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“He took the final seal from Christ”: Akko celebrates the stigmata of St. Francis

Akko, 17th September 2011

19 September 2011

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The setting here in the Holy Land for the feast-day in honour of the **stigmata received by St. Francis of Assisi**, on 17th September 1224 on the holy mountain of La Verna, is magnificent. The city of **Akko**, an ancient and prosperous centre where the splendid Crusader and Turkish ruins can still be admired, hosted this important Franciscan date, offering one of the most beauti

Going along the sea front, just behind the lighthouse on a small promontory, you reach the small Latin church of St. John the Baptist, built by the Franciscans in 1737 on the area of the old Crusader church of St. Andrew. This beautiful stone sanctuary, today in the custody and care of the **Franciscan Father Quirico Calella**, is an invaluable point of reference for the local Christian community, made up of about 100 Christian Arabs, as well as other Christians, Catholics and Orthodox, from eastern Europe.

Here, on the evening of 17th September, the gift of the stigmata to St. Francis was commemorated with a solemn Holy Mass presided by Brother Quirico and concelebrated by **Brother Mario Hadchiti**, the current guardian of the Basilica of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and by a priest of the Mondo X Community, a group that works to rehabilitate young drug addicts, which has been present for some years at the Sanctuary of the Transfiguration on Tabor. The celebration was also attended by Dr. Jurgen Schwartz the contact person for a project of musical education which twins a school in Recklinghausen, Germany, and a school in Akko, accompanied by his wife, and Col. And Mrs. Fabio Gianbartolomei, the new Military Attaché at the Italian Embassy in Tel Aviv. The community of Franciscan sisters of Nazareth and the community of sisters of St. John the Baptist of Jerusalem also took part in the Holy Mass. The liturgy was animated with great refinement by the youngsters of the Mondo X Community, with the best known Franciscan hymns. The community also presented a gift of a beautiful jam tart, which looked wonderful first in the sacristy and then on the table in the restaurant during the splendid dinner following the celebration and organized by Brother Quirico for his guests.

In the homily, Brother Quirico outlined the figure of St. Francis with great sensitivity, starting from the liturgy (Galations 6,14-18; Luke 9,23-26) to place the accent on the great love and on the great devotion of St. Francis for Christ on the Cross. He welcomed the daily cross and accepted the will of God, his plan prepared for us by eternity, making it the essential condition to be disciples of Jesus. As Dante recalls, "And when he had, through thirst of martyrdom,/In the proud presence of the Sultan preached/ Christ and the others who came after him" (Par. XI, 100-102), St. Francis announced the Gospel and carried his message of peace even to the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, in 1219, near Damietta in Egypt, obtaining from this courageous gesture the gift of a friendship that lasted a lifetime and the possibility of freely visiting Bethlehem and Jerusalem, then under Muslim control. Some time after his return to Italy from the Holy Land, St. Francis "From Christ did he receive the final seal/ Which during two whole years his members bore" (Par. XI, 107-108), that is, he received the stigmata, which associat

St. Francis was perhaps the Saint closest to Jesus and is a figure loved and admired all over the world, to the extent that Pope John Paul II decided to start the meetings for inter-religious dialogue with the world leaders of all religions in Assisi. This fertile initiative continues today. The story of Akko, with its over 3000 Franciscan and local martyrs of the past, reminds us of the enormous cost of these great conquests of dialogue and peace. In the eighth centenary of the founding of the Poor Clares, which falls this year, we cannot forget that, when St. John of Acre fell in 1291, taken from the Crusaders by the Sultan Malik al-Ashraf, 60 Poor Clares perished in the massacres that followed.

Today the Franciscans are still present in Akko, where they look after the sanctuary, pray for peace and work tirelessly for the integration and cohabitation of the complex local community, which currently has some 35,000 Jews, 14,000 Arabs, a small Christian minority and various other minority groups. The stigmata received by St. Francis on his body reveal that great love is a constant search for the Other inside ourselves and that closeness to God is not a "fact" but an "act", a path of approaching the light of Good, an infinite yearning that places the centre of everything above the skies.

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