



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN
ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR GENERAL CHAPTER HELD IN ASSISI**

Dear Italian Capuchin Friars, 1. I turn to you with affection and cordially greet you on the occasion of the Chapter of the Mats of your Italian Capuchins. I extend my greeting to your entire meritorious Order, led by the Minister General Fr John Corriveau, to whom I offer best wishes. Your gathering in the seraphic city of Assisi at the tomb of St Francis, living wellspring of the Franciscan charism, is of significant importance: be it for the number of you here present - actually 500 of you, representing about 2,500 Italian Confreres - be it for the profile of your meeting, which allows you to relive that first and remarkable gathering that was willed by St Francis and known as the "Chapter of the Mats" (*Leggenda Perugina*, n. 114; *FF* 1673). The themes that you intend to study are inspired by the well-known "Little Testament" of Siena (*FF* 132-135), which clearly focuses on your Founder's concern for the Order and his last wishes: *reciprocal love between the Friars, love for evangelical poverty, love for the Church*. You intend to set your reflections in the highly existential and dynamic context of the altered conditions of the present time, which are in continual evolution, according to the light of the providential designs of God, who accompanies the "sacred history" of our epoch with his love. 2. "As a sign in memory of the blessing and testament" (cf. *FF* 133) of St Francis, your primary concern will be to highlight the meaning attached to the name that your Founder gave you: he wanted you to be called "Friars", "Brothers". The terms "Fraternity" and "Brother" express in a meaningful way for you the evangelical newness of the "new commandment". Being brothers must characterize your behaviour towards God, towards yourselves, others and towards all creatures. The typical features of your charismatic identity as a well-defined group within the Church derive from the fundamental Gospel value of lived fraternity, your spirituality, way of life, concrete choices, criteria of teaching and activities and apostolic methods. This form of life in fraternity constitutes a challenge and a proposal in today's world, often "torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence", marked by passions and conflicting interests, seeking unity but uncertain "about the ways to attain it" (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, n. 51). To live in fraternity as true disciples of Jesus can constitute a singular "blessing" for the Church and a "spiritual therapy" for humanity (cf. *ibid.*, n. 87). Indeed, evangelical fraternity, almost constituting "a model and leaven of social life, invites men to encourage fraternal relations among themselves, and to join forces in favour of the development and liberation of the entire person, as well as authentic social progress" (cf. *Constitutions OFM Cap.*, 11, 4). As brothers and members of a fraternity, you make up an "Order of brothers". This unique fraternal style must reflect and favour the sense of each one's belonging to an extended family without boundaries. A continual and total conversion to "fraternity" on the part of the individual members, local and provincial fraternities, will lead to a sort of globalization of charity lived by brothers at the level of the Order, with the ordinary and real possibility of making the individual and community resources available for the brotherly and Franciscan service and for the general priority needs

of the entire Capuchin Fraternity.³ Another theme that you wish to explore is that of love of poverty in the light of "minority" (littleness). This term qualifies your full name ("Friars Minor"), and embraces, together with other meaningful aspects of the Capuchin charism, poverty. The dimension of "minority", which must characterize your being and acting, is at this moment the focal point of attention of the entire Order, looking ahead to the upcoming Plenary Council. I am sure that the reflections that emerge in this "Chapter of the Mats" will contribute to understanding better and putting into effect this value that specifically identifies you in the Church. As I was able to tell you on other occasions, it allows you to be "close in solidarity to the humble and simple people", and makes your Franciscan fraternities "a cordial and accessible point of reference for the poor and for those who are sincerely seeking God" (*Message to Fr John Corriveau, Minister General of the Capuchins*, 18 September 1996; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 16 October, p. 8).

"Minority" requires a heart that is free, detached, humble, gentle and simple, as proposed to us by Jesus and lived by St Francis. It requires the total denial of self and full availability to God and neighbour. Lived "minority" is not only an expression of the disarmed and disarming strength of the spiritual dimension in the Church and in the world, but true minority frees the heart and opens it to an ever more authentic fraternal love, in the expansive behaviour characteristic [of your Order]. It fosters, for example, a style of life characterized by simplicity and sincerity, spontaneity and solidness, humility and joy, self-denial and availability, neighbourliness and service, especially towards the littlest and the neediest people.⁴ Next to fraternal love and love of poverty, you will also meditate on faithful love for the Church. A love which requires of you, in imitation of your Father and Brother St Francis, a disposition of faith and obedience that is lived out in a humble and creative service which becomes a stimulating and convincing "sign" of ecclesial fidelity and of openness to one's brothers and sisters. St Francis became a promoter and a messenger of a humble yet incisive message of evangelical renewal, so that the Gospel would be presented in its integrity and purity by way of a life characterized by love, closeness [to one's neighbour], dialogue and Christian tolerance. Beloved friars, witness your obedience to the Church with your heart and your Founder's way of life; this means unremitting effort, one that will make you happy and aware of spending your existence for God's Kingdom in the name of Jesus.⁵ I cordially hope that the "Chapter of the Mats" will produce the expected spiritual fruits, helping you to single out the right direction to go forward, faithful to your charism in a changing world. It is a beautiful experience for you to come together to strengthen your fraternal, Franciscan and ecclesial vocation. In an atmosphere of prayer, reflection and dialogue you are better able to appreciate the grace of being sons and brothers of St Francis, and it will be possible for you to affirm your mission as the third millennium begins. Discerning and examining the past will open you to the needs of the present-day to build the future of your Order together. I likewise hope that this important meeting will help you to understand better the urgent need to travel the "narrow way" of the Gospel: the way of permanent conversion to Christ, which the journey of holiness is. According to Gospel teaching, it is necessary to have a change of heart if one truly desires to change one's life. Otherwise, one may run the risk of feeling disenchanting and frustrated, as words and proposals, encounters and gatherings, though pleasant, become meaningless and nullify much of the energy expended on elaborating spiritual and apostolic programmes. May the "Virgin made Church" (*FF* 259), Holy Mary of the Angels, Queen of the Order of Minors, assist you in this effort towards Christian perfection. May the continual intercession of St Francis and the numerous Saints and Blesseds of the Capuchin Order support and encourage you, so that you may live faithfulness despite change, through permanent conversion of heart. With this wish, I impart to you, to the other Confreres of Italy and throughout the world, a special Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, 22 October 2003*

JOHN PAUL II