

**XVI General Chapter
VII Elective Chapter of the
Secular Franciscan Order (OFS)
“*Animate and guide with servant leadership*”**

Conclusive document

The XVI General Chapter and VII Elective General Chapter, held in Rome between November 13 and 21, 2021, was the most important challenge the International Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order experienced. Its completion one year after the scheduled date, has motivated the capitulants to overcome challenges, requirements and demands that the COVID pandemic brought with it. Thus, with a quorum of capitulants, the meeting of brothers and sisters who make up the International Council was held.

The Lord has placed in the hands of the Secular Franciscan Order the decision to continue with the project of penitents encouraged by Francis of Assisi 800 years ago; to walk in the present with a vision of the future, in the midst of today's society, due to the scarce promotion of values.

All Seculars Franciscans were asked to pray in advance for the Chapter. Now, thanks is given to the Lord, because of this opportunity to gather and to live fraternity with brothers and sisters (62 capitulants and a number of observers) from five continents. Brothers and sisters, who represent those who are scattered throughout the world, giving testimony of the Catholic Church that they support and of the pilgrim church that they love, being witnesses of the Gospel and contributing to the construction of a more fraternal and evangelical world (GG.CC. 3.2).

1. Introduction

The XVI General Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order took place in the Collegium Seraphicum in Rome, Italy on November 13-21, 2021. This event also involved the VII Elective Chapter of the International Presidency.

After nearly 20 months of isolation and limited travel, it was a joy for the International Councillors representing 56 of 70 national fraternities of the OFS and the International Councillors of the Franciscan Youth to come together with the Presidency Council and General Spiritual Assistants.

The Opening Eucharist was celebrated by the Minister General of the Third Order Regular, Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, TOR. It was so fitting to be with the former General Spiritual Assistant of the OFS especially at the conclusion of the celebration of the 800th year of the *Memoriale Propositi* (1221), since he and his Order organized a joint event last May in Rome, with the collaboration and participation of the OFS and the IFC-TOR and some representatives of the First Order.

The capitulants were blessed to have the three other Ministers General: Fr. Roberto Genuin, OFM Cap, Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM, and Fr. Carlos Trovarelli, OFM Conv, celebrating the Eucharist on different days, during the course of the Chapter. From their presence, availability and homilies, the Chapter experienced the love and care for the OFS within the Franciscan Family.

Each challenged the capitulants and observers to embrace and recommit to the gift of the vocation as servant leaders.

2. State of the Order and Other Reporting

Due to COVID, the Presidency served an extra year for a total of seven years. The CIOFS General Minister, Tibor Kauser prepared a report of the activities between 2017 and 2021. Minister Tibor encouraged all to review the report in its entirety, which was available to each capitulant in the online storage system, but presented only the highlights during Chapter.

The Secular Franciscan Order is present in 112 countries around the world with 70 constituted and 18 emerging national fraternities, together with a special kind of Secular Franciscans presence in another 24 countries. Based on corrected figures, the Order has 173,719 members as of September 2021. The International Presidency of the CIOFS has been supported by several commissions (Communications, JPIC, Family, Juridical and Patrimonial, Formation, Franciscan Youth, Economic).

Many activities have been undertaken on all levels, such as the development of formation materials as well as the holding of formation workshops and international gatherings all over the world. Significant progress was made with various outreach efforts: Project Africa, Well4Africa, Arab Project in the Holy Land, and the Asia and Oceania Development. Reports for these projects identified challenges, but also opportunities for local fraternities to assist brothers and sisters in the developing programs. Information about these programs may be viewed through various media (CIOFS website, Facebook, the new digital magazine Vox Franciscana).

Although finances continue to be an issue for the international fraternity, significant improvement has been experienced during the past three years as more national fraternities are contributing. Related to this challenge is obtaining accurate demographic data from the national fraternities.

On the international level, the relationship with the Conference of the Franciscan Family continues to grow and mature with an excellent spirit of collaboration.

YouFra has about 50,000 members at this moment in 34 constituted, 28 emerging national fraternities and 13 presences. With respect to fraternal animation, the situation has improved but additional work is required in appointing fraternal animators at all levels of the fraternities (local, regional and national). Promoting double belonging to OFS and YouFra keeps being an important challenge everyone should be committed to.

During the course of the Chapter, capitulants reviewed the General Minister's report and Treasurer's reports, both of which were approved, notwithstanding some important recommendations were made for future projection of reports to the Chapter. The capitulants were appreciative of the Presidency's efforts, but requested that documents, such as the financial report, be made available sooner to allow for greater time for consideration. Especially regarding the financial report, in future years, details should be provided annually correlating budget figures and actual incomes and costs.

The Conference of General Spiritual Assistants to the OFS (CAS) presented its report to the Chapter which highlighted their collegial service in various fields: meetings of the Conference itself and with others, participation in Chapters, Visits, Congresses, formation courses and various activities. Capitulants noted the special commitment of the General Spiritual Assistants to the OFS and YouFra with much love and affection.

3. Papal Audience

A very special day during the Chapter, was the one where all Chapter participants had the occasion to be received in a private audience by Pope Francis. During the audience, the CIOFS General Minister, Tibor Kauser greeted the Holy Father with a message, highlighting the following: “We come to you with the same spirit that led St. Francis of Assisi to meet with Pope Honorius III in 1209 to ask him that his small fraternity may continue to advance on the path of the Gospel”. Minister Tibor also referred to the 800 years celebration of the *Memoriale Propositi* through which the first secular penitents were given the first guidelines to follow Christ in the manner of St. Francis.

The CIOFS General Minister confirmed to the Holy Father the commitment of all Secular Franciscans, to live in full communion with the Church in a confident and open dialogue of apostolic creativity (OFS Rule, Art. 6), which exhorts to seek collaboration in and also outside the Church, so that the message of the Gospel reaches all corners of the world. Then the CIOFS General Minister asked the Holy Father to bless and pray for all Secular Franciscans promising that he will be in the prayers of all brothers and sisters.

Following Minister Tibor’s greeting, the Holy Father addressed the visitors. In his address, the Holy Father reminded the capitulants and observers that “St. Francis, in his Letter to all the faithful, presents “doing penance” as a path of conversion, a path of Christian life, a commitment to do the will and works of the heavenly Father.” He exhorted each person to “Open your heart to God! And you will become, in the style of Saint Francis, a ‘mirror of Christ’” and “take on poverty, minority and simplicity as your distinguishing marks before all”. The Holy Father also encouraged those in attendance to “go out to the existential peripheries of today, and there to make the word of the Gospel resound, as did, among others, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, your Patroness. May you be men and women of hope, committed to living it and also to “organizing” it, translating it into real everyday situations, in human relations, in social and political engagement; nurturing hope in tomorrow by alleviating the pain of today.”

Lastly, Pope Francis highlighted Secular Franciscans “are called to live this in fraternity... part of the great Franciscan family.” He reminded those present that Secular Franciscans must be “men and women who fight for justice, and ... an integral ecology, collaborating in missionary projects and making yourselves artisans of peace and Witnesses to the Beatitudes.” He concluded his audience with a final blessing: “May Saint Francis and all the Saints of the Franciscan family accompany you on your journey. May the Lord bless you and may Our Lady protect you.”

The Papal Audience culminated with an opportunity for each Chapter participant to personally greet the Holy Father with a warm handshake.

4. Geographic Areas of responsibility of Presidency Councillors

The Presidency shared experiences with the geographic area assignments. There have been challenges due to wide distances even if there are no language barriers. The Presidency proposed a different grouping for the seven (7) geographic areas. In addition to reducing costs, the benefits for most of the areas are the similarity of cultures and language along with proximity. The Chapter approved to change the areas to the follows and Presidency councillors were elected accordingly:

1. Northern Europe
2. Southern Europe & Mediterranean
3. South America
4. Central and North America
5. French-speaking Africa and Islands
6. English-Portuguese speaking Africa
7. Asia-Oceania

5. Chapter Theme and Presentations

The main theme of the chapter was **Animate and Guide with Servant Leadership** based on the *Instrumentum Laboris* which was sent to the National Councils well in advance for their reflection. The inspiring document described various aspects and offered proper tools for successful “animation of fraternity” (GG.CC. 31.2). Several times during the week, speakers emphasized the co-responsibility of all Secular Franciscans brothers and sisters in guiding and animating the Order at all levels.

Former Minister General, Br. Michael Perry, OFM, presented on Servant Leadership. Reflecting on the 800th anniversary of *Memoriale Propositi* (1221), he reminded that this commemoration was an opportunity to renew our commitment “to live passionately and prophetically your Franciscan vocation as members of a universal fraternity, the Order of Franciscan Seculars”¹. Br. Michael also shared that the “General Chapter should be a time during which you ask very serious questions about your identity, vocation, fraternity, structures, missionary engagement, outreach to those who are poor and marginalized, care for the planet and also about the way you animate, govern and organize yourselves at the local, regional, national and international levels”. The *Instrumentum Laboris* engages “all OFS members in all of these areas in a way that is reflective and provocative, with the express goal of encouraging each brother and sister to deepen his/her understanding of identity and vocation, the Rule and Life, engagement in the fraternity and participation in the *Missio Dei* entrusted to the Church by her Lord and Saviour (Cf. Mt 28:19-20; Lk 10:1-11; Jn 20:21)”.

Br. Michael stated that, as successors of St. Francis, Secular Franciscans are all responsible for the success of living out the charism, suggesting to focus on three aspects:

1. Being an Order with the associated rights, dignity and obligations.
2. Being a fraternity of sisters and brothers of penance called to live and cultivate our spiritual lives together.
3. Being a missionary fraternity.

¹ “The Gift and Responsibility of the Minister as Servant (On Becoming Responsible Co-Disciples in the Franciscan Life)” (page 1)

Capitulants had also the opportunity to hear a presentation from the General Vice-Minister Chelito Núñez together with Fr. Fernando Ventura, OFM^{Cap}, regarding the **Special Synod 2021 - 2023**, encouraging all Seculars Franciscans to participate through their parishes, in the preparatory works.

6. Elective Chapter

Minister General Massimo Fusarelli, OFM, served as President of the Chapter of Elections. The new Presidency Council was elected:

General Minister:	Tibor Kauser (Hungary)
General Vice-Minister:	Mary Stronach (USA)
Councillors:	
- Asia and Oceania:	Francis (Byung Ju) Park (Korea)
- French Africa and Islands:	Adolph Assagba (Togo)
- English-Portuguese Africa:	Eremenciana Chinyama (Zimbabwe)
- Northern Europe:	Dina Shabalina (Ukraine)
- Southern Europe and Mediterranean:	Noemi Paola Riccardi (Italy)
- Central and North America:	Ana Maria Raffo Laos (Peru)
- South America:	Silvia Noemi Diana (Argentina)
- YouFra:	Luis Felix Chocojay Guamuch (Guatemala)

7. Statutes of the International Fraternity

As a consequence of the decisions of the previous General Chapter the Presidency proposed revisions to the Statutes of the International Fraternity (FIOFS). A motion to consider these revised FIOFS Statutes as a try-out version (“ad experimentum”) was accepted. The Presidency asks the National Councils to report on any problem they experience when putting the Statutes into practice. With these conditions the Statutes were accepted “ad experimentum”. The Presidency will send a letter to the National Fraternities to indicate these statutes as a guiding instrument and will ask for comments. Final approval of a revised version can take place at the next General Chapter in three (3) years.

8. *Memoriale Propositi*

On Friday morning, Fr. Carlos Trovarelli, OFM^{Conv}, Minister General of the Conventuals, celebrated the Eucharist to conclude the celebratory year of the 800th anniversary of this document helping us continue to reflect on this part of our Order’s history.

Silvia Diana, Presidency Councillor, presented a summary of the activities organized by the CIOFS to celebrate this anniversary, which included the production of videos and the special celebration in Rome together with the TOR. As part of this closing celebration, chapter participants were invited to write a prayer about one aspect within each National Council referring to the celebration of this anniversary. The cards were collected and then distributed to a different person. The recipient was asked to pray for the National Fraternity on the card received as a way of supporting each other.

9. Testimony

Sonya Maria Ahmed, an aspirant with a fraternity in Kuwait who was expressly invited as an observer, shared about her journey to the Catholic Faith and the Secular Franciscan Order. She was raised in an “open-minded” Muslim family, but studied at a Catholic school. At the age of 16 years, she became curious about the Christian faith and started reading the Gospel. She was baptized on July 15, 2018. It was a much appreciated testimony.

10. YouFra

The YouFra representatives used the colours of the picture of St. Francis by Cimabue as the theme of their creative presentation with cameo appearances regarding their activities over the last years. After the presentation, the capitulants discussed expectations between OFS and YouFra in both ways. Especially the step from YouFra to OFS was discussed. Too often the OFS sees itself as the owner of the past and the present and YouFra as the future. However, this creates distance and it is not the reality; YouFra is present and future. YouFra is part of us.

11. Triennial Budget

The Presidency presented a proposal for the budget for the next three years. There was much discussion regarding the proposed income accounts and amounts specified. The Presidency agreed with a motion to send an annual financial report to the National Fraternities including the detailed budget requests for the new Secretariats (Formation, JPIC and Communications), together with the request for paying the annual contribution.

After discussion, the Presidency provided all the various contributions per nation (ranging from zero to 33,175 Euros per year) without mentioning the countries, including the proposed contribution for each individual National Council. The allocation is much higher for fraternities in wealthier countries, while it is very low for those national fraternities in the poorest countries of the World. The Presidency stated that the majority of funding for the three new Secretariats and YouFra must be through voluntary contributions. National Fraternities are encouraged to make separate contributions for those priorities. The proposed Triennial Budget was then put to a vote and accepted.

12. Working Groups

Capitulants had the opportunity to reflect on the main theme and Presidency documents in several working groups, divided by languages, giving their conclusions in general assemblies. Based on the working groups' reflections, different proposals were presented, which allowed capitulants to evaluate various aspects of the life of the OFS. These working groups reflected specifically on reports presented by the General Minister, the Treasurer and the Spiritual Assistants, which led capitulants to the corresponding votation.

In general, working groups were an important meeting place where capitulants committed themselves to a responsible and honest discernment regarding those aspects of our OFS which tie

us together in a common vision. Such issues regarding formation to servant leaders, formation in financial aspects dealing with contributions (cf OFS Rule, Art. 25) and its important impact in the life of the fraternity, gained the attention of capitulants towards the imperative priorities which must be set as a guidance for the OFS. A firm response to the call coming from the Holy Father (“to go out to the existential peripheries of today, and there to make the word of the Gospel resound”) was a clear reference to our “building up the kingdom of God” (GG.CC. 3.2). Capitulants responded with practical initiatives focusing on projects that should be undertaken, letting the Holy Spirit take the lead in our lives and impact on others.

A very important reflection took place within the working groups, when dealing with the main theme of the Chapter, arriving at the central OFS commitment, guided by an awareness of the identity as co-disciples and co-missionaries. Aware that God first loved us and makes us see through Francis that the OFS has a missionary vocation and must give testimony: going out to seek God's love in our neighbour.

The vision of servant leadership introduced a very important discussion whereby it was understood that it emerged from within the life and practice of St. Francis, communicated in and through his writings, and from within the principal writings and documents of the Secular Franciscan Order.

13. Priorities

Following an intensive reflection by national fraternities, the following priorities were adopted for the next three years.

13.1. Implementation of New Secretariats

Put into operation the Secretariats, according to the decisions of the General Chapter 2017. In forming the new secretariats (Formation; Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC); and Communications), the Presidency should provide the national fraternities details for the composition of the Secretariats, responsibilities and terms for service along with budgetary needs. All products will be approved by the Presidency. The financing of these Secretariats, at least in part, comes from donations.

13.2. Formation

It is important that in all formation material academic language will be avoided.

13.2.1. Servant Leadership. Additional focus on servant leadership, sharing tools from *Instrumentum Laboris* and Br. Michael Perry's talk on the main theme, provided excellent tools for local fraternities to use (modules, templates, training format/outline, simple language). Create a grant fund that can support various actions related to implementing the suggestions.

13.2.2. Vocation. Offer tools for discernment and ways to promote vocations to the OFS. Assign a Presidency Councillor responsible for overseeing vocations, in joint collaboration with YouFra and the larger Franciscan family.

13.2.3. Financial. Information about fraternity finances (all levels) should be included in formation materials used by each fraternity.

13.2.4. Family life. Continue the work of the family commission providing materials to promote values of family life, helping us to become effective witnesses that affirm the dignity of all human life from the moment of conception to the end, as a gift from God.

13.3. Finances

- 13.3.1.** The Presidency should convene a commission of OFS-members with experience and expertise in finances and budgets. This commission will work together with the General Treasurer and can study the financial numbers and is allowed and invited to ask all relevant questions. The commission can also make a proposal for the budgets for the next three years. During the chapter itself the commission can respond to the questions of the capitulants who are not familiar with financial topics.
- 13.3.2.** The Chapter needs a proposed triennial budget six (6) months ahead of time to allow national fraternities to review and discuss. Annual reports of Presidency income and spending will be sent to national Fraternities as mandated by Chapter vote.
- 13.3.3.** CIOFS could create a sponsorship system; providing tools/guidelines to better argue requests for any specific project.

13.4. Communications

- 13.4.1.** Make an optimal use of social media to spread personal communication between brothers and sisters around the world, as a way to mutual animation.
- 13.4.2.** Encourage National Fraternities to use the digital passway to keep contact with local fraternities and individual members in those times when physical encounters are not possible.

13.5. YouFra

The presence of YouFra at this General Chapter is a witness of the importance the OFS attached to YouFra. The Presidency should continue this approach, and:

- 13.5.1.** the Presidency should promote National Fraternities to support their YouFra fraternities, on one hand, to find their own way, but on the other hand to be always prepared to give help when being asked;
- 13.5.2.** the Presidency should promote the local fraternities to open their fraternity meetings for YouFra (on a regular or occasional basis);
- 13.5.3.** where and when possible, youth members should be involved in the Formation, Finances and Communications groups/secretariats.

13.6. Spiritual Assistance

- 13.6.1.** Promote that Spiritual Assistants use the tools from the 2019 formation course.
- 13.6.2.** Support National Fraternities to develop a formation course for non-Franciscan religious, priests and OFS-members to become Spiritual Assistants.
- 13.6.3.** Help improve the communication of the General Spiritual Assistants with the National Spiritual Assistants.

13.7. Other recommendations

- 13.7.1. Statistics** - carry out a real census of the OFS. Councils have a basic responsibility for knowing the membership in their fraternities, as the General Chapter 2017 has already decided and requested.
- 13.7.2. Existing Projects** - work in an integrated manner to carry out existing Presidency projects, evaluate the process periodically and provide feedback on each other. Engage national fraternities to get involved with support in person or finances for such projects.

14. Epilogue

Mons. José Rodríguez Carballo, Secretary for the Congregation of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic life, presided the closing Mass, inspiring through his homily to follow Jesus as a leader who washed his disciples' feet, as a type of authority which entails service and love to the others. All to the contrary, as to the authority exercised by Pontius Pilate who just washed his hands, lacking the courage to do the only right thing, to stand for innocence itself, to stand for Jesus.

Refreshed with the booster shot for our vocations and enhanced commitment to servant leadership, the capitulants are renewed to do as the Holy Father said: “make the word of the Gospel resound...” in ourselves, our fraternities, our communities, and the world.

Through speakers and dialogue, the participants were inspired and exchanged ideas for animating and guiding their fraternities. Many came to the Chapter with the mindset of representing only their national fraternity. After a week of fraternal sharing, the capitulants will return to their homes with a convicted spirit of being a part of our International Fraternity and family.

St. Elizabeth of Hungary and St. Louis the King, pray for us!

Rome, November 21, 2021