



**Message on the 450th Anniversary  
of the Founding of the Order of the Mother of God  
Lucca, September 1<sup>st</sup>  
1574 - 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. On September 1st, we commemorate the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God, born in the City of Lucca, where the Spirit transformed Giovanni Leonardi, a pharmacist-apothecary, into a priest who based his ministry on the words of the prophet Isaiah, echoed by Jesus in Nazareth: "He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted" (Is 61:1; Lk 4:16-21). This word of salvation deeply resonated within Giovanni (known as Father Giò or simply Father Giovanni to all) and led him to dedicate himself to healing those suffering in body and spirit, especially the most vulnerable, without neglecting the young, the adults, and the elderly who were ill. "When the verse of Psalm 112 was sung, 'His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord,' he felt deeply moved within and his heart was filled with trust and hope in God. Even through his external actions, it was evident how well these words suited him," wrote Fr. Marracci, one of his first biographers.

2. A small group of people was drawn to his new and effective word, his consistent example, and his authentic and joyful lifestyle. His always serene countenance impressed some young people who, after meeting him, experienced a different kind of life and felt increasingly drawn to the Crucified-Risen One, the measure of all things. Thus, it happened that Cesare Franciotti and Giovan Batista Cioni, two young nobles of Lucca, together with Giorgio Arrighini, began living together in the Church of the Rose on September 1st, 1574, to experience a full life—not without difficulties, problems, and conflicts. The advice of Father Giò provided them with an intense program of life: saints to sanctify, free to liberate, disciples to evangelize. The formula to live by was simple yet bold: to live like the apostles

in a Church in need of change and reform. The nascent Order, which soon grew because authentic Christian experience is contagious, was dedicated to the Glorious Virgin Mary, Assumed into Heaven, the woman fully realized and filled with joy because she guarded, conceived, and practiced the Word, and by practicing it, found her happiness, becoming a sign of consolation and hope for the entire Church and every Christian.

3. It was a small and youthful community that embraced the new experience inspired by the Spirit: the initiator, Father Giò (33 years old), had been a priest for only two years; Giorgio Arrighini (28 years old); Giovan Battista Cioni (18 years old); Cesare Franciotti (17 years old); Giulio Franciotti (16 years old). After a few months, others between 18 and 25 years old joined. The Chronicles and contemporary documents that inform us about their lives attest to the continuous effort of these young people to live with ever greater readiness the apostolic spirit. They were willing to make any sacrifice: they left the security of their paternal homes to live in community, but sometimes there was not even food to eat! Many of them were nobles; all renounced their rank, studies, or profession for something greater: to follow Christ and live the Gospel deeply. Not everything went smoothly, and life presented challenges, but they did not give up. What do these "fools," as people called them, do? They pray, preach the Gospel, approach their peers, and enthusiastically motivate their choice; above all, they feel happy and fulfilled, to the point that they begin to attract others, and the authorities are compelled to intervene to contain the phenomenon. Leonardi, in particular, was a young priest who fascinated and attracted: he seemed stern, but he hid surprising joviality and tenderness. A rule inspired by the Virgin of the Rose prevailed among them all: to live obedience, which is beautiful and fragrant like a rose, but difficult and sharp like its thorns. Obedience first to the Gospel, then to the spiritual needs of the City and Diocese of Lucca, and finally to those who were eager to hear and live the Word of God in the concreteness of their lives. Obedience thus generates listening; listening leads to dialogue; dialogue fosters discernment; discernment brings forth proclamation and witness.

4. What initially might have seemed an eccentric experience soon appeared to many as something closely resembling what occurred in the early Christian community. Some testified that during prayer in the Church of the Rose, the walls and stones of the ancient Roman walls seemed to catch fire and that the action and presence of the Spirit could be strongly felt. Even some bishops passing through the city affirmed that in that small community, the pages of the Acts of the Apostles were being relived, thanks to the fraternal atmosphere, the vivid contemplation of the beauty of the Holy Face, the Crucified-Risen One, the pastoral action aimed at children through the Catechism, and finally the evangelization of adults in innovative and creative ways, pioneering for that time.

5. When the Gospel spreads, it becomes a sign of contradiction, and trials increase: the community, which on one hand saw the number of sympathizers grow, also attracted a fair number of enemies for political, cultural, economic, and social reasons. Reflecting on those moments, Saint Giovanni Leonardi often spoke of the Order of the Mother of God as a small boat that, due to the adversities faced, should have sunk and dissolved, but despite the turbulence, it continued to sail on the open sea of history, the Church, and the world.

6. After ten years of unforgettable experiences and exemplary life, in 1583 the Bishop of Lucca approved the community, recognizing it as a good vineyard that had produced many ripe fruits and wishing that it would produce even more and better ones. It was now clear to everyone that this was a work of God. On the other hand, the religious decisively committed themselves to grow and mature in the Spirit, without placing obstacles before Him, to become better workers in the Lord's vineyard day by day.

7. Today, 450 years later, we thank the Lord for this small boat, which from the walls of Lucca has reached various parts of the world: in Europe (Italy and the United Kingdom), in Latin America (Chile and Colombia), in Africa (Nigeria), and in Asia (India and Indonesia). It has managed to maintain and propagate the pioneering spirit of its origins and, with a dose of creativity, a gift of the Spirit, its members, the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God, have preached the Gospel to all nations. We thank the Lord for the many brothers who, in daily observance and in a spirit of faith, have given themselves entirely to God and to their neighbor to carry out the evangelical mission in increasingly updated forms of pastoral care, both past and present. The fruits have been abundant, ripe, and sweet: in the 450 years of the Order's life, there have been Leonardini bishops, scholars, scientists, theologians, catechists, preachers, missionaries, archaeologists, and musicians, who have made significant contributions to the Church and the world. Many religious and priests, surrendering themselves to God and letting Him work through them, in full obedience, have provided a testimony of how it is possible to live the Gospel and be happy. Many of their names have been forgotten by men, but they live on in the heart of God. We also thank the Lord for all the lay brothers and sisters who have joyfully accepted the opportunity to live and work in the various and ever-new works and institutions established by the Order, collaborating in the effort and joy of evangelization and sharing in the same charism. They are - both yesterday and today - like one family with the religious of the Order.

8. May the gratitude and joy of these 450 years awaken in all of us the desire not merely to recount an ancient history, but to commit ourselves to building the path forward. As Pope Francis points out, the Church today needs a process of reform centered on the joy of the Gospel, to be lived and witnessed with attractive strength and a spirit of obedience and service. Today's world—especially the new generations—urgently needs to receive from passionate men and women a recipe for a good life that allows them to build their personal and communal existence in peace, justice, and the care of every person and all of Creation. The Church of Lucca has also been engaged for almost thirty years in a serious path of missionary reform, which, during this time of pastoral visitation, is being shaped by the various characteristics and needs of the parish communities of the Diocese, with a view toward new lay protagonism and the decisive role of the community in transmitting the faith to new generations. The Lord's plans have not been shortened, and His grace does not diminish: let us throw ourselves into Him, and He, filling our sails, will set us on a course for unexplored paths, so that the adventure of the Gospel may continue. The upcoming canonization of our fellow citizen Elena Guerra, Apostle of the Holy Spirit, confirms us in this trust: "Even in our time, faced with the miseries afflicting the world, many are discouraged, and give up or are tempted to slow down their efforts [...]: the strength of the Holy Spirit can sustain Christians in their struggles for the good and help them successfully overcome contradictions and difficulties" (Saint John XXIII, Discourse on the occasion of the beatification of Elena Guerra, § 8).

9. The happy coincidence of 1574 and 2024 as years of preparation for the Jubilee offers us, first of all, the opportunity to ask for forgiveness for the mistakes, shortcomings, faults, scandals, un-courageous choices, fears, and sins that have punctuated the Order's journey over four and a half centuries. Before the merciful and compassionate God and before all of you, brothers and sisters of yesterday and today, we invoke forgiveness, as well as help to discern infidelities and live reconciliation as a celebration that brings life back into play. Promoting peace by building reconciled and reconciling communities is the call made to us by the Holy Father in his recent message for the XV Centenary of the Apparition of Santa Maria in Portico, the original Roman seat of the Order. "May your fraternal life be a work of evangelization, an effective sign of Christ's mandate for mutual and free love, the primary way to show belonging to Christ and the only path to perfect and lasting peace."

10. Secondly, we joyfully embrace the opportunity to become "pilgrims of hope" with all Christians, embracing the future with trust and patience, allowing God to work in our lives and history, and asking Him for the gift of discernment and ecclesial communion. In the

uncertainties we share with many of our contemporaries, we remain convinced that Christ is the measure of all things and that in Him we will not be disappointed.

11. "Trahe me post te" (draw me after you) is an expression full of spiritual meaning that Giovanni Leonardi often repeated, addressing the Virgin Mary. This phrase expresses the ardent desire to live a life of holiness, being completely guided by the teachings of the Gospel. Following Mary's example and inspired by Saint Giovanni's devotion, we too seek holiness in our daily actions: every small choice, every gesture of love and understanding can bring us closer to a life more conformed to Christ. Just as the holy Founder turned to the Virgin Mary for guidance, we too can ask her to help us overcome life's challenges with strength and faith, to reach the fullness of our vocation.

12. We will solemnly celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Order's foundation with a solemn Eucharist in the Cathedral of San Martino - where Saint Giovanni contemplated the Holy Face - on September 1st, followed by a procession to the Church of the Rose. During the upcoming Advent, dedicated to the Mother of God as the "Door of the Jubilee," the witness of Saint Giovanni Leonardi and his disciples will help us enter with enthusiasm into the "year of the Lord's favor." We invite everyone, especially the citizens of Lucca and the OMD family, to participate with gratitude and joy in these events, to draw from the memory of the past energy and inspiration for what the Lord asks us to build today and tomorrow.

To all who receive this Message, may the joy of heart and the serene peace of the Crucified and Risen Lord and the Blessed Virgin Assumed into Heaven be with you.


We greet and bless you all with all our hearts.

Lucca, August 15 2024

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Assumed into Heaven



+ Paolo Giulietti  
Arcivescovo di Lucca



P. Antonio Piccolo  
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