

In the Name of the Lord, Peace be with you...



My name is Friar Picchignito (“the little one”) Maria Vincenzo. I was born in Portugal (Vila Franca de Xira, Lisbon) on June 26, 1978, and baptized Tiago Ferreira. I have degree in Musical education and am now completing my theological formation in view of becoming a priest.<sup>1</sup>

I am writing this brief letter in order to give witness, all the more fully, to the abundant fruit that God has brought forth in my life thanks to my encounter with the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*. In order to understand that, however, you’ll have to understand the kind of person I was before...

### **BEFORE I MET THE *LITTLE FRIARS OF JESUS AND MARY...***

I was a lost young man. I always wore black, I had long hair down to my waist, with five earrings and two other piercings (in my left eyebrow and tongue), and instead of shouting the thunderous music of the Gospel at the top of my lungs (cf. *Is 58:1*) – a music which can truly and definitively vaporize our mortality like a lightning strike (cf. *John 8:51*) and speed us on to the infinite eternal space of a blessed and glorious immortality – I shouted satanic music on concert stages: music which sped me on (me, and many others) towards the burning ruin of a dark and hardly spacious reality, the coffin...

It is written, “*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*” (*Is 9:1*). Indeed, even in the midst of these moments when I was so lost in the darkness, the loving providence of God slowly enveloped me in His light, thanks to a long period of suffering: a suffering which now I bless because it led me to the Word of God, and the Word of God, to the Body of Christ that is the Church (cf. *1Tim 3:15*).

Once I was living in a context of faith and of fervent participation in the sacraments, a burning desire (cf. *Luke 24:32*) began to grow more and more in the deepest part of my heart: the desire to live out all of the words that Jesus spoke in the Gospel. Already at that point, I began to understand that God was calling me to give Him my whole life. Above all, I understood this because of what Jesus says to the disciples when they say it would be better not to marry: “*Not all can understand this, but only those to whom it has been granted. Indeed, there are eunuchs who have been so from their mother’s womb; there are others who have been made eunuchs by men; and there are others who have become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let those who can understand, understand*” (*Matt 19:11-12*). (This was also confirmed for me by the Second Vatican Council in the Decree *Optatum Totius*, n. 10, which makes reference to the encyclical *Sacra Verginitas* of Pius XII.) Before meeting the *Little Friars*, I only knew one thing: I felt the fire to give God my whole life, which would also mean renouncing any sexual relationship with a woman...but, knowing the way I had been before believing in Him, I knew that on my own strength I would never be able to do it.

I have always been someone who has thrown myself into things one hundred percent (even when I was in the thorny context of worldly desires – cf. *Luke 8:14*), all or nothing: so, once I felt the call of the Lord, I either had to follow Him in everything and everywhere, in every word that He spoke to me, or for me it wouldn’t even make sense to listen to Him.

So when I had made the decision to follow God, I truly wanted to understand what God wanted from me. I wanted to understand everything (about His will for me), with certainty, to be able to do only what He wanted. Ok, so God wanted my whole life. But where? There are so many religious communities in the world; so many nations, so many dioceses, so many seminaries. Where did the Lord want me? Since I felt urged in my heart to search for perfection, the first thing I started to do, according to the Lord’s advice (cf. *Matt 19:21*), was to give away everything I had, though I didn’t think much about how to give it, or to whom...I only wanted to give everything away, and I did – various musical instruments, the computer I was so attached to, etc. After doing this, seeing myself left with nothing, I asked myself: well, what do I do now that I have given everything away, as the Lord told me to do (through the Gospel, the life of various saints, and my conscience)? I immediately wanted to set off to do the will of God...but what, concretely, did the Lord want from me? How could I know His will with certainty? When I thought about the life of St. Francis of Assisi, there was a fire in my heart, and I wanted to meet

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<sup>1</sup> This testimony was written in 2008; on May 23, 2021, Friar Picchignito was ordained a priest (translator’s note)

a community that lived with the radicality of St. Francis! I searched and searched for it, to the point of thinking that it must not exist. I had experiences with various communities, in Portugal and beyond, but I never found peace with them because I felt that the Lord was asking something else of me...

So, leaving behind my human securities (*cf. Jer 17:15*) over and over again, I set off various times: alone, taking nothing with me, barefoot (which was a mistake, given that Jesus says to wear sandals – *cf. Mark 6:8-9*), walking the streets of Lisbon from one church to another...but I was mistaken in my way of going about things, acting according to my own opinions, even sleeping outside in the cold in a poverty that was not dignified.

### **AFTER I MET THE LITTLE FRIARS OF JESUS AND MARY...**

The Lord, in His infinite mercy, looked more at the sincerity of my heart than at my errors – as it is written, “*The Lord concedes grace and glory...to those who walk uprightly*” (*Ps 83:12*) – and He gave me the grace of meeting the community of *Little Friars*. Above all, He gave me the grace which I recognize as the greatest of my life: that of meeting Friar Volantino Verde, who, to start with, explained to me in a luminous and irrefutable way (with the Bible and Tradition at hand – that is, with door and keys at hand, as no one had ever done for me before) the importance of a profound submission to the Church, and the importance of living poverty in a dignified way (that is to say, the particular evangelical counsel of complete poverty).

Indeed, after this explanation, Jesus’ words “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; and then come, follow me*” (*Matt 19:21*) shone with a new light in my heart and made themselves felt in me with ever greater strength and security (as, indeed, the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council confirms, which speaks of poverty at n. 8: “*Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men.*” Again, at n. 40, it confirms: “The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached... ‘Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (*Matt 5:48*)”). I wanted to strive for perfection through evangelical poverty, in the full sense, as St. Paul says: “*Be firm, perfect, and adhere to all the desires of God*” (*Col 4:12*). St. Peter, too, the first Pope of the Universal Church [i.e. the Catholic Church], says, “*In the image of the Holy One who has called you, become holy yourselves in all your conduct*” (*1Pet 1:15*). In *all* your conduct! But how? How could I live all that the Lord has taught us, from the beginnings of the Universal Church to today? How could I realize this Spirit-breathed desire emerging so powerfully in my heart, to live the entire Gospel? Now I will recount to you how, in my case, I found that it could be done:

From the moment I first met the *Little Friars*, my whole life changed, because, thanks to them, I understood how it is possible to live the entire Gospel – without becoming unpleasantly eccentric on one hand, but, on the other, also going as quickly as possible in the spiritual life. For example:

The Italian Bishops’ Conference affirms, “*Evangelization can only come about following the style of the Lord Jesus, the first and greatest evangelizer...[and the Church] exists to evangelize.*”<sup>2</sup> I cannot neglect to give witness to the following: a bit like what happened before the eyes of the apostles, who, after a night of toil on the sea without the slightest catch (*cr. John 21:2-3*), at the Word of the Lord fill their nets with 153 large fish (*cf. John 21:6, 11*), I, too, am an eyewitness to the fact that, before I met and entered this community, I used to wear myself out trying to help souls come closer to the Lord (also availing myself of little flyers), but concretely I did not haul in a catch to the “Bark of Peter,” that is, the Church. Now, however, before the Lord and before the eyes of those who read this letter, I can testify to how many people change [for example, during the *Little Friars*’ evangelization in cars while hitchhiking], and change rapidly, in the face of the tremendous eloquence and simplicity of their every brief evangelization. Thanks to this, now, there is a huge difference between my life before, when I didn’t “catch” anything at all, despite all the flyers I distributed and all the words of the Gospel that I announced; now, instead, every time that I evangelize with the word of Jesus and the right “keys” of interpretation that Friar Volantino has given me, something beautiful almost always happens (if the person is really listening). On one pilgrimage, for example, I saw with my own eyes how two men, of whom one had not been to confession for 40 years, and the other, for 20, promised me to return to confession every month and to receive communion every

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<sup>2</sup> CEI, *Questa è la nostra Fede*

Sunday...after I had evangelized them with the words of the Gospel and the right “keys” of interpretation that (as I already said) Friar Volantino had given me. These “keys” are swift in opening hearts that search for true *eudemonia*, true happiness – eternal happiness, where, as St. Augustine says, “*We will enjoy the delights of the Lord for all eternity, after becoming immortal and incorruptible in body and soul... Whoever gets to this life, will have everything he wants!*”<sup>3</sup> Whoever can understand, let them understand...

Given that I, too, was searching for true happiness, eternal happiness, the Lord began to bombard me every day with an abundance of graces like never before, once I met the community of the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*...to recount them all would be an interminable enterprise!

For example, how could I not sincerely give thanks to God for having helped me encounter this new community and such a wise and mature spiritual guide?<sup>4</sup> In the person, words, and works (cf. *Luke 24:19*) of Friar Volantino, God helped me know and touch with my hands His profound Wisdom – without which an academic degree means nothing (cf. *Wis 9:6*). Meeting him not only changed my whole life, but above all, has given me the concrete possibility of changing my whole eternal destiny. Truly, I had never and have never met anyone like Friar Volantino: such a balanced, wise, and intelligent person, who, no matter what fundamental theological problem he might be faced with, has always demonstrated a unique love, altruism, and uprightness; he does not stop until he draws clearly from the Fountain (God) that water of living responses that wells up to satisfy the thirst of many, unto eternal life (cf. *John 4:14; Rev 7:17; Sir 21:13b; Constitutions V.V. p. 9*).

These living responses are always profoundly founded and demonstrated in light of the Word of God and the great authority which serves it, the Magisterial Tradition of the Roman Church, to which has been entrusted both the integral transmission of the Word of God and its authentic interpretation. Friar Volantino – with all of his limitations, as he himself admits (though I would add, also with all of his innumerable strengths!) – has an unflinching determination that kneels insistently before God to the point of not only understanding, ever more clearly, everything possible regarding full salvation, but also being able to explain it in a very simple way to other people (yet with the greatest rationality and spirituality). In this way, he gathers many fruits of meditation, of conversation, and of the vocations which are being born in ever greater quantity around himself and his charism: little and great communities in the service of the only Church of the Heavenly Majesty.

Along these lines, Pope Benedict XVI affirms: “‘It was the Holy Spirit who sparked the Word of God with new light for the Founders....[I]ndeed, the Holy Spirit attracts some people to live the Gospel in a radical way and translate it into a style of more generous following. So it is that a work, a religious family, is born which with its very presence becomes in turn a living ‘exegesis’ of the Word of God....[,] a living Gospel that is actualized in ever new forms (cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 46). The mystery of Christ is reflected in the works of...Founders....[T]he proposal of the following of Christ without compromise, as it is presented to us in the Gospel, has therefore constituted the ultimate and supreme rule for religious life (cf. Vatican Council II, Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* 2).”<sup>5</sup>

I WISH YOU A GOOD MEDITATION...  
AND I HOPE THAT YOU BECOME A SAINT  
(IN THE MANNER OF *MATT 5:19B*)! AMEN!

IN FEDE:

**Friar Picchignito M. Vincenzo**

Caltanissetta

rewritten May 16, 2008 (memorial of St. Simon Stock)

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<sup>3</sup> *Office of Readings*, Friday XIX Week O.T. (translated by *pfs*gm)

<sup>4</sup> In regards to the importance of having the right guide in one’s vocation, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “the person wishing to advance toward perfection should ‘take care into whose hands he entrusts himself....In addition to being learned and discreet a director should be experienced....If the spiritual director has no experience of the spiritual life, he will be incapable of leading into it the souls whom God is calling to it, and he will not even understand them” (*CCC* 2690).

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Discourse*, 2 January 2008