

FINAL MESSAGE OF THE XV ORDINARY GENERAL CHAPTER OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

To all OFS and YouFra brothers and sisters,
To all Franciscan friars of the First Order and TOR,
To all the rest of the Franciscan Family, and
To all people of good will,

May the Lord give you his peace!

We wish to share with you the joy of having celebrated the XV General Ordinary Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), from November 4-12, 2017, in Rome, at the *Seraphicum* OFM Conv International College! 124 participants – capitulars, observers, guests, speakers, and supporting teams – from 75 countries gathered to celebrate the gift of our secular Franciscan vocation to *"rebuild" the Church (OFS Cost. 100.1)* and to *build a more fraternal and evangelical world! (OFS Rule, 14)*.

During these days, we have shared our joys and hopes, as well as our concerns and challenges, as secular followers of Christ in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, as we reflected on the main theme of the Chapter: *"As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world" (Jn 17:18)*.

Each day of the Chapter, the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the hours was at the heart of our activities, making reality Pope Francis' recent catechesis: *"The Mass is the very "heart" of the Church and the source of her life"*.¹ We were blessed with the presence of Card. Pietro Parolin, who presided over the opening liturgy. Among other things, he told us: «The faithful disciple of Christ must therefore be a person conquered, "grasped" by Christ (cf. *Phil 3:12*), to be witness in the world, being marked with evangelical radicality».

In the following days, we also enjoyed the visit of three Franciscan Ministers general who presided over the Eucharistic celebrations. Fr. Michael Perry, OFM; Fr. Marco Tasca, OFM Conv, and Fr. Mauro Jöhri, OFM Cap. All four General Spiritual Assistants were responsible for preparing and organizing the liturgical celebrations. Through the proclamation of the Word of God, our common prayer and singing with the choirs, we truly felt like one body, the body of Christ!

Based on the Scriptures of each day, the homilists exhorted us to exercise leadership according to the model of the servant Jesus – as Francis of Assisi did; to give priority to the poor and suffering in our lives, and so discover the hidden blessing promised by Christ; to put our diversity of gifts, talents and goods at the service of the fraternity, urged by authentic Christian love; to embrace evangelical "madness" in order to renew our lives and fraternities; to rediscover

¹ Pope Francis, General Audience, Wednesday, 8 November 2017, Internet (10.11.17) in:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20171108_udienza-generale.html

goodness as an essential part of our Franciscan charism; and to constantly search for gospel wisdom in order to be always ready to welcome Christ and his call to work for the growth of the Kingdom of God, until we all share in the eternal wedding banquet of Christ and his bride, the Church.

We were edified and motivated by the Keynote speaker, Michel Versteegh, who shared his faith story, beginning with his family upbringing and then going through his involvement in parish life, professional training, and secular Franciscan vocation. He also presented us a type of “Decalogue” that synthesizes his personal guiding principles, which he offered to us as a spiritual and practical contribution. His presentation showed us how the duties proper to his occupation and his professional training (Cf. *OFS Const.* 20.2) are not separated from his secular Franciscan identity, but rather an integral part of it.

The report of the General Minister, Tibor Kauser, and of the Presidency of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS) enlightened us on how they have animated and guided the International Fraternity during the last three years, especially in light of the priorities set by the 2014 General Chapter. We were glad to hear about the growth and joys, as well as the challenges and difficulties that the national fraternities of the OFS and Franciscan Youth (YouFra) are experiencing throughout the world, and how the Presidency is accompanying them. An important element of this service has been fulfilled through national chapters, fraternal and pastoral visits, congresses, courses of formation, etc. It was great to know that secular Franciscans are present in 112 countries, while YouFra is present in 75. An interesting and encouraging aspect of the report was that dedicated to the activities of the Commissions and Projects initiated by the CIOFS Presidency, such as Project Africa, Holy Land and Arabic countries, etc. The report also touched on the relationship with the Franciscan Family and the internal offices of the Presidency, as well as the *Beato Raimondo Lullo* Foundation.

The General Treasurer's report presented a general view of national fraternities' contributions and the expenses made by the CIOFS Presidency in their service to the International Fraternity. Based on the reference to Art.25 of the OFS Rule and Art 30.3 of the OFS General Constitutions, capitulars were called to promote in their respective national fraternity the sense of belonging to the Order and their co-responsibility for its life and mission. This commitment is even more necessary considering the resolutions approved by this Chapter. While capitulars appreciated the report's content, some of them called for a more detailed information, which was given later during the Chapter. At the same time, the General Treasurer highlighted the importance of counting on an accurate demographic data and on a standard financial management in all national fraternities in order to support the Order.

The Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS) shared with the capitulars the activities they have carried out since last OFS General Chapter, the internal changes in CAS, and how they work collegially in their service to the OFS and YouFra at the international level, especially within the CIOFS Presidency, and during national elective chapters, pastoral visits, courses, etc. Another element of their service has to do with their diverse publications. The Conference also presented some comments and four proposals in regards to the *Instrumentum Laboris* in the area of spiritual assistance.

One of the most expected moments of the Chapter was, precisely, the presentation on the 8 topics included in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which was elaborated based on the input received from 45 national fraternities about the theme presented at the 2014 General Chapter “How

should an Order like the OFS be managed at all its levels?" Each presenter invited us to consider specific proposals contained in the Terms of Reference for each area and discuss them in the work groups, so that the Chapter could define the criteria and strategies to follow for the next three-year period. Throughout the Chapter discussions, capitulars were constantly called to exercise co-responsibility to support the life and mission of the OFS fraternities at all its levels.

Work groups were conformed by language so that all capitulars could share the experiences and input from their respective national fraternity and their own personal opinion. Based on the work groups' input, the Commission for the Conclusive Document elaborated and presented the list of proposals that capitulars further discussed, at times with passion and intensity, and then voted on. In preparation for the vote, we all invoked the Holy Spirit for guidance.

Another important subject discussed in the Chapter was the life and mission of YouFra at the International level. Andrea Odak, International coordinator for YouFra, explained how important is for all OFS national fraternities to understand the proper identity and mission of YouFra, and to promote it and support it. This commitment implies appointing fraternal animators for every YouFra fraternity and promoting double belonging among YouFra members.

As a highlight of the Chapter, Tibor Kauser, Minister General, announced the celebration of a Jubilee Year (24.06.2018-24.06.2019) to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the current OFS Rule, which Pope Paul VI approved on June 24, 1978 with the apostolic letter *Seraphicus Patriarcha*. National fraternities will be invited to suggest to the CIOFS Presidency ways in which this Jubilee year may be celebrated. This announcement was the cause of a great joy for the Capitulars, which also were surprised with the gift of a commemorative copy of the Latin version of the Rule.

Half-way through the Chapter, we went to Subiaco's Abbeys, St. Benedict's and Santa Scolastica. This place is very significant because that is where St. Benedict initiated monastic life in the Western World, in the early VI century. This sacred place also has a particular importance for us Franciscans, since it is known that Francis spent some months there in prayer and contemplation ca. 1223, and during that time, an artist depicted his image on a fresco without stigmata and halo. The breathtaking beauty of the natural surroundings, the story and artistic value of the monastery provided us with an opportunity to meditate and pray, leading us to the joyful celebration of the Eucharist. This trip gave us also the opportunity to relate to each other in a more personal way and to build up our fraternal integration.

An important part of the program was the round table presentations. The first round table allowed us to know several ways in which our identity as secular Franciscans is carried out with creative fidelity to our charism and to the needs and opportunities around us, bringing the Rule from paper to life. The stories and reflections we heard exemplify the main theme of the chapter, that is, our being sent by Christ to the world as his witnesses. The story about a small local fraternity's efforts to apply Pope's Francis Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, helped us to understand that simple but meaningful initiatives can pave the way for greater projects. We were encouraged by the story of family of Secular Franciscans that felt called to do a missionary experience in Venezuela, in Calcutta, and then in Milano. We also reflected on the goals and challenges of secular Franciscans' involvement in public life. The second round table dealt instead with issues related to the future management of the Order, that is, a more effective use of demographics

within the Order, the necessary improvement of financial contributions at all levels of the Order, and the emerging reality of training secular Franciscans as spiritual assistants.

We were also enriched by the presentation on the biography of two blessed Secular Franciscans, Lucien Botovaso, martyr of the faith and truth, and Franz Jägerstätter, martyred during Nazism, and the explanation of the process for the postulation of saints.

We enjoyed several fraternal evenings in which we shared our diverse cultural heritage and exchanged some gifts as signs of our mutual affection and joyful sense of belonging to an international fraternity.

At the end of the Chapter, we thank God, above all, for giving us this opportunity to enjoy each other as brothers and sisters during this week, as we engaged in praying, reflecting, sharing and discerning together, as a true family and in the spirit of Franciscan joy. Even though we came from different national fraternities from all over the world, speaking different languages and having different cultural backgrounds, we strived to become of one heart and mind, as members of the same and only body of Christ. We also thank the Lord for the success of this Chapter; the Holy Spirit was present in our midst calling us to be faithful to the gospel and to the reality of the OFS and YouFra at the present time.

As we leave this gathering, illuminated with a renewed vision and mission for the OFS and YouFra, and filled with hope for a better future, which is ours to build with the help of God, we invoke the intercession of Mary, the Mother of our Lord, of our seraphic father St. Francis, St. Clare, and all Franciscans saints, specially our patron saints, Elizabeth of Hungary and Louis IX of France.

We now go forth, as brothers and sisters called to ongoing conversion and sent by Christ into the world, as the Father sent Him, to be leaven of the Kingdom of God! As we go back to our families and fraternities, to our daily activities and our countries of residence, we recall the exhortation of our Seraphic father: “Let us begin again, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now, we have done little or nothing”! (*1 Cel* 103).

Given in Rome, on November 11, 2017.