

Pope John Paul II Thanks Friars Minor for Ministry in Holy Places

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To mark the 65th anniversary of Pope Clement VI's Bull *Gratias agimus* (1342) entrusting the care of the holy places to the Friars Minor, the Holy Father sent a letter to the Minister General. The following translation of the Italian original was provided by the Friars Minor.

To the Most Reverend Father Hermann Schalück, OFM Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor.

In this season of Advent which introduces us to the liturgical celebration of the mystery of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is for me a pleasure to extend a special greeting to you and to all your confreres, especially to those living and working in the land sanctified by the physical presence of the Lord, traversed by Him in proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and dyed in the end in the purple of His precious Blood.

There recurs, in fact, in this very year now drawing to its close, the 650th anniversary of the Bull *Gratias agimus* with which my predecessor, Pope Clement VI, entrusted to the sons of St. Francis, who had been present there from the time of their founder and father, the custody of the places which recall the mysteries of the redemption.

From that time on, the Franciscans have never interrupted their beneficent presence, in spite of not a few difficulties, as they committed themselves generously to the conservation of the ancient memorials, the erection of new sanctuaries, the liturgical animation and welcoming of pilgrims.

The work of the Friars Minor has not, however, been limited to these aspects, important as they are. Mindful of their primary vocation (*Rnb* 16, 5f), they have given themselves to the service of their brothers, providing succour for the poor and the weak, instruction for the young, a welcome for the old and the sick, out of love for him who has first loved us (cf. St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, IX, 1).

To their pastoral activities they have added cultural ones, founding centers for the study of the word of God and for the propagation of the rich culture of the Christian Orient.

In this way they have professed their faith and their hope (cf. 1 Pt 3:14-17) with a witness which extended not a few times to the shedding

of their blood in martyrdom or to the sacrifice of their lives in assisting those struck down by the recurrent epidemics.

My venerable predecessors have not been lacking in giving public recognition to this providential work of Christian animation. I am pleased to recall in particular the Letter *Quinque ante* with which Pius XII on 1 July 1947 (cf. *AOFM LXVI* [1947], 113-114) wished to express his encouragement to the Minister General on the occasion of the sixth centenary of the setting up of the Custody, and the affectionate declarations of Paul VI who, upon his return from his pilgrimage to the holy places, expressed his "grateful admiration for the many well-deserving sons of St. Francis who in the course of seven centuries have carried out with such self-abnegation a precious and fruitful service of faithful apostolate" (*Acta Custodiae Terrae Sanctae*, 9 [1964], 79).

Following in their footsteps, I, too, desire to present to the zealous friars of the Custody of the Holy Land and to all the Order of Friars Minor my fervent exhortation to continue along the path opened by their confreres with the same evangelical generosity and dedication (cf. Mt. 13:52), giving the Church a shining example of faithfulness to the task entrusted to them, and giving witness to the local faithful, as well as to those who travel there in devout pilgrimage, of their love and loyalty to Christ, the Redeemer of mankind.

While inviting our dear Franciscan Friars to persevere in this their noble and appreciated service to the Church and to souls, I invoke upon them an outpouring of divine graces and rewards, and at the same time I impart to you and to the whole family of Friars Minor the Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 30 November 1992, on the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle, in the 15th year of my Pontificate.

Ioannes Paulus PP.II