

Feast of the Portiuncula by Marion Habig, O.F.M.
(August 2)



At the foot of the mountain on which Assisi is situated, hermits from Palestine had built an oratory in the first centuries of the Christian era. This oratory together with a small plot of land was given to St. Benedict in the 6th century. The name Portiuncula, that is, Little Portion, is supposed to have been derived from the transfer of this small piece of property. The little church was called St. Mary of the Angels, and the inhabitants of Assisi went there frequently to pray.

When St. Francis forsook the world, it was his first pious act to restore this sanctuary of the Queen of heaven, which had become somewhat dilapidated. Many extraordinary favors were granted to him in this little church. The Queen of heaven designated this place as the cradle of his order. Here, likewise, she implored for him the great indulgence by which the Portiuncula chapel became famous throughout Christendom.

A special impulse led St. Francis on a certain night to go to the chapel. There he saw our Lord and His holy Mother surrounded by a great host of angels. Filled with astonishment and reverence, the saint prostrated himself upon the ground and adored the Divine Majesty. Then he heard the voice of our Lord urging him with ineffable tenderness to ask some special favor. Nothing was so near to the heart of Francis as the salvation of souls, and so, after a few moments of reflection, he asked for the grace of a full pardon for all who, being contrite and having confessed their sins, would visit this little sanctuary. Mary cast herself upon her knees before her Divine Son, and repeated the petition of her faithful servant.

Thereupon the Lord said to Francis: "It is a great favor that you request, nevertheless it shall be granted to you. Go to my Vicar on earth, to whom I have given the power to bind and to loose, and ask him in My name to grant this indulgence."

Forthwith Francis presented himself to Pope Honorius III, who, after having assured himself of the truth of the vision, granted his request, but with the restriction that the indulgence could be gained on one day of the year. The 2nd of August was the designated day, that being the anniversary of the little church's dedication. At the command of the pope and in the presence of 7 bishops, St. Francis preached the extraordinary indulgence at the Portiuncula before a great concourse of people. From that time, the Portiuncula was annually the goal of innumerable pilgrims. Subsequently the indulgence was extended to every day of the year.

A large basilica was built over the chapel, and so the little sanctuary of the Portiuncula has been preserved in its original condition. By virtue of their apostolic power, the popes have extended this indulgence to all Franciscan churches, and under special conditions even to some other churches. They have also granted that the indulgence can be gained not only once, but as often as anyone, who has been to confession and to holy Communion, visits the appointed church on Portiuncula day and prays 6 Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glorys for the intention of the Holy Father. Besides, the indulgence can be applied to the holy souls in purgatory.

THE PORTIUNCULA INDULGENCE

It cannot be denied that this indulgence is one of the most precious favors that comes to us from the treasury of the divine mercy. Not only the Vicar of Christ but Christ Himself granted it at the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of Mercy. It is recorded that when the pope first granted his approval St. Francis departed without having obtained a written document as a testimonial. When his attention was drawn to the fact, St. Francis remarked: "God Himself will testify to this indulgence." Was that not actually verified by the great confidence of all Christians? One may well say of this indulgence what was said of the gracious condescension of our Lord in the Incarnation: "Through the heart of the mercy of our God, the Orient from on High has visited us unto the remission of sins." (Luke 1:78) Who would not use this day of grace well?

Consider how extraordinary are the graces of the Portiuncula indulgence. If we have contritely confessed our sins and gone to Holy Communion, we can gain this indulgence as often as we visit the designated church and pray the 6 Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glorys for the intention of the pope. If we have gained the indulgence and leave the church, we can re-enter and gain it again. In the event that we have really gained the plenary indulgence so that there remains no further punishment to be remitted, we can help the holy souls each succeeding time if we apply the indulgence to them. How many souls may be waiting for this day, to be aided by your charity and mercy. Shall their trust in you be in vain?

Consider that the effects of the Portiuncula indulgence depend on the disposition of him who sets out to gain it. It was the spirit of penance and of trust in God that made St. Francis worthy of obtaining this indulgence. His entire life was one continuous act of penance, and when this great grace was granted to him, our Lord and His Blessed Mother, and a great number of angels appeared to him: this increased his confidence still more. With a similar disposition of mind and heart, you will assuredly share the benefit of the indulgence. Awaken in yourself the true spirit of penance and of great confidence, so that our Lord may also say to you: "Go, and as you have believed, so be it done to you." (Matt 8:13)

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

O GOD, WHO DOST PERMIT US ANNUALLY TO CELEBRATE ANEW THE DEDICATION DAY OF THY TEMPLE, AND DOST GRANT THAT WE MAY ATTEND THE SACRED MYSTERIES IN GOOD HEALTH, HEAR THE PRAYERS OF THY PEOPLE AND GRANT THAT EVERYONE WHO ENTERS THIS CHURCH TO ASK GRACES FOR HIMSELF, MAY REJOICE IN THE COMPLETE ANSWER TO HIS PRAYERS. THROUGH CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

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