

“As you have sent me into the world, I have also sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18)

*Michel Versteegh, OFS Netherlands
OFS General Chapter, November 6, 2017*

Dear brothers and sisters,

As our father Francis taught us in his Testament, I would like to greet you this morning as the Lord revealed to us¹:

“May the Lord give you peace!”

1. Introduction

The main theme of this General Chapter is the quote from the gospel of St. John: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18).

Considering that there is a risk that this presentation could within a few minutes deteriorate into vague generalities, I decided to prevent this by starting with a look at how we are, no, even less general, how I am, literally, sent into the world.

2. My origins

Born and raised in a traditionally Roman Catholic family, the Gospel was an integral part of my youth. Not only did we hear the Gospel in the church, at school, and at home, but, probably most importantly, my parents ‘lived’ the Gospel. Even before somebody, regardless of background, religion, or whatever, had the opportunity to ask, help was offered or given. No request was ever refused. But we, the children, did not take this for granted. When we were teenagers, most Sundays were completely filled with discussion about the readings from Scripture or the parish priest’s sermon in that morning’s mass. And of course, being bright youngsters, in these discussions we tried to convince each other of our own point of view with another quote from the Bible or some other authoritative book. It was not uncommon that at the end of the afternoon there were four or five Bibles on the table. As you can imagine, this was not without influence on us, me and my brothers and sister. Almost all of us chose a serving occupation and remained an active member of the church. We also remained in the church after the Second Vatican Council, which cannot be said of many young adults in the church at that time in the Netherlands.

About my own occupation: because of my own capacities like technical skills, manual dexterity, and so on, I decided to become a medical practitioner, more specifically a cardio-thoracic surgeon. That means that in everyday life I perform heart and lung surgery. At this moment I am one of the most experienced cardio-thoracic surgeons in the Netherlands, which is not so difficult since I am 65 now. So I have to retire next year. That experience means that almost all my surgical procedures are complex cases, with normal workdays of 12 hours or more.

¹The Testament: 23

This is, in a nutshell, how I was sent into the world. And what did I do with all this that was given to me? After all, the Gospel says, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.” (Luke 12:48)²

3. My daily activities

In 1983 I met my wife Marianne and we married. In our limited free time, both of us are active members of our parish, for instance Marianne as member of a church choir and member of a liturgical working group. I was a member of the parish council and at a certain moment also a confidential advisor in cases of sexual harassment, a position for which I had been approached by the Association of Catholic Schools in the town where we lived at that time.

In 1997 Marianne and I came in contact with the Secular Franciscan Order. Our first meeting was the inaugural meeting of a new fraternity. Two members had made their profession years before that moment in another fraternity, and there were three newly professed members, so with five professed members they were then just enough to establish a new fraternity. And we were there as newcomers who were interested. From the beginning, the spiritual assistant of that new fraternity pointed out that we, secular members, had to make our own meetings. After all, they were meetings of the Secular Franciscan Order. The issue was *our secular* spirituality. He, as spiritual assistant, stated that he could only be of additional value. That attitude encouraged the commitment of the members. The fraternity turned out to be a vigorous fraternity, with 22 members at this moment.

But in joining the OFS, our already limited free time became a little more limited. The fraternity has its meetings every first Saturday of the month from 11 am until 4 pm. Combined with two hours of travelling to and from the meeting, the fraternity meetings take up most of that Saturday. But we could arrange our schedules so that we hardly missed a meeting in these past twenty years. In the year 2000 Marianne and I made our profession in the Secular Franciscan Order.

We try to take our profession seriously. When we are thinking about buying something new, we ask ourselves if we really need it or if we can't live without. We choose things of good quality so we can use them for many years. We try to use ecological products when possible, etcetera. And we changed our daily routine a little to start the day, before breakfast, with a part of the morning prayer from the liturgy of the hours (including a psalm, readings from the Scriptures and a few prayers) to dedicate our activities of that day to God.

3.1 Regarding work

At 7.30 am my professional day starts at the hospital. Most days, at least three to four per week, I spend in theatre, performing surgical procedures of 7 to 8, by exception even up to 12 or more, hours, without a break. The majority of the procedures are at the edge of what is possible. To illustrate this: at our hospital we developed surgical reconstruction techniques of the heart as a treatment possibility for patients with end stage heart failure. These patients would be candidates for heart transplantation if there were not a lack of donor hearts. But this lack of donor hearts means the life expectancy of these patients is just a few months. Perhaps you can imagine that such an operation has a very high risk of complications and failure, which puts pressure on the surgical procedure. As senior surgeon you are the leader of the team of almost 10 people in the OR and the

² All texts from the Bible are taken from ‘the Bible, New International Version’ published by BiblicalInc®

contributions of all team members are literally of vital importance. Even if it threatens to go wrong, you should not show any stress or lose your temper, because a tense atmosphere induces mistakes. But this is only about the stress of such a procedure for the surgical team. Can you imagine the stress for the patient and his family? For that reason, we take a lot of time to discuss the surgical option with them and also the alternatives, which is in most cases just accepting that the condition of the patient will further deteriorate. This 'watchful waiting', as it is often called, can be a very good alternative if the patient can put up with it. And I think it is extremely important to pay attention to the smallest remarks in such a conversation with the patient. These small details sometimes make clear what the major things are for that patient in that phase of his life. It is not exceptional if such a preoperative conversation takes an hour or more. These patients are in probably the most vulnerable period of their life, so they have the right that we physicians pay attention to them. They are humans, not cases.

After a daylong surgical procedure there are a few more things to do that very same day. One of them is the discussion with my colleagues if we see surgical possibilities for other patients. Being very critical of the health benefit for the patient is sometimes necessary when you have young colleagues who are eager to offer a patient a treatment. Furthermore, I am head of the training program to train our residents to become cardio-thoracic surgeons. That means discussions with them as a group or as individuals about surgical aspects, as well as ethical matters, professional standards and behaviour, medicolegal topics, and so on. You can imagine that it is already evening when there is time for my round on the ward, visiting the patients that are recovering from their operation. They are often very, very emotional and full of questions, questions that were pushed aside before the operation, because of the doubt whether they would survive. It feels wrong to me to walk along, just say "hello" and "how are you" or stand still for just a minute at the foot end of the bed. No, I take a chair, place it beside the bed and take the time the patient needs. Finally, to conclude the day, I prepare the case of the next day. On most days I do not have enough energy left at that time to work on a scientific manuscript, although that too belongs to my tasks as member of staff of a university medical centre. I never finished my PhD-thesis, because I considered a PhD-title less important than spending time with my patients.

In those years I was also elected president of my scientific professional society³, a task I fulfilled for more than 10 years. Furthermore, I have been and still am member of several national and international committees regarding the quality of the profession, committees like a committee for professional behaviour or the audit and guidelines committee of the European Association⁴. More than enough about the way I practice my medical profession, inspired by St. Francis.

3.2 Regarding OFS

And what about the commitment to the Secular Franciscan Order? At the elective chapter of 2002 I was elected minister of our local fraternity and was re-elected in 2005. A third period was not possible, because I had been elected at the national elective chapter of the year 2008 as national minister and was re-elected twice.

In the national council we tried to make use of the talents of all members of the council. We created short communication lines within our national fraternity by meetings of the national council with all the ministers of the local fraternities twice a year. We publish an article about the activities of the

³ The Netherlands Association for Cardio-thoracic surgery (NVT)

⁴ The European Association for Cardio-thoracic Surgery (EACTS)

national council in the national periodical of our order and we try to be present with a delegation of the council at every profession in a local fraternity. At every local elective chapter and fraternal and pastoral visit there is a delegation of the national council consisting of at least two or three members. We reinforced the relationships with the other members of the Franciscan family in The Netherlands. And it is not because the members of the council had nothing to do. Most of them combine the activities for the national council with a daily job. At our last national elective chapter, in June this year, we learned that our combined effort was much appreciated, not only by the brothers and sisters of the OFS, but also by the brothers and sisters of the first and second order.

So gradually we have left the personal part of this presentation. And in case you have the feeling that I am very satisfied with myself, let me correct that immediately. On the contrary, I very often repeat to myself the words of St. Francis in the last period of his life: "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing."(1 Celano 103) I told you this personal story just to see if we can discover some central themes that it includes. Which aspects, which mainsprings, which key words can we take from this personal part to a more general deliberation?

4. Extraction of the key words

First of all: Education or formation: one has to receive information, to get informed, to gain knowledge. But receiving the information is not enough, you have to reflect on the knowledge, discuss the matter with others, to make it your own. That is what we, as a family, did on Sunday with the Scripture texts, and what we should do in our OFS meetings especially when there are new people in the Order. A certain minimal level of knowledge about our faith and the life of in our case St. Francis and St. Clare, is required to become inspired by them.

Secondly, you need an example, a role model, which for instance, my parents were to me and my brothers and sister.

Third point: you have to make choices that suit you. If you do not have the competency to work with numbers, do not strive to become an accountant. Try to find out what your talents are and be grateful to our Creator for these talents. Show this gratitude by using your talents.

Number **four**: if you have made a choice, stick to it, go for it, do everything to make the best of it. Let your "yes be yes and your no be no" as Jesus said according to St. Matthew in his sermon on the mount⁵.

Number **five**: and, if you did say yes, when you were called to perform a task, apply yourself to this task with heart and soul. Get involved, be committed. Being committed to building a more fraternal world and showing this commitment is a testimony to your profession.

Key word number **six**: dedicate your day to God Almighty. But realise that we are secular Franciscans, so we are not monks or nuns disguised in everyday clothes. To monks and nuns prayers might have the highest priority and their activities come second. Of course we have to pray and meditate, but *our* first priority is to live the Gospel in the world, in everyday life.

Key word number **seven** is from our own Rule, of which we will celebrate next year its 40th anniversary: "Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the Gospel, going from Gospel to life and life to Gospel."(Rule, art. 4)

⁵ Original quote: "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." (Matt 5:37)

Key word **eight**: when you are the leader of a team you have to be the ‘primus inter pares’ which means that all members, including yourself, are of equal value to the team. Being in charge of the team only means that it is your responsibility to take care that *all* members have the opportunity to give their best.

Key word number **nine**: keep the essence of what you are doing in mind. Whether a surgical procedure is a wonderful challenge for you as a surgeon is absolutely unimportant. It is the benefit to the patient that counts. In a modern version the Hippocratic Oath includes: “I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.” Remember also the words of St. Clare in her second letter to Agnes of Prague: “But because one thing is necessary, I invoke this one thing and advise you, by the love of him to whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice, to be mindful, like a second Rachel, of your founding purpose always seeing your beginning. What you hold, may you continue to hold, what you do, may you keep doing and not stop.” (2nd Letter to Agnes: 10-11)

Key word number **ten**: be realistic to yourself and be aware that we can’t fulfil this. For sure, we cannot. We cannot, because we fail many times a day when we try to put the Gospel into practice, we have to acknowledge that our motivation is not always altruistic, but also from time to time egoistic. We have to admit that we take pride in performing a difficult job, instead of giving it back to the Lord as St. Francis told us in his Admonitions, etcetera. But this awareness of our failure should not make us despondent. This awareness should be an invitation to us to try it again every new day.

The key words are:

- Education/knowledge/formation
- Role model
- Make choices according to the talents you have received
- Your ‘yes’ should mean ‘yes’
- Commitment
- Dedicate your day to God, but don’t try to be a monk or nun
- Going from the Gospel to life and from life to Gospel
- All members of a team are of equal value
- Seeing your beginning, what you hold, continue to hold
- Invitation to start all over again, every day anew

5. Translation of the key words

Can we translate these ten key words to help us find answers to the questions raised during the past years in the organisation of the OFS and presented in the theme of this General Chapter with the quote from the Gospel of St. John: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world”?

5.1 Key word number 1

Let us start with: education, or if you prefer, **formation**.

The education or formation of people who are interested in St. Francis or St. Clare, even if this includes only a very small part of their spirituality, is of the utmost importance. We have to nourish that interest and try to broaden the fascination to other parts of the Franciscan spirituality. The more people are a little or more familiar with the Franciscan spirit the better.

This is even more the case when people come to our fraternities because they wonder if the secular Franciscan spirituality suits them. At that moment the way we receive them is crucial. First we have to offer them real hospitality, regardless their social or economic status or state of life. This is so important that I have to make a small step aside, away from education, to this hospitality. For admission to the Secular Franciscan Order our General Constitutions require that we “profess the Catholic faith, that we live in communion with the Church, that we are of good moral standing, and that we show clear signs of a vocation.”(GC article 39.2). Regardless of this very high standard, we all are sinners and have to be aware of our shortcomings. And did Jesus not say: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matt 9:12,14). And didn’t our father St. Francis send brother Angelus after the three robbers brother Angelus had just sent away? St. Francis ordered him to bring the bread and the wine that he himself had just begged for to the robbers and demanded of the brother that he ask the robbers to forgive him his lack of hospitality (Little Flowers of St. Francis, chapter 26).

The second important point from the moment of reception of newcomers to our fraternity is our example. I will let that subject rest for a moment, because since that regards the second key word I will speak about that later.

So by offering our real hospitality and giving a good example to those who are interested in our Franciscan spirituality, we can fulfil what a fraternity promises at every admission of a candidate, namely (and I quote from the Rite of Admission in our Ritual): “to help the newly admitted with friendship, prayer, and the witness of the life of the fraternity.”⁶

We hope that with our Franciscan hospitality and the witness of its life just mentioned, the fraternity will prove to be a source of Franciscan spirituality to the newcomers, so their spirituality can grow. A good tailor-made formation program with attention for the individual level of knowledge in general and, even more important, knowledge of life is the third vital point for the reception of the newcomer. The individual level of knowledge regards not only the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare, their writings, etcetera, but especially nowadays in the Western European countries also the knowledge of and familiarity with ecclesiastical doctrine, liturgical traditions, and Holy Scripture. Most clearly this regards initial formation, but in a more subtle way also ongoing formation. As you can see, I emphasize the same triangle in formation (human aspects, Christian aspects, and Franciscan aspects) as mentioned by our brothers and sisters of, for example, the national fraternity of the USA.

International activities on formation can be useful. However, in my opinion, at least the majority of the formation material has to be published by the national councils, because they are familiar with the local circumstances and sensibilities. A wrong choice of words used in a translation of a very well written document can cause a disastrous reception and neglect of the document.

The development of the awareness of belonging to an international organization should be included in formation. Information about international matters should be distributed among all members of the national fraternity. The international councillors seem the most appropriate persons to be responsible for this.

5.2 Key word number 2

Role model or testimony

⁶Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order, Rite of Admission

Earlier I already underlined the importance of the testimony of Franciscan life given by the fraternity. Of course this means we have to bear testimony to Franciscan life. If we do so, we can be a role model to all people around us, not only within our fraternity but also to the people we share our work with, the people we share our lives with. Our behaviour can raise questions about which motivations produce this behaviour, this attitude. This of course offers us the opportunity to talk about our Franciscan spirituality and to realise article 6 of our Rule: “They have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.”⁷ As I mentioned before, our example is important for the newcomers in our fraternity and can also be of value to those brothers and sisters who have already belonged to our fraternity for some time. Some of them can be in need of a role model, for instance when they, for one reason or another, are having a difficult time in their life. Besides the example given by members of the fraternity, an exchange of views can also challenge a brother or sister to make a further step on his or her Franciscan way. I use the word ‘exchange of views, exchange of thoughts’ and not ‘discussion’ because these conversations in the fraternity meetings have to be conducted with respect for everyone’s own conscience and honest intentions. The further step on the Franciscan way through life can also mean to accept more responsibility, for instance more responsibility for the course of things in the fraternity and/or being a candidate for office in the council.

5.3 Key word number 3

Third point: use the talent you received

Regardless the fact that every member of a local fraternity has his or her own responsibility for the fraternity, it should be common practice that a local fraternity discusses, at least a few months before an elective chapter of the fraternity itself, which members have certain competencies that make them suitable candidates for an office in the council. This discussion should be an open discussion in which all members can tell on what grounds they think somebody is suitable for an office. But the openness should make it also possible for the proposed candidate to react by explaining why they are wrong or, although the member has to admit that he or she has the required talents, he or she is not available for office. This should not only happen a few months in advance of the elective chapter of the fraternity itself, but also before the elective chapters of higher levels. These discussions can of course be combined. Taking inventory of the competencies available in the fraternity gives the council of that local fraternity the possibility to inform the councils of the higher levels. In such a letter, the council can express the judgment of the local fraternity on the suitability of certain members for offices in the councils of higher levels, and even on the international level. The competencies can also have bearing on knowledge of and experience with translating documents and so on. Also the council can indicate if the candidate has agreed to accept his or her nomination. Of course the acceptance or declination of the nomination cannot be a final decision because circumstances of life can change. But it is an indication of how the nominee feels about it at that moment. Another suggestion is that the national council sends a letter to all local fraternities

⁷The complete text of article 6 of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order: “They have been made living members of the Church by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism, they have been united more intimately with the Church by profession. Therefore, they should go forth as witnesses and instruments of her mission among all people, proclaiming Christ by their life and words.

Called like Saint Francis to rebuild the Church and inspired by his example, let them devote themselves energetically to living in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests, fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity.”

once in a three year period, asking them to debate on this subject and report afterwards to the national council. In this way the national council can create a pool of names of members, which pool can be deployed when it is considered necessary.

5.4 Key word number 4

Your yes should be yes and your no no

All Christians should be people one can rely on. So we all should apply the quote from the Gospel: “your yes should be yes and your no no.” We should not compromise ourselves. So don’t promise things you know you cannot realise. And if you made a promise, don’t break it, except in circumstances beyond your control.

5.5 Key word number 5

Commitment

A few words about commitment these days in general. At least in Western European countries, there seems less commitment of the individual to the world surrounding him than in earlier days. It is more ‘me’ and less ‘us’. We are becoming more individualistic. The important thing is ‘how I feel, what I think is the best for me’. Years ago, I heard about a large car manufacturer where there was a serious industrial dispute. The trade union called a strike. The workers responded on a massive scale, not by stopping the work, but by wearing an armlet with the text: “I strike.” They were committed to their employer and their job and did not want to put the manufacturer at risk. This seems unthinkable these days. The loss of commitment is not only caused by the more individualistic culture of this moment. It is also caused by disappointment in authorities and organizations like the European Community. Especially politicians make a lot of promises, both in the electoral contest and when they are in power. Many of these promises are not fulfilled. The more individualistic culture and the loss of commitment reinforce each other, with consequences for loss of commitment to the job, to the sports club, to the church, to friends, to one’s own family.

So commitment of members to the OFS, both locally as on a higher level, cannot be forced, but I think it can be fostered. The more OFS-members become involved in the meetings of the fraternity, the more they will feel their co-responsibility. That means that there is a difference in experience when you are involved in the preparation and in the presentation of a meeting of your local fraternity in contrast with your experience of the same meeting when you are just there to consume what is being presented to you. This difference in experience creates a difference in commitment. This applies equally to the involvement of a member with a social project of the fraternity. This means that the council of the local fraternity should be aware of this phenomenon and should try to involve the members as much as possible in all its activities. The members should be involved as much as possible not only in the organization of the meeting or the social project, but also regarding the contents of the meetings.

Fostering commitment seems to be more difficult for the councils of the fraternities on a higher level. However, it has to sink into the minds of the members of these councils that the local fraternities are the basic units of our Order. See article 22 of our Rule. The councils of higher levels are there to serve the local fraternities. The councils of the higher levels should demonstrate this awareness by their behaviour, by their attitude. They can demonstrate it by keeping the members informed about their activities, by attending special meetings of the local fraternities, by offering assistance when asked, by being very accessible, by performing what they promise, and so on.

In my opinion if there is commitment on a local level, it will be easier to find candidates for offices on both local and higher levels. And if we can create a structure for the international organization with short lines of communication, this will promote the commitment to the international Order. These short lines should be reciprocal. The CIOFS has to inform members of local fraternities about what is happening in the Presidency, about major events in other national fraternities, and so on. On the other hand, the national fraternity should, via the international councillor, keep the CIOFS informed about what is happening in their fraternity. A more decentralized structure might facilitate these short lines, but we have to be very careful not to introduce an extra bureaucratic layer in between existing layers in the organization. If a decentralized structure means a new bureaucratic layer, it will probably be experienced as more distance between national and international council. An intermediate solution could be to gather national fraternities in groups of countries with a more or less comparable socio-economic and religious culture. The international councillors of these national fraternities can meet, for instance, two or three times a year. These meetings can be physical meetings or, in these days, digitally via Skype, or such media. The international councillors can decide (in consultation with their national councils) to organize joint meetings, to pay each other a visit, exchange formation material, and so on. A short report to the international council renders an account of these meetings, but, in this concept, the intermediate layer does not have an official status in the governance in the Order. I am convinced that an official governance layer in between the current structure will carry the risk of increasing the distance between the Presidency and the national fraternities. An informal layer, on the other hand, can increase the commitment.

Just a few words about international congresses. Congresses like the European congress of OFS and YouFra, like the past congresses in Lisieux and in Mostar, contribute very much to the awareness of belonging to an international organization and to commitment to this organization. But I am afraid that this is only the case for the members of the national councils. The delegates on these congresses are delegations of the national councils, and I am not convinced that the feeling of commitment radiates to the members of the local fraternities.

5.6 Key word number 6

Dedicate your day to God

Prayer is an essential part of our life. Our Rule says: "As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do." (Rule art. 8) But although prayer and contemplation should be our soul, our state of life is secular. In the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity by Pope Paul VI⁸ we can read that our life requires a continual exercise of faith, hope, and charity. Only then can we seek His will in every event, see Christ in everyone whether he be a relative or a stranger, and make correct judgments about the true meaning and value of temporal things both in themselves and in their relation to man's final goal.

For members of the OFS the emphasis on prayer will and should be different in comparison to that of men and women living in a monastery, withdrawn from the world. For them prayer and contemplation will have a higher priority. Our spirituality, however, is characterised by our secular life, we live immersed in the world. And that means we can spend less time in prayer and contemplation. But let us remember that we can also pray through our actions. And offering up a little prayer can be done in a split second, for instance when we suddenly have to take a difficult decision, or see a beautiful sunset.

⁸ Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity 'Apostolicam Actuositatem' solemnly promulgated by his holiness pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965

5.7 Key word number 7

Going from Gospel to life and life to Gospel

One of the most important sentences, at least to me, in our Rule is the last sentence of article 4: "Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the Gospel, going from Gospel to life and life to Gospel." The article deals with the interaction between what we read in the Gospel and what we experience in everyday life. If we want to try to follow Jesus in the footsteps of our father Francis, the Gospel should not be a theoretical reality but something to put into practice. We have to live the Gospel.

In the Netherlands there is a saying: in the Bible you can find arguments in favour of every point of view. And to a certain extent that may be true of the Old Testament. In contrast to the Old Testament, in the Gospel there is no validation for any cruelty, disrespect, dishonesty, lack of love, hypocrisy, hatred, or other negative aspects of human nature. No, in contrast to this, Jesus said: "The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31) So let us model ourselves on our father Francis and try to put the Gospel into practice. And let us consider: we don't have to be perfect all at once. We may grow gradually. Once, somebody compared our Rule with a cookery book: if you see a recipe which is too difficult for you at that moment, you can turn the page and choose another one. At a later moment you can return to the previous recipe. Of course this does not mean we can go without committing ourselves and choose only the easy ones. That is where our fraternity can help to keep us alert. Our brothers and sisters in the fraternity can continuously challenge us and we should be open for these challenges.

Of course, careful reading of the Gospel also means that we have to open ourselves up for the message of the Gospel. Earlier today I told you that Marianne and I start the day with the morning prayer from the liturgy of the hours. Regularly it strikes me that the text of the day from the Gospel has bearing on the matters at issue at that very moment.

5.8 Key word number 8

All team members are of equal importance

All teams need a leader. So if we are talking about a team we are also talking about leadership. For true leadership it is important to have in mind that all members of a team are of equal importance for the performance of the team. When one of the members cannot cope with his or her task, the team will not be successful. The leader should rearrange the tasks. Only when there are no other options should a team member be replaced. It is the responsibility of the team leader, though not exclusively of him or her, that all members can contribute to the team activities according to their capacities. All members of councils of OFS and other leading institutions should remember that their task is only to serve the fraternities on the different levels. This is a humble task, not something to take any credit for. Especially leading up to an elective chapter it can help to keep Admonition number 4 in mind and I quote: "I did not come to be served, but to serve, says the Lord. Let those who are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers. And if they are more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a money bag to the peril of their soul."

A good leader of a team is open to criticism. The other members of the team should be able to mention it immediately and without any hesitation if they think something may go wrong. The immediate importance of such a culture differs, of course, per profession or kind of team. The most obvious example is an aircraft. If it is difficult for a member of the cockpit crew to raise the alarm if there is even the slightest suspicion something is going wrong, it can cost hundreds of lives. Some of you will perhaps remember the disaster at Tenerife airport, 40 years ago this year. On March 27, 1977 a Boeing 747 of KLM, the Dutch airline company, crashed into a 747 of PanAm, an American airline company, at the take-off from Tenerife airport. It is still the largest air crash in history, with 583 people killed. Later investigations showed that members of the Dutch cockpit crew did realise that their captain did something wrong, but the captain was of such a high seniority, that they did not have the nerve to literally call him to a halt. From that very moment, all airline companies train their cockpit crews to be one team, without seniority, without differences of rank or age. For a number of years now we also try to create such an atmosphere in the operating room, because also there a wrong decision or mistake can cost a life. But from my own experience, I notice that some young members feel a barrier to raise the alarm. I often wonder if this is due to my grey hair. Of course, in an OFS council a wrong decision will probably not cost lives, but there should be a real team spirit which makes all members of equal value and equally appreciated.

The council should also be open to criticism from outside. When a wrong decision has been made, it sometimes seems very difficult to admit it and apologize. Whereas if one admits the decision was wrong and explains to the aggrieved party, if appropriate, the reasons for the wrong decision, it can create openness and sympathy. In Admonition 22 St. Francis writes: "Blessed is the servant who, after being reprimanded, agrees courteously, submits respectfully, admits humbly, and makes amends willingly."

5.9 Key word number 9

Seeing your beginning, what you hold, continue to hold

St. Clare urged Agnes of Prague to keep her initial inspiration in mind. The initial inspiration that caused us to take the decision, to make the first move, to make a new start, regardless whether this was the first step to visit a meeting of an OFS fraternity or the first step to take the decision to make our profession. Later on, along the way, we easily accept minor adjustments, just a small compromise, nothing serious of course. But after some time, it may be that we have to acknowledge that all these small moderations moved us away from our initial goal. So it can be helpful to follow the advice of St. Clare and call to mind your initial inspiration, the vocation that caused you to want to follow the footsteps of St. Francis. Perhaps you can experience once again the fervour and readiness of that special day when you decided to make your profession on the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. In 2005 our local fraternity made a pilgrimage to Assisi. On one of the days we went up to the Carceri, dispersed into the caves (which were not yet closed at that time) and stayed there to pray or meditate for an hour or two. After that we reunited at the open air chapel for the celebration of the Eucharist. During this Mass all members renewed their commitment to the OFS, one by one, before our spiritual assistant. This was a very intense and spiritual experience for all, which from time to time is still called to mind by us. Although there was a cloudburst with a thunderstorm during those hours when we were in the caves, some members only found that out later. At the moment itself they didn't notice.

5.10 Key word number 10

Invitation to start all over again, every day anew

Both the positive life choice we made with our profession and the toning down because of us being human with our shortcomings, our weaknesses, our transgressions against our Rule, against the Gospel life are taken into account in our Rule, when it says: "United by their vocation as 'brothers and sisters of penance', and motivated by the dynamic power of the Gospel, let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the Gospel itself calls 'conversion'. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily." When we are really critical of ourselves, the number of times Jesus told his disciples they have to forgive each other is not nearly enough: he tells Peter to forgive seventy times seven times⁹. We need a lot more than that. But we are invited to convert. The Gospel is full of examples of people that made a mistake, receive forgiveness, and can make a new start. Just remember the prodigal son¹⁰ or the adulterous woman¹¹, but there are many more examples. And a conversion means that you can start again. Conversion was very important to our father Francis. His writings are filled with invitations to do good things and refrain from the bad. Admonition 23 invites us to penance both inwardly as well as outwardly. I quote: "Faithful and prudent is the servant who does not delay in punishing himself for all his offenses, inwardly through contrition and outwardly through confession and penance for what he did." And at the end of his life St. Francis called on his brothers to "Begin to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing."(1 Celano 103)

6. Conclusions

Dear brothers and sisters, I started this presentation with the story of my own life, how I was sent into this world. I told you how I was blessed with genuinely Catholic parents who were true witnesses of Jesus. I told you how the Gospel gained a foundation in the hearts and minds of me, my brothers and my sister. And I told you about the talents the Almighty gave me, and shared with you what I did with all that was given to me in my life so far.

I tried to extract some key words from this personal experience and translated these words into more widely applicable concepts. Then we investigated where these concepts can be applied to our Secular Franciscan Order. Where appropriate, I underlined these concepts with quotes from the Gospel, quotes from Franciscan texts, or quotes from our own Rule.

I hope that this presentation can contribute to this chapter. I hope that the quotes I used and the experiences from my professional life and from my participation in councils, both occupation-related and in the OFS, can help us this week when we are discussing the several proposals to facilitate the management of our Secular Franciscan Order. Having said this, I realise it was a long presentation with a lot of words that were poured out over you. Of course you cannot remember them, but I hope that the quintessence of this presentation will stick with you a little bit.

I would like to end this presentation with the attempt to gather from these concepts some strong recommendations, which I hope will be useful when later in this General Chapter we are discussing the topic 'How to manage an international order like the OFS.'

6.1 On the topic of formation

⁹ Matt 18:21

¹⁰ Luke 15:36-50

¹¹ John 8:3-11

On the topic of formation:

There should be formation material of all levels for the newcomers to our local fraternities. The initial formation should be tailor-made to each individual newcomer. Nowadays, at least in the Western European, more secular, countries, initial formation should also include basic knowledge on ecclesiastical and liturgical topics. Because of cultural differences, the national councils have to publish at least the greater part of the formation material for their own country.

Formation, both initial and ongoing, should include the development of awareness of the co-responsibility of all members for what happens in the fraternity, at all its levels, from local to international.

We, having been members of the OFS for some years, have to bear in mind that we have to be role models to support the new brothers and sisters in our fraternity in their search in life as we promised when they were admitted to our fraternity.

We cannot overemphasize that the spirituality of the OFS is a secular spirituality. So the last sentence of article 4 of our Rule is a key sentence: “going from the Gospel to life and from life to Gospel.” This has consequences for identifying the priority in our daily life: ‘living the Gospel immersed in the world’ is priority number one.

6.2 On the topic of commitment and leadership

On the topic of commitment and leadership:

Councils on all levels can enhance the commitment of members by keeping them informed about current issues, by showing the commitment of the council to the local fraternity or a specific member. On an international level the international councillors can play an important intermediary role. Communication between all levels of governance and the members is of vital importance.

In my opinion an intermediary official governance layer carries the risk of increasing the distance between the International Presidency and national councils, while an informal layer can enhance commitment.

National councils should encourage local fraternities to discuss which members have certain competencies, making them good candidates for offices in the council of the local fraternity or a council of a higher level. The local council should keep the national council informed about these members, creating a pool of experienced and skilled people for all kinds of tasks. The International Council could also utilize this pool through the international councillor.

7. In closing

Finally, I thank the Presidency for the invitation to be here today and to give this presentation. I would like to thank you for your attention and I wish you all a successful chapter and peace and all good to you and your loved ones.

Michel Versteegh, OFS