

II INTERNATIONAL OFM JPIC CONGRESS EMBRACING THE EXCLUDED OF TODAY

WELCOME AND OFFICIAL OPENING

Esteemed Sisters and Brothers,

In the name of the General Government of the Order of Friars Minor, we fraternally welcome you to this II International JPIC Congress, approved at the beginning of the six-year term of the present OFM administration. The Congress has been carefully prepared by yourselves and by the preparatory committees, building on the solid reflection and decisions of the first International JPIC Congress which was held in Vossenack, Germany, in 2000.

It is important to remember that the II International JPIC Congress is part of the preparatory process for the celebration of the VIII Centenary of the founding of the Order. It is inspired by the *conversion process* of Francis of Assisi. As he himself tells us, one of the key moments of his life was his experience in the midst of the lepers. It was so important that after *the Lord led him among them* (cfr. *Test 2-3*), he could no longer walk alone in the world; the excluded had been transformed into his inseparable brothers and sisters, into his teachers. We also, who have accepted the Gospel mandate, desire to walk with the lepers of our day, with those who are newly excluded by the political, economic and even religious systems of our society. For this reason we have chosen as icon and logo of this Congress *Francis' embrace of brother leper*, and have chosen as our slogan *embracing the excluded of today*.

It is also very significant that this II JPIC Congress is being celebrated in Latin America, and especially in Brazil; it is celebrated in a continent and in a country replete with challenging contrasts. One clear example is the contrast between the *immense human and natural wealth* of these places, and the many and diverse situations of *extreme poverty* that are present, and which surely strike at the sensibilities of anyone who takes the time to look at them. It is a continent that struggles between *the hope* of a more human and just future for all, and *the anguish* of the daily effort to secure bread and for recognition of human dignity. It is a continent where the Church has opted strongly for the excluded and as a result has been persecuted and martyred. The Church of this continent has not only been *the voice of the voiceless*, but has learned to listen to and to encourage the poor so that the poor themselves *raise their voices and speak a prophetic word*, a word of salvation for all.

It is in this context of Latin America and on the way toward the VIII Centenary that we celebrate our II JPIC Congress. Given the methodology chosen, the Congress will help us determine *the causes* that generate exclusion and *the processes* that make such exclusion possible, an exclusion whose dehumanizing effects we see every day in the lives of the people and in the state of the environment. Our Congress will surely challenge us to go *among the excluded of today*. But we will not go as *curious researchers* who do not feel the pain of the excluded or take up their cause; nor will we go as *uncommitted politicians* who for better electoral results promise a paradise here on earth; nor will we go as *false philanthropists*, who for personal vanity throw crumbs to satisfy the needs of the poor and to appease their own consciences. Rather, in this Congress we look to go among the excluded as Francis did, moved by the Spirit and by passionate and unconditional love; we go among them not only to show them mercy and to share the best that we have to offer, but above all *to listen to them and be converted by them*. In this way, *the very real faces of the excluded*, along with that of Jesus Christ and those of the brothers in our Fraternities, are transformed into a clear and decisive criterion for discernment regarding our current forms of presence and service in the Church and in today's society. It is a discernment that commits us, together with the excluded of today, to concrete action leading to the recovery of the inalienable human dignity of all, and to defend the rights of our mother and sister, the Earth. The social position of the excluded, then, becomes the privileged space for our formation as lesser brothers and sisters. It is also the necessary horizon from which our evangelizing mission reaches its highest credibility. It is not enough to read and interpret the signs of the times; rather, together with the excluded of today, we must be the signs of new times of liberty, solidarity, justice and peace. We are called to be signs showing that the Reign of God is present in the history of our daily life,

and that it impels us to open new and promising places of encounter and communion with all created beings.

Esteemed brother and sister animators of JPIC, thank you very much for having accepted with joy, enthusiasm and hope, the invitation that Brother Jose Rodriguez Carballo, our Minister and servant, extended to all the Entities of the Order, and thank you for your effort in arriving here in this place. We offer our sincere gratitude to the commissions for liturgy, animation, health, finances, and especially to the commission of logistics, for all the work they have done in preparation and for all the work that will continue to be done during these days. We recognize and appreciate those who will be serving as moderators, translators, secretaries, presenters and facilitators. We also thank the participation of our invited guests from the General Curia and of the brother Ministers who are here from some of the Entities of the Order and who honor us with their presence. We are certain that their sharing, based on their own experience and reflection, will be of great importance. We offer a special word of thanks to the Brazilian Franciscan Conference, represented by its president, and to the Foundation of our Lady of Fatima, for receiving us in their house and for providing us with the facilities needed for our work.

Welcome to all, sisters and brothers; may the Lord accompany and illumine each of us individually and all of us together in the course of our work. And now, in the name of the General Government of the Order of Friars Minor, *we declare this II International JPIC Congress officially open*, in the spirit of our theme, *embracing the excluded of today*.

Uberlandia, January 30,

2006

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