



# 800 years of EVANGELICAL *life*

*The 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Franciscan Order*

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**F**rancis of Assisi was the pillar of support that our Lord willed to uphold the Church that was beginning to waver because of sin and unfaithfulness of its members to the Gospel. Francis' shining example permitted this divine institution, made up of men, to triumph over these dark ages. But Francis, like Jesus, was not alone in this mission. After a brief period of time spent in solitude, necessary to strengthen his love for God, the Poor One of Assisi went out in search of his neighbour to share this love. His first followers soon joined him: Egidio and Silvestro of Assisi, Bernardo of Quintavalle, Pietro Cattani and Angelo Tancredi. This was the first *fraternity* that transformed the solitary, radical follower of Christ into a founder of an order. It was natural for him to formulate a *way of life*, a first rule, that sadly would be lost. In 1209, he brought that precious manuscript to Rome to seek the Pope's approval. Innocent III, recognised in Francis the young friar he saw in his dream holding up the cathedral of St. John Lateran, and gave, even if only by word of mouth, his approbation to these new

"twelve apostles" to "preach to all repentance." When the formal written approbation was given in 29 November 1223, by Pope Honorius III, with his bull *Solet Annuere*, which officially confirmed a new and more detailed rule written by Francis and that authorised the birth of the order of the Friars Minor, the fraternity had by then increased in number and its founder had already three years previously resigned from his position as Minister General to the faithful Pietro Cattani.

800 years (1209-2009) have gone by since the recognition of that first rule and to commemorate that historic moment, the great Franciscan family in this month of April will meet in Assisi between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> for an International Chapter of the Mats, called for by the four Minister Generals in thanksgiving "for the gift which God gave us and His Church by calling Christians, through the intercession of Francis and his companions, to accept the totality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through a new life." And because it is a call that, "has not ceased to echo and to be expressed in life and still now, after eight centuries, it reaches out to countless men

and women from every walk of life."

This great Chapter of Assisi will also be an opportunity to study the ancient project "to live according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ" approved by Pope Innocent III. We have, at a distance of eight centuries, the grace to be the inheritors of this project and the serious task of being those who must continue it. (*From the letter of the Conference of the Franciscan Family in preparation for the 8th Centenary. November 29, 2006*)

Then on 18 April, we will be received in audience by Benedict XXVI at Castel Gandolfo and have the occasion to renew our obedience to the Pope and to receive again the mandate to go out into the world "to preach to all repentance."

We invite also you, friends and devotees of Padre Pio, to share with us this important time of reflection and encounter with the Gospel. Because it is not possible to understand fully the beautiful flower of grace that budded here in San Giovanni Rotondo, if one does not know and comprehend always more the ancient roots of Padre Pio's Franciscan life. ■