

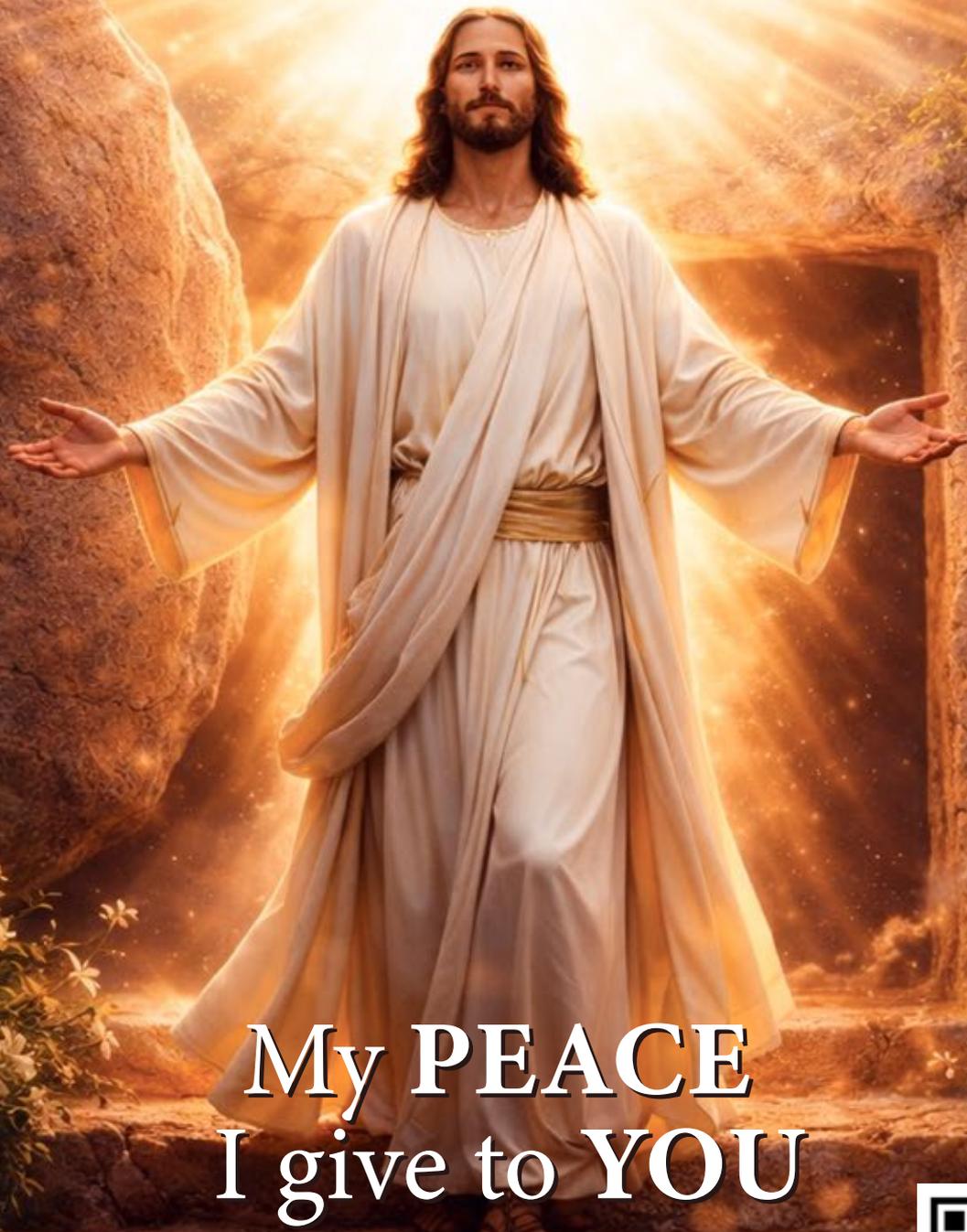


**MISSIO-AVONA**  
THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES

ISSUE NO. 5 / 2026

# SOWER

MAGAZINE 2026



My PEACE  
I give to YOU

*John 14:27*





# SOWER



We have “SOWER” the title of the digital magazine of the MISSIO-AVONA based on inspiration from the Parable of the Sower (Gospel of Mathew chapter 13). The Sower went to sow the seeds in the field. Likewise, through this magazine we too would like to become the Sowers of the Gospel values of Joy, Love, Hope, Faith, Compassion, Mercy and Inspiration in the minds and hearts of its readers.



# Contents

1. St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al Malik Al- Kamil in Damietta, Egypt | 5
2. Pope Leo XIV's Message to promote dialogue and peace | 6
3. Bishop Aldo Berardi's Message for his people during wartime | 8
4. Bishop's Easter Message 2026 with Greeting poster | 10
5. Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Arabia, Ahmadi, Kuwait | 12

## II. LENT AND EASTER ARTICLES

1. You are dust, and to dust you shall return | 16
2. Season of Return | 18
3. Do this in memory of me- service with love | 21
4. Jesus: The wounded healer | 23
5. By His wounds we are healed | 24
6. He is Risen to die no more | 25
7. Tongues of Fire | 27

## St. Francis of Assisi – Special Jubilee Year

1. Decree of Pope Leo for the Jubilee Year of Franciscans | 29
2. Decree of the Bishop | 33
3. San Damiano Cross: An Icon of Glory | 36
4. Portuncula: the cradle of the Franciscan Order | 39
5. The door that stays open: The pardon of Assisi and the Jubilee of Mercy | 41
6. Il Perdono d'Assisi (Plenary Indulgence) | 43
7. Franciscan Missionary: Beyond Italy, the Alps, and the encounter with the Sultan | 44
8. Stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi | 47
9. Death as Transition | 51

## III. Spirituality and Reports

NeoCatechumens | 52

Reports from the Missio - Avona's office, Awali and Manama | 54



## A Crossroad of **FAITH** and **FIRE**

In the Middle East, a rare spiritual convergence began on February 18, 2026, as the holy months of Ramadan and Lent dawned on the same day—a sacred invitation to pray, to fast, and to perform acts of charity. Yet, as we embraced this path of grace, a different reality unfolded. Bishop Aldo Berardi described a region, “We are caught in a logic of ‘you strike me, I strike you; you attack me, I attack you,’” and by February 28th, the Middle East was ignited by an escalation of conflict.

For a week now, the roar of missiles and the wail of sirens have defined our days. We have prayed unceasingly for a ceasefire and peace, yet even amidst the violence, Our Church leaders who stand for the Culture of Life and well-being continue to sow seeds of hope and comfort and a better tomorrow.

In this issue of our magazine, we feature appeals from Church leaders calling on everyone to become peacemakers through dialogue, rather than war. We remain committed to our spiritual warfare and interior journeys, remembering the Lenten reminder: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This season is a time of return to God, mirrored in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. During the Holy Week Triduum, we reflect on Jesus Christ—His Commandment of love, the healing found in His wounds, and His resurrection. We pray for the Holy Spirit (Tongues of Fire) to grant new life, transforming and healing our world. Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth. We need this fire that purifies and guides our lives.

This year also marks a historic milestone: the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi (1226–2026). To honor this legacy of peace, we bring you messages from His Holiness Pope Leo XIV and Bishop Berardi, along with features articles on San Damiano Cross, the Portiuncula (the cradle of the Franciscan Order), il Perdono d’Assisi, Franciscan missionaries, and the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi.

We also explore the spirituality of the NeoCatechumenal Way and various Mission-Avona’s Holy Childhood day reports. May these reflections strengthen your faith as we journey toward the hope of the Resurrection. He is risen!

Digital Magazine Vol. 1/ Issue 5

March 2026

Publisher: **MISSIO -AVONA**

With the permission and Approval by

**H.E. Bishop Aldo Berardi O.S.S.T.**

*Editorial Team*

**Fr. Marcus Fernandes OFM Cap.**

Delegate of Missio Avona

**Dr. Stephen Kachappilly OFM Cap.**

**Brilston Francis**

Designer

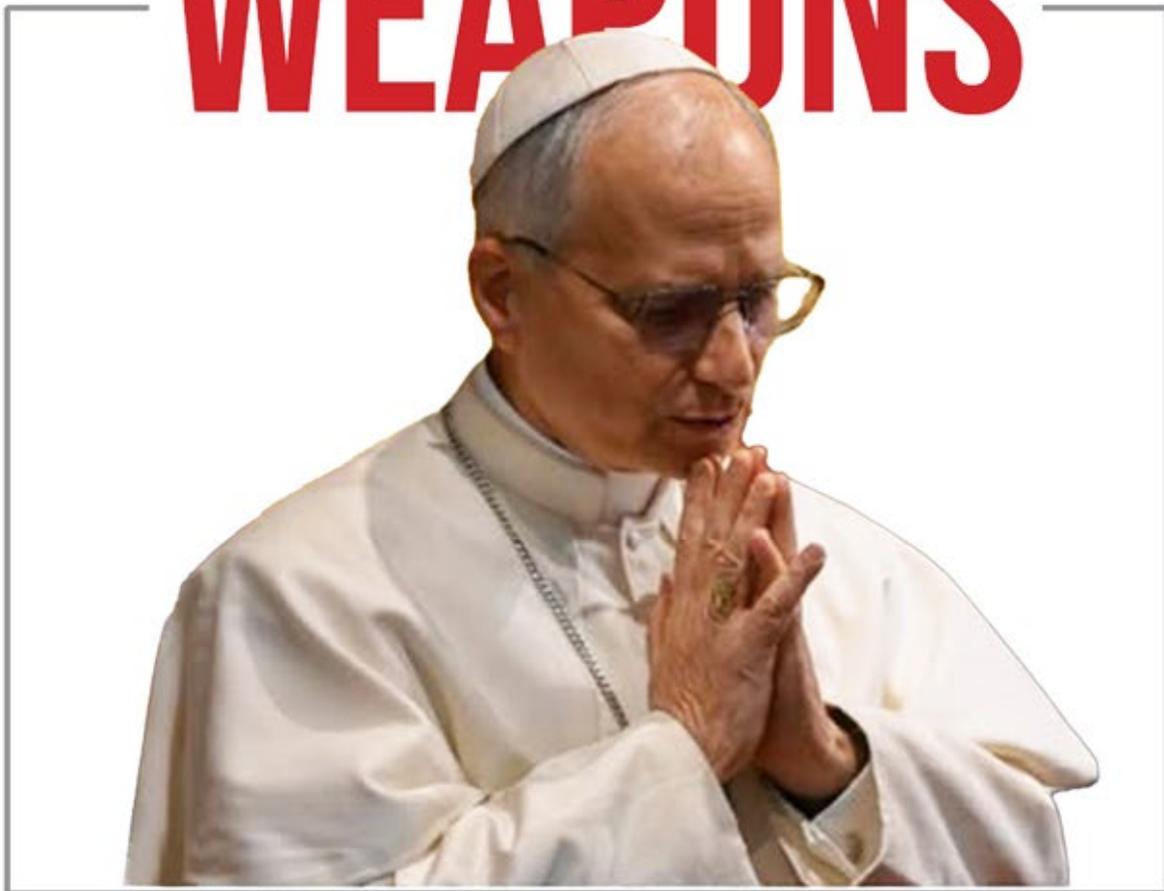
# LET US PRAY FOR PEACE



*The brotherly embrace between St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil  
(an encounter of peace and dialogue amid conflict in 1219)*



# WORK FOR PEACE AND SEEK SOLUTIONS WITHOUT WEAPONS



“May every kind word, every gesture of reconciliation,  
and every choice for dialogue be seeds of a new world.” Amen

Pope Leo XIV



# Pray with us, for PEACE

by AVONA



Heavenly Father,

Lord of history and God of Peace, we lift our hearts to You amid the fear and unrest that weigh upon the Middle East.

O Jesus, Prince of Peace, You have said: "Peace I leave with you; My Peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." May Your peace take root in our homes, strengthen our cities, and embrace the entire region. Protect Your children in these troubled times.

Touch the hearts of the leaders of the nations whom you have given the authority to rule over the Earth, that they may choose dialogue over division, justice over oppression, and reconciliation over violence. Protect the innocent, the displaced, the vulnerable, and the grieving. Grant us the courage to overcome fear with faith, and hatred with love.

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Arabia, Queen of Peace, may Your peace reign in our hearts, in our families, and among all nations. For You have promised, "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

**“ LET US BE  
PEACEMAKERS,  
as Jesus Christ reminds us,  
and ask God  
to inspire paths of **UNITY**  
so that the roar of missiles  
may **CEASE** and we may  
live in harmony  
in a region too often  
marked by  
division ”**

**Bishop Aldo Berardi O.S.S.T**  
Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia



— AVONA's —

# Shepherd's VOICE

**The Shepherd's voice shows concern and gives guidance to his flock...**

Bishop Aldo Berardi, the Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia, ordained on March 18th, 2023, views the Middle East conflict as a new challenge. Despite this, he approaches the situation with insight, peace in his heart, and a clear vision, offering words of hope and love.

He encouraged the faithful to stay calm, united in prayer, and attentive to everyone's safety. He invited all the faithful and said, "Please follow the instructions of civil authorities carefully and take all necessary precautions at home, work, and parish settings." He also urged "all parish priests and rectors to act appropriately and make responsible decisions to ensure the safety of those in their care." Finally, he highlighted, saying, "Let us stay united in faith and charity, especially caring for the elderly, the sick, and the vulnerable." Finally, he prayed for all the faithful, invoking God's protection, "May the Lord protect you and your families, and may Our Lady of Arabia, our mother, watch over us all."



*H.E. Bishop Aldo Berardi in the Chapel of Our Lady of Arabia offers a Holy Eucharist for the Peace in the region, along with the Cathedral Team - 28 Feb. 2026.*



# النيابة الرسولية لشمال شبه الجزيرة العربية APOSTOLIC VICARIATE OF NORTHERN ARABIA

BAHRAIN . KUWAIT . QATAR . SAUDI ARABIA

## Easter 2026 Message from the Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia Every act of peace, mercy, and solidarity becomes a living sign of the Resurrection

*“Death swallowed Him once, but He swallowed death forever.  
The grave conceived Him and brought forth life;  
the tomb became the womb of resurrection.”*

– Ephrem, the Syrian (Hymns on the Resurrection I–III)

### Beloved brothers and sisters in the Risen Christ!

He is risen! He is truly risen!

At Easter, the Church proclaims the mystery that stands at the center of Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. As Saint Paul writes, «*If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain*».<sup>1</sup> Yet Christ has been raised, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, and through Him God has opened the path of life for all humanity (cf. 1 Cor 15:20–22).

The resurrection is not only an event of the past but the decisive turning point of history. In raising His Son, God reveals that love is stronger than hatred, truth stronger than falsehood, and life stronger than death (cf. Rom 6:9; Acts 2:24). The empty tomb, therefore, becomes the sign of hope for every generation.

This proclamation acquires particular urgency in our own time. As war and violence continue to wound many lands of the Middle East, we see before us the tragic reality of destruction, displacement, and suffering. Families mourn their dead, communities are torn apart, and the dignity of human life is threatened. Yet precisely in such moments the Easter message resounds with greater power. The resurrection stands before every field of conflict as a promise that death and violence do not have the final word.

In recent reflections on the mystery of Easter, Pope Leo XIV has reminded the faithful that the resurrection is not an escape from the world's suffering but its transformation.<sup>2</sup> The risen Christ enters the wounds of humanity and calls His disciples to become witnesses of life and reconciliation in the midst of history (cf. Jn 20:19–23).<sup>3</sup> Thus, every act of peace, mercy, and solidarity becomes a living sign of the resurrection already at work among us.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 15:14–20; cf. Rom 6:4–9; Acts 2:24.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Pope Leo XIV, General Audience, “*The Resurrection of Christ, the Response to Human Sadness*,” Vatican, 22 October 2025, in Cycle of Catechesis: Jubilee 2025 – Jesus Christ Our Hope. IV. The Resurrection of Christ and the Challenges of the Contemporary World.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Pope Leo XIV, General Audience, “*Easter Gives Hope to Everyday Life*,” Vatican, 5 November 2025. The Pope teaches that the Paschal Mystery is “the cornerstone of Christian life” and that the Church continually celebrates the living presence of the Resurrection.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Pope Leo XIV, General Audience, “*Easter Spirituality Animates Fraternity*,” Vatican, 12 November 2025, emphasizing that belief in the resurrection inspires Christian fraternity and commitment to goodness.

The Fathers of the Church contemplated this mystery with profound wonder. The great preacher St. John Chrysostom proclaimed in his Paschal homily:

*“Christ is risen, and you are overthrown, O death!  
Christ is risen, and life reigns!  
Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the tomb.”*<sup>5</sup>

For the early Church, the resurrection was the decisive victory of God over the powers of death and evil. As St. Augustine (of Hippo) taught, the resurrection of Christ is both the foundation of Christian faith and the promise of our own future glory (cf. Sermon 261; 229).<sup>6</sup> St. Ephrem, the Syrian, shares the mystery of Easter, which is described with luminous imagery: Christ enters death like a seed planted in the earth, but rises again bringing a harvest of life for the world. In this vision, the tomb itself becomes a womb from which new creation emerges.<sup>7</sup>

This truth speaks powerfully to our present moment. Wherever war seeks to sow death, Christians are called to sow life. Wherever hatred divides people and nations, the Gospel calls us to reconciliation. Wherever despair threatens to prevail, the resurrection invites us to renewed hope.

Easter, therefore, sends us forth with a mission. We are called to live as people of the resurrection: to defend the dignity of every human life, to care for those who suffer, and to work tirelessly for peace.

May the light of the risen Christ shine upon all who endure the pain of war, especially in the lands of the Middle East, where the Gospel first took root. May He comfort the grieving, protect the displaced, and inspire leaders and nations to seek justice and reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> And may the joy of the resurrection renew our faith so that we may walk together in hope until the day when God will wipe away every tear and make all things new (cf. Rev 21:4–5).

**Christ is risen! Alleluia!**

A blessed and joyful Easter to you all.



**✠ Aldo Berardi, O.S.S.T.**  
Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia



<sup>5</sup> cf. St. John Chrysostom, *Paschal Homily* (4th century).

<sup>6</sup> cf. St. Augustine, *Sermon 261* and *Sermon 229P*.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Resurrection I–III* (4th century), imagery of Christ descending into Sheol like a seed and rising as the harvest of life.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Pope Leo XIV, General Audience, “*The Pasch of Jesus Christ: The Final Answer to the Question of Our Death*,” Vatican, 10 December 2025, reflecting on how the resurrection gives meaning to the mystery of human death.



Our Lady of Arabia Church  
Elevated to the  
**DIGNITY OF A MINOR BASILICA**  
A Sacred Milestone in the History of the Church in the  
Arabian Peninsula, Ahmadi, Kuwait – 16 January 2026



In the providence of God and under the tender patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church of Our Lady of Arabia in Ahmadi was solemnly installed as a Minor Basilica, marking an event of enduring historical and ecclesial significance for the Catholic Church in Kuwait and throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

This distinguished honour, granted by the Holy See, stands as a recognition of the church's flourishing liturgical life, steadfast pastoral mission, and its role as a beacon of faith for generations of the faithful who have found within its walls a spiritual home.

The solemn Eucharistic celebration was presided over by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State, The Holy See. The sacred gathering was further graced by the presence of His Excellency Archbishop Eugene Martin Nugent, Apostolic Nuncio to the State of Kuwait; His Excellency Bishop Aldo Berardi, O.S.S.T., Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia; and His Excellency Bishop Paolo Martinelli, OFM Cap., Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia. Priests, religious, and representatives of civil institutions joined more than 5,000 faithful from numerous nations and rites, whose gathering manifested the universality, vitality, and unity of the Catholic Church in this region. What unfolded on that blessed day was not merely a ceremonial elevation, but a moment destined to be inscribed in the living memory of the Church.



**Adv. Shibu Jacob,**  
*PPC Member, Ahmad, Kuwait*



**The Apostolic Decree: A Gift from the Universal Church**

At the heart of the celebration was the solemn proclamation of the Apostolic Decree issued by the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Responding to the request of His Excellency Bishop Aldo Berardi and the prayers of the clergy and Christian faithful, the Dicastery—by virtue of the special faculties granted by the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Leo XIV —adorned the parish church in the city of Ahmadi, dedicated to God in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title Our Lady of Arabia, with the title and dignity of Basilica Minor, together with all the rights and liturgical privileges pertaining thereto, in accordance with the norms of the Church.

Issued on 28 June 2025, the Memorial of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and signed by Cardinal Arthur Roche, Prefect, and Archbishop Vittorio Francesco Viola, O.F.M., Secretary, the decree stands as a lasting testimony to the vibrant faith of the People of God in Northern Arabia and to their deep filial devotion to the Mother of the Lord.

This apostolic recognition further strengthens the Basilica's bond with the Successor of Peter and situates it prominently within the communion of the universal Church.

### **A Celebration Marked by Sacred Solemnity**

The liturgical celebration began with a dignified procession that reflected the grandeur and spiritual depth of the occasion. The rites that followed were rich in symbolism and tradition, drawing the faithful into a profound experience of prayer and thanksgiving.

Among the most significant moments was the blessing and unveiling of the insignia proper to a Minor Basilica:

- the ombrellino, signifying the Basilica's special union with the Roman Pontiff;
- the tintinnabulum, a reminder of the church's readiness to welcome the Holy Father;
- and the basilica flag, representing its participation in the universal mission of the Church.

These sacred symbols now stand permanently within the Basilica as visible expressions of its ecclesial dignity and mission.

The Holy Eucharist, celebrated with reverence and splendor, was enriched by sacred music and prayers offered in multiple languages, eloquently reflecting the catholicity of the Church — one faith lived and professed by many peoples.

In his homily, Cardinal Parolin reminded the faithful that the elevation of a church to the rank of Minor Basilica is not simply an honour bestowed, but a responsibility entrusted — a call for the community to become more a centre of worship, evangelization, reconciliation, and charity.

With gratitude to the Holy Father, Bishop Aldo Berardi acknowledged the generations of priests, religious, and lay faithful whose sacrifices and witness prepared the path toward this historic moment.

### **From Humble Beginnings to a Living Sanctuary of Faith**

The story of Our Lady of Arabia is inseparable from the history of the Catholic presence in Kuwait. On 25 December 1945, the first Holy Mass was offered in a humble tent in Ahmadi for Catholic workers — a quiet yet decisive moment that marked the planting of the seeds of faith in the desert. What began in simplicity soon grew into a vibrant community. The blessing of the first chapel on 8 December 1948 inaugurated a new chapter in the Church's life. Shortly thereafter, the shrine was recognized as a place of pilgrimage.

A defining milestone came when the statue of Our Lady of Arabia, blessed in Rome by Pope Pius XII on 17 December 1949, was solemnly enthroned on 6 January 1950. Ever since, countless faithful have turned to the Mother of God under this beloved title, seeking her intercession and protection. Across the decades, amid changing times and expanding communities, the church has remained a steadfast refuge of prayer — a sanctuary where hope is rekindled, faith strengthened, and hearts united.

## **The Ecclesial Meaning of a Minor Basilica**

The title of Minor Basilica is granted only to churches distinguished by historical importance, vibrant liturgical life, and exemplary pastoral service. It establishes a particular bond with the Roman Pontiff and calls the Basilica to serve as a model of ecclesial communion. This elevation therefore signifies more than honour; it is a spiritual mandate.

The Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Arabia is entrusted with the mission of fostering deeper participation in the sacred liturgy, promoting devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and serving as a welcoming home for pilgrims and seekers of grace.

## **A Beacon of Faith and Hope**

In a region where the Church lives her vocation with humility and perseverance, the raising of this sacred shrine to the dignity of a Minor Basilica shines as a powerful sign of hope.

It proclaims that the Gospel continues to take root and flourish, and that the presence of Christ remains alive among His people.

As this Basilica enters a new chapter in its sacred history, it stands not only as an architectural landmark but as a living testament to God's providence — a House of Prayer, a Place of Pilgrimage, and a Sign of Faith for the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

Entrusted to the maternal care of Our Lady of Arabia, may this holy sanctuary continue to draw generations into the mystery of God's love and serve as a luminous witness to the unity and universality of the Church.

In a moment of profound significance for the Catholic Church in Kuwait and the Arabian Peninsula, the Church of Our Lady of Arabia in Ahmadi was officially designated as a Minor Basilica, a recognition bestowed by the Holy See under the auspices of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This event highlights the church's vibrant liturgical life and its steadfast pastoral mission, serving as

a spiritual sanctuary for many generations of the faithful.

The solemn installation was presided over by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of the Holy See, and concelebrated by prominent ecclesiastical figures, including Archbishop Eugene Martin Nugent (Nuncio), Apostolic Vicar Bishop Aldo Berardi (Avona), and Apostolic Vicar Bishop Paolo Martinelli (Avosa). The ceremony attracted over 5,000 attendees from various nations and rites, showcasing the universal nature and vitality of the Catholic Church in the region. This event marked not only the ceremonial elevation of the church but also a historic milestone to be remembered by the community.

Central to the celebration was the proclamation of the Apostolic Decree from the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which, at the behest of Bishop Aldo Berardi and the prayers of the Christian community, designated the church as a Basilica Minor. This decree, dated June 28, 2025, and signed by Cardinal Arthur Roche and Archbishop Vittorio Francesco Viola, is a testament to the faithful devotion of the People of God in Northern Arabia and their connection to the universal Church.

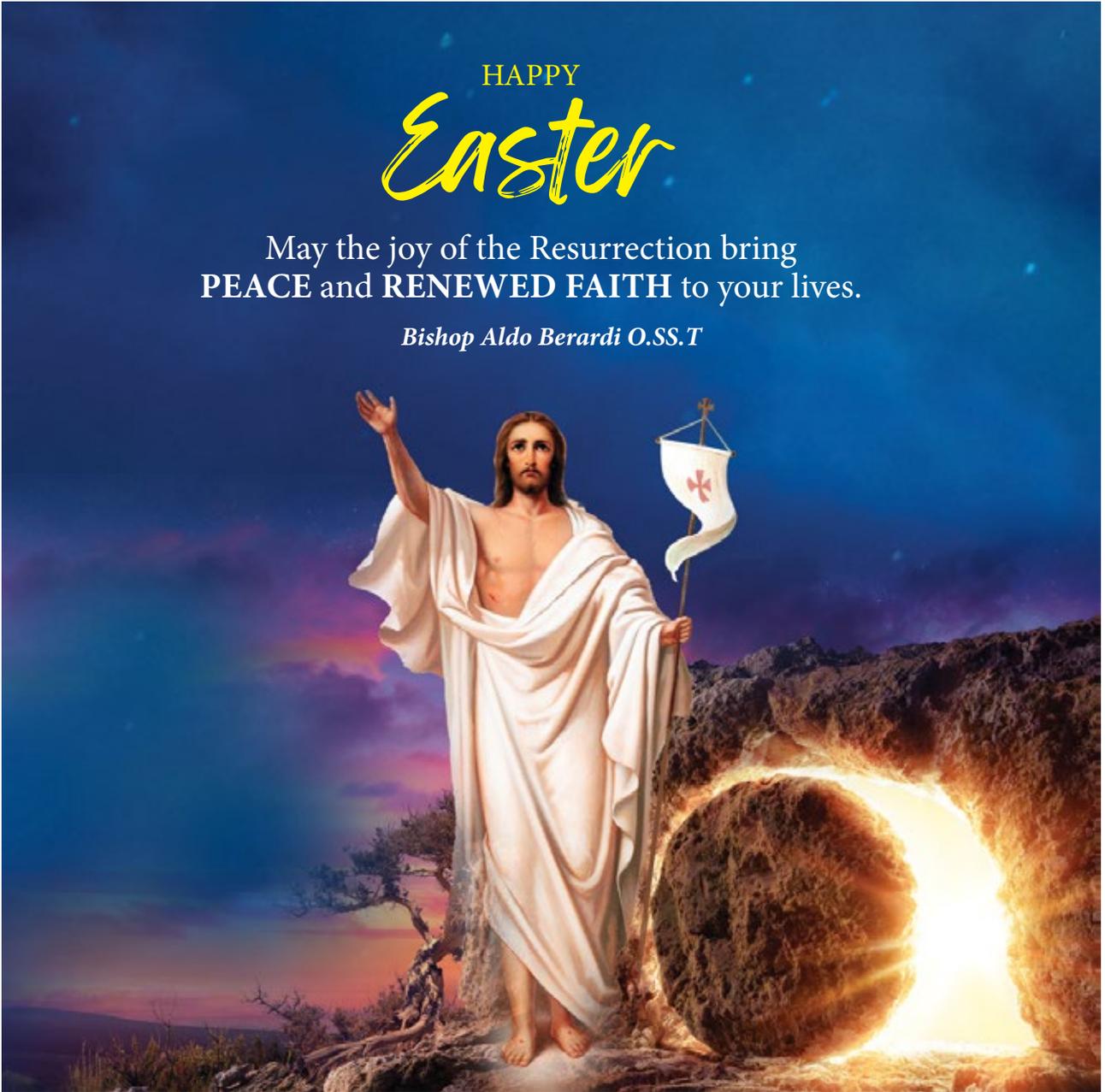
The celebration commenced with a solemn procession that embodied the spiritual depth of the occasion. Various symbols were blessed, including the Ombrellino, representing the church's connection with the Pope; the Tintinnabulum, a reminder of its readiness to welcome the Holy Father; and the basilica flag, emblematic of its role in the Church's global mission. These symbols now stand as permanent reminders of the Basilica's ecclesial dignity and commitment.

The liturgy, enriched with sacred music and multilingual prayers, highlighted the diversity within the Catholic faith. Cardinal Parolin's homily emphasized that this elevation signifies not just a title but also a deepening of the church's mission and unity with the global Church, reaffirming the vital role of the Basilica in the spiritual life of the faithful. ■

HAPPY  
*Easter*

May the joy of the Resurrection bring  
**PEACE** and **RENEWED FAITH** to your lives.

*Bishop Aldo Berardi O.S.S.T*



# **PART 2**

# **LENT AND EASTER ARTICLES**

*“You are Dust, and to Dust you shall Return.”  
Lent: A Season That Teaches Us How to Prepare*

# Ash Wednesday



*Dr. Stephen Kachappilly OFM, Cap  
Director, Office of care, AVONA*



Every year, quietly and without spectacle, the season of Lent arrives. It does not shout. It does not entertain. Instead, it pauses the noise of ordinary life and invites reflection. Beginning with ashes and ending in resurrection, Lent is not merely a religious observance – It is a journey into the truth of what it means to be human.

At its heart lies a sentence both ancient and unsettling: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words, spoken on Ash Wednesday, frame the entire season. They remind us of our fragility, our limits, and our shared destiny. Yet Lent is not a season of despair. It is a season that uses honesty to lead us toward hope.

## **1. Ash Wednesday: The Courage to Remember**

Lent begins with ashes placed on the forehead, visible to the world. The gesture is simple, yet deeply symbolic. Ashes come from burned palm branches – once signs of celebration, now reduced to dust. They speak of impermanence, humility, and truth. In a culture that values strength, youth, productivity, and success, Ash Wednesday offers a counter-message: you are finite. You are not self-made. You are not permanent. This reminder is not meant to humiliate, but to ground us. When we accept our mortality, we begin to live more honestly. We stop pretending that time is endless and that consequences can always be postponed.

## **2. “You Are Dust”: Fragility as a Teacher**

To be called dust is not an insult. In the biblical imagination, dust is sacred – It is the material from

which humanity is formed. Remembering that we are dust reconnects us to the earth, to one another, and to God. Lent invites us to confront the fragility we often avoid: the fragility of our bodies, of relationships, and of peace, justice, and security.

Recent global events, such as pandemics, wars, and the climate crisis, have only reinforced what Lent has always known: life is vulnerable. Yet fragility, when acknowledged, has the power to transform us. It can soften our judgments, deepen our compassion, and awaken gratitude. When we realize how easily life can be lost, we begin to value it more fully.

## **3. Forty Days: A Biblical Journey**

In Scripture, forty days is a time of testing, purification, and preparation. Lent mirrors this pattern. It is not an escape from life, but a season of learning how to live rightly within it. The

forty days of Lent echo many biblical moments: forty days of rain during the time of Noah, forty years in the desert, forty days Moses spent on the mountain, Jonah said “after 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed, and forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

Throughout Scripture, forty days often function as a time of inner formation, when transformation happens quietly before public renewal begins. Lent reflects this hidden work, shaping character, intention, and desire. It is a season not of escape, but of interior growth that prepares individuals to live more faithfully and consciously. The church also reminds us of the three pillars of Lent: Prayer, fasting, and Almsgiving.

#### **4. Prayer: Relearning How to Listen**

Lent places renewed emphasis on prayer, not as ritual repetition, but as a relationship. In prayer, we do not simply speak, but we listen. We allow silence to confront us with truths we normally drown out. In a fast-paced world, silence can feel uncomfortable. Yet Lent teaches that silence is necessary if we are to hear the deeper movements of the heart. Prayer during Lent becomes less about asking for things and more about allowing ourselves to be changed.

#### **5. Fasting: Creating Space**

Fasting is one of the most misunderstood practices of Lent. It is not about punishment or deprivation for its own sake. Rather, fasting is about making space. By stepping back from excess – food, screens, noise, consumption – we become aware of our dependencies. We learn how often we use distractions to avoid discomfort, loneliness, or self-examination. True fasting always points beyond itself. It is meant to open us to God and to others, reminding us of those who live with scarcity not by choice, but by circumstance.

#### **6. Almsgiving: Faith That Moves Outward**

Lent also calls us toward almsgiving, an outward expression of inward conversion. Remembering our own fragility makes us more sensitive to the suffering of others. Almsgiving is not limited to financial generosity. It includes generosity of time, attention, forgiveness, and advocacy. It asks us to look beyond ourselves and respond to the needs of the world with concrete action. Lent insists that spirituality without compassion is incomplete.

#### **7. Repentance: The Courage to Change Direction**

At its core, Lent is about repentance – a word that means “to turn around.” It is not about shame, but about honesty. It asks us to face the patterns that diminish life: resentment, pride, indifference, and injustice. Repentance requires courage. It involves admitting where we have failed to love, where we have harmed, and where we have settled for less than who we are called to be. Lent assures us that change is possible, but only if we are willing to take the first step.

#### **8. Walking with Suffering**

As Lent progresses, it draws us closer to the suffering of Christ. The season does not deny pain; it enters it. This makes Lent deeply relevant in a world marked by grief, illness, and loss. Lent teaches that suffering does not have the final word, but it also refuses to rush past it. It honors the reality of pain while holding space for hope.

#### **9. Toward Easter: Hope Beyond the Ashes**

Lent ends not in ashes, but in resurrection. The journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter mirrors the human journey –from dust to life, from loss to renewal. Easter hope is not naive optimism. It is hope born of honesty, sacrifice, and love. It is hope that has passed through the cross and emerged transformed.

#### **Lent Still Matters Because**

In a distracted, hurried, and anxious world, Lent offers something rare: depth. It calls us to slow down, to remember who we are, and to ask what truly matters. Lent reminds us that life is fragile, yet also meaningful. That time is limited – but also sacred. That we are dust – but dust loved, called, and destined for more.

Perhaps this is the quiet wisdom of Lent: when we learn to face our fragility, we finally learn how to live well.

At its heart lies a sentence both ancient and unsettling: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Wishing you a blessed and reflective season of Lent: I will get up and go to my Father (Luke 15: 11-32). ■



As we enter the sacred season of Lent, the Church gently calls us to a deeper awareness of who we are, where we are going, and—above all—whose we are. Lent is not merely a season of sacrifice, but a season of return: a journey back to the heart of God, an invitation to walk once more toward the open arms of our Heavenly Father and to rediscover the faithful love that has been waiting for us all along. More than a moral lesson on repentance, it is a revelation of the Father’s heart. As we reflect on it during Lent, we begin to see our own story woven into its sacred narrative, hearing anew the call to return home and to experience the mercy of God afresh.

### 1. The Younger Son: The Illusion of Freedom

The parable opens with a startling request from the younger son: “Father, give me my share of the inheritance now.” It is a demand made too soon, revealing impatience, entitlement, and a desire to break away from the security of his father’s home in search of independence. What follows is equally

*“I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.’”*

*LUKE 15:17 -18*

*(The Turning Point of the Prodigal Son)*



**Philomena Menezes**

*Parishioner of Our Lady of Rosary Church  
Qatar*

striking. Though the father has every right to refuse, he offers with no argument and no rebuke. He grants the inheritance and allows his son to leave, not because he approves of the decision, but because love does not force itself.

The son travels to a distant land and quickly wastes everything in reckless living. What once appeared to be freedom soon shows its true face.

He is left feeling needy, isolated, and hungry, reduced to feeding pigs, a detail that would have signaled complete humiliation to any audience. His outward poverty reflects an even deeper inner emptiness. The freedom he sought has become a form of bondage.

The father's response, or rather, his silence, is deeply revealing. He does not pursue his son, restrain him, or attempt to control his choices. This silence is not indifferent, nor is it approval. It is the quiet strength of love that respects freedom, even when that freedom leads to suffering. The father lets his son go, yet his love does not diminish him. His heart remains turned toward the one who has left, patiently, watchfully, and ready for the day of return.

Here, the parable touches our own lives. How often do we seek fulfillment outside the Father's house, chasing pleasure, independence, or easy answers, only to discover a deeper hunger within? Lent begins precisely at this moment: with the honest recognition of our wandering and the courage to name our emptiness. Sin promises freedom, but it often delivers isolation. Like the younger son, we may desire the gifts while forgetting the Giver, until we realize that true freedom is found not in leaving the Father, but in remaining with Him.

## **2. The Moment of Awakening: “He Came to Himself.”**

One of the most powerful lines in the parable is simple yet profound: “He came to himself.” This is the turning point of the story.

At the lowest moments, surrounded by hunger and loneliness, the son remembers his father. He recalls that even the hired servants in his father's house live better than he does now. More than regret, this moment is one of remembrance. He rediscovers not only his father's goodness, but his own true identity.

This is repentance in its deepest form, not shame-driven remorse, but a return to truth. The son gets up and goes home, confessing his sin without excuses. True repentance is not rooted in fear of

punishment, but in trust in the Father's mercy.

Lent is our moment of awakening. It invites us to “come to ourselves” in God's presence to remember that we were created for communion, not for spiritual famine. Repentance is not a defeat nor is it rooted in shame; it is a homecoming to the Father's embrace.

## **3. The Father Who Sees, Seeks, and Runs**

Perhaps the most shocking moment in the parable is not the son's rebellion, but the father's response. While the son is still far off, the father sees him, filled with compassion, he runs to meet him, embraces him, and kisses him.

In the cultural context of the time, a patriarch running would have been considered undignified. Yet love makes the father forget dignity. Mercy breaks all conventions. Before, the son can finish his rehearsed confession, the father restores him, fully clothed him with the finest robe, placed a ring on his finger, and welcomed him into a feast. These are not symbols of tolerance, but of restored sonship with the father.

This is the heart of God. He does not wait for us to be worthy. He runs toward us while we are still far off. This parable prepares our hearts to understand the mission of Christ Himself. The mercy revealed here reaches its fullness in the Paschal Mystery. At Calvary, the Father does not merely run to meet us; He gives us His only beloved Son.

No sin is too great, no distance too far, and no shame too deep for the mercy to overcome. The prodigal son expected rejection, but he encountered restoration.

This Lent, let us have the courage to come home. Let us allow ourselves to be embraced, healed, and transformed. For when we return, we discover that mercy has been waiting for us all along.

## **4. The Elder Brother: The Hidden Distance**

The parable does not end with the feast. It ends with a question. The elder son, who remained at home

and worked faithfully, hears of the celebration and refuses to enter. He is angry, wounded, and resentful. Though physically close, his heart is far from the father. His resentment replaces joy, mercy offends him, and grace feels unfair.

Once again, the father goes out, this time to the faithful son. He reassures him gently: “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” The father’s love reaches both sons, the one broken by rebellion and the one hardened by self-righteousness.

Lent too challenges us here. Do we struggle with God’s generosity toward others? Do we measure love by merit rather than mercy? The elder son warns us of a faith that obeys outwardly but resists grace inwardly.

## From Exile to the Father’s Embrace

Ultimately, the parable of the Prodigal Son is not a story of failure, but of hope. Its true climax is the embrace. This is the heart of the Gospel and the heart of Lent. Lent is not about proving ourselves to God but allowing ourselves to be loved by Him. It is a season of grace, a time to be clothed once again in mercy and restored to our identity as beloved sons and daughters waiting to be welcomed from exile to embrace.

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” - Luke 15:24 ■

## CHRISM MASS



# DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME:



## SERVICE WITH LOVE

Jesus came amongst us as a servant, giving us salvation and showing the way of holiness. One of the most significant signs he gave to us of his servant heart was washing the apostles' feet at the last supper. In the time of Jesus and still today, this is considered the lowly work of the most menial of servants, in ages past often done by slaves. Jesus lowered himself even to perform this act of humility and service to show us how we are to live as his disciples. By this act, he lowered himself, but raised all servants, even the forgotten slaves, and exalted everyday service and menial tasks to the work of the divine.

We are called to be servants like Jesus in our daily lives. The act of humility of Jesus, the master and supreme teacher, washing the feet of his disciples, directs us to recognize the call to acknowledge divine grace working through our daily lives.

Especially in our time, living in relatively well-off countries, we should recognize the everyday Christian heroes who serve as they should. In our time with so many attacks on family life, with media bombarding our senses and tempting the youth, it is the everyday faithful souls I would call my heroes.

Who are these "everyday" heroes? I would point to parents who raise their children with discipline, sacrifice, prayers, and the call to service, while



*Fr. Joseph LoJacono, IVE*

witnessing in their lives these virtues, and be open to large families if the Lord so graces to them. I would point toward youth who live lives of discipline, sacrificial giving, modesty, and chastity. I would point toward faithful parish priests, who minister with perseverance, prayers, and a witness of humility. These souls may not always get the headlines, and their lives may not be dramatic, but they represent the call to service in daily life.

Throughout Church history, there have been such faithful souls, some of whom are now canonized, and more recently, we can recognize some saintly lay professionals who showed noble witnesses of service in their time. In ages past, one can look toward the example of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a noble woman, queen of the land, who chose to humble herself to serve people experiencing poverty and clothe them with her very hands. Choosing a poor religious life after the death of her noble husband, she renounced all titles. One can consider the example of St. Louis, King of France,

a mighty king, who led a great army that was renowned for his care for the poor, his attentiveness to just administration, and his attentiveness to decorating Churches. As he testified in his letters, his greatest desire for his children was that they would not commit mortal sin even if it meant their whole kingdom.

One can consider the Catholic physicist and philosopher of science, Pierre Duhem, who devoted his genius to investigating the foundations of modern science in response to atheistic philosophers. Duhem used his keen intellect to show the wisdom of Christian inspiration, which inspired man to study the laws of nature systematically, giving way to the scientific endeavor among Christian-inspired intellectuals.

One can consider the medical doctors, St. Giuseppe Muscatt, St. Gianna Molla Beratti, and Ven. Jerome Lejeune, who gave themselves in service to others. St. Giuseppe was known as a doctor for the poor and outcasts in Italy. St. Gianna turned away from medical procedures during her pregnancy to save the life of her unborn child. Venerable. Jerome Lejeune, who discovered the gene that causes Down syndrome, went on the stand for the dignity

of all unborn life, inspired Catholic bioethics, and started a clinic to embrace children with special needs in the face of a European culture from the 1960s that scorned much of his witness.

One can consider the example of St. Carlo Acutis, who, with a smile, witnessing with chastity and a compassionate heart, reached out to the poor, evangelized other youth, and used his computer skills to evangelize the world about the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and devotion to Mother Mary, who appeared in so many apparitions. Or Joe Wilson in Scotland, who died at 17 in 2011, devoted to Our Lady, inspired other young people to see holiness as real through a simple life of joyful service to others and concern for the poor.

These servant saints of ages past and recent witnesses continue to embody the call to image Jesus as the humble servant who lowered themselves to do even the menial tasks out of love for the Lord. This Holy Thursday, as you witness again the ritual reenactment of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, recognize in this liturgy the call for you to be an everyday servant, an everyday hero. ■





**Episcopal Ordination of**  
**H.E. Bishop Aldo Berardi O.S.S.T**  
Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia

18 **MARCH** 2026

Warmest **CONGRATULATIONS** on the  
**3<sup>RD</sup> ANNIVERSARY** of your episcopal  
ordination. We thank God for your  
dedicated service, unwavering faith, and  
shepherd's heart, praying that He continues  
to bless you with wisdom, strength, and joy  
in your continued ministry. God bless you  
from **MISSIO-AVONA**.

# JESUS

HE HIMSELF BORE OUR SINS  
IN HIS BODY ON THE TREE,  
THAT WE MIGHT DIE TO SIN  
AND LIVE TO RIGHTEOUSNESS.  
BY HIS WOUNDS YOU HAVE  
BEEN HEALED.

1 PETER 2:24

## The Wounded Healer

*Fr. Marcus Fernandes OFM. Cap.*

The concept of the “Wounded Healer” serves as a profound bridge between human suffering and divine redemption, rooted in the biblical promise from Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 2:24 that “by His wounds, we are healed”. It refers to the passion of the suffering servant, the future Messiah, Jesus Christ. This theological truth portrays Jesus as the “salve” (anointment) for humanity’s brokenness—the innocent, silent lamb who took on the physical and spiritual weight of sin.

The sheer depth of this sacrifice is vividly captured in the visions of St. Bridget of Sweden, which detail the thousands of blows, thorns, and drops of blood lost during the Passion, illustrating a total self-emptying, or kenosis. This sacrificial offering does more than just acknowledge pain; it actively replaces punishment with grace, defeating darkness and death.

In our daily lives, particularly during Good Friday or in every Eucharistic celebration and in the sacrament of confession, we are invited to bring our own fresh or lingering wounds. Just as St.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” – Isaiah 53:5

Henri Nouwen’s “Wounded Healer” suggests that the Messiah sits among the suffering, ready to take care of others despite His own pain, we find healing through His Body and Blood, allowing His historical sacrifice on Calvary to become a present reality of restoration in our souls. The wounded healer is available to heal us by his wounds and sacrifice. ■



By  
**HIS WOUNDS**  
we have been  
*Healed*



*Mr. Rogy Joseph  
Bahrain, Catechism  
Coordinator*

**W**hen we look at the cross in our churches, we see the wounds of Jesus. We often hear that those wounds “heal us,” but it can be hard to understand what that really means in our daily lives. Sometimes, God has to show us.

### **A Lesson from Ten Years Ago**

About ten years ago, I was on vacation at my home in Kerala. One morning, after breakfast, a man came by with a small pulling cart. He was a scrap collector, looking for old plastic or metal.

My mother had some things set aside in the storeroom, so I went out to show him. He weighed everything and told me the price was ₹130. Even though I had a good job and we were living comfortably, I suddenly forgot my current life. I started bargaining with him, just like I used to do when I was a child. I told him it was too low and asked for more. He quietly gave me another ₹50 and started to leave.

When I went inside and told my wife, she didn't praise my bargaining. Instead, she looked at me and said something that pierced my heart: “Rogy, that was wrong. We have more than enough, but that small amount of money is his whole life today.” Suddenly, I felt terrible. I realized I was wrong. I ran out to the road as fast as I could and called him back.

### **An Unexpected Sight**

When he came back to the house, I handed him ₹500. As soon as the money touched his hand, he

started to cry. I told him, “Please don't cry,” and asked him what was wrong. Without saying a word, he lifted his shirt.

I was shocked. A large part of his stomach was an open, raw wound with clotted blood. I asked him why he wasn't in the hospital. He told me he had gone before, but he needed surgery that he couldn't afford. So, he just kept working, pulling that heavy cart every day just to get enough money to eat.

### **What Those Wounds Taught Me**

I couldn't sleep for three or four days after that. All I could think about was that man's wound. And then, I thought of Jesus. If it hurt me this much to see a stranger's wound, imagine how much Jesus loved us to take all those wounds on His own body for our sake. He didn't turn away from the pain; He walked right into it because He loved us.

That day, I learned that we should never let our “status” make us blind to the suffering of others. When we see a wound in our neighbor, we are seeing the same pain that Jesus carried. We are reminded that He is not far away; He is right there in the struggle with us. As we look at the cross this week, let's remember that Jesus took every pain and every scar upon Himself so that we could find peace. We don't have to be perfect or hide our own brokenness, because His are the wounds that heal us. God bless us all! ■



# HE IS RISEN TO DIE NO MORE

## Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Paschal Mystery stands at the heart of the Christian faith. In fact, Easter is not merely the remembrance of a past miraculous event. Still, the proclamation of an eternal victory that reshaped history, redeemed humanity, and transformed death itself. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we commemorate during the Easter season, declares a decisive truth: “He is risen to die no more.” Good Friday, with all its darkness and apparent defeat, could not keep Him nailed forever on the cross. The sealed tomb could not imprison the Author of Life in rising from the dead. Indeed, Christ inaugurated a new creation, opening the way for a new life for all humanity. Easter, therefore, is not an appendix to the Cross; rather, it is its fulfillment and final triumph of life. Though this event occurred more than two thousand years ago, its theological and moral significance continues to shape Christian faith today.



*Fr. Theophilus Chidozie  
Ntadinobi O.S.S.T.*

## Good Friday: The Apparent Victory of Death

Good Friday presents one of the greatest paradoxes in Christian theology. The Son of God hung lifeless on a Roman cross, mocked by the Jews, abandoned by his disciples, died, and was buried. To human eyes, on this occasion, death appeared victorious. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, “He was despised and rejected... cut off from the land of the living” (Isaiah 53:3,8). The powers of sin, violence, and injustice, on Good Friday, seemed to have prevailed over the sacrificial act of love.

However, Scripture reminds us that the Cross was never an accident nor a defeat. The apostle Peter proclaims that Jesus was “handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). Theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes,

“The cross is not the end of Christ’s story; it is the place where God enters most deeply into human suffering in order to redeem it from within.” Indeed, Good Friday reveals not the weakness of God, but the depth of divine love. That’s why the Cross, which was a place of condemnation to death for the sinners, has become, with Christ, a sign of salvific victory to humanity: the Glorious and Holy Cross.

Still, the question remained: could death hold Him? Could the nails and the tomb have the final word?

## The Tomb That Could Not Hold Him

The Gospel accounts emphasize the finality of Jesus’ burial. A great stone was rolled against the tomb’s entrance; Roman guards were posted to secure it

(Matthew 27:62-66). Every human precaution was taken to ensure that death remained permanent. But Easter morning shattered these expectations. Indeed, death no longer has the final word in human existence, for Christ has risen from the dead and brings eternal life to humanity. That's why in the creeds we proclaim that: He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell (to destroy the power of death), the third day he rose again from the dead. Though the angel's proclamation resounds through history: "He is not here; for He has been raised, as He said" (Matthew 28:6). Indeed, the tomb was not opened to let Jesus out; it was opened to show the world that He was already gone to His origin with the Father. As St. John Chrysostom famously preached, "Death took a body and discovered God. It took earth and encountered heaven."

Saint Paul captures the theological depth of this moment, saying: "Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him" (Romans 6:9). This is the heart of Easter: Jesus rises not to return to mortal life, but to enter a glorified, indestructible existence for our sake. He has risen to die no more.

## **Resurrection: Final Victory of Jesus**

The resurrection is the Father's definitive "yes" to the Son and God's decisive "no" to sin and death. As N. T. Wright explains, "The resurrection is the beginning of God's new world. It is not life after death, but life after life after death." Easter indeed signals the dawn of a new age where death's authority has been broken. And Paul proclaims triumphantly, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). The victory of the resurrection is not symbolic or metaphorical; it is real, cosmic, and irreversible. Resurrection indeed vindicates Jesus' identity as the Son of God (Romans 1:4) and confirms that the Kingdom of God He proclaimed has truly begun.

Theologian Karl Barth writes, "The resurrection is the turning point of the world. It is the revelation that God's love is stronger than human sin, and

divine life stronger than human death." Indeed, Resurrection assures believers that no power, political, spiritual, or mortal, can ultimately overcome God's saving purpose, which is to build a new life and give the privilege to experience eternal life with Him and in Him.

The resurrection of Jesus is not an isolated miracle; it is the source of new life for the entire human family. Saint Paul emphasizes this universal dimension: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). In this case, through Christ's resurrection, a new humanity is born and our Baptism itself, which initiates us as Christians, is rooted in Easter theology: "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). That's why the liturgy of the Easter vigil mass requires renewal of our Baptism. Through the risen Christ, humanity is restored, healed, and elevated: fear gives way to hope; despair yields to joy. We can easily understand here that the resurrection announces that suffering, sin, and death do not define humanity's final destiny; life does.

## **Conclusion: Living in the Light of Easter**

In summary, "He is risen to die no more" is not only a proclamation for Easter morning; it is a truth meant to shape Christian existence every day. Indeed, Good Friday reminds us that suffering is real, but Easter assures us that it is never final. The tomb reminds us of human limits, but the resurrection proclaims God's limitless power over sin and death. In fact, because Christ lives, humanity is offered a new beginning. Because the tomb is empty, hope is never empty. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The resurrection is not a myth or a dream; it is God's answer to the deepest question of human existence." Easter proclaims the final victory of Jesus; a victory that no cross could cancel, no grave could contain, and no power could overturn. In the risen Christ, death is defeated, history is redeemed, and humanity is invited into new life. Alleluia. He is risen indeed, and He will die no more. Happy Easter to everyone! ■

# TONGUES OF FIRE:



## PENTECOST AND NEW CREATION

**T**hen God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. (Genesis 1:3-5). Just as the first creation began with light, the new creation begins with fire. Pentecost is not merely the birthday of the Church; it is the rebirth of humanity in the Spirit. Sin had fractured creation, but the Spirit now reorders hearts from within. In this new creation, fear gives way to faith, brokenness opens to healing, and death is challenged by life.

Fire, throughout the Bible, is never merely destructive. It is revealing, purifying, and empowering. The burning bush was not reduced



*Fr. Rosario Colaco O.F.M. Cap  
Our Lady of Rosary Church,  
Qatar.*

to ashes; instead, it revealed the living God. The significance of God coming near us with fire in the Bible is that it has burning power without destructive power. When fire is used to cleanse an individual, the person does not feel ashamed, and when a person receives God’s fire, they are fully enlightened by God’s flame without experiencing an overpowering experience. Therefore, at Pentecost, God’s fire came upon every person,

signifying something extremely important—God does not take away who a person really is; instead, He uses His Holy Spirit to renew from within.

While mankind uses various labels and methods to define their identity, God defines each of us through what we have been created for—being a dwelling place for God. Pentecost is in many ways the commencement of a New Creation in God. As God created the first creation when His Spirit was floating over chaos and out of it, He created order and beauty; likewise, when the Holy Spirit entered our sinful, broken, confused condition on the Day of Pentecost, He turned chaos into His order and beauty.

God is joining what sin has separated and empowering what silence and fear have hindered. This power activated a miracle of many languages understood as one voice. At Pentecost, the fire descended again—not on stone tablets or temple altars, but on human hearts.

The tongues of fire signified more than enthusiasm or emotion. They symbolized that God’s Spirit now speaks through humanity. The same breath that hovered over the waters at creation now hovered over the Church, ushering in a New Creation.

There are moments in salvation history when heaven touches earth so vividly that nothing

remains the same. Pentecost is one such moment. Scripture tells us that tongues as of fire rested upon the disciples—not to consume them, but to ignite them. That fire did not burn outwardly; it burned within, transforming fear into courage, silence into proclamation, and ordinary people into witnesses of divine life.

At Babel, language became a barrier; at Pentecost, language became a bridge. Fire rested on each disciple individually, yet all were united in one Spirit. This is the paradox of Pentecost: diversity without division, unity without uniformity. The fire did not erase differences—it sanctified them. Every tongue, every culture, every story became capable of carrying God’s message. Pentecost proclaims that no voice is insignificant when touched by the Spirit.

Pentecost is not confined to the past. The tongues of fire have not been extinguished by time. They still fall—quietly, persistently—on open hearts. The Spirit continues to create anew: in weary souls, in divided communities, in a world longing for meaning. To live Pentecost today is to allow that fire to: Purify our intentions, enlighten our choices, and empower our love. It is believed that God is not finished with creation—and certainly not finished with us. ■

## Saint Francis of Assisi

### PRAYER FOR PEACE



### Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
 where there is injury, pardon;  
 where there is doubt, faith;  
 where there is despair, hope;  
 where there is darkness, light;  
 where there is sadness, joy.  
 O divine Master, grant that  
 I may not so much seek  
 to be consoled as to console,  
 to be understood as to understand,  
 to be loved as to love.  
 For it is in giving that we receive,  
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.



## PAENITENTIARIA APOSTOLICA

### DECREE

#### **ON THE EIGHTH CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, A SPECIAL JUBILEE YEAR IS BEING ANNOUNCED WITH ATTACHED PLENARY INDULGENCES.**

*“Keep the memory of our father and brother Francis, to the praise and glory of Him who made him great amongst men and glorified him amongst angels. Pray for him, as he himself asked us before he died, and pray to him, so that God may also share with him in his holy grace”.<sup>1</sup>*

Whilst the fruits of grace of the Ordinary Jubilee of the year 2025 that has just ended, in which we have all been spurred to become pilgrims of this hope that does not disappoint, are still timely and effective (cf. Rom 5:5), here is added to it as an ideal continuation a new occasion for jubilation and sanctification: the Eighth Centenary of the happy passage of St. Francis of Assisi from earthly life to his heavenly homeland (3 October 1226).

In recent years, other important jubilees have concerned the figure and works of the Saint of Assisi: the eighth centenary of the creation of the first Nativity scene in Greccio, of the composition of the Canticle of the Creatures, a hymn to the holy beauty of creation, and that of the impression of the Sacred Stigmata, which took place on Monte della Verna, almost a new Calvary, two years before his death. 2026 will mark the culmination and fulfillment of all previous celebrations: it will in fact be the Year of St. Francis and we will all be called to become saints in the contemporary world following the example of the *Seraphic Patriarch*.

If it is admirably true that “there is no other name under heaven given to men” (cf. At 4:12) apart from Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of humanity, it is equally

<sup>1</sup> *Lettera enciclica di Frate Elia, a tutte le Province dell’Ordine, sulla morte di San Francesco, 7 (FF 311)*



## PAENITENTIARIA APOSTOLICA

extraordinarily true that between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the age of so-called holy wars, laxity of morals, misunderstood religious fervour, “a sun was born into the world”<sup>2</sup>: Francis, who, from the son of a rich merchant, became poor and humble, true *alter Christus* on earth, providing the world with tangible examples of evangelical life and a real image of Christian perfection. Our time is not very different from that in which Francis lived, and precisely in the light of this his teaching is perhaps even more valid and understandable today. When Christian charity languishes, ignorance spreads like immorality, and those who exalt concord among peoples do so more out of selfishness than out of a sincere Christian spirit; when the virtual takes over the real, disagreements and social violence are part of everyday life and peace becomes more insecure and distant every day, this Year of St. Francis spurs all of us, each according to our possibilities, to imitate the *poor man of Assisi*, to form ourselves as far as possible on the model of Christ, not to frustrate the purposes of the Holy Year that has just ended: may the hope that has seen us as pilgrims now be transformed into zeal and fervour of active charity.

“*And in this I want to know if you love the Lord and love me as his servant and yours, if you will do this, namely, that there may never be a brother in the world who has sinned as much as he could sin, who, after seeing your eyes, goes away without your merciful forgiveness, if he asks for it*”<sup>3</sup>.

With these extraordinary words, reported in the well-known *Epistola ad quendam ministrum*, St. Francis at the same time not only dispenses consolation and advice to an anonymous confrere, but above all outlines and emphasizes the fundamental concept of mercy, to which that of forgiveness and indulgence is inextricably linked. And it is precisely a pardon, the well-known “Pardon of Assisi” or “Indulgence of the Portiuncula,” that Pope Honorius III granted by exceptional privilege directly to Francis for those who, having confessed and received communion, visited on the 2nd August an ancient church near Assisi, erected 800 years earlier on a “small portion of land” (hence the name Porziuncola).

<sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia, Paradiso*, XI, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Francesco d’Assisi, *Lettera a un ministro*, 7-8 (FF 235)



## PAENITENTIARIA APOSTOLICA

With the same generous enthusiasm and joy that the Saint, in seeing his prayer answered by the Vicar of Christ, radiated on the crowd present at the consecration of the Portiuncula in announcing the grace granted, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, Minister of our faith and our joy, establishes that, from January 10, 2026, to coincide with the closing of the Ordinary Jubilee, until 10 January 2027, a special Year of St. Francis may be proclaimed, in which every Christian faithful, following the example of the Saint of Assisi, may himself become a model of holiness of life and a constant witness of peace.

For a more perfect attainment of its intended purposes, the Apostolic Penitentiary, through the present Decree issued in conformity with the will of the Supreme Pontiff, on the occasion of the Year of St. Francis, grants the *Plenary Indulgence* under the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father), which can also be applied in the form of suffrage for the souls in Purgatory:

1) Members:

- of the Franciscan Families of the First, Second and Third Regular and Secular Orders;
- Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life and Public or Private Associations of the Faithful, male and female, which observe the Rule of St. Francis or are inspired by his spirituality or in any form they perpetuate his charism;

2) to all the faithful without distinction

who, with a spirit detached from sin, will participate in the Year of St. Francis by visiting in the form of a pilgrimage any Franciscan conventual church, or place of worship in any part of the world named after St. Francis or connected to him for any reason, and there they will devoutly follow the Jubilee rites or spend at least a suitable period of time in pious meditation and will raise prayers to God so that, following the example of Saint Francis, may sentiments of Christian charity towards one's neighbour and authentic wishes for harmony and peace among peoples spring up in hearts, concluding with the Our Father, the Creed and invocations to the



## PAENITENTIARIA APOSTOLICA

Blessed Virgin Mary, St Francis of Assisi, St Clare and all the saints of the Franciscan Family.

The elderly, the sick and those who take care of them and all those who for serious reasons are unable to leave their homes, will also be able to obtain the Plenary Indulgence, provided that they are detached from any sin and intend to fulfill the three usual conditions as soon as possible, if they join spiritually in the Jubilee celebrations of the Year of St. Francis, offering their prayers to the Merciful God, the pains or sufferings of one's life.

In order that such an opportunity to obtain divine grace through the Power of the Keys of the Church may be realized more easily, this Penitentiary firmly asks all priests, regular and secular, endowed with the appropriate faculties, to make themselves available, in a ready, generous and merciful spirit, for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

This decree is valid for the Year of St. Francis. Notwithstanding any provision to the contrary.

Given in Rome, from the See of the Apostolic Penitentiary, on the 10th January 2026, the Vigil of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

**Angelo Card. De Donatis**

**Major Penitentiary**

**+ Krzysztof Jozef Nykiel**

**Regent**

**L. + S.**

*Prot. N. 03069/2025-1360/25/I*



## ALDO BERARDI

By the grace of God and the favour of the Apostolic See  
APOSTOLIC VICAR OF NORTHERN ARABIA  
(Bahrain-Kuwait-Qatar-Saudi Arabia)

Prot. 13/2026

### SPECIAL JUBILEE YEAR ON THE EIGHTH CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Known as *il Poverello d'Assisi* (the little poor man of Assisi), St. Francis, a radical disciple of the Gospel, embodied this good news in his earthly pilgrimage, particularly Christ's Peace. Echoing the Seraphic Father, the Holy Father Leo XIV writes that «*peace is the sum of all God's gifts, a gift that comes from above*» and that this peace is not only between human beings but also encompasses all of creation. It is, thus, the teaching of the *Poverello* that one cannot do without God's peace. On the occasion of his death, we are reminded that in peace—St. Francis entered his final rest, even calling death «our sister». This is the peace we all need, especially in these trying times: in our homes, in the local Church, and in the world. In this peace, we are freed to love with an undivided heart, give radically, and obey joyfully.

Thus, in conformity with the will of the Supreme Pontiff, the Dicastery of the Apostolic Penitentiary issued a decree on the Special Jubilee on the Eighth Centenary of the death of St. Francis with the obtention of plenary indulgence on 10 January 2026, valid for the Year of St. Francis until January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2027. Therefore, in communion with the universal Church,

### I DECREE

that the said special jubilee be for this Apostolic Vicariate a holy, momentous, and fruitful year-long celebration by providing the faithful the possibility of its solemn observation and thus obtain for themselves and for the souls in purgatory the Plenary Indulgence.

In observance of the Decree by the Apostolic Penitentiary with Prot. No. 03069/2025-1360/25/I, I reaffirm and iterate the Dicastery's decree for our Vicariate Apostolic:

## I.

### 1. The granting of the Plenary Indulgence under the usual conditions:

- sacramental confession,
- Eucharistic Communion, and
- prayer according to the intentions of the Holy Father

### 2. Applicable also by way of suffrage for the souls in Purgatory:

#### A. *to the members*

- of the Franciscan Families of the First, Second, and Third Regular and Secular Orders;
- of Institutes of consecrated life, Societies of apostolic life, and public or private Associations
- of the faithful, male and female, who observe the Rule of Saint Francis or are inspired by his spirituality, or in any way perpetuate his charism;

#### B. *to all the faithful without distinction*

who, with hearts detached from sin, take part in the Year of Saint Francis by visiting, in the form of a pilgrimage, any Franciscan conventual church or any place of worship anywhere in the world dedicated to Saint Francis or connected with him for any reason, and there devoutly follow the jubilee rites or spend at least a suitable period of time in pious meditation and raise prayers to God so that, following the example of Saint Francis, sentiments of Christian charity toward neighbour and genuine desires for concord and peace among peoples may arise in hearts, concluding with the Our Father, the Creed, and invocations to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to Saint Francis of Assisi, to Saint Clare, and to all the Saints of the Franciscan Family.

The elderly, the sick, those who care for them, and all who for serious reasons are unable to leave their homes may likewise obtain the Plenary Indulgence, provided they are detached from all sin and intend to fulfil as soon as possible the three usual conditions, if they unite themselves spiritually to the jubilee celebrations of the Year of Saint Francis, offering to the Merciful God their prayers, pains, or sufferings of daily life.

In order that so great an opportunity of attaining divine grace through the Power of the Keys of the Church may be more readily realised, this Penitentiary firmly requests all priests, regular and secular, endowed with the appropriate faculties, to make themselves available, with ready, generous, and merciful spirit, for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation».

## II.

In addition to the above, I designate the following places of worship where the faithful, with the grace of God, may be able to gather and celebrate devoutly the special jubilee rites:

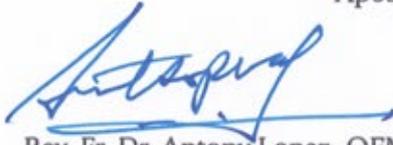
- **BAHRAIN: Shrine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Manama**
- **QATAR: Avena Chapel, Doha.**
- **KUWAIT: Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Arabia, Ahmadi, and Convent Chapel in Abbasiya.**
- **ST ARETHAS PARISH, special chapel.**
- **ST JOSEPH PARISH, special chapel.**
- **OUR LADY OF FATIMA PARISH, special chapel.**
- **OUR LADY OF ARABIA PARISH JD, special chapel.**

This Decree is valid in the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia throughout the Year of the Eighth Centenary of the Death of St. Francis, notwithstanding anything to the contrary.

In Awali, Kingdom of Bahrain, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2026, *memorial of St. Agatha, Virgin and Martyr.*



✠ Aldo Berardi, O.S.S.T.  
Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia



Rev. Fr. Dr. Antony Lopez, OFM Cap.  
Chancellor





# AN ICON OF GLORY

## FRANCIS OF ASSISI:

*linked with San Damiano church,  
the Cross, and the prayer before the Cross.*

### I. Origin of Saint Damiano Church

Historical research (specifically by Mons. A. Tini) suggests that the Church of San Damiano was constructed between the 7th and 8th centuries. Devotion to Saint Damian (the physician martyr) spread to Assisi from Rome following the relocation of his relics in the 5th century. In the 12th century, when Francis of Assisi first arrived, the Church was in ruins—neither a monastery nor a parish, but a sanctuary existed, tended by a priest dedicated to the Holy Cross.



*Fr. Marcus Fernandes, OFM. Cap*

### II. The San Damiano Cross: An Icon of Glory

The San Damiano Cross is a significant “Icon Cross,” a Byzantine-style tradition introduced to Umbria by Serbian monks from the Eastern Church. Measuring 2.10m by 1.30m, this 12th – century masterpiece is classified as an icon because it depicts specific figures who illuminate the theological meaning of the crucifixion. Unlike traditional crucifixes that portray suffering, this “Icon of Christ in glory” presents Jesus as a living presence rather than a victim, serving as a visual sermon intended to strengthen the faith of believers. Originally housed in the Church of San Damiano until 1257, the cross is now preserved at the Basilica of Saint Clare, and it remains forever associated with its original location.



*San Damiano Cross in the  
Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia-  
Kingdom of Bahrain*

## Key Symbolic Features from top to bottom of the Cross:

- **The Right Hand of God:** the hand of God with two fingers extended occupies the top place on the icon. It is inserted in a semi-circle. In simple words, we can understand God's blessing on all Jesus has done, or on the fact that He raised him from the dead.
- **Ten angels:** The angels are crowded around, and some have their hands extended in a welcoming gesture to Jesus, who himself has his hand raised in the form of a greeting. The angels' dresses are painted in gold and red like those of Jesus. This is a heavenly welcome
- **The Medallion (Top):** Shows Jesus ascending into heaven, carrying a golden cross as a royal scepter of victory.
- Above the halo, there is an inscription INRI (Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum).
- **The Face & Halo:** Jesus gazes peacefully without a crown of thorns. The halo represents the "cloud of God's glory," marking His divine presence. The face of Jesus: the eyes of Jesus' face look out peacefully. The crown of thorns is missing. The head of Jesus is encircled with a halo of glory, but the halo is in front of his face. The completion of its circle can be seen under Jesus' chin, and the face is darker than his upper body and arms. The halo on the face is like a cloud of God's glory in the Old Testament. It overshadows Jesus, subduing his light, and points to him as the presence of God.
- **The symbol of Dove on the forehead of Jesus:** on the forehead of Jesus, one can see a dove as if descending with outspread wings. It is a symbol of the Holy Spirit.
- **The Enlarged Neck:** Symbolizes the Holy Spirit (the "breath" of new creation) given to the disciples after the Resurrection.
- **The Garment:** He wears a white and gold Ephod, identifying Him as the Eternal High Priest.
- **Jesus' pierced hands, feet, and side:** the blood from his feet flows naturally, but from the hands it does not drip directly down as per the gravity. It runs down from his elbows. His wound on



the side: one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out (John 19:34). The artist shows only the blood flowing from Jesus' side.

- **The Angels:** the artist has depicted six angels; the two angels with their folded wings are positioned at both ends of the crossbar, pointing to the event of death and calling us to marvel. The four angles under the arms have their wings extended. All of them are pointing to the victorious and glorified Christ.
- **The Witnesses / The group of people:** under the arms of Jesus, there are two groups of people, and the painter has identified each figure by writing their name below. On the left hand of Jesus, stand Mother Mary and the apostle John. On the right-hand side, from left to right, are Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and the centurion. Above the Centurion, there is the face of a young man. He is considered to be the son of the Centurion who was cured by Jesus: Your son will live (John 4:53). The blood of Jesus from his hands falls on this mixed community of Mother Mary, beloved disciple, two Jewish women, some Gentiles, a man, and his son. A community of Jews and gentile, men and women, young and old, which is protected under his arms and is nourished by his blood.
- **Minor witnesses:** in the icon, there are two small figures: on the left hand at the feet of

Mother Mary is Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus with a lance. On the lower right is Stephaton, who is identified with the soldier who offered Jesus a sponge soaked in vinegar wine.

- **The Rooster:** There are two interpretations of the rooster at the right side of the cross at the level with Jesus' knee. Michael D. Guinan, in his book *The Franciscan Vision and the Gospel of John*, quotes that it is in reference to the denial of Jesus by the apostle Peter. On the other hand, Marc Picard, in his book 'The Icon of the Christ of San Damiano,' writes about the rooster; he says that in this icon, Jesus Christ is glorified with his chosen ones. The rooster is the symbol of the rising sun, and no more denial. It announces that Jesus is the true light that now and forever rises upon the world.
- **Characters at the foot of the Cross:** there are different opinions about the figures at the foot of the Cross. Some say there were six figures (persons), the so called the patrons of Umbria: Saint John, St. Michael, Saint Rufino, Saint John the Baptist, Saints Peter and Paul, but only two can be discerned. Others might have been erased due to the veneration of the crucifix by the faithful.

### III. The Prayer

#### Before the Crucifix (1206)

As Francis knelt before this image in a state of spiritual restlessness and inner turmoil he asked, "Lord what do you want me to do?," he uttered his first recorded prayer. Influenced by the Eucharistic liturgy, it was a plea for discernment and clarity.

#### The Prayer before the Crucifix at San Damiano

**Most High, glorious God,  
enlighten the darkness  
of my heart  
and give me true faith,  
certain hope and perfect charity,  
sense and knowledge,  
Lord, that I may carry out  
Your holy and true command.**

### The structure of the Prayer

This prayer is a petition prayer. It consists of two invocations and two petitions. The first invocation is qualified by two adjectives by which Francis acknowledges God as the Most High and most illustrious. The most illustrious confronts him in the darkness of his heart. Francis knows that the enlightenment of his senses can come only from God, who is light. Therefore, his prayer to God is for the enlightenment of his heart and to have the true faith, sure hope, and perfect love, awareness (wisdom), and understanding. There is also a pattern of movement from negative to positive, like darkness, which is a negative, to faith, hope, charity, wisdom, and understanding, which are positive virtues. The second invocation is a short one, just a single word, Lord, but it leads on to the whole point of the prayer. The heart of the prayer is that he may do the holy will of God.

### The Spirituality of the prayer

Therefore, the prayer has an internal dynamism of its own. Francis in the presence of his Lord and God, acknowledges that his heart is shrouded in darkness and doubt. Every faculty of heart and mind that he has comes to him from God alone and must lead him back to God. Though he was troubled by his crises and darkness, he is not just asking for the three theological virtues, the wisdom and understanding, but his prayer is directed towards only one aim: to carry out the holy and true commandment of God.

### Conclusion

San Damiano Church, the Cross, and the prayer before the Crucifix by Saint Francis of Assisi are important events and places in his life. A journey that started with troubles and disturbances in life is now illuminated by the response he received to his prayer: Francis, "Go and repair my Church." He devoted this Damiano Cross by lighting the lamp before it, and the adoration of the Cross continued by the poor Claire's sisters. Today, the Icon is displayed for public veneration in the basilica of Saint Clair in Assisi, speaking for itself, the life of Jesus, and echoing the words, "Francis, go rebuild my Church which is falling into ruin". You are called to build the Kingdom of God, the Church and Society. ■

# Portiuncula:

## THE CRADLE OF THE FRANCISCAN ORDER

The Portiuncula, also known as Porziuncola in Italian, meaning “little portion of land,” stands as one of the most sacred sites in Christian history. Though modest in size, this tiny chapel is immense in spiritual significance: it is the birthplace of the Franciscan order and the heart of Saint Francis of Assisi’s evangelical vision.



*Fr. Liju Thomas OFM.Cap (Kuwait)*

### A small chapel with a great mission.

The Portiuncula, likely originating in the 4th century as a Benedictine chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels (Santa Maria degli angeli). When Francis encountered it in the early 13th century, the building was abandoned and in ruin. He restored it with his own hands, embracing poverty not merely as an ideal, but as a lived reality. It was here in 1208 that Francis heard the gospel passage proclaiming Christ’s command to the apostles to go forth without gold, staff, or sandals. This moment became decisive as Francis himself expressed the clarity of his calling, “this is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart”. From that moment, the Portiuncula became the spiritual home of Francis and his first companions, a place of prayer, fraternity, and radical simplicity.

On the night of Palm Sunday, March 20, 1212, Claire of Assisi secretly left her family home to join Francis and his brothers at the Portiuncula chapel. There, her hair was cut as a sign of her dedication to the Lord.

### Birthplace of the Franciscan order.

At Portiuncula, the Franciscan order took shape. The early friars gathered here in huts made of branches, living lives of prayer, manual labor, and joyful service. They also gathered in large numbers for the chapter of Mats (Pentecost). Francis insisted that the chapel never be owned by the order, but only be used as a symbolic reminder that the friars were pilgrims and strangers in the world. Saint Francis’s love for humility was inseparable from his love for this place: “See brothers, the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before Him”. What began as a small fraternity at the Portiuncula would eventually spread across the world, influencing theology, spirituality, art, and social reform for centuries. Missionary journeys were embarked from here.

### The Portiuncula and Divine Mercy

The chapel is also closely associated with the Portiuncula indulgence, granted by Pope Honorius III in 1216 at Francis’s request. Francis desired that all who entered the chapel with sincere repentance

might experience God's mercy fully and freely, without cost or status. This emphasis on mercy reflects the heart of Franciscan spirituality. As Pope Benedict XVI later observed: "Saint Francis reminds us that faith is lived not in power, but in love; not in possession but in gift."

### Death and legacy

Saint Francis chose the Portiuncula as the place of his death, passing away there on October 3, 1226, lying on the bare earth. The chapel is enclosed within the grand Basilica of Santa Maria Degli Angeli. Its simplicity is preserved within monumental walls. Pilgrims from around the world enter in silence, struck by the contrast between the vast Basilica and the fragile chapel at

its center. The Portiuncula remains a living symbol of the Franciscan charism: simplicity, humility, fraternity, and joy in God. From this 'little portion' of land emerged a movement that continues to inspire millions to seek peace, care for creation, and live the Gospel with authenticity. As Saint Francis famously prayed, echoing the spirit of the Portiuncula, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," within its quiet walls, greatness can be born from smallness, and a life surrendered to love can change history. ■



*St. Francis of Assisi (OFM) presenting his rule to Pope Innocent III, in the presence of St. John Matha (O.S.S.T) in 1209*



## The Door That Stays Open: The Pardon of Assisi and the Jubilee of Mercy

Eight hundred years after the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Church once again turns her gaze toward the small chapel of the Porziuncola. In preparation for this centenary, Pope Leo XIV has proclaimed a special Jubilee Year of Saint Francis from 10 January 2026 to 10 January 2027, accompanied by the gift of a plenary indulgence. What began in the thirteenth century in a humble stone chapel now resonates across the universal Church. The memory of Francis is not nostalgia. It is an invitation.

For over eight centuries, the Franciscan charism has reminded the Church that the Gospel shines most clearly when lived in simplicity and mercy. In the quiet valley of Umbria stands the Porziuncola, a small and unadorned chapel known as the “little portion.” From this unassuming place, a profound spiritual current began to flow. It was here that St. Francis of Assisi perceived a fundamental truth: God’s mercy is not measured, negotiated, or rationed. It is freely given.



*Fr. Xavier D'Souza OFM. Cap*

Nestled in the Umbrian countryside, the Porziuncola has become a living symbol of divine love. Each year on August 2nd, the Church celebrates the *Perdono di Assisi*, the Pardon of Assisi, recalling this extraordinary gift of grace and inviting all the faithful to encounter God’s mercy anew.

### **A Bold Petition for Mercy**

The story of the Pardon of Assisi begins in 1216. Deeply aware of the burden of sin and the suffering it brings, St. Francis spent hours in prayer at the Porziuncola, where he experienced a vision of Christ and the Virgin Mary. When asked what

he desired for the salvation of souls, Francis did not request wealth, prestige, or privileges for his order. He asked for something far greater: a plenary indulgence, the complete remission of the temporal punishment due to sins, for anyone who entered the chapel with a repentant heart.

When Pope Honorius III expressed surprise at this extraordinary request, Francis answered with words that echo through the centuries: “Holy Father, I ask not for years of indulgence, but for souls.” In that moment, mercy was made radically accessible. The Pardon became a gift for all, free and immediate, a spiritual doorway open to every repentant heart. The humble Porziuncola became the visible sign of God’s infinite forgiveness.

### **The Meaning and Reach of the Pardon**

The Pardon of Assisi is a plenary indulgence, which reconciles the soul by removing the temporal effects of sins already forgiven in confession. Originally granted only at the Porziuncola, the Church gradually extended this grace to all Franciscan churches and, eventually, to parish churches worldwide.

To participate fully, the faithful are called to a path of spiritual renewal from noon on August 1st through August 2nd. This path includes a sincere confession, reception of the Eucharist, the recitation of the Our Father and the Apostles’ Creed in a church, and prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father. Those unable to travel, because of age, sickness, or other limitations, can unite their prayers and sufferings to the Jubilee, sharing in the grace of pardon. The Church, following the example of Francis, invites everyone to step through this open door.

### **The Guardians of the Confessional: Padre Pio and Leopold Mandic**

To understand the depth of the Pardon of Assisi, one can reflect on the lives of two Capuchin saints of the twentieth century: St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina and St. Leopold Mandic, who embodied mercy in complementary ways.

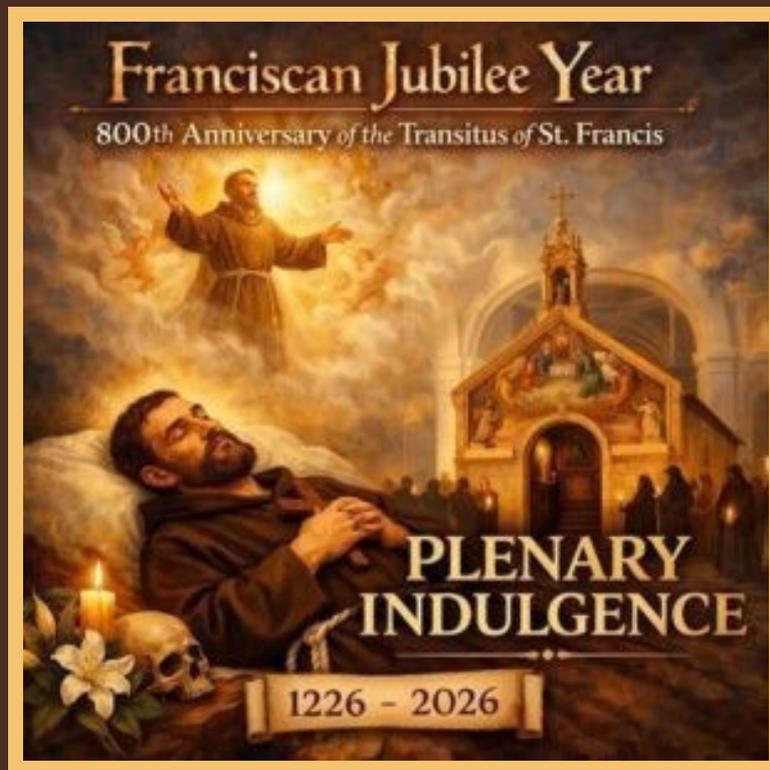
For Padre Pio, the confessional was a sacred encounter with truth. He spent countless hours

hearing confessions, often enduring physical suffering, convinced that authentic repentance was essential for the grace of God to take root. Though known for his firmness with the insincere, his strictness arose from love. He sought true conversion, not a superficial absolution. To him, the Pardon was a freely offered remedy for souls wounded by sin, a chance for profound transformation.

St. Leopold Mandic, in contrast, exemplified gentleness. Small in stature but immeasurable in compassion, he spent decades welcoming penitents with patience and kindness. Some considered him overly lenient, yet he believed that priests must mirror God’s eagerness to forgive. In his ministry, the Pardon revealed a Father who runs joyfully to embrace His returning children, and Leopold reflected that love in every confession.

### **The Heart of the Pardon**

When St. Francis first announced the Pardon to the people, he stood outside the Porziuncola and proclaimed, “I want to send you all to Paradise.” This remains the essence of the Perdoni di Assisi. It is a day to lay aside the burdens of the past, to trust in the gentle mercy of St. Leopold, and to confront the honest truth, as Padre Pio did, within our own hearts. Above all, it is a reminder that no matter how far we have wandered, the door of the little chapel remains open, inviting every repentant soul to return, be healed, and begin anew. ■



To obtain the  
**PLENARY INDULGENCES**

Pope Leo XIV has declared 2026  
 a “Special Year of St Francis” to mark the 800th anniversary of the saint’s passing.  
 From January 10, 2026, until January 10, 2027.

**Requirement:**

During this time, the faithful may receive a plenary indulgences under the usual conditions—confession, Holy Communion, and prayer for the intentions of the Pope—concluding with Our Father, Creed, invocation to the BVM, St. Francis of assisi, St. Clare and all the saints of the Franciscan Family- by making a pilgrimage to any Franciscan churches or any place dedicated to St Francis around the world. In Avona, the following places are assigned by H.E. Bishop Aldo Berardi, the Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia.

- 
- BAHRAIN** : Shrine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Manama
  - QATAR** : Al Verna Chapel, Doha.
  - KUWAIT** : Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Arabia, Ahmadi,  
and Convent

- Chapel in Abbasiya.**
  - ST ARETHAS PARISH, special chapel.**
  - ST JOSEPH PARISH, special chapel.**
  - OUR LADY OF FATIMA PARISH, special chapel.**
  - OUR LADY OF ARABIA PARISH JD, special chapel.**
- 

May every Christian, inspired by the example of the Saint of Assisi,  
 become a witness of holiness and a messenger of peace in today’s world.

# FRANCISCAN MISSIONARIES:

## Beyond Italy, the Alps, and an Encounter with the Sultan



*Custos Fr. Michael Fernandes OFM.Cap*

From its humble beginnings in Assisi, the Franciscan movement was never meant to remain confined within the borders of Italy. From the earliest years of the Order, Saint Francis and his brothers felt compelled by the Gospel to cross frontiers—geographical, cultural, and religious. The missionary impulse was not an afterthought but an intrinsic part of the Franciscan charism. As Saint Francis himself wrote in the Earlier Rule: “The Lord revealed to me that we should live according to the form of the holy Gospel.” (Regula non bullata, I, 1)

To live the Gospel meant to go where Christ was not yet known or where peace had not yet taken root. This article traces the early missionary expansion of the Franciscans beyond Italy, across the Alps, and into the Muslim world, culminating in the dramatic and prophetic encounter of Francis with Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil in 1219.



## 1. The Gospel Mandate and the Missionary Heart of Francis

The missionary vision of Saint Francis flowed directly from his radical embrace of the Gospel. His desire to follow Christ “without gloss” (*sine glossa*) impelled him to live among the poor and to announce peace to all. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Francis, recounts: “He burned with a seraphic desire to go among the infidels and proclaim the faith of the Holy Trinity and the Gospel of Christ.” (*Vita Prima*, ch. 20)

This longing was not romantic idealism. Francis understood mission as witness rather than conquest, as presence rather than domination. The Earlier Rule reflects this spirit with striking clarity: “The brothers who go among the Saracens and other non-believers can live spiritually among them in two ways: one way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake and to confess that they are Christians; the other way is to announce the word of God when they see it pleases the Lord.” (*Regula non bullata*, XVI)

Here, Francis laid down a missionary theology far ahead of its time—marked by humility, respect, and peaceful coexistence.

## 2. Beyond Italy: The First Franciscan Missions

Even during Francis’s lifetime, the friars spread rapidly across Europe. By 1217, at the Pentecost Chapter in Assisi, the Order had already organized provinces beyond Italy. Friars were sent to France, Spain, Germany, Hungary, and England. Bonaventure writes: “He sent brothers into various parts of the world, even into remote regions, to sow the seeds of the Gospel.” (*Legenda Maior*, ch. 4)

The crossing of the Alps symbolized a decisive step: the Franciscan charism was no longer an Italian phenomenon but a universal movement. In Germany and France, the friars encountered different ecclesial and cultural realities, adapting their preaching and lifestyle without losing the core of their vocation.

Pope Gregory IX, who canonized Francis in 1228, recognized the global scope of this movement:

“The Order of Friars Minor has spread to the ends of the earth, bringing the fragrance of Christ everywhere.” (*Mira circa nos*, 1227)

This rapid diffusion was not the result of strategic planning alone but of an intense evangelical zeal rooted in fraternity and poverty.

## 3. Francis and the Sultan: A Missionary Gesture of Peace

The most iconic moment of Franciscan mission is undoubtedly the encounter of Saint Francis with Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil during the Fifth Crusade in 1219. Against the backdrop of violence and religious conflict, Francis crossed the battle lines to meet the Muslim ruler in Damietta.

Thomas of Celano records: “Francis, burning with zeal for the faith, decided to go to the Sultan of Babylon to proclaim the Christian faith to him.” (*Vita Prima*, ch. 20)

Contrary to later legends, Francis did not go as a crusader but as a pilgrim of peace. He approached the Sultan unarmed, trusting in God alone. The Sultan received him with courtesy and listened to him with respect. Bonaventure describes the extraordinary nature of this meeting:

“The Sultan was struck by the fervor of his spirit and listened to him very willingly.” (*Legenda Maior*, ch. 9)

Although the Sultan did not convert, Francis’s witness left a deep impression. This encounter stands as one of the earliest recorded examples of interreligious dialogue grounded in mutual respect rather than coercion.

Pope John Paul II later reflected on this prophetic moment: “Saint Francis, faithful to the Gospel, went to meet the Sultan not with weapons but with the humility of Christ. He thus became a model of dialogue between Christians and Muslims.” (*Address in Assisi*, 1986)

## 4. From the Holy Land to the Ends of the Earth

After Francis’s death in 1226, the missionary drive of the Order only intensified. Franciscans established themselves in the Holy Land, eventually

becoming Custodians of the Christian holy places. They also ventured into North Africa, the Near East, and later into Asia.

In the 13th century, Franciscans such as John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck traveled to the Mongol Empire, opening unprecedented contacts between East and West. The missionary bishop John of Montecorvino became Archbishop of Beijing in 1307.

Pope Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope, encouraged this missionary outreach:

“The friars of Saint Francis are to be sent to the peoples who sit in darkness, so that the light of Christ may shine upon them.” (Cum hora undecima, 1289) This universal horizon of mission became a defining mark of the Franciscan identity.

## 5. Papal Witness to the Franciscan Missionary Spirit

Throughout history, popes have repeatedly highlighted the missionary vocation of the Franciscans.

Pope Leo XIII, himself a great admirer of Francis, wrote: “From the very beginning, the sons of Saint Francis crossed seas and deserts, mountains and plains, to announce Christ with the simplicity of the Gospel.” (Auspicato Concessum, 1882)

Pope Paul VI, addressing the Order, emphasized continuity with Francis’s original inspiration: “Remain faithful to your missionary vocation, which springs from the heart of Saint Francis and from his burning love for Christ and for humanity.” (Address to the Franciscan Family, 1971)

Pope Francis, taking his name from the Poverello, has frequently recalled the encounter with the Sultan as a paradigm for Christian mission today: “Saint Francis shows us that authentic mission is not proselytism but witness—drawing near to others with humility, respect, and love.” (Evangelii Gaudium, §14; Address in Assisi, 2013)

## 6. The Voice of the General Ministers

The General Ministers of the Order have consistently reaffirmed the missionary and dialogical nature of the Franciscan vocation.

Fr. John Vaughn, former Minister General, wrote:

“Mission is not something added to Franciscan life; it is at its heart. To be a Franciscan is to be sent.” (Circular Letter, 1997)

Fr. Michael Perry, former Minister General, reflected explicitly on the meeting with the Sultan: “The encounter of Francis with al-Malik al-Kāmil is not a romantic episode but a foundational moment that defines our approach to interreligious dialogue and peace-building.”

(*Letter to the Order*, 2019)

The current Minister General, Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, has emphasized the contemporary relevance of this heritage: “The Franciscan mission today must cross new frontiers—of culture, indifference, migration, and ecological crisis—just as Francis crossed the frontiers of his world.”

(Circular Letter, 2021)

## Conclusion: A Mission Beyond Borders

The story of Franciscan missionaries is not merely a chronicle of travels beyond Italy or across the Alps. It is a spiritual journey rooted in the Gospel and embodied in the daring witness of Saint Francis himself. His encounter with the Sultan remains a luminous symbol of a mission defined not by conquest but by peace, humility, and dialogue.

From medieval Europe to the Holy Land, from the Mongol courts to the modern world, the Franciscans have carried forward a missionary tradition that is both ancient and ever new. As Pope Francis reminds us: “The Church grows not by proselytism but by attraction.” (Evangelii Gaudium, §14)

In this spirit, the Franciscan mission continues—beyond borders, beyond fear, and beyond all that divides humanity—faithful to the vision of a poor man of Assisi who dared to cross frontiers in the name of the Gospel of peace.

# The Stigmata of St. Francis



*Fr. William Robert*

Following the ancient biblical tradition, the Church has always encouraged the faithful to reflect on the lives of holy men and women of every age as models of holiness and self-sacrifice. Their example is meant to inspire us to live lives of holiness for the glory of God and to invite others to know him. The Book of Sirach invites us to, “praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations.” However, St. Francis warns us, in his sixth Admonition, “it is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honor by recounting them.” This means that while it is laudable for us to remember the holy lives of the great saints, at the same time, we are truly pitiable if all we do is learn the stories of these holy men and women, without being inspired to strive for the same holiness that they lived. Otherwise, we have accomplished nothing.

This presents an interesting problem for us when we consider the lives of some of our great Franciscan saints, like St. Francis himself, or Veronica Giuliani, or Padre Pio. One thing common to these three saints is that each of them received the stigmata. Yet the stigmata is not something that we can emulate. Rather, it is a reality given to some for purposes known fully to God alone. By reflecting on the stigmata of any of these saints, we must look deeply into the phenomenon to discover what about that reality is ours to emulate.

This brief article will use the image of the stigmata of St. Francis found in the thirteenth chapter of the Major Legend written by St. Bonaventure. This reflection is heavily influenced by my former teacher, the Franciscan historian and scholar, Michael Cusato, OFM.

Bonaventure explains that near the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, a Seraph appeared to St. Francis as he prayed on Mount La Verna. The Seraph held in its wings the image of Christ crucified. When Francis saw this vision, “immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet.” Bonaventure describes these marks not as holes in the hands and feet of Francis, but rather as black marks, looking like the heads of nails in the palms of his hands and on the top of his feet, with the black points of the nails appearing on the back of his hands and the bottom of his feet. The image described is one of something that came bursting out from within, not something that entered Francis from the outside.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sirach 44:1

Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi. I: Early Documents: The Saint, vol. I* (New York, NY: New City Press, 1999). Admonitions, p. 131.

To understand what this could mean, it is helpful to turn to the first chapter of the Major Legend. Here we find the second of seven crosses that Bonaventure describes as key moments in the conversion of St. Francis and his early followers. The second cross appears after Francis encounters a leper and in embracing him, discovers Christ present there in that moment and in that suffering soul. Soon after, Bonaventure explains that Francis would “seek out solitary places,” as the Holy Spirit prayed through him with “unutterable groans.” One day, caught up in this profound prayer, while still in search of his vocation, Christ crucified appeared to Francis, and in that moment, something entered his heart. A sort of seed was sown that would mature and grow in the heart and life of the great saint until it finally came to full fruition, bursting out of him in the form of the stigmata.

The seed that was sown was the seed of that pure and totally self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, offered to all of humanity as a saving balm on the cross. The Major Legend then describes Francis’s life after this encounter. We see that he continues to grow in a life of prayer and virtue. His relationship with God increases and is shared with every creature. This life inspires others to follow him and inspires him to view every person, and indeed every creature, as his brother and sister, children of the same creator God. Among these brothers and sisters are those who could easily be viewed as enemies. Nonetheless, every creature is to be valued and loved as a beloved child of God, and therefore as brother or sister.

This reflection gains a greater depth when reflecting on the meaning of the seraph, the six-winged angel that appeared to Francis on Mount La Verna holding Christ crucified in its wings. Cusato notes that the first time a seraph is mentioned in the Bible is in Numbers 21: 4-8, when the seraph snakes, the snakes with fire in their bite, are sent among the people of Israel. The people were set free from their bondage in Egypt. The Lord led them across the sea to begin their journey through the wilderness that would ultimately lead them to the Promised Land. This is also an image that describes the Christian journey of life. Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we suffer in bondage to the power of sin, which is the source of division and death in the world. Despite this sad state, we are people of hope because the Lord comes to free us. We pass through the waters of baptism and begin our journey through the wilderness of this life to the glory of the great Promised Land that is the fullness of God’s kingdom in the life to come.

Despite the great promise that urged the people on, they, like us, grew weary, dissatisfied, and even concerned by the hardships they encountered on their journey. They began to worry when they noticed that the provisions they had prepared for themselves were beginning to run out. They did not yet trust that God would provide for them what they could not provide for themselves, and they complained to Moses and to God. In response, the ever-merciful Lord provided them with manna, the bread from heaven, and with quail so that their physical strength would not falter.

How often we attempt to do all we can to care for our needs and those of the people we love as well as those of the people we have been called to serve. When we see the limits of our own ability to satisfy those needs, we may become disheartened and we begin to complain. Sometimes we may even begin to search for ways to satisfy those needs that no longer harmonize with the lives to which we have been called. Are we willing to trust that the same God who took five loaves and two fish and returned twelve baskets full

---

<sup>3</sup>The Major Legend can be viewed as a sort of theological reflection on much of the earlier source material on the life of St. Francis. Thus, rather than attempting an academic study of all of that source material, this article will use the image in the Major Legend as a sort of compendium of the images found in earlier works. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: The Saint*, vol. II (New York, NY: New City Press, 2000). ML, p. 632-3. [Hereafter FA:ED, vol. II].

<sup>4</sup> To read Cusato’s explanation, please see his work: Cusato, Michael F. *Francis of Assisi: His Life, Vision and Companions*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2023. Bonaventure used many of the earlier writings

<sup>5</sup> Armstrong, FA:ED, vol. II, p. 633.

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, FA:ED, vol. II, p. 534. See also: Romans 8:26.

of food after feeding thousands will bless what little we have to offer and satisfy our needs and those of the people around us? Can we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” and accept that when today’s needs are satisfied, that is enough? Or do we only find comfort if we believe we are able to provide enough to satisfy what we assume our needs will be for months and years to come?

Now that their stomachs were full, the people still did not fully trust the providence of God and they complained even more. This time they were concerned by their growing thirst. They again complained to Moses and to God, wondering why they had been led out into that dry land to wander towards a promise that seemed so far away as to be more fantasy than reality. Yet again, the all-merciful Lord responded with compassion and told a frustrated Moses to strike a rock with this staff, and from that dry rock came flooding out an abundance of water to satisfy the desires of the people.

Again, we find here an image of our own reality. How often we thirst for all that we desire. We think we know what we truly want and we feel deprived when it does not come to us. Following the way through the wilderness of this life, the wilderness that leads to the fulness of the kingdom in the life to come, grows tiresome and we thirst for a little extra comfort, some sort of treat, some something to help us not to feel so burdened by the journey. The Lord provides us with all the comforts that we truly need, and so much of what we really desire. If only we learn to see with the eyes of faith and gratitude, then we can find the green pastures through which the Lord is leading us. If we do not develop the gift of gratitude, then all we notice is our thirst.

One might think that after having their hunger satisfied by the manna and quail, and after having their thirst slaked by the water from the rock, the people would finally be satisfied. However, the reality of the Israelites, and our own reality, is that without developing a habit of gratitude, too much is never enough. They continued to complain. The food was becoming boring for them. They remembered the leeks and garlic of Egypt. Yes, they were slaves, but even as slaves, at least everything tasted better.

How often we are the people who have been set free from the bondage of sin, yet the little pleasures that come with that bondage still call out to us, and we begin to think that maybe that bondage was not so bad after all. We can start to find the sacrifices that come with living a faithful life burdensome. So many people in the world around us do not make the same sacrifices and their lives appear to be enjoyable. We feel deprived, and we forget the sadness, the division, the many deaths that come when we choose our way over God’s way, when we accept a life bound to sin rather than living in the freedom offered by Christ.

The Lord God then sent the seraph snakes, the serpents with fire in the mouths to bite the people. It was a moment when God in his mercy allowed the people to remember the pain and sorrow that comes when we live in bondage to sin. The serpents bit the people, and they suffered and many died. Then Moses called out to the Lord in prayer and asked for God’s saving mercy to return to his people. The Lord told Moses to mold the image of a serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole so that as the image of their suffering was lifted up in the desert and they looked at it, their suffering would come to an end.

The bronze serpent was only a sign pointing to a much deeper reality that would be revealed with the crucifixion of Christ. In the second part of his three-part series *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI writes about the moment in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was faced with drinking from a cup that was offered to him. In his discussion, Benedict asks what that cup contained. Jesus says, “My Father,

---

<sup>7</sup>See: Benedict. *Jesus of Nazareth. part Two, Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2023.

<sup>8</sup>Matthew 26:39

<sup>9</sup>John 11:25

<sup>10</sup>2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>11</sup> John 3:14-15

if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” What did Christ want to avoid in that moment? It was not long before that when Jesus, standing before the tomb of Lazarus, said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Thus, it is difficult to think that he feared death. Jesus is fully human just as he is fully divine. No human wants to suffer. What greater suffering could the Son of God know than to be blinded from seeing the Father? Only one tragedy could cause that to happen, somehow Christ would have to experience sin. St. Paul writes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians that he who knew no sin became sin for us. Thus, Pope Benedict explains that the cup contained all of human sin. In that moment, there in the garden, Jesus drank that cup, taking all of human sin into himself. Then every indignity and pain that he suffered from that moment until his death would cleanse the world of sin and conquer the power of death forever by means of Christ’s own suffering, death, and resurrection. Now, when we look upon the cross, we see in the one crucified, the image of our suffering just as the people of Israel saw the same image in the bronze serpent, and we are saved from our suffering. Thus, the seraph is a sign of suffering but also a sign of healing through the merciful grace of God.

Cusato then points out another place where we find the seraphim, in Isaiah 6:1-7. In this place the seraphim are described as the fiery angels with six wings who stand closest to the throne of God crying out His praises. As they praise God, singing out “Holy, holy holy,” the fire of their love and devotion comes bursting out of them and the temple is filled with smoke.

These two images of seraphim taken together tell us something about the image Francis saw on that mountain. There was the crucified Christ held aloft in the wings of the seraph. He is the one who took on the guilt of our sin so that he could wash it away in his own blood, forever conquering the power of sin and death and opening up for us the way to lasting peace in God’s eternal kingdom. Christ does all of this for us, not because we deserve his mercy and healing, but because we need it so much. This image that should fill us with inexpressible gratitude is lifted up in the wings of a fiery angel from whom the praise of God comes bursting out in a continuous song of praise. When Francis sees this vision, the seed of love and devotion planted in his heart so many years before comes to full fruition and that same love and devotion comes bursting out of his flesh in the form of the nails that appear on his hands and feet, and in the wound that opens in his side, opening a direct path to his heart, the symbolic center of love in the human body.

St. Francis had learned the lessons of the seraph snakes, that despite our lack of gratitude and satisfaction, God continues to fill us with the abundance of all we need to know and love him. God then calls us to share that abundance with others. Rather than seeking satisfaction in the things of this world, Francis calls his followers to find God’s generous abundance and freedom by living lives of obedience, with nothing of our own, and in chastity. He also learned the lesson of the crucifixion, embracing even those the world would call his enemies as his brothers and sisters, not because they deserve such love, but because they need that love. He learned that by sharing the overabundance of God’s loving mercy with others, we live our true identity as God’s beloved children, and we begin to discover the truth that all creatures are equally the much-beloved sons and daughters of God, and therefore our brothers and sisters.

We cannot emulate the stigmata in a physical sense, but we can emulate the lessons that the stigmata of St. Francis reveal. His stigmata is all about God’s mercy and love. It is a call to a life lived in thankful praise to God and loving self-sacrificial generosity with others. By striving to live these realities in our lives we not only recount the heroic deeds of the life of our Seraphic Father Francis we also begin to live some part of that holiness to which he invites us, to the praise and glory of God.

---

<sup>12</sup>Isaiah 6:3



*The remains of Francis of Assisi are displayed in a glass case inside the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Assisi, Italy, Saturday, Feb. 21, 2026, on the eve of a public exposition beginning Feb. 22 to mark the 800th anniversary of his death in 1226.*

## PART 3

# SPIRITUALITY AND REPORTS

## Historical Background and Spirituality of the NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY

### and a Brief History of the ICON OF MARY

Founded in the poverty-stricken shanty towns of Palomeras Altas (Madrid) in 1964, the Neocatechumenal Way is a distinctive itinerary of Christian initiation within the Catholic Church. Its roots rest in a profound encounter with Christ and a deep desire to rediscover and live the faith in the heart of today’s world.

#### Origins: From the Margins to the Heart of the Church

The Neocatechumenal Way began when Francisco José Gómez Argüello — “Kiko” — a Spanish painter and winner of Spain’s National Painting Prize in 1959, experienced a spiritual crisis that drew him to Christ’s Paschal Mystery as encountered among the poorest people of society. He encountered the suffering of the marginalized in the slums and was inspired to follow Christ more intensely, abandoning former ambitions to live among those often abandoned by society.

In this context, he met Carmen Hernández, a chemist-theologian touched by the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. Together, they began a process of catechesis modeled on the catechumenate of the early Church—a process founded on the triad: Word of God, Liturgy, and Community.

The first small Christian community formed in Palomeras Altas soon grew and was eventually supported by the local archbishop, leading to its gradual spread across Spain and then around the world.

#### Spirit and Mission: Catechesis, Community, and Evangelization

The Way’s spirituality centers on the ongoing discovery of baptismal life and on adult formation in faith, lived out in parish communities. These small groups — often a few dozen people — meet regularly for formation, prayer, liturgy, and shared witness. The process is intended to deepen intimacy with Jesus Christ and transform individuals into active witnesses to the Gospel.

Successive Popes have recognized the Way as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. In 1974, Pope Paul VI saw in the Way a living continuity with the early Church’s catechumenal life, and later pontiffs, including Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis, have encouraged its role as a valid contribution to the life of the Church.

In 2008, under Pope Benedict XVI, the Way’s Statutes were definitively approved by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and its Catechetical Directory received doctrinal approval, reflecting full ecclesial recognition of its mission within the Catholic Church.

Today, the Neocatechumenal Way is present in hundreds of dioceses worldwide, serving as an instrument of evangelization and adult Christian initiation.

#### The Icon of Mary and Sacred Art in the Way

Art has always held a central place in the spirituality of the Neocatechumenal Way, particularly through the work of Kiko Argüello. Formed in the fine arts and deeply influenced by the sacred traditions of the Eastern Church, his artistic vision understands beauty as a path to God, inviting the faithful to



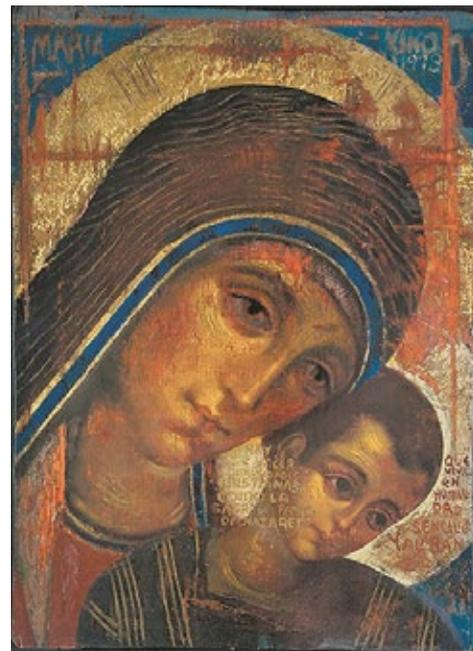
*Fr. John Nuñez*  
*Fidei Donum, AVONA*



contemplation and to a deeper encounter with the mystery of faith celebrated in the liturgy.

Among his works, the icon of the Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus holds a distinctive place as a spiritual image connected to the origins of the Way. While not an object of formal liturgical devotion, the icon symbolizes the call to form Christian communities modeled on the Holy Family of Nazareth, characterized by humility, simplicity, and praise. Present in many Neocatechumenal communities and parish spaces throughout the world, it serves as a constant reminder of the Gospel's call to be lived in communion with Christ.

Beyond individual icons, Kiko Argüello has contributed to a broader renewal of sacred art through cycles of painting, stained glass, architectural design, liturgical furnishings, and music, all conceived as a unified whole at the service of the liturgy. This coherent aesthetic is visible in numerous churches, chapels, and ecclesial spaces worldwide, notably in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia in Bahrain, whose Eucharistic focus, biblical symbolism, and early Christian inspiration offer a strong witness of communion in a minority context, as well as in the Redemptoris Mater seminaries, whose carefully designed spaces foster prayer, community life, and the integral formation of future priests within a living experience of the Church.



### **Vatican Recognition of Kiko Argüello's Artistic Contribution**

While the Church's acknowledgment of the Neocatechumenal Way's mission is well established, Kiko Argüello's contribution to sacred art has also been recognized independently within the broader cultural life of the Church. In 2024, he was awarded the "Per Artem ad Deum" Medal, an honor sponsored by the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education, which recognizes outstanding contributions to sacred art and spirituality.

This medal honors not just technical artistic achievement, but the deeper role of sacred art in evangelization and spiritual formation — affirming that beauty can draw the human heart toward the divine and enrich the Church's liturgical and catechetical life.

### **A Path of Faith, Art, and Evangelization**

From its humble beginnings in Madrid's small town to its presence in parishes and dioceses around the world, the Neocatechumenal Way remains a living expression of the Church's call to Christian initiation. It blends deep spiritual formation with communal life, enriched by a distinctive artistic vision rooted in Scripture and tradition. Through its communities, liturgical life, and sacred art, the Way continues to invite the faithful to mature, dynamic, and transformative discipleship in Jesus Christ.

## Report on the Holy Childhood Day 2026

Reported by: Fr. Marcus Fernandes

Celebriamo (we celebrate) the Holy Childhood day 2026, which began with a bang in December 2025. The theme chosen was: Children come around Jesus. It was a great desire of our Apostolic Vicar, H.E. Bishop Aldo Berardi, to promote the Pontifical Mission Societies in the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia (AVONA).



On December 5, 2025, for the first time, St. Nicholas Day was celebrated to honor the children and to foster a deeper understanding of the saint. Saint Nicholas was an example of someone who followed Jesus Christ faithfully and expressed his love for Jesus by serving the poor, especially children. We held a drawing and essay-writing competition for the children based on the life of Saint Nicholas. Many children participated. After the Holy Eucharist, candies were distributed to the children. Children surrounded our Bishop, receiving his love, blessings, and candies, creating an atmosphere of joy which we can witness in the above photo (Bishop Aldo with Children).

On December 15, 2025, we released our digital magazine, "SOWER". In this fourth issue, we focused on the theme of "Peace" and dedicated a part of it to the Holy Childhood Association: our Bishop's encouraging message for the children in the magazine, and other articles, like Children's Education and Formation, a path towards peace, the Holy Childhood is oriented to build a block for a peaceful world. Some reports and activities of the children were also highlighted. <https://www.avona.org/sower-magazine-2025-i-issue-no-4-2025/>

Holy childhood Children also prayed for the success of the first apostolic journey of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV in Turkey and Lebanon.



**SERENADE:** Let's spread the Christmas joy. The singing competition was conducted through submission of a recorded video. Altogether, we had 9 groups from the four countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Most of them are posted on YouTube. It was a beautiful and community-oriented competition. After the event, we were told that it helped form unity among children, parents, and the community. The prizes of the winners were declared and presented on 4th January 2026 on the Holy Childhood day during the Pontifical Mass. We have conducted this event for the first time in the vast Northern Vicariate through the medium of social media. One of the video's link is attached here to view <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=130rIw0ZnbI>. It has created excitement among the parishioners, and they are already expecting to have this again next year. Last year, under Missio-Avona, we had conducted essay writing for the children based on the theme: children are the missionaries of Hope (based on three mottos: pray, help, and share). By introducing Pontifical Mission Societies in AVONA, we have created awareness about the four societies, and gradually, people are aware of each society's role. In less than a year and a half, Missio-Avona has made significant awareness and progress. The aim of the propagation of PMS is achieved, and it continues.



The preparations for the Holy Childhood Day had begun in the month of November, soon after the Month of Mission 2025. The plan was outlined and approved by our Bishop Aldo Berardi. The Letters to Parish Priest were sent in advance to announce the event to the people. The Holy Childhood Day in the vicariate was celebrated from the 2nd to the 4th of January 2026. For the first time on a grand scale at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia, Awali- Kingdom of Bahrain. It was announced under the title: Celebriamo: The Holy Childhood Day 2026, and the theme was “Children, come around Jesus.”

On the 2nd of January 2026, we organized a Holy Childhood Day program for the children from 8:30 am to 1:30 pm. It began with the Holy Eucharist celebrated by Fr. Saji Thomas, and he invited the children to be the stars inviting others

to Jesus, like the star of Bethlehem that led the three magi. Then, Sr. Roselyn, a Carmelite nun and the Headmistress of the Sacred Heart School in Bahrain, gave a motivational talk on the importance of the Holy Childhood. We had added activities of drawing and painting based on the theme Children, come around Jesus, action songs, quiz and spot prizes, games, dancing, and a live music band by the children, who performed five songs. This entire event was fully supported and encouraged by our Bishop Aldo Berardi. Almost all the ministries of the Cathedral and volunteers came together to make this day memorable.

After the celebration of the Holy childhood, what we get to hear is, “Missio-Avona is bringing life to the vicariate”. We must continue this, as, this is the desire of the parents and our coordinators. Thank you, Bishop, for your unwavering and continuous support in promoting the mission in all the possible sectors of Avona.



On the 4th of January, H.E. Bishop Aldo celebrated the Solemn Mass of the Epiphany of the Lord. He reminded the children of the Holy Child about their missions and the three mottoes of prayer, help, and sharing the gospel. He appreciated the children’s prayer and support to the Church in Gaza by their little monetary collections and their handmade cards with messages of hope.

Before the final blessings, Monsignor took the pledge of the Holy Childhood and blessed them. Children’s Missionaries song dedicated to the Holy Childhood was released and received with thunderous applause from the faithful. Our Holy childhood children sang it so beautifully. Please find the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRWNemRpTd0>. At the end, prizes were awarded to the winners of the Serenade: Let’s Spread the Christmas Joy.

The two months of planning and actualizing of the Holy Childhood day have done greater good to the community, children, Apostolic Vicariate, and the church at large. It has created awareness of the Pontifical Mission Societies and had an impact on their lives. Long Live Missio-Avona.

I would like to sincerely thank our Bishop Aldo Berardi, played the pivotal role by his encouraging and financial support. I too like to thank the Coordinators of Missio-Avona and various ministries of the Cathedral for their generous support. We are forming a network that will unite us for the One Mission of the Church and the Northern Vicariate of Arabia. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BLjn9sCEZM> (highlights of Celebriamo)

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DTApMfRkqk6/> (News of Bahrain)



*Approved by:*

**Bishop Aldo Berardi O. SS.T.**  
Apostolic vicar of AVONA



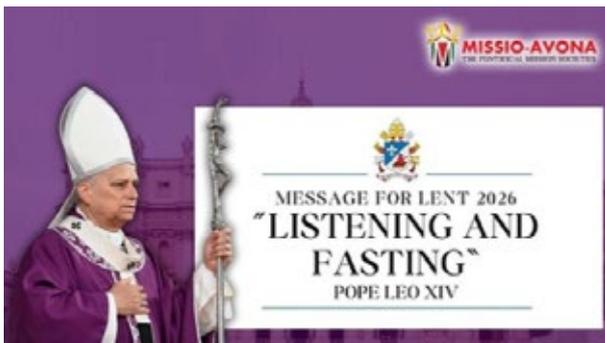
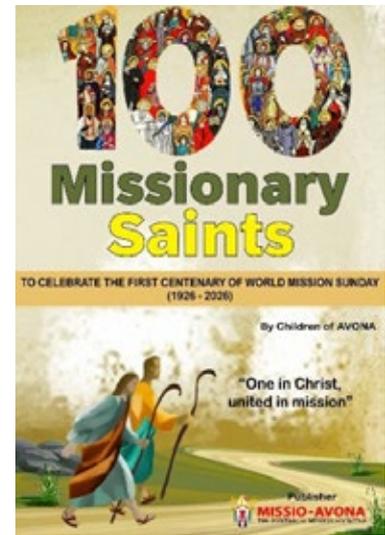
*Reported by*

**Fr. Marcus Fernandes OFM. Cap**  
Delegate of Missio-AVONA

Holy Childhood day celebration- Celebriamo from 2nd to 4th of January 2026. This celebration created a huge awareness of the Holy Childhood Society under Missio-Avona. Now, many children have joined the society.

In the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, we continue to promote the Mission and Pontifical Mission Societies. One of the main aims is to create awareness and, secondly, to establish a network among the parishes in the four countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Recently, we have been planning to bring these four countries together through a book.

The main aim of the book will be to form a Network of Parents, Children, Co-coordinators of Catechism and Holy Childhood, Spiritual directors of the Holy Childhood, and the Parish Priest. From the 100 selected children, each child will be given a particular Saint, and the child, along with her parents, will write a small biography of a Saint. So 100 children will contribute 100 saints. This project of the book is fully supported by our Bishop Aldo Berardi.



At the beginning of the Season of Lent, our Holy Childhood Society children prepared a small video based on the Lenten message 2026 of the Holy Father. We can follow the link [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_UZBbKuD0UI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UZBbKuD0UI).

Our Children also keenly adhered to the Papal intercession for February 2026: pray for the children with incurable diseases. Child was requested for the whole month of February to pray a Hail Mary for the sick child and also to make a prayerful card. A couple of them I would like to post here.



Isaac IV A.  
AVONA- Holy Childhood



Alvin  
AVONA- Holy Childhood

Reported by **Fr. Marcus Fernandes OFM.Cap**  
Delegate of Missio-Avona

## Report on the Holy Childhood Society in Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain.

### Feast of the Pontifical Holy Childhood of Jesus



*Mrs. Aldita D'Costa*

The Feast of the Pontifical Holy Childhood of Jesus was celebrated on 9th January 2026 with Holy Mass at 10:30 a.m. The children wore special T-shirts bearing the Holy Childhood emblem, which added beauty and unity to the celebration.

The feast, organized by the Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood, was solemnly celebrated with Rev. Fr. Michael Payyappilly as the main celebrant, along with the Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Francis Joseph, and our Spiritual Director, Fr. Victor Prakash.

The Mass began with a warm welcome to all the children. After the homily, the children took their pledge and prayed for children around the world who are suffering. During the offertory, they brought their loving offerings to the altar. At the end of the celebration, Briccio delivered the vote of thanks, expressing gratitude to the priests and everyone who helped make the feast meaningful and memorable.

After the Holy Mass, a small gathering was held for the children. During the gathering, the children exchanged gifts by describing their favorite Friend which created excitement and joy among them. It was a delightful and memorable moment for everyone present. Snacks and juice were served to all the children. They also played games and quizzes, and prizes were distributed to the winners. The children greatly enjoyed the activities. The joyful celebration came to an end at 12:15 noon.

### Holy Childhood Day Celebration

The Holy Childhood Day was joyfully celebrated on 2nd January 2026 at Our Lady of Arabia Cathedral, with enthusiastic participation from children, parents, catechists, and volunteers. The programme was the result of collective planning and teamwork, as coordinators from all the ministries were actively involved, and regular preparatory meetings were held for nearly two weeks before the event to ensure smooth organisation and successful execution.



*Mrs. Olga Fernandes  
Awali Holy Childhood  
coordinator*

The day began with registration at 8:30 a.m., where children were guided to their respective groups using colour-coded ribbons (White, Green, and Blue). Ushers and coordinators efficiently directed the children



to the Cathedral. The Holy Mass was celebrated from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., with Rector, Fr. Saji Thomas as the Main Celebrant, supported by altar servers, lectors, and the music ministry. The Mass set a spiritual tone, reminding children of faith, unity, and their role in the Church.

After the Mass, the gathering moved to the auditorium. The programme officially commenced at 10:10 a.m. with a warm welcome by the MCs, Steve and Joshua, who clearly explained the flow of the day and group instructions. Mrs. Olga, the Holy Childhood Coordinator, then introduced Rev. Sr. Roselyn, Principal of Sacred Heart School, who delivered an

inspiring, meaningful, and child-friendly talk. Her message encouraged children to grow in faith, love, and responsibility. A child presented flowers to Sister, and Mrs. Lilia, the coordinator of Catechism, thanked her. Fr. Marcus later honoured her with a memento as a token of appreciation.

This was followed by a snack break, efficiently managed to maintain the programme schedule. The children then participated in the Drawing Competition, which began at 10:45 a.m. Participants were divided into three age groups: 5–8, 9–11, and 12–15 years. Soft gospel and Christmas music played in the background, creating a peaceful and creative environment. The drawings were judged promptly by dedicated teachers and coordinators, ensuring timely prize distribution.

The programme continued with a lively series of activities and entertainment, including action songs by the youth ministry, children’s dance performances, engaging games such as quizzes with spot prizes, and interactive segments that kept the children enthusiastic and involved. A special highlight was the Live Music Band, which added joy and excitement to the celebration.

Other engaging activities included the Guess the Chocolates game, Blessed Holy Child drawing, fostering unity, and joyful participation. Photography and technical arrangements were well managed, capturing precious memories throughout the day.

The celebration concluded with a meaningful Vote of Thanks by Fr. Marcus, expressing gratitude to all ministry coordinators, volunteers, catechists, parents, and children for their cooperation and dedication. The event ended with lunch, served in an orderly manner to all groups.

Overall, the Holy Childhood Day celebration was a grand success, made possible through careful planning, inter-ministry coordination, and the collective efforts of everyone involved. The event truly reflected the spirit of Holy Childhood—faith, joy, creativity, and togetherness.



*Teamwork from the various Cathedral Ministries under the leadership of Missio – Avona to Holy Childhood Day, January 2026 at Awali, Bahrain.*



*H.E. Bishop Aldo blessing the Holy Childhood children on 4th January 2026.*



**MISSIO-AVONA**  
THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES

P.O. Box. 25362, Villa 137, Rd 4603, Awali, Kingdom of Bahrain  
Email: [cur.missions@avona.org](mailto:cur.missions@avona.org)