

THE PORTIUNCULA INDULGENCE:

Our Lady Queen of the Angels

by Diana Serra Cary

The origin of the Portiuncula Indulgence has been lost in the haze of centuries just as the origin of the chapel itself.

The first written document we have regarding this indulgence is dated October 31, 1277, some sixty years after the indulgence is said to have been granted. As a result, many different accounts have come down to us purporting to relate the vision of St. Francis and the way in which the Pope consented to grant this indulgence. Each author seems to relate a different version that St. Francis beheld. However, although the accounts differ in details, in substance they are the same. The one we present here is the one accepted by Jorgensen in his *Life of St. Francis*.

One time when Francis was kneeling in prayer before the image of Our Lady, he seemed to behold men and women from every corner of the world converging upon this obscure little chapel in the Umbrian forest. He had been praying for the forgiveness of the sins of mankind when suddenly the dark interior seemed illumined by the light of a million candles. Jesus and Mary appeared in the midst of a dazzling cloud of angels, and he heard a voice that fell like music on his soul, "What do you wish me to do to help poor sinners?" Francis hardly knew how to answer, but suddenly the words came tumbling out and he asked the Lord to grant a full pardon to all who came to visit the church of Portiuncula and made a good confession. It then seemed that Jesus was in favor of this. He turned smilingly to His Mother and she, in turn, nodded to St. Francis and smiled.

Typical of the saint's impetuosity and generosity of soul, he marched off to see the Pope and beg from him the coveted indulgence. The reigning Holy Father, Honorius III, was literally dumbfounded at the request to grant such a generous indulgence. At that time, the summer of 1216, plenary indulgences were rarely granted by the Church. The plenary indulgences that had been granted were given to those fighting men who took up the cross and the sword and went as crusaders to the Holy Land. Later, this hard won indulgence was extended to those who remained at home but helped the Crusaders in supplying men and alms.

Francis, however, was not to be refused. The Lord Himself had promised him, and the Roman Curia was bound to relent! The Pope finally yielded and left it to the astonished cardinals to limit the application of the new indulgence. The date set was from vespers of the first of August until sundown on the second. It is said that Francis chose this date because the feast of the Chains of St. Peter (his release

from prison) is celebrated on the first of August, and Francis felt that sinners should also be freed from the chains of their sins on the day following this great feast. Furthermore, this date was the anniversary of the consecration of the Portiuncula chapel.

As Francis took his leave of the Holy Father, after obtaining the unprecedented privilege, the Pope is said to have asked if he did not wish some document to prove that his request had been officially granted. With characteristic Franciscan lightheartedness came the saint's reply: "I need nothing more than your word. Our Lady is the parchment, Christ the notary, and the angels our witnesses!"

When the first great August first arrived, seven bishops gathered in the little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels to dedicate it as "Our Lady of the Angels of the Portiuncula." And St. Francis, overjoyed, cried out to the crowd that overflowed the narrow building, "I want to make all of you go to heaven!"

But at the time there seemed something almost scandalous in this indulgence, and conservative prelates did little to make it known. In St. Francis' own lifetime the Portiuncula Indulgence was enjoyed by comparatively few Christians. Travel and communications were slow, and not even such good news as a plenary indulgence could travel swiftly over the mud-choked trails that passed for roads in thirteenth-century Europe. Later, of course, the indulgence was extended to all Franciscan churches on August first and second.

This chapel was the saint's favorite spot on earth. It was here he heard the Gospel that caused him to establish his First Order, following the command of Christ to go into the world and preach and baptize all men, taking neither gold nor script nor an extra cloak for the journey. Here Francis received his first Brothers, and from here he sent them into the world. In this chapel, St. Clare knelt before the image of Our Lady of the Angels, and on the floor her golden tresses fell beneath the scissors plied by Francis himself. Indeed, Francis placed such a high value on this chapel, which he had rebuilt with his own hands, that he wrote a special rule just for "Portiuncula."