

THE GREAT PARDON

In a vision at the Chapel of Our Lady of the Angels, the Lord, accompanied by the Blessed Virgin, invited Saint Francis of Assisi to ask whatever favor he desired. St. Francis asked for what came to be known as the *Portiuncula Indulgence*, otherwise known as the *Great Pardon of Assisi*.

He asked that those who devoutly visited the Chapel would be forgiven of all of their sins and the punishment due them.

At one time, the Pardon was reserved for those who visited the Chapel the afternoon of the 1ST and all day on the 2ND of August, the 2ND being the Feast of Our Lady of the Angels. Over the centuries, the Popes have extended the favor to include every parish Church, beginning at noon on the 1ST and ending at midnight of the 2ND of August.

PORTIUNCULA INDULGENCE

The first written document we have regarding this indulgence is dated October 31, 1277, some sixty years after the indulgence is said to have been granted. As a result, many different accounts have come down to us purporting to relate the vision of St. Francis and the way in which the Pope consented to grant this indulgence.

One time when Francis was kneeling in prayer before the image of Our Lady, he seemed to behold men and women from every corner of the world converging upon this obscure little chapel in the Umbrian forest. He had been praying for the forgiveness of the sins of mankind when suddenly the dark interior seemed illumined by the light of a million candles. Jesus and Mary appeared in the midst of a dazzling cloud of angels, and he heard a voice that fell like music on his soul, "What do you wish me to do to help poor sinners?" Francis hardly knew how to answer, but suddenly the words came tumbling out and he asked the Lord to grant a full pardon to all who came to visit the church of Portiuncula and made a good confession. It then seemed that Jesus was in favor of this. He turned smilingly to His Mother and she, in turn, nodded to St. Francis and smiled.

Typical of the saint's impetuosity and generosity of soul, he marched off to see the Pope and beg from him the coveted indulgence. The reigning Holy Father, Honorius III, was literally dumbfounded at the request to grant such a generous indulgence. At that time, the summer of 1216, plenary indulgences were rarely granted by the Church. The plenary indulgences that had been granted were given to those fighting men who took up the cross and the sword and went as crusaders to the Holy Land. Later, this hard won indulgence was extended to those who remained at home but helped the Crusaders in supplying men and alms.

Francis, however, was not to be refused. The Lord Himself had promised him, and the Roman Curia was bound to relent! The Pope finally yielded and left it to the astonished cardinals to limit the application of the new indulgence. The date set was from vespers of the first of August until sundown on the second. It is said that Francis chose this date because the feast of the Chains of St. Peter (his release from prison) is celebrated on the first of August, and Francis felt that sinners should also be freed from the chains of their sins on the day following this great feast. Furthermore, this date was the anniversary of the consecration of the Portiuncula chapel and is the Feast day of Our Lady of the Angels.

As Francis took his leave of the Holy Father, after obtaining the unprecedented privilege, the Pope is said to have asked if he did not wish some document to prove that his request had been officially granted.

With characteristic Franciscan lightheartedness came the saint's reply: "I need nothing more than your word. Our Lady is the parchment, Christ the notary, and the angels our witnesses!"

When the first great August first arrived, seven bishops gathered in the little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels to dedicate it as “Our Lady of the Angels of the Portiuncula.” And St. Francis, overjoyed, cried out to the crowd that overflowed the narrow building, “I want to make all of you go to heaven!”

But at the time there seemed something almost scandalous in this indulgence and conservative prelates did little to make it known. In St. Francis’ own lifetime the Portiuncula Indulgence was enjoyed by comparatively few Christians. Travel and communications were slow, and not even such good news as a plenary indulgence could travel swiftly over the mud-choked trails that passed for roads in thirteenth-century Europe. Later, of course, the indulgence was extended to all Franciscan churches on August 1ST and 2ND.

CONDITIONS TO OBTAIN THE PLENARY INDULGENCE OF THE FORGIVENESS

(for oneself or for a departed soul)

- * Sacramental Confession to be in God’s grace (during the eight days before or after);
- * Participation in the Holy Mass and Eucharist.
- * Visit to a Catholic Church, followed by PROFESSION OF FAITH, in order to reaffirm one’s own Christian identity;
- * Say the OUR FATHER, in order to reaffirm the dignity as child of God that one received in Baptism;
- * A prayer for the Pope’s intention, in order to reaffirm one’s membership in the Church, of which the Roman Pontiff is the foundation and sign of visible unity.