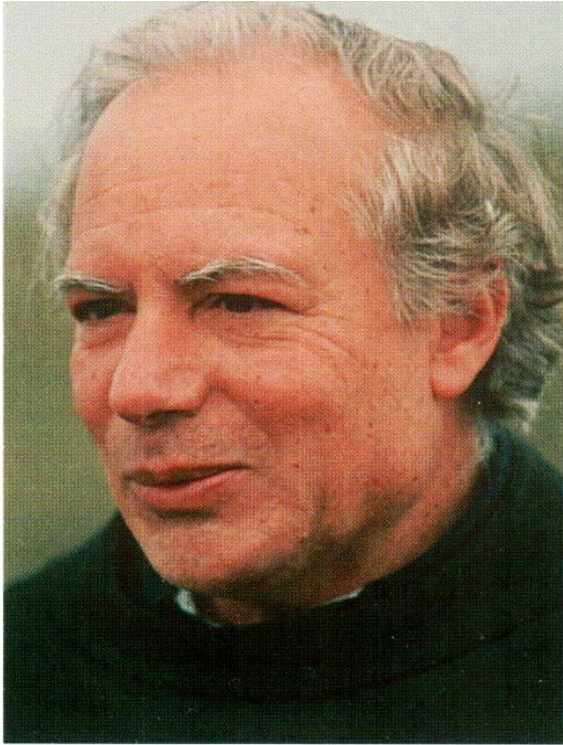


**ASSISI-NYT**  
**FAREWELL TO FATHER MAX MIZZI**  
**WITH PEACE AND ALL GOOD**



**Fr. Massimiliano Mizzi**  
Frate Minore Conventuale

*«Alla sera della vita  
saremo giudicati sull'amore»  
(S. Giovanni Crisostomo)*

**FR. MASSIMILIANO MIZZI**  
Frate Minore Conventuale

*n. 28 ottobre 1930  
Birgu (Malta)  
m. 3 marzo 2008  
Assisi (Italia)*

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*Holy card for Father Max Mizzi  
"At the evening of life we are judged by love" (St. John Krysotomos)*

Dear Assisi-friends.

Assisi, March 14, 2008

Shortly before Easter, that great celebration in the Christian world, with its unique divine assistance with the transformation of individual and collective trouble and pain into joy and resurrection – I will tell you about the days after Father Mizzi's death in the hope that my personal narrative will help all the people who are grieving at the fact that this little, humble Franciscan Friar with his great ability for embracing, compassionate love is no more among us in his physical body. May it be a strengthening and consolation to all of us that he is close to all people mourning, and that the compassionate, embracing love, in which his soul is active, flows in a renewed depth and intensity now it is liberated from a tired, painful physical body.

**Vigil at Father Mizzi's bier**

Shortly after Father Mizzi's last breath on Monday March 3, 2008 in the morning, I was called on my mobile telephone, while I was in Denmark arranging my journey home. One of the young Maltese friars said: "*Bente, don't you come down to us now. We are at Father Max's bedside. He has just left us.*" Through frequent telephone calls with the Sacro Convento and an inspiration the day before I knew that another crisis and a transition might be on its way. Nevertheless, it was of course with almost a bottomless grief that I had to realize that I had not managed to come

home to be physically present with him during the last hours. We had been together through thick and thin, in all the ups and downs of life during the last 6 years, and had often spoken about how we would like to share also the last moment in the physical life. However, I continued my preparations and soon afterwards I went to the airport supported by my loving and compassionate son. A few days after Father Mizzi's funeral I received an inner understanding why our physical separation during these last hours was actually a great gift, which I am already now feeling a little of, and the grief beyond time and space is being healed and transformed into a deeper inner connection to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and father Mizzi's soul.

The young Maltese friars tidied Father Mizzi's physical body, and already on Monday evening he was placed in an open coffin in "*Cappella delle Reliquie*". The chapel was closed for tourists, and only friars and sisters and the friends, who were close to Father Mizzi, were allowed to pay the last honour to him and to keep vigil at his bier. This first evening the friars sang special vespers for the dead, sitting around the coffin, and I have been told that it was a very deep, peaceful and beautiful moment for all of them in their sadness.

Late Monday evening I arrived in Assisi, and on Tuesday morning I went to the Chapel of Relics to be present at the vigil at his bier which took place uninterruptedly all day and night until the coffin was closed on Wednesday morning.

It was a beautiful and very touching moment to step into the chapel, where only one friar was present. There was an infinite silence and peace, and it was clear that great angels emanating this intense peace kept guard at the bier. Father Mizzi was lying so beautifully and peacefully in his coffin – all suffering was washed away from his face, which was radiant in sublime peace and purity. As a Franciscan sister later said to me, he was radiant with the mildness, love and childlike joy which I knew so very well from our time together – especially during the first years before the deep processes of surrender through illness and the loss of the CEFID started. Not least the childlike joy, which I often shared with Father Mizzi in these first years, made me think about the teachings of Jesus according to Matthew:

*" At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, had him stand among them, and said, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn around and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven! Whoever then humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18, 1-5)*

Father Mizzi's body was dressed in the better of his two grey habits, and he was wearing a very beautiful purple stole – the ribbon for priests which is connected to penance, atonement and transformation. On his chest was put a crucifix and a picture of the great Franciscan mystic and saint, from whom he took his spiritual name, *Maximilian Kolbe*. In his hands Father Mizzi had the rosary. Around the bier were beautiful flowers in all colours, the large Easter candle was lit, and on a lectern the Bible was lying open at the Gospel of St. John with the Franciscan cord and a another purple stole on top of it as a symbol of Father Mizzi's life's work as a Franciscan friar and priest in fidelity to the Gospel. In a bowl close to the coffin was holy water, which priests coming to the chapel sprinkled over Father Mizzi's body.

Together with the bishop of Assisi, friars and sisters and friends coming and going I kept vigil at the coffin all day Tuesday only interrupted by eating and resting and the meeting with the Finnish group of pilgrims who together with their Lutheran priests had come to the Sacro

Convento to celebrate their mass. The leader of the group had got to know Father Mizzi during a short meeting in 2007, and shortly before the arrival of the group this year I had been in contact with him to help him with the visits of ecumenical groups planned for 2008. I accompanied the Finnish priest to Father Mizzi's bier. It was touching to experience his grief and saying good bye. Father Mizzi and he had only had one unforgettable meeting, and while he caressed his Tau-cross he told me that Father Mizzi had blessed it at their short meeting in 2007.

Another beautiful and deep moment this day was the vespers (evening prayers) at Father Mizzi's bier. All the friars of the Sacro Convento, I and another Franciscan sister and three biological brothers and a brother-in-law sang the prayers, which were again adapted to the vigil at Father Mizzi's coffin. We finished by praying the rosary to Mary for Father Mizzi. It was so beautiful with antiphonal singing, readings, and prayers, and the atmosphere of peace was remarkably intensified. It was also beautiful to witness how affectionately the spiritual brothers said farewell to their little brother. In different ways they expressed their respect and love for Padre Massimiliano, which was his name among them. Some sprinkled holy water, others stroked or kissed his body.

After the beautiful vespers we could all go to dinner in the refectory of the Sacro Convento. Our being together was characterized by a deep sense of unity, solidarity, sadness, joy and peace.

### **The funeral at the Basilica di San Francesco, the Lower Basilica, on Wednesday March 5, 2008**

After many days of sunshine and warm temperatures in Assisi the weather changed on the day of Father Mizzi's funeral. From early Wednesday morning it was grey and very rainy. The leader of the Japanese Buddhist organization Rissho Kosei-kai, who had come from the organization's offices in Geneva, said to me with much grief in his voice, when I received him at the Sacro Convento: *"It is raining because the whole earth grieves at Father Mizzi having left our world."* The short time between Father Mizzi's last breath on Monday morning and the funeral on Wednesday meant of course that not all the people who would have liked to participate in this farewell, were able to arrive in Assisi in time. More foreign contacts and friends have told me how sad they were that it was impossible for them to be present at this moment of thanksgiving and remembrance in Assisi. But I know that in spiritual groups, churches and religious communities all over the world thousands of people joined in an inner way with masses, prayers, meditations, songs, commemorative words, etc.

In spite of the fact that many friends were not able to come, the lower Basilica was filled with people who in deep silence were waiting for the moment when the procession of about 60 concelebrating Franciscan priests and all the other friars of the Sacro Convento brought Father Mizzi's bier to the main altar, while the choir of the Basilica sang so beautifully. The main celebrant was Bishop Sergio Goretti, who for 25 years was bishop of Assisi. In these many years he got to know Father Mizzi and his ecumenical and inter-religious activities very well.

The coffin was placed in front of the main altar, and on top of it was placed the Bible open at the Gospel of St. John with the Franciscan cord and the beautiful purple stole – exactly as it had been on the lectern in the Chapel of the Relics with the lit Easter Candle next to the coffin.



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*Father Mizzi's coffin during the mass  
The main celebrant, Assisi's former bishop, Msgr. Sergio Goretti, blesses with incense  
the crucified Christ placed next to the altar,  
because we are in the 40 days' Lent before the holy week*

A Catholic funeral is always a mass, i.e. a celebration culminating in the Eucharist, the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ with communion to all. The mass was naturally adapted to the farewell to Father Mizzi, which is not least sent as thanksgivings to God for the gift, he gave us in Father Mizzi's physical life among us.

For 1½ hours prayers, readings of the Bible, sermon, psalms, the Eucharist and special commemorative words alternated with each other, while the choir sang more and more from their hearts. For a long time the mass was at the inner level characterized by deep grief and heaviness of heart with an inflow of the compassionate love of Christ, which embraces, softens and opens all pain, but towards the end the turning point came which for me is always a sign that now – by the grace of God – yet another part of the individual and collective pain of humanity and the earth is transformed. The inflow changed character to the burning, ecstatic, joyful love of Christ, which made me think about the atmosphere at the birth of Jesus and the heavenly army of Angels praising God by singing:

*"Glory to God in the highest and on earth!  
Peace among people with whom he is pleased!"*

The Sacro Convento has shown me the confidence to hand over to me the Italian liturgy of the mass, including the prayers with permission to share it with all of you. Below I pick out the parts of the mass, which I think at least some of you could feel enriched by reading.

After the introductory rites with confession of sins and evocation of the Father's and Son's merciful forgiveness the readings followed:

**First reading - Isaiah 25, 6.-9:**

*"The Lord who commands armies will hold a banquet for all the nations on this mountain. At this banquet there will be plenty of meat and aged wine – tender meat and choicest wine. On this mountain he will swallow up the shroud that is over all the peoples, the woven covering that is over all the nations; he will swallow up death permanently. The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from every face, and remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. Indeed, the Lord has announced it! At that time they will say, "Look, here is our God! We waited for him and he delivered us. Here is the Lord! We waited for him. Let's rejoice and celebrate his deliverance!"*

**Second reading – 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2, 8-13**

*"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship to the point of imprisonment as a criminal, but God's message is not imprisoned! So I endure all things for the sake of those chosen by God, that they too may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus and its eternal glory. This saying is trustworthy: If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, since he cannot deny himself."*

**Gospel Reading – Matthew 11, 25-30**

*"At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son decides to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and my load is not hard to carry."*

Not least I was grateful that the master of ceremonies, Father Giuseppe Marini, who when he was young was one of Father Mizzi's novices, had chosen this text from Matthew as the Gospel reading. I know that it was one of Father Mizzi's most beloved texts of the Bible that he often read and preached on during the masses, which he since 2004 celebrated for the groups of **ASSISI MISSION** in Cappella della Pace at the Sacro Convento and other groups. It is also one of the texts from the Gospel connected to Francis, and thus it is this text which is read when masses for Francis are celebrated.

After the readings and the bishop's very beautiful and loving sermon as thanksgivings and tribute of Father Mizzi's life and mission the universal prayers followed. About 15 minutes before the mass I was asked by Father Giuseppe Marini whether I would come to the altar and lead these prayers. Even though I was very grateful for the recognition of Father Mizzi's and my close co-operation and friendship during the most difficult years of his life, which his request was an expression of, I thanked him but said no, because in those seconds I was thinking that I did not have enough time to prepare myself for the somewhat difficult Italian text. Instead one of Father Mizzi's and my close friends, Suor Alessandra from The American Sisters, read the prayers saying:

*"In the resurrected Christ, The Father tells us that He will not abandon His consecrated one in the tomb, but He will give new life and that without end. Empowered by this promise we turn to Him with our supplications:*

*Let us pray together and say: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*For our brother Maximilian who, at his Baptism, received the seed of Eternal Life and who, upon the example of St. Francis, consecrated his whole life to the love of Christ: May he, O Lord, be received into the joy of Paradise; and may the Holy Ministry practised by him in the Church enable him to participate in the Heavenly Liturgy which is without end. Let us pray: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*Thank you, Lord, for the gift of our brother Maximilian, who did work for years, both with love and dedication, in the education and formation of young vocations. May, O Lord, the good sown in his life bring plentiful fruit of vocations to our Franciscan Family and to the Church; youth who feel the joy of total consecration to the love of Christ in order to live in contemplation and in the practise of charity. Let us pray: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*For a long time, Brother Maximilian has lived his Franciscan vocation in the service of dialogue amongst men and women from different faiths and cultures, in order to bring about a more just and brotherly cohabitation, according to God's plan. His humble and faithful commitment to peace has contributed to Evangelisation and the spreading of The Kingdom; so that all could come to know the true God and Him whom He sent, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. As a recompense for all the hard work, Grant him, O Lord the pardon of his sins and Eternal Life. Let us pray: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*O Father, your Son took upon Himself the poverty and weakness of all mankind: for many years our brother Maximilian suffered patiently the pains of his body; his strength and courage have shown to us the Christian value of endurance. As in his illness he was united to the Passion of Christ, may he now enjoy the peace and consolation of seeing Your Face. Let us pray: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*For the family, relatives and friends of Brother Maximilian and for the Brothers of the Province of Malta: May they, O Lord, live this moment of suffering consoled by the strength of your love and in the certain hope that one day we will all live in full and lasting communion with those who have left this life in Christ. Let us pray: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*For all of us gathered here in the faith of Christ and participate in this celebration: May we, O Lord, fed by the Body of Your Son, Bread of Eternal Life, feel more united amongst ourselves and with all brothers and sisters both living and dead, in the love of Christ which has gained victory over death. Let us pray: **Lord, you are our life, hear us.***

*The supplications of this your family rise to You, of Father, united in sorrow and in the hope of the resurrection; may the faith professed in prayer for our dead manifest itself in a coherent life according to The Gospel. **For Christ our Lord. Amen.**"*

The Eucharist was extremely beautiful, deep and touching. Bishop Goretti, Father General of the Order, Father Marco Tasca and Father Custos of the Sacro Convento, Father Vincenzo Coli were at the altar at the head of the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and the heartfelt singing by the choir helped to intensify the presence of Christ. When the choir during communion sang "Panis Angelicus" by Franck no eye was dry and no heart

untouched. It was as if everybody in the church in deep emotion fell on their knees as in an intense inner listening and surrender.

After the Eucharist it was time for some special commemorative words about Father Mizzi. On behalf of the order the three leading friars of Father Mizzi, Father General, Father Custos and the leader of the province of Malta each gave their beautiful contribution. Then Father Mizzi's beloved biological brother, Laurence Mizzi, spoke on behalf of the family and at the end one of the many inter-religious friends, Yasutomo Sawahata from the Buddhist Organization Rissho Kosei-kai in Japan spoke. He was almost the only one of the inter-religious friends who had managed to come to the funeral, because his daily work is in the office of the organization in Geneva.



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*Yasutomo Sawahata reads the commemorative words of  
Rissho Kosei-kai for Father Mizzi*

After the concluding rites and blessing Father Mizzi's bier was carried in procession to the car waiting outside the Basilica. In the heavy rain only a few people chose to follow the car on foot to the burial place of the Order at the cemetery in the mountains behind Assisi, where Father Mizzi's physical body has now been laid to rest. Also I chose not to walk to the cemetery on that occasion but to be available for the many people who contacted me after the mass. I also spent one hour together with Sawahata from Rissho Kosei-kai in order to – in the spirit of Father Mizzi – talk about the continued mission and the next meeting in June, when the president and other representatives of the organization plan to visit Assisi.

A very beautiful, intense and moving day had ended, and, tired, we could all go home to rest before the next day's new tasks. During these succeeding days - together with my continued grief - I was also very grateful knowing that the inner divine work of redemption seemed to be

successful during the funeral, which was followed in an inner way by thousands of people all over the world. Also the certainty that Father Mizzi's soul was now liberated to ascend to the high divine level, at which it is now working in its full capacity of indescribable love and wisdom of more benefit to the whole earth and humanity, is of great joy to me.

It continues of course to be a demanding time, in which much grief is being transformed for the thousands of people who knew Father Mizzi and who experienced him as the messenger of love and peace who touched their hearts so deeply. Also at the Sacro Convento the friars are grieving, not least the friars who together with me took turns to sit at his bedside since the middle of December 2007. As the Sacro Convento unexpectedly was shaken by the sudden death of another beloved friar, Fr. Salvatore, I ask you also to keep the Sacro Convento in your prayers, so that the friars at this significant mother house of the Friars Minor Conventual may come through a difficult situation with renewed strength, and so that they may perform the important tasks of the convent at an even deeper level under divine guidance by *“the Spirit of Assisi”*.

The most important commemorative words I would like to share with you about our beloved Father Mizzi are an experience I had innumerable times during our 6 years of close co-operation, and which made a very deep impression on me. Together with him I met people from all over the world and from many different cultures, traditions and religions. Whether it was religious, cultural or political leaders from the “highest” posts of The World Community or women and men from the “lowest” post, there was no difference as to the warm-heartedness with which he received them. With his warm smile and loving eyes he embraced all people, and especially towards those he sensed in difficult processes a stream of compassionate love emanated from his heart, which gave so much comfort and relief.

To illustrate this experience here is one of these memories. One day, while Father Mizzi was busy with his many tasks at the CEFID, and I was not present, the doorbell rang. Father Mizzi answered through the entry phone, and a woman from India said humbly, *“that she would very much like to say hallo to him, because she had heard so much about him”*. She continued by saying *“that probably it was not a good idea, because she suffered from leprosy, and therefore she might be infectious”*. Father Mizzi pushed his business aside, went to the door to open it for her, and while they were talking about half an hour, he offered her coffee in the small kitchen of the CEFID. As a farewell he gave the Indian woman a warm hug. At a table in the beautiful meeting room of the CEFID there is a statue of St. Francis showing him in one of his most crucial moments, i.e. the moment in which he overcame his disgust of and resistance against the most outcast people in the Middle Ages, the lepers. He got down from his horse, embraced and kissed the leper. In that moment Francis' disgust was transformed into the most delicious and sweet love, and for the rest of his life it was the lepers who were closest to his heart.

When I am thinking about our innumerable meetings with seeking people, where the compassionate love of Christ flowed to everybody “high as well as low” – I feel the closeness of Father Mizz's soul, and I feel how the unconditional love flows in a renewed depth. Also I feel how this love flows on from my heart, and at the same time I sense a new depth in his prayer for love, peace and reconciliation for the whole human family and for all kingdoms of the world – the prayer he wrote at the turn of the millennium:



**God of mercy and love,  
at the dawn of the new millennium my heart and mind to you I turn  
in loving gratitude, in joyful praise and in humble adoration  
for the gift of Jesus, your Son, you sent to me,  
for the spirit of life you instilled in me,  
for the gift of love I receive and give,  
for the brothers and sisters all over the world,  
for the black and the white, for the old and the young,  
for the rich and the poor,  
for the joys and the sorrows that enrich my life,  
for the whole of creation, a precious gift to cherish and love.**

**O my God, loving and compassionate,  
at the dawn of the new millennium  
open my heart and the hearts of all to the new dimensions  
of the coming era.**

**Open my heart, O Lord, to a new dimension  
of prayer and faith, of love and peace,  
of reconciliation and universal brotherhood,  
of joyful forgiveness for the wounds, great and small,  
past and present, inflicted and received.**

**Lord, God of love and peace, open my heart  
to a new dimension  
of unlimited self donation to all  
independently of race and creed,  
of loving respect and protection to all living creatures,  
indeed, to the whole of creation.**

**Lord, God of mercy and love,  
may I dare to ask you as my brother Francis did:  
"Make me an instrument of your peace"!**

*Maximillian Mizzi OFM Conv.  
Sacro Convento, Assisi*

When we become silent and sensitive, we all have an outstanding possibility of surrendering to the processes which will make all of us deeper instruments of peace, love and reconciliation.

Father Mizzi's prayer for the new millennium can be found in an illustrated and printable version in the home page of *ASSISI MISSION* under the following link:

[http://www.assisimission.net/images/stories/boenner/millennium\\_eng.pdf](http://www.assisimission.net/images/stories/boenner/millennium_eng.pdf)

With peace and all good from Assisi

Bente

***LET US PAY TRIBUTE TO FATHER MIZZI's MEMORY***



*From a trip with a rest at the top of Subasio early May 2007*

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