

# CHALLENGES FOR YOUFRA IN EUROPE

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## **Introduction**

This is a historic moment for the Franciscan Family in Europe, especially for the life of Secular Franciscans. This Congress is a kind of new beginning for Secular Franciscans' charisma because this is the 1<sup>st</sup> time that we celebrate this European Congress together (OFS and YouFra). On other continents this is already a well established practice but in Europe we have had only YouFra Congresses. If I may say, they were a little bit ahead of us. What did YouFra talk about in these Congresses? Let me just remind you.

## **I European YouFra Congress**

Jerbon (Santiago de Compostela), Spain

July 27 - August 2, 1999

“With saint Francis towards year 2000”

## **II European YouFra Congress**

Porto, Portugal

August 7 - 12, 2001

“Globalization: challenges and values for YouFra in Europe”

## **III European YouFra Congress**

Samobor – Ptuj, Croatia - Slovenia

August 17 - 23, 2003

“Together with saint Francis”

## **IV European YouFra Congress**

Assisi – La Verna, Italy

August 25 – 29, 2006

“Francis, from dream to sign”

## **V European YouFra Congress**

Vilnius, Kretinga, Kaunas - Lithuania

August 18-24, 2009

“Through martyrdom to resurrection”

Through these themes YouFra was trying to get to know each other better and to find ways of personal growth as well as the growth of a fraternity. Today I'm going to tell a little bit about challenges YouFra is facing.

### **Example of YouFra in Croatia**

Let me start by introducing myself and the country I'm coming from. Croatia is a Mediterranean country with 20 years of independence and democracy. But before the Croatian people, mostly Catholic tradition, suffered from the communist regime in Yugoslavia for 45 years. Deprived of religious freedom, freedom of property, thought and other freedoms, national identity was suppressed. Life of the secular fraternities was reduced to individual devotion of those who continued daring to live their faith despite oppression, one of many victims was blessed Alojzije Stepinac, Cardinal and Archbishop of Zagreb, Secular Franciscan too. The first years of Croatian independence were marked by the aggression of Serbia which was completed in 1995. The similar thing happened in our neighbouring country Bosnia and Herzegovina. The people you have among yourselves, this young people, lived this war. They are aware how important it is to build peace, to rely on God, and to be connected to the Church through its priests. This was also one of the reasons why YouFra in Croatia began. Friars wanted to offer to the young people some hope, a view to a better future relied on Jesus by the example of st. Francis and st. Clare. They started to gather youth in prayer, in concrete actions (by visiting people in need which during the war were many). And it showed them they are useful, needed, capable and precious for the world they are living in.

### **The situation of YouFra today**

As some of you have had the opportunity to hear at the General Chapter in Brazil, today YouFra exists in 67 countries and has about 49.000 members. Out of that, 9 established YouFra fraternities and 5 emerging are in Europe. As we have heard during the presentations, some fraternities of the OFS are having some difficulties in organizing YouFra fraternities. Among other things, this is also the consequence of the situation in Europe in general, which I'm going to describe soon. But before that I would like to mention that, as CIOFS Presidency and YouFra Commission, we have tried in the past several years to help OFS and YouFra fraternities to organize better. The most recent document that you have received in May is called *Guide for the establishment of a new YouFra fraternity*. I won't present it in details now but I would like to draw your attention to it because there are very concrete things and requirements, necessary for establishment a new YouFra fraternity. This document, as well as all other YouFra documents, you can find at [www.ciofs.org/youfra](http://www.ciofs.org/youfra).

## **The situation in Europe today**

Europe has witnessed the rise, especially in the last century, of totalitarian ideologies and extreme forms of nationalism which sparked conflicts both within and between nations, leading up to the immense tragedy of the two World Wars. More recent ethnic conflicts, which have again led to bloodshed on the continent of Europe, have once more demonstrated to everyone how fragile peace is, how it requires an active commitment on the part of all.<sup>1</sup>

Europe is known as the “cradle of Christianity” but in a 2000-year-old history there have been lots of influences that are trying to diminish the importance of Christian roots, to suppress them and even to forget them, especially in the last decades. *“There can be no doubt that the Christian faith belongs (...) to the foundations of European culture. Christianity in fact has shaped Europe, impressing upon it certain basic values. Today’s Europe however, at the very moment it is in the process of strengthening and enlarging its economic and political union, seems to suffer from a profound crisis of values. While possessed of increased resources, it gives the impression of lacking the energy needed to sustain a common project and to give its citizens new reasons for hope”*<sup>2</sup>, said the Pope John Paul II in his Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*.

## **Joy – proclaiming the Gospel even when in chains**

And who can give these new reasons of hope to Europe? The youth. How? During Pope Benedict’s the Apostolic journey to my country (Croatia) in 2011, he presided the Prayer Vigil at the main square of Zagreb with 25.000 young people. On that occasion he addressed youth talking about difficult moments in which young people can find themselves, referring to the situation of st. Paul (letter to the Christians of Philippi). He said that even when in chains *“the preaching and testimony of the Gospel cannot be chained. Saint Paul’s experience reveals how it is possible, along the journey of our lives, to preserve joy even in moments of darkness.”* He encouraged us not to *“yield to the temptation of putting all our trust in possessions, in material things, while abandoning the search for the truth which is always ‘greater’”,* which is *“capable of giving meaning to our daily lives”*. This is why we need today a new evangelization, new beginnings. And youth can have here an essential role.

Europe is a “Franciscan continent”, in a sense that st. Francis and st. Clare, whose anniversary we are celebrating this year, were born in Europe. In this continent the “first follower of st. Francis in the world” (secular) was born in Europe – st. Elisabeth of Hungary, as well as st. Louis, the king of France, in whose country we are gathered today. Those young people in their own time inspired people to join them. This should be the mission of our Franciscan youth too. How to do that? How to inspire young people not only to join us but to stay with us?

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<sup>1</sup> See *Ecclesia in Europa* (EE) 112.

<sup>2</sup> EE 108.

## **Authentic life – Present in public – Creativity**

“... in the countries of the East the problem of how to conserve their newly refound freedom is highlighted, in those of the West they are questioning themselves on how to live an authentic freedom”<sup>3</sup>. And precisely that is the answer to all our questions – to **live an authentic life**. This is how st. Francis attracted all those people.

I believe this authentic life means to have the life of **prayer**. Every day needs to be filled with a prayer. This authentic life also understands being **present in public life**. This is certainly a challenge for all Franciscans. As I said, on one hand we have people, who, for decades, had to keep quiet and reserved vis-à-vis the socio-political news. Even today, when people exercise democracy, as it is, this attitude persists in society and even among members of our Franciscan family. Thus, sometimes we prefer to limit our activities to the devotion and charity to risk nothing, and in this way the initiatives, which are more and more numerous each day, are blocked. On the other hand, we have the challenge of **being faithful to Christian values** in the society that offers absolute freedom, the right of choice without taking any responsibility for the actions. It is difficult to direct the youth if they are “driving without any signs” (directions).

What we have to offer to the youth is a possibility for **creativity**. We should be able to recognize the need in our concrete society and in accordance to that, react. Collaboration with other Church institutions, but also with civil society organizations, will enable us to feel brothers and sisters with all men of good will, as it is said in our *Rule*.

Our **goals** should be:

- to help youth in their personal mature growth;
- to help them specialise in specific areas (media, communication, family, politics and civil society, economy, ecology, etc.);
- to educate our young brothers and sisters from the beginning to address the social problems;
- to have good communication with them.

The **difficulties** that we encounter are:

- the lack of understanding what lay spirituality really is, what the identity of YouFra really is (in the Church, inside of the Franciscan Family and Secular Franciscans themselves)
- the indifference for being actively present in the Church and in the society and insufficient formation for that, as well as
- the incapacity to attract the youth by our own example.

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<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Work for Ecclesiastical Vocations: *New Vocations for a New Europe (In verbo tuo)*, 11a.

What are the **positive aspects** of this effort that needs to be done in regard to YouFra – for our Order, for the Church, for the society? With this kind of authentic life, we can offer the youth **an alternative** to what today's society offers them. Working together with youth in different social initiatives, we can mobilize a relatively large number of brothers and sisters of the Order (including members of YouFra). It will allow us to better understand our brothers and sisters and live our fraternity more intensely. Also, the Order can become more visible in the Church and in civil society. And what is very important, we can together break the prejudices that exist and put us in dialogue with those who do not share our faith and value system.

Is it not a good way to build a more fraternal world? An opportunity for evangelisation?