

Franciscans gather in Assisi to celebrate 800 years

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Apr. 21, 2009



CNS photo

ASSISI, Italy

Brown-, gray- and black-hooded robes rustled, knotted white cords swung rhythmically, and sandaled feet crunched gravel.

The soft sounds of labored breathing could also be heard as several hundred Franciscan friars from all over the world wound their way up steep hills, passing wheat fields and olive groves while on a two-hour penitential procession to the tomb of their founder, St. Francis of Assisi.

The processing friars were just some of the 1,800 Friars Minor, Conventual Franciscans, Capuchins and Third Order Regular Franciscans attending an April 15-18 gathering celebrating the 800th anniversary of papal approval of the Franciscan rule. It was the first time that many representatives of the four main Franciscan branches had come together in Assisi.

Participants followed in the footsteps of their founder with many activities centered around or near the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, which houses the Portiuncula chapel -- the small church where St. Francis experienced his conversion.

On April 18, participants traveled south for a special audience with Pope Benedict XVI. The trip recalled St. Francis' pilgrimage to see Pope Innocent III in 1209 to receive approval of his rule of life and formally establish the Franciscan order.

Meeting with them in the courtyard of the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome, the pope thanked the world's Franciscan family for being "a precious gift" to all Christians.

The pope recalled how St. Francis heard God's voice telling him, "Repair my house," and he urged today's Franciscans to continue those efforts of fixing the serious "ruins" in society and mankind.

"Like Francis, always begin with yourself. We are the first homes that God wants restored," Pope Benedict said. In the spirit of the Gospel, "continue to help the pastors of the church by rendering her face as the bride of

Christ more beautiful."

During an outdoor eucharistic celebration in Assisi April 17, Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, a Franciscan who heads the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, underlined the importance of the Franciscan charism of fraternity, communion and living the evangelical ideal of poverty.

"To live evangelical poverty in a world that is increasingly dazzled and enslaved by money and to live with love and solidarity toward the poor -- toward every single poor person -- must be one of the most important and significant contributions the Franciscan friars make" in bearing witness to Christ in today's world, Cardinal Hummes said in his homily.

Cardinal Franc Rode, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, echoed the importance of living as humble and poor children of God as personified by St. Francis.

Being a living witness to humility and poverty is a sign of having been freed by God from the thirst for power and possessions, he said in his homily April 16, adding that this liberating message must be shared with others so that everyone may have the possibility of receiving eternal life.

Though St. Francis' rule of simplicity, fraternity and poverty received formal approval by Pope Innocent III 800 years ago, it is still relevant and crucially urgent in today's world of excess, individualism and hedonism, a number of friars told Catholic News Service April 17.

Franciscan Father Bob Mokry, who served as provincial of the Franciscans in western Canada, 2001-2007, said St. Francis' example and message "is absolutely necessary" today.

Technology and scientific advancements have done so much to benefit mankind, but "on the downside it's turned humanity in upon itself, thinking that we are the masters and controllers" who can also shut out God's existence, he said.

Merely celebrating one's own human powers and accomplishments at the detriment or expense of one's spiritual life has left people dissatisfied, he added.

That is one reason the figure of St. Francis is so appealing to people of such a wide variety of backgrounds, not just Christians, but even to people with little or no faith in God, he said.

"His is a universal life. There's something about the poor, little rich man who gives up everything and experiences freedom and has a rapport with everyone, with all of creation," he said.

It was this sense of universal brotherhood, the joy, freedom and love he experienced, rejoiced in, and shared with others "that just touches everyone," said Father Mokry.

Franciscan Father Russell Becker, director of the Holy Name province's mission office in New Jersey, said what makes St. Francis attractive and valuable to every age and generation is "he just has this way of honoring the person in all people."

"We all tend to objectify people and rob them of their personhood, but when someone comes along and recognizes you are a person, it's really the most remarkable," life-changing experience, said Father Becker.

He said Franciscans, with their easily identifiable robes, are tremendously lucky because people respect them and expect them to have the same gifts St. Francis had.

"People recognize us, open up to us," and offer "unbelievable opportunities" for doing good, he said.

Franciscan Father Mark G. Reamer, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Raleigh, N.C., said what struck him the most about the international gathering of Franciscans was seeing so many friars from such different cultures.

"We look so different, we speak different languages, and yet there is a sense of unity in our vocation and in our sense of being brothers," said Father Reamer.

This unity in diversity, he said, was aided by St. Francis, who was able to recognize the uniqueness in each person, which led to there being no "cookie-cutter approach to being a friar."

Father Becker compared St. Francis to Saran Wrap -- "it can fit around everything yet it still doesn't cover the person" and his individual gifts, talents, personality and opinions.

Being a Franciscan friar and living a life of poverty and simplicity does not mean that cable television, Internet and BlackBerry electronic organizers get the boot; rather the friars said they all find a way to maintain a proper balance between a simple, spiritual life that is still part of a busy, high-tech culture.

Father Mokry said he does it through prayer that "sensitizes you and leaves you open to finding the presence of God in the world."

When one becomes in tune with the beauty in people and creation and "you rejoice in the goodness and the beauty that exists," then work commitments, routine and technology all fall into perspective, he said.

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