

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF JPIC OFM

Embracing the excluded of today

AN EXPERIENCE AMONG OUR LANDLESS BROTHERS AND SISTERS

“The Lord led me among them... and I treated them with mercy, and what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body”

In the time of Francis, as we know, the lepers (the excluded) were kept outside the walls of the town. Today also, in many towns and countries, walls have been erected so that the great majority of the poor cannot have access to social amenities (work, education, health, communications, housing, etc.) or natural amenities (land, water, air, minerals, etc.). If we wish, therefore, to embrace them, which is the topic of our Congress, we must go out to them.

On this occasion we are offered the possibility to live some time with our landless brothers and sisters, to get to know “other” brothers and sisters, people who, being children of God, are not strangers or dangerous, or a labour force. For us Friars Minor, on the contrary, the excluded represent a very great social and cultural richness. The meeting with them will also be an opportunity to compare our “discourses” with the “concrete life” of a social group.

HOW WILL WE GO TO THEM?

We do not wish to go as:

- Curious investigators; the poor are not objects of study!
- False philanthropists, or as rich benefactors who bring them a few crumbs.

We wish to go as Friars Minor, disposed to:

- Embrace the excluded. This implies that we approach them without fear, without prejudice, that we embrace their mind and heart in order to accept and appreciate them, and that we walk at their side, full of joy and hope.
- Sharing the goods of the Lord. This implies giving and receiving. We have a lot to offer to the excluded of today, the riches given to us by the Lord are so many and we must restore them to the poor; among them is the Gospel. But we can also receive a lot from them, their joy, simplicity, their desires for a better world, their struggles to live from day to day in the midst of adversity, etc. Let us remember that *“Nobody is so poor that he cannot give, or so rich that he cannot receive”*. And equally, *“Nobody is so wise that he cannot learn, or so ignorant that he cannot teach”*. Let us not go, therefore, only to give or to teach, but also to receive and to learn as disciples.
- Discovering the face of Jesus. The expressions “I was hungry, I was thirsty...” of Jesus continue to be a fundamental requirement of our discipleship. It is there that our salvation or condemnation comes into play. Let us not turn “the works of mercy” into simple pious advice, and much less into a mere pastime.

The experience among the landless, on the other hand, is a fundamental part of the process of reflection of the Congress; consequently, all are invited to participate in the best way possible.

However, if anyone cannot do so because of health or age, he or she should let it be known. We do not want this experience to be taken as an imposition, but that it be assumed freely and convincingly. Therefore, each one is called on to discern honestly before God and his or her conscience about his or her active participation in this experience which is provided for in the programme.

This experience should not become another anecdote in our life, but rather the confirmation of our options and, God willing, the beginning of a new, more just style of life in solidarity among ourselves and with the excluded of today.

The poor await us in order to share the best of themselves with each one of us and we have accepted the proposal to be and to live as Friars Minor.

Let us prepare ourselves, brothers and sisters, with joy and generosity of spirit, so that we also may experience the sweetness of soul and body which radically changed the life of Francis of Assisi.

JPIC Office.