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T Curia Generalis
Fratrum Minorum
Capuccinorum

Circular Letter
on the occasion of canonization

Blessed
ANGELO D'ACRI
(1669-1739)

15 October 2017

Letter of the General Minister of the Friars Minor Capuchin

DEAR BROTHERS,
MAY THE LORD GIVE YOU HIS PEACE.

On December 18, 1825, Pope Leo XII beatified Venerable Servant of God Angelo of Acri, known by all as the Apostle of Calabria for his tireless preaching during the thirty-eight years of his priestly life. In imitation of the Good Shepherd, he did not hesitate to go out in search of the sinner, the poor, and the least, holding back nothing of himself but rather returning to the Lord what he had received that the message of Life might be brought to all. This figure of an austere friar as preacher and confessor—characteristic elements of our being as Capuchin friars—will be proclaimed a saint by Pope Francis this coming October 15, 2017. It is a sure witness to the veneration that has always followed him. Anyone who visits the basilica in Acri where his mortal remains are preserved cannot but be struck by the many faithful who visit him day after day, pray to him, ask his advice, and entrust themselves to him. Thus, from the day of his death blessed Angelo has continued his ministry of preaching Christ the Lord—the Way, the

Truth, and the Life—as well as a strong and compassionate summons to sinners.

Someone will then ask with surprise: why is he being canonized only now? Certainly we know that our confrere was not only invoked and thus present in the minds and hearts of those devoted to him, but also after his death he himself never ceased to be present to us with intercession for those who turned to him in need. Many graces have been attributed to his intercession over the centuries and among these there was a miracle that the Church has recognized as decisive for his canonization. Let us rejoice in this!

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I. Brief Biography of St. Angelo of Acri

Luca Antonio Falcone was born on October 19, 1669 in Acri, then a small town at the foot of the Sila mountainous plateau, in the heart of the of the old Casalicchio neighborhood, to a family of humble means. Of this he was always proud, and in later years would recall in his conversations with the nobility that he was the son of a baker and a goatherd. He was



baptized in the church of St. Nicholas the day after he was born.

Having learned to read and write from a neighbor who had opened a sort of elementary school, he was also taught the fundamentals of Christian doctrine by frequenting the parish of St. Nicholas and the friary church of the Capuchins, St. Mary of the Angels. As he grew up, an uncle who was a priest, his mother's brother Fr. Domenico Errico, put him to study in the hope of making of him a learned and cultivated person, able to be of assistance to his mother, who had been widowed young.

As he turned twenty, after a brief experience of the eremitical life, Luca Antonio turned to consecrate himself among the Capuchins, casting aside all doubts in 1689 after hearing the charismatic preaching of the Capuchin Antonio of Olivadi. But the young man soon faced a sort of obstacle course; twice he put aside the religious habit and left the novitiate, discouraged by the austerity of Capuchin life and giving in to how much he missed his mother, whom he had left in tears. But on the third time, on November 12, 1690, Luca Antonio began the novitiate in the friary of Belvedere Marittimo with the name Angelo of Acri. This time too the second thoughts and temptations were not lacking, but during the reading of the heroic deeds of Br. Bernard of Corleone († 1667), whose cause for beatification was taking place at the time, Br. Angelo lifted up a deep prayer to the Lord, asking for help in his struggle. It is said that the young novice was encouraged by the Lord, who showed him that he should follow in the footsteps of Br. Bernard, behaving just as he did. It was the awaited sign.

Making profession of vows on November 12, 1691, Br. Angelo set himself on the way of evangelical perfection, preparing himself also for priestly ordination, which he received in the cathedral of Cassano all'Jonio at Easter, April 10, 1700. He was then called by obedience to prepare himself to be a preacher. From 1702 until his death in 1739, he traveled tirelessly through all of Calabria and much of central Italy preaching Lenten sermons, retreats, and popular missions.

The beginning of his preaching ministry was not very glorious; his debut in the pulpit of San Giorgio Albanese, near Corigliano Calabria, was a real failure. For three consecutive evenings he was unable to remember the text which he had studiously committed to memory and, finding himself unable to continue to preach in some other way, could only go away in disappointment.

In tears before the crucifix in his cell, Br. Angelo took stock of his failure and reached an irrevocable decision: from then on he would preach, "Christ crucified and naked, far from esoteric rhetoric and also from the uneasiness of the Tuscan language, but only in his native dialect," repeating "step by step" what the Holy Spirit would suggest to him, as his heart was thus inflamed with zeal and spiritual unction. And in this he was a success, despite the resistance he met in those who thought of themselves as having reached the enlightenment of reason.

Aware, however, that the preacher who does not also hear confessions is like a sower who does not think of the harvest, Angelo of Acri spent many hours in the confessional, never tiring of listening and of treating sinners with mercy. He was convinced that the most difficult situations could be resolved with chari-

ty and that mercy was the easiest way to lead back to God the sinners that divine love had drawn to kneel at his confessional. But he didn't just wait for them; many times the love of God pushed him to seek out sinners in need of reconciliation, just as he was also solicitous for the sick who asked for his spiritual assistance. Angelo's love for the poor and those who suffered injustice moved him many times to call the Sanseverino family, for centuries the great nobles of Acri, to listen to the justified claims of the people such that their basic rights would be respected. He had at heart the salvation of the whole person, of both the spiritually and materially poor, of those denied their dignity and those who distanced themselves from God.

He never left the place where he had preached the mercy of God and reconciled sinners without leaving some concrete signs: an image of Calvary and a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows as tangible reminders of the Love of God that suffers and offers itself that humanity might have Life. Angelo also had roles of authority in the Order and as Provincial Minister he did not fail to recall the friars to an authentic Capuchin life, offering them five precious gems: austerity, simplicity, the exact observance of the Constitutions and the Rule, innocence of life, and boundless charity.

At the age of seventy, Angelo died in the friary of Acri, offering his life that God would lavish on the city and on all of Calabria the greatest of gifts: peace and well-being for all.

II. The holiness of Br. Angelo of Acri: a gift to embrace and live today

The vocational path of the young Luca Antonio was marked by many uncertainties. Twice he asked to enter religious life among the Capuchin friars and both times he ran off in confusion, leaving the friary. It was still with many doubts that he returned for the third time and asked to be invested in the habit of St. Francis and begin the novitiate again.

Luca Antonio experienced a deep conflict in his soul: on the one hand he had great affection for his widowed mother and did not want to disappoint the hope of his priest uncle who had helped him study in order to be able to support her adequately; on the other hand he was strongly attracted by the example and words of the Capuchin preacher Antonio of Olivadi. The future Br. Angelo had within himself the feelings of someone who loved his mother and uncle sincerely, but at the same time perceived himself called to something else. The vocation to consecrate oneself to the Lord asks that one give of oneself without clinging to anything. It remains true in our time that often the choice to consecrate one's life to the Lord arises after

meeting people who live their own consecration in an authentic and radical way. Often too in our time the path of a vocation is marked by doubts and uncertainties in whi-





ch there is the risk of falling back on oneself and leaving behind the ideal that had been experienced with great attraction and enthusiasm. Only when someone understands that it has been asked of him to make of a gift of his whole existence, of all that he has, even his own ideas and feelings—only then will the decision to embrace the call of the Lord be discovered as a source of profound joy and the realization of one's proper existence.

The vocational struggles that St. Angelo of Acri went through reaffirm the truth of what Jesus said to his disciples: Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10: 29-30)

To follow Christ means a new way of living relationships, including those that are sacred. Jesus does not command any escape, but asks for a greater love that places His Person at the center of all. When He becomes the unifying center of our existence, we rediscover a freer and more authentic way of living our own relationships and affectivity. It will be Christ Himself who will lead us to discover the Supreme Good, the Eternal Good, from Whom all good comes, without Whom there is no good. (St. Francis, *A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father*, FA:ED I, 158) Paradoxically, it's not about losing, but about finding for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, receiving a hundredfold.

The pastoral care of vocations and the accompaniment of those discerning our way of life

must propose decisively this giving of one's whole existence to the Lord without reserve, making it also clear that one who begins to do this will have to experience trials and the temptation to abandon the path he has begun. Br. Angelo of Acri, after having consecrated himself to the Lord, at first experienced failure in preaching. He did not, however, give in to discouragement but changed the style of his preaching, which then became powerfully evangelical, taking inspiration from the exhortation of St. Francis himself in the Rule: I admonish and exhort those brothers that when they preach their language be well-considered and chaste for the benefit and edification of the people, announcing to them vices and virtues, punishment and glory, with brevity, because our Lord when on earth kept His word brief. (Later Rule, IX:3)

This teaching remains current for us today: we are called to proclaim the Gospel faithfully, to break the bread of the Word in a way that is simple and comprehensible to the people of our time, announcing the merciful Love of God that embraces our humanity. Such preaching will bear more fruit than a refined discourse filled with learned theological and cultural citations.

Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii gaudium*: “[The] setting, both maternal and ecclesial, in which the dialogue between the Lord and his people takes place, should be encouraged by the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures. Even if the homily at times may be somewhat tedious, if this maternal and ecclesial spirit is present, it will always bear fruit, just as the tedious counsels of a mother bear fruit, in due

time, in the hearts of her children.” (140) The Capuchin Angelo of Acri had the intuition that refined sermons or an oratory that was rhetorically exemplary, as also one imbued with doctrine or purely moralistic, did not help the heart to open itself unconditionally to conversion and to the recognition of the whole Mystery of God. His preaching was an invitation to find once again the beauty of being a child of God in Jesus the Son and the goodness of that Love of God that never holds itself back but is a continuous Gift.

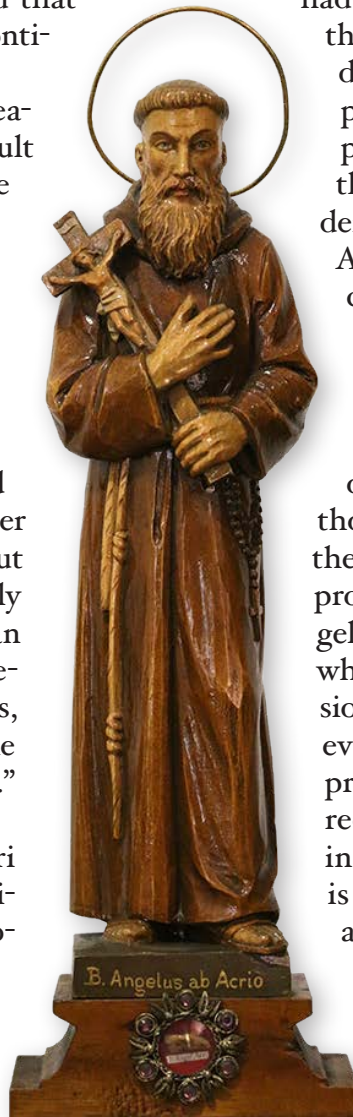
Pope Francis also writes: “The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people. The dialogue between God and his people further strengthens the covenant between them and consolidates the bond of charity. In the course of the homily, the hearts of believers keep silence and allow God to speak. The Lord and his people speak to one another in a thousand ways directly, without intermediaries. But in the homily they want someone to serve as an instrument and to express their feelings in such a way that afterwards, each one may choose how he or she will continue the conversation.” (Evangeli gaudium, 143)

By his preaching, Angelo of Acri was an instrument capable of uniting the Heart of the Lord with those of people. Br. Angelo communicated to those who heard him the joy of a God who is happy to be in dialogue with his people. In this the confessional was the place to offer to the penitent the consolation of God’s pardon, opening a path to a new life in Christ. It is precisely in the sacrament of reconciliation that the grace of God, already given in baptism, is renewed and given once more as a merciful embrace. His zeal in preaching and in the pardon offered in the sacrament of reconciliation gave Br. Angelo a strong sensitivity to the suffering of the poor. He strongly and courageously denounced the miserable conditions in

which the men and women of his time and place lived. He called for justice for the poor, condemning banking scandals, the arbitrary reduction of the rate of return, the high duties on the cultivation of silkworms, and the unjust and violent confiscation of private property by those who claimed to be leaders of the people. He witnessed to Christian charity by visiting the poor in their homes and sharing the Providence that he himself had received. Nor did he fail to visit the imprisoned, recognizing their dignity and exhorting them to repentance and to the acceptance of punishment, while also defending those who had been unjustly condemned.

As a missionary, preacher, and confessor, Angelo of Acri understood and witnessed to how the words of one who proclaims the Gospel must be incarnate in concrete gestures for the sake of the people, the suffering, and those who suffer injustice. “From the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement, which must necessarily find expression and develop in every work of evangelization. Accepting the first proclamation, which invites us to receive God’s love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others.” (Evangeli gaudium, 178)

The impassioned preaching of the saint was able to convert souls, waking up consciences to seeking the good, and this ministry showed forth in the works of mercy on behalf and in defense of the poor. Let us too, in our time, ask the Holy Spirit to lift up preachers able to confirm their words with the authenticity of their lives, with such concrete acts that communicate as salt and light, as a purifying and leavening presence in the world. Let us ask this grace also for ourselves and make all our energies available so that our li-





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ves become salt and light for the world, and that good leavening that makes for the fresh bread of charity and welcome.

St. Angelo of Acri, whom the Church gives us as a model and example of an authentic and realized life, teaches all Christians, and us Capuchin friars in particular, how to proclaim the Gospel to a world thirsty for freedom. Life in the Spirit leads us to that true freedom that makes us able to recognize the dignity of each human being. This movement happens and grows when we embrace the Lord Jesus in faith; He who, taking on our humanity, lifted up the human person to the dignity of a child of God.

One of the oldest paintings of Br. Angelo of Acri shows him looking at and contemplating the Crucified, the center of his preaching and his prayer. Meditation on the Passion of the Lord accompanied his long travels on foot from one place to another in his preaching tours. In long hours of solitary prayer he meditated on the suffering of Christ moment by moment; in the same way he cared for and embraced the sick in body and in spirit, recognizing in their illnesses the wounds of Our Lord. He kept in his heart the face and the name of Jesus crucified, the icon of a love without limit.

Dear brothers, St. Angelo of Acri enriches the holiness of our Order in a wonderful way. His holiness, proclaimed by the Church, joins the great multitude of friars who have followed St. Francis of Assisi, proclaiming the Kingdom of God with passion, loving the Church, and embracing the lepers of their own time. May all of us keep within ourselves a soul that is contemplative, simple, and joyful. Let us ask the grace to contemplate Christ Crucified, that we might love him in the suffering flesh of the poor, the marginalized, and the one who has need of care and sympathy. And let us not forget that among these there is often also our own brother living in fraternity.

May all of you, as witnesses to the beauty of divine Mystery, be bearers of the peace and love of Christ our Savior. May the Immaculate Virgin remain with you and support you always.

Rome, 4 October 2017
Feast of our Seraphic Father St. Francis

Br. Mauro Jöhri, OFM Cap.
General Minister

