

*“I am the way and the truth and the life”* – says the Lord (*John 14:6*)



*“[T]he LORD, your God, carried you,  
as one carries his own child,  
all along your journey...”*

*(Deut 1:31)*

In the name of the Lord, peace and good!

I am writing the essence of my testimony in order to give witness to the wonders that the Lord has worked in my life, since, as St. Peter says, we must always be ready to respond to anyone who asks us for the reason for our hope (cf. *1Pet 3:15*). Given that I write with this noble end in view, I prefer to start not only by introducing myself but by going a bit further back in my story so you can understand better who I was before, and what the Lord began to bring about in the brief period of my existence (cf. *Ps 90:10, 12*) in order to bring me to that marvelous and unforgettable day when He bent down to me, his little creature, and helped me to encounter the religious community of the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* (where I have given my life, because this is God’s full will for me) – and, in particular (and most memorably) to encounter the founder of this community, Friar Volantino Verde!

My religious name is Friar Michael. I was born Giuseppe Mastrangelo, I have a degree in industrial engineering (particularly as a crew chief with a specialization in electronics and telecommunications), and was born in Naples on June 22, 1977 (though I grew up in a nearby town called *S. Giorgio a Cremano*).

#### BEFORE ENCOUNTERING THE *LITTLE FRIARS AND LITTLE NUNS OF JESUS AND MARY*

I’ll start by saying that I was a lost sheep; I grew up in a Catholic family, but we did not practice the faith very much – with the exception of my maternal grandmother, who went to Mass every morning as long as she was in good health. With her, I began to pray the Holy Rosary, which she carefully taught me when I was very little. You could say that, all things considered, I knew something of the Lord and of the Catholic religion, even if I didn’t practice the faith. What I most certainly did *not* know, on the other hand, was what God’s will was for me...nor did it even cross my mind to try to search it out.

Like many young people, I looked for communion, not with the Lord, but with the beautiful created things of this world. I was searching for peace and justice, but naturally, without the Lord, it was impossible to find them! Finally, when I was about 19, the Lord attracted my heart and mind towards searching for Justice only in Him. Indeed, only God can satisfy this hunger and thirst, as Jesus says: “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (*Matt 5:6*).

Once I had begun to be attracted by poverty, a bit like St. Francis of Assisi, I began to understand that the Lord was calling me, too, to live in such a way; at the beginning I thought about becoming a hermit, since I didn’t have a concept of community (and much less did I give importance to Mother Church; I was still far from the Sacraments, and thus more than a bit confused).

The Lord, in His infinite goodness, had marvelously come to meet me in the way that I could understand; it was I, on the other hand, who – in my weakness – did not go to meet *Him*, the only and highest Good. Indeed, overcome by the fear of leaving everything behind (since my family was well-to-do), and by various problems in the family, I ignored this seductive call of the Lord. And not only that – I didn’t even try to understand better what kind of calling this might be. From that moment onward, I started to enter a tunnel of suffering and sin that I had brought upon my own head. It came to the point that I didn’t want to do anything anymore; I didn’t want to study, I didn’t want to make use of the gifts of singing, theater, and the arts that the Lord had given me. I cried, desperately searching for God’s help; I hoped He would free me from all my problems and give me strength and courage. But nothing came of it; the Lord did not help me, since I was insisting that everything be done according to my own will. Later, however, I started to go to Mass, to go to confession and to receive the Eucharist, and finally the Lord started to speak to me (cf. *Ps 28:1*) more clearly. I started to come out of the “dark wood” of

which Dante speaks, the “dark wood” full of vices and sin, and to find myself on the right Way that is Jesus (as He himself says: “I am the way...” – *John* 14:6).

After two years of this spiritual journey in the Church, along which the Lord led me by the hand (cf. *Deut* 1:31), I understood, through various situations, that God wanted me to become a friar. Finally I knew that Jesus not only wanted me to become poor; now, after I had matured in suffering and been educated in the concept of fraternity in the Church, I knew that God also wanted me to join a religious community.

### THE ENCOUNTER WITH *THE LITTLE FRIARS OF JESUS AND MARY*

I had understood that the almighty Lord wanted me to join a religious community, but where? I thought about the Capuchin Franciscans, and armed with courage and determined not to turn back, I left everything and departed for Assisi to become a Capuchin friar.

The Capuchins are wonderful...but the Lord had other plans for me! In Assisi, in the friary where I was hosted, I had to wait for the friars who dealt with vocations, since I wanted to enter their order...but strangely, they didn't arrive, and didn't arrive. I thought, “wow, this is strange. Why is this happening?” So I went to prayer, and with all my heart I asked Jesus what I should do and what He wanted from me, because I was certain that He had brought me to that place (among other reasons, because I was there on the advice of my spiritual guide). The day after this fervent prayer, in this same friary, I met two friars who told me that they were part of a community of *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*...and strangely enough, they were passing through on pilgrimage and had asked for hospitality at the same friary! “Stranger and stranger,” I thought to myself!

One of the things that instantly struck me was their simplicity and poverty, and when I learned that they didn't even touch money (“not because it's bad,” they explained, “given that even the apostles had a safekeeping, but this is what we have been called to”) and when they told me that they lived on divine Providence and travelled the world on foot and hitchhiking, my heart was set on fire. After a few days the Lord, in His infinite mercy, gave me the grace of meeting the founder of the community of the *Little Friars and Nuns of Jesus and Mary*: Friar Volantino! Through him, the Lord illuminated my intellect in a powerful way, helping me see and understand, in a concrete way (through their marvelous lifestyle) that even today it is possible to live the Holy Gospel “without gloss” – that is to say, to the letter. (Not the ancient “letter” of which St. Paul speaks, the letter which kills – cf. *Rom* 7:6; *2Cor* 3:6 – but that new Letter of the holy Gospel of which Jesus speaks, He who gives “Spirit and Life!” (*John* 6:63).)

Indeed, I was very struck by the fact that Friar Volantino always tried to found his words and actions on the Word of God while also making frequent reference to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, remaining thoroughly anchored in the Tradition! Personally, to tell the truth, I had never seen anyone do this in such a powerful way (nor have I to this day!). Once I had overcome some doubts, therefore, I decided with great joy to set off with them (given that they were headed for Lourdes and then Fatima on foot and hitchhiking), as they did: depending totally on divine providence, without taking anything for the journey, as Jesus says (cf. *Mark* 6:7-9).

### AFTER THE MEETING WITH *THE LITTLE FRIARS*, AND SOME OF THE FRUIT OF THIS COMMUNITY... (CF. *MATT* 3:8)

The 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2005 is an unforgettable date for me: from that day on, I have been a part of this religious family in which I am now (by God's grace) a friar and in which (with His grace!) I hope to remain until death.

From the moment that I began my journey with this community, I experienced the grace of God in a powerful way. His infinite providence, the unique encounters with people (wisely guided by a higher hand), the extraordinary conversions that the Lord worked through the brothers and sisters, their joyful harmony: all of this (and more) brought great peace and joy to my heart and helped me overcome the various daily challenges and sacrifices.

When we returned from the pilgrimage and arrived in Calabria, where the first Mother House was located, I met the other brothers and sisters; the extraordinary warmth of their welcome, the union of their thought, their communion of spirit, and their fraternal love were more intense than I had encountered in any other religious order.

Speaking of fraternal love, I would like to recount something that moved me greatly. This whole time, from when I departed for Lourdes until I got to Calabria, I (out of my own negligence) had still not called my parents to tell them my news. The brothers had told me several times to call, but I hadn't done it. Because of this, my earthly family, in their worry, had sent out an alert that I had gone missing, and the police were looking for

me! Because of my negligence, I could have endangered the whole community (because someone could have thought that the brothers had forced me in some way not to call my parents). Friar Volantino had advised me to call immediately, but I wanted to send a letter instead...and because of that, I created problems for the whole community. Because of my negligence, they had to go through persecutions and slander; but from the very beginning they, and Friar Volantino in particular, told me (in word and deed) that I shouldn't worry and they would not abandon me. This episode further sealed my certainty of the infinite love that the community had for me; for me, and for all, particularly those who search for the full will of God. From the beginning, I have truly experienced the love of Christ in a concrete way in this community.

Something else that struck me when I entered the community was the fact that, from the very beginning, the Lord spoke to my heart in one way or another (cf. *Job* 33:13ff), through His Word in the first place and in other ways...I was truly astonished! God, the all-powerful creator of the whole universe, was stooping down to *me*, the little creature He Himself had created, and helping my intellect and my little heart understand that I should join this religious family!

Something else that strikes me about Friar Volantino is the fact that, with the fine and luminous wisdom that God himself has granted him (precisely because, in a very impressive way, he tries to live the Word of God in all its aspects – cf. *Ps* 119:99-100), he always manages to explain the subtleties of the Word of God in a simple and clear way (which would otherwise would have remained an incomprehensible mystery for me and many others in the community and beyond). With the grace of God, Friar Volantino manages to join head and heart with his tremendously clear responses. It's exceptional! And he does so, not based on his own word, but demonstrating everything with the Word of God, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, phrases of the saints, the Magisterium, etc.; that is to say that every word that comes from his mouth is weighed and balanced (cf. *James* 3:2b) because he does not want to wound or scandalize anyone!

The fact that he always tries to take the best from everyone, even the most recent arrival in the community, is also praiseworthy, because it shows that he really listens to the others; though he has a truly divine wisdom, he tries to consider the others – in all humility – as superior to himself (cf. *Phil* 2:3). This enables him to find the best of what there is to be found in whatever the others have to offer!

Not that I'm the only one who has realized this; every day there are many people who meet him and hear him speak and come to the same conclusion. Given that Jesus says that it is by the fruit that you will recognize the tree (cf. *Matt* 12:33), here (for the benefit of the reader) are some of the many and marvelous fruits that have come from this tree of the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*.

In the first place, the huge change that came about in me – who ever would have thought?! I, comfort-seeking by nature, would never have been able to think of leaving home to go around on foot and hitchhiking without a euro in my pocket! When I was in the world, I never would have left Italy without a wallet full of money...but now I find myself traveling through France, Spain, England, Austria, Bosnia, Poland, etc. without a cent! **Would it be possible to do all this without the hand of God?** Then there is the fact that, though I have always been timid and awkward in speaking to others, I now find myself in cars (together with the other brothers and sisters) speaking with those who are in need: in need of a word of hope, a word of comfort, in need of the Word of God (above all), which, as it is written, heals all (cf. *Wis* 16:12).

**And what can I say of my spiritual growth! In community I have finally understood the meaning of the holy meditated Rosary**, very different from the Rosary as I had learned it from my grandmother. As Pope Benedict XVI says, “*The Rosary is a contemplative and Christocentric prayer; inseparable from meditation on Holy Scripture. It is the prayer of the Christian who advances on his pilgrimage of faith, following Jesus and preceded by Mary*” (Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 01 October 2006).

Speaking of fruit, I also give thanks to the Lord for the fact that this year, with the grace of God, I am finishing my first year of studies towards the ministerial priesthood. But to avoid the possibility that someone might think that the fruits are all about me, hold on tight...here we go!

To start with, we are currently 17 members (friars and nuns), all young, who have left everything to follow the Lord, trying to live the Gospel in its entirety! In addition, there is the beauty of the 70 groups of prayer (in Italy and beyond, founded over the course of about three years) that we minister to through the prayer of the holy meditated Rosary. I can't list the innumerable people that have begun a journey of conversion, promising to go to Mass, confess with a Catholic priest, and receive Jesus in the Eucharist at least on Sundays. Among these I can count my parents (my father in particular, who finally went to confession after about thirty years!). This has also

happened with the parents of some of my fellow friars (as well as with the father of Friar Volantino). We are also very much gratified to see families who have reconciled after being separated or on the verge of separation, thanks to the Lord who has worked through us! Furthermore, on the theme of fruits of conversion, I would also like to mention the daughter of a Jehovah's Witness who lived in great confusion and was no longer practicing the Catholic faith when she met us; after meeting us, thanks to the teaching that Friar Volantino has shared with us (always based on the teaching of Christ), she received all the answers she needed. Now she, too, as an ex-Jehovah's witness, not only frequents the sacraments of Confession and weekly Communion, but is also part of our Marian groups of prayer and prays with us every Saturday, helping with the songs for our Saturday Night Missions (which are dedicated to Mary). When she speaks with her father, she now knows how to respond in order to take down the devil (so to speak)! I could also speak of the many young people who have drawn closer to the Church – the same Church that they might have criticized before – and now there are many who defend the Church and some who offer Her their contribution!

#### IN CONCLUSION

I thank the Lord Jesus who has taken me by hand and has led me on the right way, that is (in my case), into this marvelous family of “Little Ones”...in which I hope, with the grace of God, to bear ever more fruit of *meditation and conversion*, and above all of *vocation*: all for the greater glory of God and the salvation of the most souls possible, for this is the aim (cf. *1Pet* 1:9) and the eternal crown of our faith. Amen!

Peace and good! May you become a saint!

In Faith,

*Friar Michael*