



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
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Audience with the Communities of the Friars Minor of La Verna and of the Tuscan province

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father received in audience the Communities of Friars Minor of La Verna and of the Tuscan province, on the occasion of the eighth centenary of the appearance of the stigmata of Saint Francis (14 September 1224).

The following is the Pope's address to those present during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers, welcome!

I greet the bishop of Arezzo-Cortona-Sansepolcro – three dioceses – who is accompanying you, and all of you. I am happy to meet you, in the year in which we commemorate the eighth centenary of the gift of the stigmata, which Saint Francis received in Verna on 14 September 1224, two years before his death. Thank you for bringing here the relic of his blood, which is making a long pilgrimage in various communities, to remind us of the importance of conformation to “poor and crucified Christ” (Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, no. 105).

And it is precisely of this conformation that the stigmata are one of the most eloquent signs the Lord has granted over the course of the centuries, to brothers and sisters in faith of various conditions, states and provenances. They remind everyone in the holy People of God of the pain suffered by Jesus in His own flesh for our love and salvation; but they are also a sign of the Paschal victory: it is indeed through the wounds that the mercy of the Crucified and Risen One, as if through channels, flows towards us. Let us pause to reflect on the meaning of the stigmata, first *in the life of the Christian* and then *in the life of the Franciscan*.

The stigmata *in the life of the Christian*. Jesus' disciple finds in the stigmatized Saint Francis a mirror of his identity. Indeed, the believer does not belong to a group based on thought or action, held together solely by human forces, but to a *living Body*, the Body of Christ that is the Church. And this belonging is not nominal, but real: it was impressed in the Christian by Baptism, which has marked us with the Pasch of the Lord. In this way,

in the communion of love of the Church, each one of us rediscovers who he or she is: a beloved, blessed, reconciled child, sent to witness the wonders of the grace of being an artisan of fraternity. Therefore, Christians are called to address themselves in a special way to the “stigmatized” they encounter: to those who are “marked” in life, who bear the scars of the sufferings and injustices they have endured or the mistakes they have made. And in this mission, the Saint of La Verna is a companion on the journey, who supports us and helps us not to be crushed by difficulties, fears and contradictions, ours and those of others. This is what Francis did every day, from the encounter with the leper onwards, forgetting himself in giving and in service, even going so far, in his last years, as to “disappropriate” himself – this word is key – to disappropriate himself in a certain sense of what he had initiated, opening up with courage and humility to new ways, docile to the Lord and to his brethren. In his poverty of spirit – let us emphasize this: Francis, poverty of spirit – and in his entrustment to the Father he left us all an ever-timely testimony to the Gospel.

If you want to know the suffering Christ well, look for a Franciscan. And you, think that you are witnesses of this...

And so, we come to the second point: the stigmata *in the life of the Franciscan*. Your founder Saint offers you a powerful call to unity among yourselves and in your history. Indeed, the image of Christ in the crucifix that appears to him in La Verna, marking his body, is the same as the one that had impressed itself upon his heart at the beginning of his “conversion”, and which had indicated to him the mission of “repairing his house”. In this point of “repairing”, I would like to say the capacity for forgiveness. You are good confessors: the Franciscans are famous for this. You forgive everything. You forgive always. God never tires of forgiving: we tire of asking for forgiveness. The Lord forgives everything. [Resumes] Your founder Saint offers you a powerful call to unity among yourselves and in your history. Indeed, the image of Christ in the crucifix that appears to him in La Verna, marking his body, is the same as the one that had impressed itself upon his heart at the beginning of his “conversion”, and which had indicated to him the mission of “repairing his house”. In Francis, a man pacified in the sign of the cross, with which he blessed his brethren, the stigmata represent the seal of the essential. This calls you too to return to the essential in the various aspects of your life: in formative paths, in apostolic activities and in your presence in the midst of the people; to be forgiven bears of forgiveness, healed bearers of healing, joyful and simple in fraternity; with the strength of the love that flows from the side of Christ and that is nourished in your personal encounter with Him, to be renewed every day with a seraphic ardour that burns the heart.

It is good that you start out again from here, dear Franciscan brothers, in this jubilee year: start again from here, especially you, custodians of La Verna. Hear that you are called to bring, in your communities and fraternity, in the Church and in the world, a little of that immense love that drove Christ to die on the cross for us. Intimacy with Him, as it was for Francis, will make you ever humbler, more united, more joyful and essential, lovers of the cross and caring towards the poor, witnesses of peace and prophets of hope in this time of ours that finds it so difficult to recognize the presence of the Lord. May you increasingly be a sign and witness, with your consecrated life, of the Kingdom of God that lives and grows among men.

And one thing I would like to say to you: I think of my homeland. There are some anticlerical people who, when a priest comes along, touch iron, because he brings bad luck. But this is never, never done when one sees a Franciscan habit. It is curious. A Franciscan is never insulted. Why, I don't know. But your habit makes one think of Saint Francis and the graces received. Go forth in this way, and it doesn't matter if beneath the habit there are blue jeans: there is no problem. But keep going.

And precisely to ask for this grace of continuous and beneficent conversion, I would like to conclude by invoking your Seraphic Father with this prayer I entrust to you, asking you also to remember me before the Lord:

Saint Francis,
 man wounded by love, Crucified in body and in spirit,
 we look to you, decorated with the holy stigmata,
 to learn how to love the Lord Jesus,
 brothers and sisters with your love, with your passion.
 With you it is easier to contemplate and follow

Christ, poor and Crucified.
Give us, Francis,
the freshness of your faith,
the certainty of your hope,
the gentleness of your charity.
Intercede for us,
so that it may be sweet for us to bear the burdens of life,
and in trials we may experience
the tenderness of the Father and the balm of the Spirit.
May our wounds be healed by the Heart of Christ,
to become, like you, witnesses of His mercy,
which continues to heal and renew the life
of those who seek Him with a sincere heart.
O Francis, made to resemble the Crucified One,
let your stigmata be for us and for the world
resplendent signs of life and resurrection,
to show new ways of peace and reconciliation. Amen.

And now I would like to give you the blessing, with the relic of Saint Francis.
