circumscription or in every Conference, celebrate a **Chapter of Mats** to reclaim fraternity as the constitutive element of every act of witness and evangelical mission.

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Phase IV 2008-2009: “The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ...” (LR 1:1)-- The Gift of the Rule: Living the Gospel in Obedient Communion with the Church

13. With the oral approval of Innocent III (probably in the spring of 1209), the Order of Friars Minor is recognized and inserted into the life of the Church. This approbation will be confirmed by Pope Honorius III on November 29, 1223, with the bull *Solet annuere*, which states:

We confirm with Our Apostolic Authority, and by these words ratify, the Rule of your Order, herein outlined and approved by Our predecessor, Pope Innocent of happy memory, which is as follows....

And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me. (*Test* 14-15)

When blessed Francis saw that the Lord God was *daily increasing* their numbers, he wrote for himself and his brothers present and future, simply and in few words, a form of life and a rule. He used primarily words of the holy gospel, longing only for its perfection.... Then he went to Rome with all his brothers, since he greatly desired that the Lord Pope Innocent the Third confirm for him what he had written. (*IC* 32)

St. Francis presents himself to the Church with a plan for an evangelical life and allows himself to be guided by the Church. He obeys the Church and the friars obey him. By means of the Rule, Francis and his companions definitively choose the Gospel as the “form of life” toward a radical conformity to Christ that is both personal and communal. From the first year of their journey together, Francis commits himself and his first companions to go on mission “*two by two*” to proclaim Christ by word and deed and to indicate the road to conversion for the people of his time.

Application

14. Do we live, as individuals and as fraternities (local, provincial, and at the level of the Order), the relationship of communion with the Church and faithful obedience to it according to the style of Francis? Are the **Rule** and **Constitutions** the “force” behind our

life of consecration and belonging to God in fidelity to the Order to which God has called us? Are the Rule and Constitutions, with the Gospel, the ever-present guides for our daily lives, the criteria by which we judge goodness, truth, and the value of our choices? What are the fundamental elements of our mission? How do we incarnate the Rule in diverse cultures of the world in which the Order finds itself?

Symbolic Action

An edition of the **Rule** translated into the languages spoken in the Order as a sign of the unity of our religious family and the value of the various cultures in which Franciscanism has been incarnated.

Communal Initiatives

At the conclusion of the centenary, near the feast of St. Francis, every circumscription should celebrate a spiritual chapter to synthesize the commitments made for renewal of life, of witness, and of mission which are proper to our charism at the start of this millennium. The friars of every circumscription should renew their profession of vows together on this occasion.

In addition: A pilgrimage to Rome of delegations from the Conferences (together with the other members of the Franciscan family) for the Feast of All Saints of the Order. During this pilgrimage, the Ministers General, in the name of all the friars, will renew before the Pope their profession of vows according to the Rule.

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15. Each stage of this commemoration will be introduced by an individual Letter of the Minister General for the purpose of guiding the course of the celebration and to indicate the path to follow for reflection and prayer during the year.

We suggest that for the centenary, the friars should be provided with intentions for communal prayer (traditionally at Morning and Evening Prayer) as well as the essential resources to promote communal initiatives (entrusting of various *symbols*, celebrations of chapters *of mats*, spiritual chapters, renewal of religious profession at the end of the centenary, etc.).

Any “Chapters of Mats” which are national or broader in scope could be celebrated with the other branches of the I, II, and III Orders.

Conclusion

16. Dearest brothers, so that this plan might bring the good gifts that we all desire, it is indispensable that each friar open himself to and welcome this proposed journey in order to live it in true and effective fraternity. Furthermore, I invite individual confreres, the Provinces, and the Conferences/Federations to take an active and creative part in adapting for their territories what has been laid out in only a very general manner. It would be helpful as well for other initiatives to be planned in conjunction with the local

situations proper to the various levels of the Order. When such initiatives are planned, we ask that you inform the central government of the Order so as to promote a continual exchange of information and ideas. In this way every part of the Order will be enriched by the creativity of all the friars.

As we embark on this journey of memory, reflection, prayer, and conversion, we invoke the light and the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, so that every friar, every community, and every circumscription will truly grow in conformity to Christ—poor, obedient, given to the brothers on the cross and in the Eucharist. Christ is the goal toward which we strive and on account of which the charism of Francis of Assisi has been entrusted to us even today. May our Mother and Queen, Mary Immaculate, St. Joseph her husband, St. Francis, and all of our saintly confreres who have preceded us to the embrace of our heavenly Father, intercede for us and ask for an outpouring of the grace of conversion and of holiness upon all of us.

Rome, 4 October 2005
Solemnity of Our Seraphic Father St. Francis

Friar Joachim Giermek
Minister General
with the General Definitory

N.B. The volume by various authors, *San Francesco e Rivotorto* (Casa Editrice Franciscana, 2004), which bears the signature of P. Lanfranco Serrini and has been revised by friars of the three Orders, offers a solid synthesis of the stages of primitive Franciscanism, particularly during the years 1205-1210.

ⁱ All quotations from and abbreviations for Francis' writings and the Franciscan sources are taken from Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1999).