



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE BISHOP OF ASSISI
TO MARK THE INAUGURATION OF THE SHRINE OF RENUNCIATION**

*To My Esteemed Brother Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino
Bishop of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino*

You have informed me, dear brother, of one of your initiatives that is tied in a special way to the visit that I made to Assisi on 4 October 2013, when, in the Archbishop's Residence, I paused in the Room of Renunciation. In that place we recall the act of young Francis, who divested himself of all earthly goods, to the point of nakedness, in order to give himself entirely to God and to his brothers and sisters. In order to highlight this important episode, you have chosen to establish — in the Church of Saint Mary Major, former cathedral of Assisi, and in the places of the Bishopric that were “eyewitnesses” to this event — the *Shrine of Renunciation*. In this way you have added a pearl to the religious panorama of the “Seraphic City”, offering the Christian community and pilgrims yet another great opportunity which one may rightly hope will bear spiritual and pastoral fruits. I am therefore happy to participate in this official inauguration, which will take place on 20 May, with a reflection and blessing.

I recall quite well the emotion of my first visit to Assisi. Having chosen the name of Francis as the inspirational ideal of my pontificate, the Room of Renunciation made me relive with particular intensity that moment in the Saint's life. Renouncing all earthly goods, he unfettered himself from the enchantment of the money-god that had seduced his family, in particular his father, Pietro di Bernardone. Certainly the young *conversus* did not intend to show his father a lack of due respect, but he recalled that a baptized person must place love of Christ above all his dearest affections. In a painting that adorns the Room of Renunciation we see clearly the hardened face of the parent who is turning away with the money and clothing of his son, while the son, naked but now free, throws himself into the arms of Bishop Guido. In the Upper Basilica of Saint Francis, the same episode is depicted in a fresco by Giotto, emphasizing the young man's mystical gaze, now projected towards the heavenly Father, while the Bishop covers him with his mantle, expressing

the maternal embrace of the Church.

When I came to visit the Room of Renunciation, you asked me to meet primarily with a representative group of the poor. In this most eloquent Room, they bore witness to the scandalous reality of a world that is still deeply marked by the divide between an endless number of the poor who often lack the basic necessities, and the miniscule number of the wealthy who possess the greatest part of the wealth and who presume to determine the destiny of all of humanity. Unfortunately, after 2,000 years since the proclamation of the Gospel and after eight centuries since Francis' witness, we are faced with a phenomenon of "global inequity" and an "economy that kills" (cf. Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 52-60). The very day before my arrival in Assisi, many migrants lost their life in the waters of Lampedusa. Speaking in this place of "renunciation", affected also by the emotion caused by such a tragic event, I felt the whole truth of what young Francis had testified to: only by reaching out to the poor, in his time represented especially by those suffering from leprosy, by practicing mercy toward them, could he experience that "sweetness of soul and body" (*Testament*, ff 110).

The new Shrine in Assisi is born as a prophecy of a more just and fraternal society, while reminding the Church of her duty to live, in the footsteps of Francis, renouncing worldliness and taking on the values of the Gospel. I want to reiterate what I said in the Room of Renunciation: "We are all called to be poor, to renounce our very selves; and to do this we must learn how to be with the poor, to share with those who lack basic necessities, to touch the flesh of Christ! The Christian is not one who speaks about the poor, no! He is one who encounters them, who looks them in the eye, who touches them". Today it is more necessary than ever that the words of Christ characterize the journey and lifestyle of the Church. If in so many parts of the world that are traditionally Christian we see a distancing from the faith, and we are even called to a new evangelization, the secret of our preaching is not so much in the power of our words, but in the attraction of our witness, supported by grace. And the condition is that we cannot ignore the instructions the Master gave his Apostles in his mission discourse, making a joint appeal for generosity from the evangelizers and for fraternal care toward them: "You received without pay, give without pay. Take no gold nor silver nor copper in your belts; no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food" (Mt 10:8-10).

Francis of Assisi understood it quite clearly. He assimilated it by meditating on the Gospel, but especially in contemplating the face of Christ in the lepers and in the Crucifix of Saint Damian, from which he had received the mandate: "Francis, go, repair my house". Yes, just as in the time of Francis, the Church is always in need of "repair". She is, in fact, holy in the gifts she receives from on high, but is composed of sinners, and therefore is always in need of penance and renewal. And how can she renew herself, except by looking to her "naked" Lord? Christ is the original example of "renunciation", as you, dear brother, wanted to emphasize by promulgating your letter instituting the new Shrine in the solemnity of Christmas. In the Babe of Bethlehem divine glory was hidden. It will be even more shrouded on Golgotha. "Have this mind among

yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).

From Christmas to Easter, Christ's journey is entirely a mystery of "renunciation". His Omnipotence is in some way eclipsed, so that the glory of the Word made Flesh can be expressed first and foremost in love and mercy. Renunciation is a mystery of love! It does not express disdain for the world's reality. How could it? The world comes entirely from the hand of God. Francis himself invites us, in the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, to praise and safeguard the beauty of all creatures. Renunciation helps us make use of them in a sober and fraternal manner, with a hierarchy of values that places love in first place. We must renounce, in substance, more than just things, our very selves, setting aside the selfishness that leads us to take shelter within our interests and our possessions, and prevents us from discovering the beauty in others and opening our hearts to them. An authentic Christian journey does not lead to sadness, but to joy. In a world marked by so much "desolation and anguish" (Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2), the Shrine of Renunciation is intended to foster in the Church and in society evangelical, simple and fraternal joy.

A beautiful aspect of the new Shrine comes from the fact that in the event of Francis' renunciation we also see the figure of a Pastor, Bishop Guido, who probably knew him, if not actually accompanied him in his journey of conversion, and now embraces him in his decisive choice. It is an image of the Church's maternal nature, which deserves to be rediscovered, while the condition of youth, in a general context of societal crisis, raises serious questions that I wished to focus on by calling for a Synod on the topic. Young people need to be welcomed, appreciated, and accompanied. We need not be afraid of proposing to them Christ and the demanding ideals of the Gospel. However, we must be among them and journey with them. Thus, the new Shrine has the added value of being a precious place where young people can be helped in discerning their vocation. At the same time adults are called there to join together in a unity of intentions and sentiments so that the Church can show ever more clearly her family character, and the new generations can feel supported in their journey.

Therefore, I cordially bless the new Shrine, extending my blessing to the pilgrims who will visit it and to the whole diocesan community. May the Blessed Virgin, to whom the Shrine will be dedicated, make her motherly protection felt by all.

16 April 2017, Easter Sunday

FRANCIS

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