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Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv. ©

*Father Max Mizzi OFM Conv., when in 1978 he gives
Pope John Paul II an album with articles and photos
from the ecumenical and inter-religious work in Assisi, which he started in 1960*

Promoter of Inter-Faith Dialogue

Laurence Mizzi on the pioneering work of his brother, Fr Maximilian Mizzi, a Franciscan Conventual who has just celebrated 50 years of priesthood

Fr. MAXIMILIAN MIZZI, OFM Conv. has just celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination. He was ordained a priest by Archbishop Michael Gonzi at the Mdina Cathedral together with two brother Franciscans Fr. Dominic Bonello and (the late) Fr. Michael Bezzina, and two Dominicans, Fr. E. Gatt og Fr A. Vella.

Fr. Max, as he is commonly know, has spent most of his priestly life promoting peace and dialogue between people of different faiths, including non-Christians. He dedicated the first years of his priestly life to pastoral work in Malta and Gozo. Then in 1959, the minister general of the Franciscan Minor Conventual Order called him to Italy and appointed him master of novices at Rivortorto, near Assisi.

“Life was not easy”, he recalls. “We were practically short of everything, sometimes even food. During the winter months when the weather turned very cold, it was unbearable... Heating was non-existent. In the summer, during harvest time, the students and myself went to help in the fields to earn some very badly needed money.” The superiors, realizing the hardships they were suffering, called them to Assisi and put them up at the *Sacro Convento*.

In 1975 a march for peace from Assisi to Rome was jointly held by Fr. Mizzi and Mgr. Carroll-Abbing from Boys’ Town. Around 170 youths, Catholics and Protestants, participated in the march. It was during the march that Fr. Mizzi came into contact with the Charismatic Renewal Movement, since quite a few members were among the participants. Their form of prayer and singing, and above all their unity, in spite of their different beliefs, left a lasting impression on Fr. Mizzi.

A few weeks later the Catholic Charismatic Movement organized an international congress in Rome which was attended by some 10,000 participants from various parts of the world. The congress was addressed by Pope Paul I who delivered a strong message of hope. Fr. Mizzi said that during the mass, he had a profound experience which in Charismatic terms is called “baptism in the Spirit”: “Suddenly I felt as if I had been born again. I realized I had become a new person completely. This dramatic change was clearly noticeable and commented on by those who knew me”.

Following this experience Fr. Max became a committed Charismatic Christian. Soon after returning to Assisi he had a few others set up in a prayer group. Some months later when he was in Malta for a short break he came to know that in Balzan a prayer group had just been formed. He was invited to one of their meetings.

Fr. Mizzi encouraged those youngsters to persevere and to invite others to join the group. His presence and words of advice helped during the formative years of the Maltese Charismatic Movement which is now firmly established and very active with membership running into thousands.

Fr. Mizzi remained in the Movement for several years. But then he was called to give his service in another field: that of ecumenism. In reality his contacts with people of other faiths, mostly British and American Anglicans and Scandinavian Lutherans, had long been established. He met these people during their cultural visits to the town of St. Francis who is revered by Protestants as well as Catholics. Later he made contacts with Buddhists and Hindus.

In 1978, just a month after his election, Pope John Paul II paid a visit to Assisi. Fr. Mizzi was privileged to meet the Pope personally. He spoke to His Holiness about his ecumenical work. He also gave the Pope an album with pictures of his ecumenical encounters. John Paul II seemed to be impressed and later, through the Vatican Secretariat of State, Fr. Mizzi received a letter with the Pope’s blessings and thanks.

Fr. Max was by now deeply involved in the ecumenical field. In 1972, six years before the Pope’s visit to Assisi, with the approval of the Franciscan Conventual Chapter he opened the Franciscan Centre of Apostolic Work for Dialogue which later became the International Franciscan Centre for Dialogue (*Centro Francescano Internazionale per il*

Dialogo – CEFID) in the heart of Assisi. He was appointed its first Delegate General for inter-religious dialogue.

He was often invited to attend international meetings where he had the opportunity to meet a great number of religious and political leaders. Some of these meetings were held in Japan, the United States, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Russia, the UN in New York, Nepal, India and in several Latin American and African countries.

Fr. Mizzi was delighted when John Paul II invited representatives of all Christian denominations and leaders of other world religions to that historic meeting of prayers for peace which was held in Assisi in October 1986.

Fr. Mizzi's involvement in the ecumenical field gave him the opportunity to get to know some of the world's most renowned figures like George Bush Sen. Mikhail Gorbachev, Bill Clinton, the Dalai Lama, Lech Walesa, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Runcie, Yasser Arafat and of course Pope John Paul II. He also met members of the British Royal Family during their visits to the famous Umbrian town.

Fr. Mizzi was greatly impressed by some of these personalities. He describes the late Queen Mother, whom he joined in prayer at the tomb of St. Francis, as "a very religious woman". As for Mother Teresa he says that she was a saintly woman, imbued with great love, very humble but extremely courageous and very determined. He recalls that when he was in Oxford to attend a "Global Forum" meeting, Mother Teresa paid a courtesy call on then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who welcomed the saintly nun and gave her a considerable sum of money for her poor. Mother Teresa thanked Mrs. Thatcher, but graciously returned the money telling her to use it for the benefit of the homeless who sleep in the streets of London!



*Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv. ©
Mother Teresa and Fr. Mizzi in Assisi in 1982*

Another personality who left a big impression on Fr. Mizzi was Mikhail Gorbachev, whom he described as “religious ... and providential in the fall of Communism”. He again met the former Soviet leader in Moscow only a month after the historic Bush-Gorbachev Summit in Malta in December 1989. Pictures of Fr. Mizzi wearing the Franciscan tunic were published in the Soviet press. “I just couldn’t believe that I was really in the capital of the Communist atheistic state”.

Fr. Mizzi’s work to bring about understanding and peace among nations and people of different cultures and beliefs were amply recognized. He was awarded the Cross of St. Augustine by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie. He was made Doctor of Letters (Hon. Causa) by the Christian University of Texas and given the “Earth Star Award” by Life Foundation and named “Earth Saint” by the board of directors of “Master Peace” in San Francisco California. The commune of Triuggio, Milan, awarded him the title of Uomo del Dialogo. Malta also recognized his work in 1999 by making him Companion of the National Order of Merit.

For the last six years Fr. Mizzi has been recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Pro Mundo Centre of Varese. Various members of the Italian Parliament and Senate and men of letters have endorsed his nomination, which also has the support of the Maltese government.



*Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv. ©
Guido De Marco, President of Malta and Father Mizzi in 2000
when he was received into the “National Order of Merit”*

Looking back, Fr. Mizzi states that his greatest satisfaction is seeing Assisi becoming a centre of religious dialogue and ecumenism. He also takes pride in the fact that thanks to his efforts ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue have become part of the mission of the Franciscan Minor Conventual Order. By contrast he feels disappointed that “we have not

reaped the fruits we had hoped for in the field of unity among religions and peace in the world even though progress had been registered”.

Recently, due to various factors including serious health problems, my 74-year-old brother has had to give up his work. He has left CEFID, the Ecumenical Centre and is now living in the *Sacro Convento*. However, he has not completely abandoned his work, which he loves so much and to which he has dedicated the best years of his life. He is still receiving invitations to attend international conferences and seminars.

“I do attend whenever I can. I am determined to continue to give my contribution towards ecumenical dialogue and peace among people professing different faiths. I have always strived to be an instrument of peace. The rest is in God’s hands,” he commented.



Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv. ©

*Fr. Mizzi with Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury
when in 1987 he is given the Cross of St. Augustine
for his unity work between the Church of Rome and the Church of England*

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