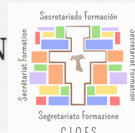


FRANCISCAN CENTENARY 2023-2026

2023: 800 YEARS OF THE RULE AND THE CRIB
IN GRECCIO



SECRETARIAT FOR FORMATION
CIOFS



PRESENTATION

We have begun the journey of celebrations and family gatherings.

Each year, we are going to share simple materials for all OFS and YouFra fraternities, so that together with the rest of the Franciscan Family around the world, they can share the great joy of celebrating together these centenaries during which we will commemorate: the 800th anniversary of the Later Rule (Regula Bullata); Christmas in Greccio (2023); the Stigmata (2024); the Canticle of the Creatures (2025) and, as a culmination, the Easter of Francis (2026).

Last year we received material from the Conference of the Franciscan Family to guide us in celebration. Below, we share a few paragraphs.

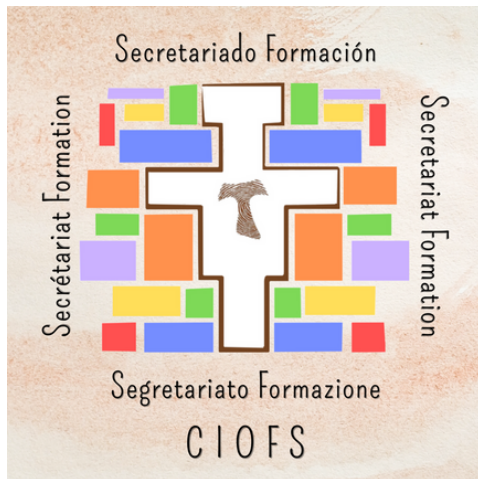
... The celebration of the centenaries has the basic aim and purpose of fixing our gaze toward the future and charismatically strengthening our Franciscan identity...

.... The gift that St. Francis received from the Divine Giver is most fully realized in its complementarity and lively reciprocal communion. This is a motivating force in the lives of “all those who love the Lord with their whole heart” (First Version of the Letter to the Faithful 1, FF 178/1). Therefore, as a Franciscan Family, we invite everyone who is attracted to the evangelical beauty of the Poverello (cf. Laudato si’ 10) to join us in celebrating these centenaries. The centenaries offer us a valuable opportunity to invigorate the richness of our charism with a prophetic vision toward the future....

... The celebration of the centenaries is undoubtedly a good occasion to make the Franciscan Family visible in its entirety. Therefore, it would be very fitting for all activities and initiatives, at the national and/or regional level, to be coordinated by a commission representing the entire Franciscan Family. Ad intra and Ad extra: The centenaries are not intended to have a positive impact only within the Franciscan Family. Imagination and creativity must be brought to bear so that the centenaries impact outwardly upon non-ecclesial social and cultural... (Conference of the Franciscan Family 2022).

We would appreciate it if each national fraternity would encourage the work and proposals put forth in these materials for this year 2023, two formation and meeting topics on the Crib and the Rule, which we, your brothers and sisters, have prepared with dedication and effort.

Your brothers and sisters,



SECRETARIAT FOR FORMATION CIOFS

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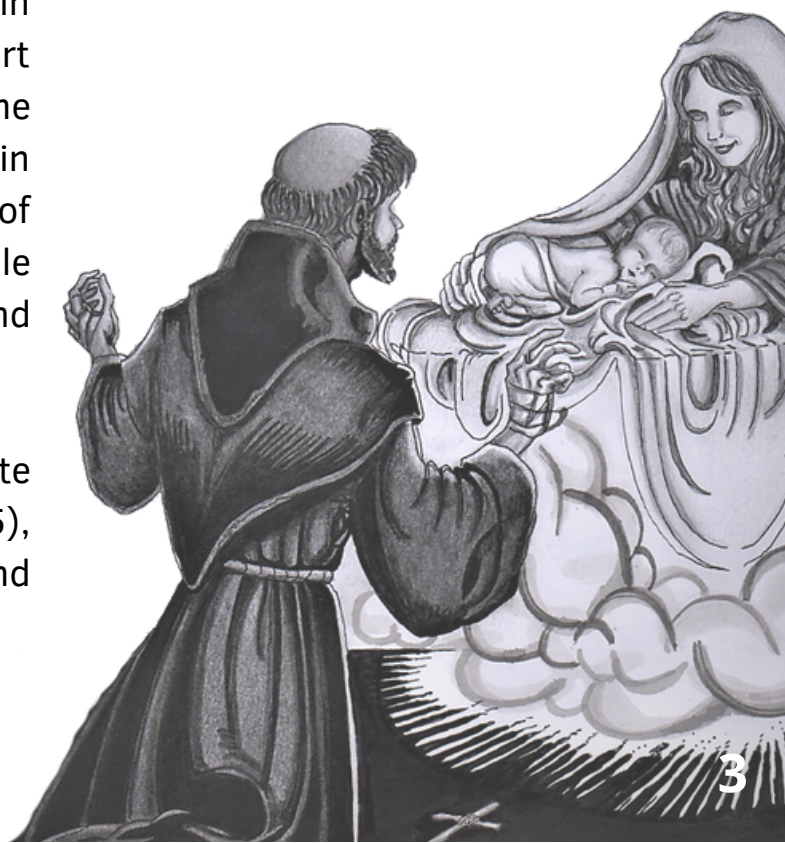
THE CRIB: 800 YEARS OF CELEBRATION, 800 YEARS OF JOY

We have begun a time of festivity, of celebration, 800 years since that Christmas in Greccio, Italy, where our brother Francis made in that community the first living nativity scene for all humanity. We are going to share simple materials for all OFS and YOUFRA Fraternities, so that together with the greater Franciscan Family in each locality, they can share the great joy of celebrating these centenaries together.

...Celebrating the centenary of Christmas in Greccio as a Franciscan Family is an invitation to pause before the mystery of the Incarnation to contemplate the greatness of divine love for humanity. The Son of God also becomes the Son of man, he becomes one of us, our brother (cf. Letter to the faithful, 2nd edition 56). Our faith in the Incarnation drives us to discover the seeds of the Word (semina Verbi) present in all cultures and in contemporary society, so that the seeds of humanity found there may flourish. In addition, it urges us not only to defend life, but also to become instruments of life and humanity in our families and fraternities, to reach out to those who are no longer considered human but are disposable members of society. The concreteness with which Francis of Assisi celebrated the mystery of the Incarnation in Greccio invites us to recover the awareness that “we are keepers of a good that humanizes, that helps to lead a new life. There is nothing better to transmit to others” (Evangelii gaudium 264)... (Centennial Franciscan Family Conference 2022).

The beauty of the Christmas season lies in the path we take, in the opening of the heart that listens to the Word of God, in the Christmas music that fills our streets, in finding ourselves filled with the rhythm of hope, not so waiting for the arrival of a single day, but, above all, so that we are ready and long for “the Great Day.”

See/Listen, Discern, Act and Celebrate methodology. (Cf. Mater et Magistra, 235), will be used in the material that we will send annually in these coming years.



In this part of our proposal, we are going to share experiences of our Franciscan family, so, we have asked a friar, a Franciscan religious sister, an OFS sister, and a YOUFRA sister to share what the Incarnation and manger mean in their lives and especially on the path of their Franciscan vocation.

AN OFS SISTER

The meaning of the Incarnation manifested in the Manger represents in my life a constant space for contemplation of the Mystery of Christ who comes into my life with the richness of simplicity; poverty not only as a lack of a place to be born, but complete abandonment in God the Father, the All Good.

When looking at the Manger with the details that one usually focuses on, I have come to the conviction that the Incarnate Word did not need to shine, stand out or keep everyone waiting, but in the silence of the night, embraced by the stars, visited by the lowliest of the people, I learn that life is a wonderful opportunity to build the Kingdom, with joy, hope, dedication, service, solidarity and a fraternal spirit, but also from the centrality of Christ, as the Poor man of Assisi was capable of understanding it.

By sharing the Sacrament of the Eucharist with the brothers and sisters, I cannot help but be deeply grateful for the gift that was given to us in Bethlehem, which traveled so many paths doing good, which gave itself without limitations for the redemption of the sins of the world and which continues there in the Host, which feeds us we walk the paths of this century, testifying with our life and works that love is still alive in us and that we are constantly invited to bring it to others with determination.

Franciscan spirituality has nurtured every dimension of my life and has allowed me to embrace the Christ of the Manger, who, humble, silent, faithful to the Father, asks me every day to turn off the lights and noise of the world in order to listen to Him, the Incarnate Word, with serenity and to do his will in the midst of temporary realities, but responding to the needs of those dear to his heart.

Fanny Rojas Vargas
OFS Costa Rica

The Manger: Willingness to experience the novelty of living

"Blessed be the Lord Jesus Christ

That if He had been born today, we wouldn't have even seen him.

Lost in the Mediterranean on a ship in the middle of the sea

Taking some flowers to His father's grave."

So sang Brunori Sas in 2020, remembering the ability of the Divinity to disrupt the meaning of the spaces we inhabit and the "common places" with which we surround ourselves. God incarnates himself in a child and chooses unusual places for his cradle, considered inhospitable for a newborn. From the shepherds' huts in the countryside, among simple men dedicated to their flock and willing to be surprised and shocked, God is born wherever there is an opening to welcome the novelty of a child God.

The manger, then, is not only a pleasant place, away from the city, but it can be in the center of Rome, under the arcades of Termini station or in the heart of ancient Rome, it can be in the nomadic Mediterranean or in a cramped student room outside the office.

Saint Francis of Assisi wanted to "see with the eyes of the body the hardship in which he found himself for lack of the necessary things for a newborn, how he was laid in a manger and how he lay on the hay between the ox and the donkey" (FF 468) allowing those who gathered that holy night "a joy never experienced before, in the presence of the new mystery." The forest echoes with voices and the towering cliffs ring with festive choruses. The friars sing select praises to the Lord, and the night seems like a whole jubilation of happiness." (FF 469)

It is unique to read how the forest and the cliffs acquire "voice" and praise the Creator, praise to the Baby God arises from deep places. This opens the reflection portraying the manger as a place where God and the broader community of human beings coexist. His birth in a manger makes new the Word of the Old Testament "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth; subdue it and dominate the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and every living thing that creeps on the earth" (Gn 1,28), considering the existence of man on earth and his dominion not "absolute, but ministerial" (John Paul II, General Audience, January 17, 2001).

María Chiara Libreri
YOUFRA Italy

"Because a most holy Child was given to us, and was born for us (cf. Is.9,6) on the way he was placed in a manger, because he had no place in the inn (cf. Lc.2, 7)

Psalm XV of Saint Francis

Personally, the Incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God, always occupied a very special place in my life. The preparation for the coming of the Savior with the preview that we experience in the prophecies of the prophet Isaiah, makes me savor the great mystery of God who can become so human and be in diapers and be born in a place as humble as the manger. A place for animals.

Every life that is born brings hope, and this Life that we celebrate at Christmas makes all the promises that God made come true and is the one that gives meaning to our faith.

With the passage of time in Franciscan and consecrated life I learned that this mystery of the Incarnation, like the cross and the Eucharist, were the pillars of our spirituality.

Francis discovers the great love that God has for us and it is what he transmits to us in his chosen way of life. God makes himself small, tenderness is made in the child Jesus, he gives himself to us and invites us to follow him.

Sister Ma. Verónica Negri
Christian Charity - Argentina

What does the Christmas Crib mean in my personal and Franciscan life?

To speak of the crib, for me, is to speak of the Incarnation, not only as a mystery, but also as a proposal of life and a way of acting. And because the crib refers us to the historical fact that the Son of God came to take on our "flesh" and our humanity, it would be impossible to think of the Incarnation if it were not in very concrete and tangible ways, translated into our daily actions, in our way of being and being in the world, in our everyday life. In my personal experience, the Nativity always leads me to reflect on how I have lived and how I have assumed my mission in the world. It is as if a question always arises each time the crib is prepared and contemplated: have I lived the Incarnation of the Word in my life, engaging with the different realities that need to be humanised? Or, to put it another way, have I inserted myself into the various realities in which the Incarnate Word has marked his presence and "pitched his tent among us"?

In other words, the Bethlehem in my life is to commit myself, to involve myself, to mix myself with the reality around me, with the situations that cry out for change, with the people who count on our gaze and our incarnated action. Seen in this way, only in this way can I/we embrace, in our Franciscan life, the true meaning and significance of the mission of the one who became incarnate and came to meet us.

Friar Wellington Buarque OFM
Brasil

In Love with a Poor God

The Incarnation of the Son of God is the greatest gesture of Love for humanity, not only on the part of the Word, but on the part of the entire Trinity. The Father who created everything in the Son, through the Son and for the Son (cf. Col 1,15-16) empties himself of Him out of love for us and delivers him into our hands (cf. Jn 3,16) . The Holy Spirit makes it possible for the Word to become incarnate in the womb of Mary and accompanies all her saving work (cf. Lk 1, 35; 2Ltf 4-5).

God is Love (1Jn 4,8), and the characteristic of love is to give oneself, to give oneself to the beloved, to strip oneself of oneself (cf. Phil 2,6-11). Love is poor because it knows nothing but to give itself to those it loves. We are his loved ones.

Francis and Clare intuited this Love that descends until it washes the feet of those it loves. Poverty, minority, are the path of Love; the way of God, because "the Son of God has become for us the Way" (Test. 5). That is why they both passionately embraced this Way which they contemplated in the Manger, on the cross, in the Eucharist, and which they followed to the end.

This is our inheritance, the inheritance of the entire Franciscan Family: embracing and following a poor God out of love that unites us in this poverty. We are small because He chose that path. The Father has placed his Son in our hands. Let us embrace him with humility, with the virtue of faith, with the arms of poverty (cf. III Letter Cl 7).

Poor Sisters of the Santa Clara de Moreno
Monastery, Buenos Aires - Argentina

Francis of Assisi called Christmas "the festival of festivals" -more than all other solemnities- and celebrated it with "ineffable fervor" (2 Celano , 199). He kissed the images of the Child Jesus with great devotion and stammered words of sweetness as children do, Thomas of Celano tells us (Ibid.).

We are going to share the reading of some texts by Franciscan authors that refer to the Nativity Scene celebrated in Greccio , we can find many more to enrich this point.

Texts:

"In mid-December 1223, Francis traveled to a hermitage located in the area surrounding Greccio, some fifty kilometers from Assisi. While there with some friars, he sent a message to a devout nobleman in town, asking for his help in organizing a Christmas ceremony.

According to the words of Luke in the New Testament, Jesus was born in a rustic setting, inside a stable. Francis guessed that there must be animals present, and recalled a verse from the Old Testament: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's manger." So Francis asked that these animals be taken and carefully tied near a local couple and their son, who represented the Holy Family. The Gospel also mentions several astrologers (magi) and shepherds, so Francis asked the friars to play their part.

Candles and torches lit up the Christmas Eve sky, and the tableau - a liturgical drama or medieval auto sacramental - turned Greccio into a new Bethlehem. During midnight mass, Francis preached about God's humble arrival in the world and the poverty of Jesus. Leaving aside the severity of medieval sermons, Francis spoke of the mercy and goodness of God, whose ingenuity chose neither violence nor cataclysms to approach man but presented himself in the form of an innocent child. After the service, he helped the nobleman serve a banquet for the guests and asked that the animals receive double rations of hay and oats, and that seed be scattered outside for the birds.

For Francis, this celebration was not a sentimental play, but a symbolic representation of an everyday event: the rebirth of Christ in the hearts of all those who wanted to accept it. Consequently, the banquet that night was a kind of mystical experiment in what the Eucharist offered: the presence of Emmanuel, or "God with us," in Hebrew.

“From the manger to the cross”:

The poverty that Francis chooses with his companions is the loving response to the love of Jesus. They try to follow both the inner and outer poverty of the Son of God.

Outwardly, like the Master, they renounce all shelter and all protection. That's why, Francis frequently quotes the passage of the foxes and the birds and the Son of God who did not have a place to lay his head (cf. Mt 8,20 with 2 C 56). When the Poor Boy contemplates the life of Jesus, he is moved by the evident poverty that accompanies his Lord from the manger to the cross: "...he celebrated with ineffable joy the [feast] of the birth of the child Jesus; He called it the festival of festivals, in which God, made a little child, was raised at the breasts of a human mother. [...] He wanted that on that day the rich would feed the poor and hungry in abundance and that the oxen and asses would have more fodder and grass than usual. "If I were to speak to the emperor," he said, "I would beg him to issue a general provision by which all the wealthy are obliged to throw wheat and grain along the roads, so that in such great solemnity the little birds, especially the sister larks have plenty." He did not remember without shedding tears the hardship that surrounded the poor Virgin that day (2 C 199-200)".

Niklaus Kuster . Francis of Assisi. The most human of all saints. Editorial Herder
2003.

3 ACT:

We will share in the local fraternity together with the local Franciscan family the following questions:

- Is our daily life, with its joys and difficulties, a privileged place of encounter with the Lord? We share our experiences.
- Does the way we celebrate Christmas and other liturgical festivals reflect the simplicity, poverty and humility that Francis of Assisi desired? We share our experiences.

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CELEBRATE:

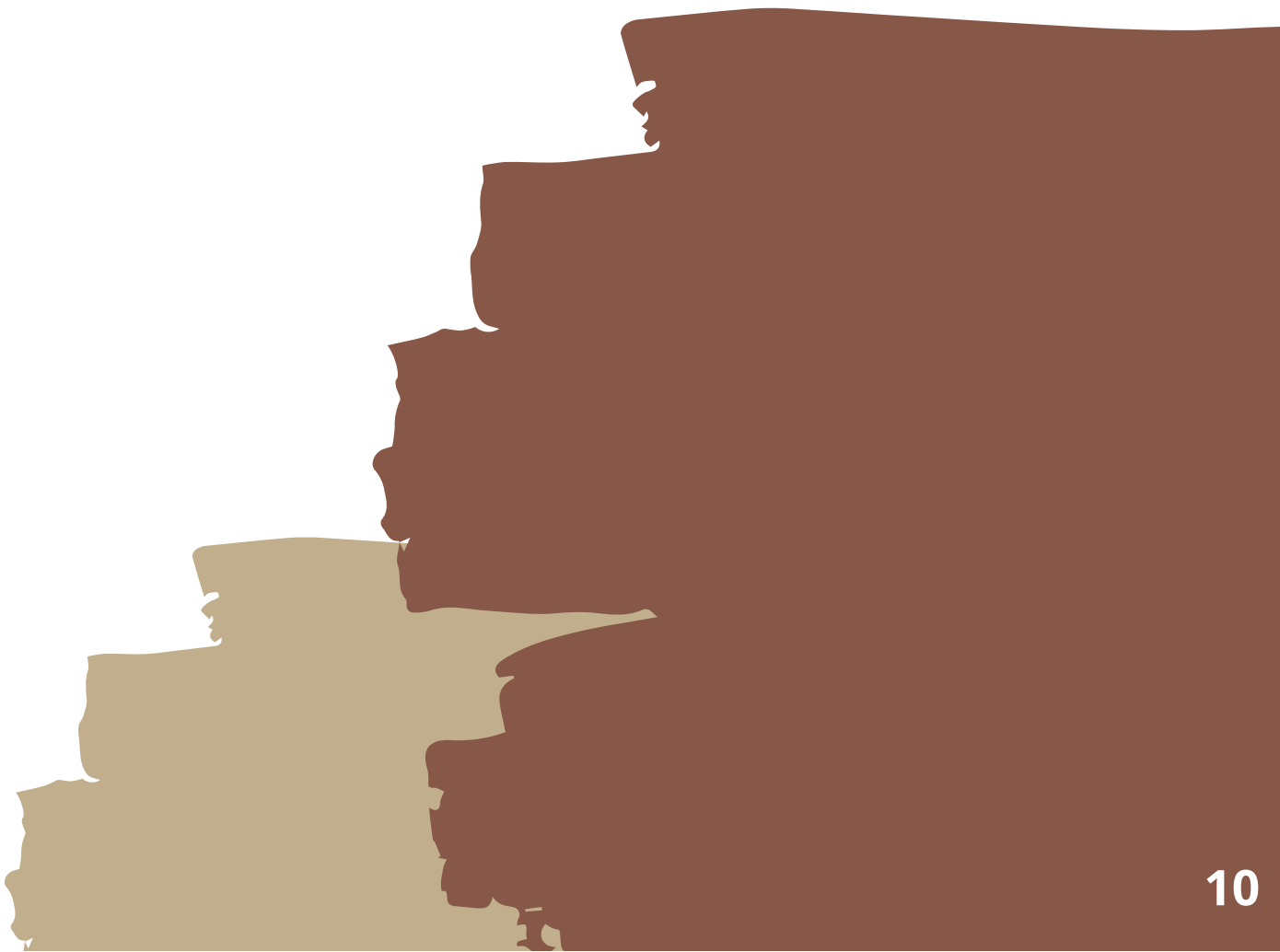
At this moment of "celebrating", we invite the entire Franciscan family to participate in its entirety.

We want to invite you to carry out what we usually call community involvement in your town or city. We hope that in the month of December before Christmas, you might propose making a nativity scene at a social venue in your town; you also might paint a mural on a wall of a nativity scene; hold a music festival in the streets; distribute a prayer so that the families can pray before the Manger on Christmas night. Different proposals can arise with great creativity according to the traditions of each country. We want this time and this celebration not to pass unnoticed in the places where our Franciscan fraternities are present.

That is why we invite you to make your presence known with these expressions and thus share the festival of the Christmas holidays with our brothers and sisters of this beloved world .

We ask you to send us photos of these events before February 2024 so that we can share these celebrations as a great Franciscan family.

Let us do a good job and celebrate together and say to the Lord, "You are our joy."



THE RULE: A WAY OF LIFE, 800 YEARS ON THE ROAD

The universe has, without any doubt, not only its own rules, but it also follows them precisely. If we are still enjoying our beautiful planet, it is because, “He established the earth on its foundations” (Ps 104,5). The first book of Holy Scripture tells us that “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1,31). Any society that follows just laws and sound principles enjoys stability and offers its citizens a certain degree of comfort. The same is valid for any person, any family, small or large, and also for the entire Franciscan family, which is celebrating 800 years since the Rule of the Friars Minor was approved by Pope Honorius III, on November 29, 1223.

The Franciscan Order is a living institution both in its material elements (legal, administrative structure, etc.) and in its spiritual elements (path of holiness, theological thinking, etc.) because its founder, Saint Francis of Assisi, gave it a Rule which, for eight centuries, has never ceased to inspire its members to actively live the Gospel life.

With a sincere desire to avoid the risk of getting lost in words, we would like to turn our attention to this Rule, seeing it as its author intended it to be, namely a way of life. This is, in fact, how he conceived it, and his intention is very clear from the very first verse, which points it out: “The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ...” (LR I, 1).

The role and purpose of the Friars Minor, as intended by Saint Francis, is none other than to become and be custodians of the Holy Gospel, not merely to preserve it in libraries or special places, but by embodying it themselves. In order to carry out this task, the Rule has a very important place in their life and plays a very significant role in the structure of the Franciscan Order and, of course, of the great Franciscan family. Francis is aware of the value and importance of the word of God and is absolutely convinced that life, in all its fullness (cf. Jn 10:10), dwells only in this word. If we were to refer to certain philosophical categories, perhaps less familiar to him, namely, hylomorphism, we could say that the “Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” constitutes the “matter” while the Rule, conceived by Francis of Assisi, shapes its “form”. Therefore, the Rule is not life in itself, for only the word of God is life, but the Rule is one of the “forms” through which life expresses itself. The Rule is actually the only form that life manifests itself to the Friars Minors, because it helps them to “pay attention to what they must desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity” (LR X 8).

The Franciscan Order has experienced countless divisions over the centuries, as we know only too well, mainly because of the way the Rule was understood and followed. Looking back on history only from a human point of view, we might be justified to say: “You, most holy one, know perfectly how, lost in a maze of mystifying perils, they follow your footprints from how great a distance” (2Cel 224). Of course, failures and mistakes made over the centuries can’t be ignored either but, all together, the friars, striving to follow in the footsteps of their Seraphic Father Saint Francis, have never ceased to enlarge his family by many brothers and sisters who are now living the same charism, albeit in different ways.

One of the problems of today's society, as we have unfortunately seen in recent years, is the reluctance of many individuals to follow rules. Could the same be true for the brothers and sisters of Saint Francis with regard their own Rule? Could it be possible that what was originally perceived as a way of life is no longer held in the same esteem?

Indeed, all God has made is very good (cf. Gen 1,31), but if the Rule and spirituality of Saint Francis continues to fascinate, inspire and attract an impressive number of brothers and sisters after eight centuries, we must admit that he has done something good. We all, brothers and sisters of the great Franciscan family, certainly have our own inner aspirations regarding our lives, and our vocation is definitely one of them. Therefore, despite our daily difficulties and weaknesses we continue to pray: “Draw us, then, to yourself that we may run after the fragrance of your perfumes (.....). Give us such days as we had of old, oh mirror and exemplar of the perfect! Do not allow that those who are like you by profession be unlike you in life” (2Cel 221).



In this part, we are going to share experiences from our Franciscan family. We have asked a Poor Clare sister, two brother frairs, a Franciscan TOR sister, a Secular Franciscan sister and a Franciscan Youth sister to share what the Rule of their orders mean in their lives and especially in the journey of their Franciscan vocation.

A POOR SISTER OF ST. CLARE

To be a Poor Clare sister today is not determined by an external, material dimension of space or place, but it is much more; it is a deep, essential inner and spiritual reality that constitutes one's identity in God. Through the profession of the evangelical counsels, I live my vocation in a constant attitude of thanksgiving to the Father of mercies and I feel I am called to live a form of life which makes me more and more like Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, by consecration, I offered myself totally to Jesus, without anything of my own, and I am dedicating myself to contemplative prayer in the cloister, living in obedience, in chastity and in the communion of fraternal life, following the Rule written by Saint Clare, namely to observe the Holy Gospel. In the commitment of my profession, I am inspired by the example and teachings of our Mother Saint Clare, who enclosed herself out of love for her heavenly Bridegroom.

My day in the monastery is marked by various time periods: prayer, work, study, moments of recreation and rest, which embody the preciousness of time lived and given by God. This disposes me to live my life with perseverance, patience, and joy despite all its hardships, always praising God everywhere and every time. My life is a life intertwined with contemplative prayer and activity in the sacred space of the monastery. It is about a spiritual life characterized by the joy of meeting God and the other sisters, following the example of Saint Clare.

My day begins with liturgical prayer, which unites me with the whole Church, to consecrate to God the first movements of my mind and spirit and to undertake nothing before receiving a thought from God. For me it represents the intention and activity of the whole day and thus becomes an enlightening moment, because prayer is nothing more than establishing an intimate dialogue with God and myself; listening to God's word from the early hours of the morning nourishes, transforms and guides me on my spiritual journey. To live my daily relationship with the Eucharist, with Jesus who comes down from heaven every day not to remain in the golden ciborium, in the golden chalice of the church, but to find another heaven that is infinitely dearer to him than the first, the heaven of my soul. From this place, the sanctuary of my soul, my praise rises unceasingly to God, so that the mind itself is in tune with the voice; but in a community, I would say, the melodic sound, comes from the harmonious accord of all the chords of life, of prayer, of charity, of service and of living together.

In Thomas Eccleston's chronicle it is stated that "On the ladder of poverty the highest step is to live by one's own labour and be a burden to no one." (Thomas Eccleston n 127: FF 2566).

According to the Rule, work starts after the Third Hour. The Lord has given me the grace to work like all other people, to imitate the example of Jesus, to sanctify this work by offering it to the Father. "Reflect upon... holy humility, at least blessed poverty, the untold labours and punishments that He endured for the redemption of the whole human race" (4LAg 22, in The Lady. Clare of Assisi; Early Documents, New York, 2005, p.56 –

I thank God for my vocation to the contemplative life and I am happy to be present in the world as a sign of God's kingdom for my Romanian people. People may want to see me, they typically see active life sisters but, by God's grace, I am what I am. He has chosen me to be the heart of this mystical body, to be love and to live in silence, praying in silence to sustain the fragile and insecure members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. To live this contemplative dimension as a prophetic sign, a witness of a life lived in love for Christ, poor and humble; to be like a candle that leads to Christ and helps every Christian to draw closer to God with his mind and heart, with his whole life and to collaborate in the work of salvation to the praise and glory of God.

Sr. Dorotea del Redentor,
Poor Clare sister - Our Lady of the Angels
Monastery, Roman, Romania

I am Father Iulian Misariu, a Conventual Franciscan friar, who has been serving as a confessor in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican for more than two years.

Today it is increasingly difficult to talk about deep things, about personal faith, because one risks being ridiculed, considered a man who does not live with his feet on the ground. I think it is essential for us Christians to have the courage to step out of the catacombs, imposed or imagined, to proclaim the primacy of God in our lives.

As a Franciscan brother, belonging to the First Order of the Seraphic Father, I feel honoured to testify that after 31 years of Franciscan life, I feel the enthusiasm I had at the beginning of my Franciscan experience. I feel in love with Christ and I am a beloved son of the Father, a confrere of the Seraphic Father, who continues in the present day of history the witness of faith that I have professed with courage and humility before the Church and the fraternity. I came from a life experience living in a communist, atheist and dictatorial regime, having worked in a large factory in Romania, having done military service. The freedom God gave me, inspiring me to give myself totally to Him, was preceded by a few months by the fall of the communist regime in Romania. I was arrested by security while praying in a church, it was September 1989, leaving me after several hours of interrogation. The question the security guard asked me was: What are you? My answer was categorical: I am a Catholic Christian. He told me that this could cost me deprivation of liberty for six months in a prison of the communist regime. I honestly trembled, but in that moment I met Christ, like Francis, before the crucifix at San Damiano.

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For me, that Jesus continues to speak to me today. When I professed the religious life, I promised to be faithful to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living the Rule of the Order, by which I pledged to "keep the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of my own and in chastity". The Gospel and the Eucharist are two constant and daily tracks of my spiritual life. I cannot imagine my mission in the fraternity and in the Church without these two sources of spiritual life. They give me inner joy, they give me consistency in my daily conformity to God, and in this faith I want to live every moment of my existence and my mission on this earth, until I can eternally enjoy His presence in Paradise.

Julian Misariu OFMC^{Conv.}

Rumania-Roma

My Experience of Observing the Rule of Saint Francis

One of the first things I remember about the rule was reading the book "The Brother of Assisi" by Ignacio Larrañaga, when I was a YouFra member. I was struck by how Saint Francis "gave birth" to the rule in a long process, not free from pain and misunderstandings, in order to give birth to a charism in the Church... how could we not suffer a little in YouFra with the zonal regulations and the national document! ("Ugly Duckling" for those in the know)! The tension in an institutional organization that does succeed in extinguishing the spirit becomes part of the organization from its origins.

That is why I was interested, already as a Capuchin postulant, in studying the genesis and development of the text of the rule. Behind each expression there is a story, and in it resides the intention of Francis, what God was stirring up in him and what the brothers were discovering. Francis and the brothers (not only himself) were discerning and making choices, guided by the Spirit. Knowing more about Francis, especially through his own writings, was the way to become attuned to his heart and to better understand the charism.

Later I learned that "a text without context is a pretext"... By understanding better the context of Francis's time, his words and choices were clearer and stronger. They were more inspiring and committed during the novitiate. And more demanding for a current rereading, in the context of the times. For example the phrases, "don't ride a horse" or "don't touch money," reread by a fraternity that lives on the periphery, among poor people, visiting lepers... is understood from life.

I was like this discovering that the rule is like a map... It indicates the general direction and the great places to stop. As a map, it is an instrument to orient yourself along the way. But then you need to have the ability to interpret the map on the route, verifying the signs on the path of life and, many times, getting lost and returning to the correct path. The path is more complex than the map... more tiring, often uphill. But also more beautiful, with its landscapes and unique experiences.

The rule is the map of Jesus's footprints, we put our footprint on his: prayer, fraternity, living without one's own, mission. "Observing the rule according to the intentions of Francis" is a permanent movement to passing from the concrete of our lives to the Gospel of Christ and from the Gospel to life. Observing the rule is not "being in good standing." Rather than ensuring external practices, the rule affirms us in a permanent dynamism of conversion and reform.

The different experiences and traditions regarding the value of the rule of the friars and its interpretation, which today are expressed in the three Orders of Minors: Conventual, Observant and Capuchin, rather than indicating a division, point to the inexhaustible possibilities contained in the charism. The grace of the successive reforms were a breath of fresh air on the path of history. It is a true wealth of our charismatic family that we are not a single monolithic institution, but several authentic, complementary, true facets, in reciprocal communion with the contemplative sisters and with the Secular Franciscans.

More than an Order in good standing, Francis bequeathed to us the rule of "dis"-order, putting the institutions in permanent reform at the service of the Gospel and of life. A reform that today, a new Francis, successor of the Apostle Peter, encourages us to spell out in all areas.

Br. Leonardo González Ruilópez OFM Cap
Argentina-Rome

My first encounter with our Rule was not impressive. It was an encounter with an old, lifeless, tired looking book. This, the fraternity said, was our Rule. This book was going to teach me how to live from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel. Not a very exciting start to my journey as a Secular Franciscan. First impressions last and I didn't pick up that book for a long time.

Now 16 years into the journey, the book still looks tired. But the pages have become more alive with occasional words jumping out at me. I am reading it more diligently and it has become a point of reference, a source of clarification and, importantly, an encounter with life – a life that I professed to "observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the centre of his life with God and people". (Article 4)

Living the Gospel is hard enough; to follow the example of St Francis takes this to a different higher and higher level, one which I know I will never be able to achieve in my life time. "Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith". (Article 15). I do not have courage for courageous initiatives and am only able to push the envelope a little at a time.

Fraternal life can be pain. Sometimes I ask why I even bother with it. Hasn't life got enough for me to deal with without another person to care for? About whose feelings I have to consider? Why are dissensions of the past being carried forward over and over again? Yet, I stay and struggle and, admittedly, grumble. Over the years, I have gotten to know some members better, appreciate some more, and see in some marks of a Franciscan which I admire. Some, I could give a good shake!!! But they are all brothers and sisters for me in this thing called Fraternity. I guess I have been placed in their lives, and they in mine to help each other in living this vocation. If the Franciscan vocation is to be lived in simplicity and humility, the fraternity is surely necessary. It does a good job of pruning us, if we stay long enough. I still get vexed and irritated but more and more I am recognizing these as moments of possibilities to grow in the spirit of minority. Is it really necessary for my opinion to be counted? Do my views need to be the best? Does the annoying trait of someone need to upset me so much? God's grace works among us in the fraternity, I know, because there is joy, laughter and care amid the vexation and irritation because we are fraternity! And we do not walk away. We make things work. Truly, the fraternity is "the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic life of its members." (Article 22)

The Rule is not an old, lifeless and tired book. It is not a set of rules. It leads to the Joy, Love and Peace the Gospel speaks about, if we allow ourselves to meet it. It is an encounter with Life.

Janet Lim OFS
Singapore

My experience of living promises in YouFra and OFS Rule as inspiration

Two weeks ago I gave my 8th promise, my 8th promise to God that I would follow the steps of Saint Francis and walk the way of Life. It's very interesting to reflect on my life from eight years ago. I was a child, now I'm still kind of a child, but at least I'm aware that I'm a child of God, a beloved child of God. I probably wouldn't be aware of it without my fraternity and without my holy promises. To take the narrow path, to follow Jesus – that is not an easy thing, but if you are aware that you are a child of God, it is possible. Not only that you think it's possible, but your heart changes and you just want to follow that path. So you do. How? You make a promise to God that you will. Did I do it perfectly? No. Was I always faithful? Sadly, no. But, He was, He was perfect and faithful and He never gave up. There were times when I would find myself thinking how I would much rather take the easy way out, but I was well aware of my promises and I kept saying to myself. This is not how a member of YouFra acts, this is not what you promised." But that wasn't in a restrictive way. I was free to do anything I wanted.

It's just that my heart longed to do better and I knew I could do better because I had promised God that I would and He equipped me with an abundance of mercy. Be it the first or the eighth promise, it brings with it many questions, but also encouragement. The first time, you ask yourself if you are worthy of it, if you will manage to live up to it and the eighth time you ask yourself again if maybe this year you will succeed better, if this time you will really surrender to Jesus, will you be more obedient this time, will your heart be purer and more humble. You don't know if you will manage to live that fullness this year, but you know that you want it, you see your brothers and sisters from YouFra and you see examples from OFS members who have promised to live like that till the end of their lives. You remember that Saint Francis, before his conversion, wasn't much different from you so you believe it's possible and you finally say your first or your eighth "Here I am". I gave Him eight "Here I ams" and a few "I accepts" and He gave me everything. He taught me how to be humble, how to see Christ in the poor, how to spread the Gospel, how to be a sister. He taught me to serve, to be joyful, to love Mary and to love Him. He's still teaching me. Glory be to Him, for his love is the only promise we need.

Ana Matić, YouFra
Croatia

My Experience in Living the Rule

I am Sister Claudenice Aparecida Sabadin, a Franciscan Sister of Mary's Heart, a Brazilian congregation, founded in the city of Piracicaba/SP in the year 1900 by Antônia Martins de Macedo and Friar Luiz Maria de São Tiago, Capuchin. I want to highlight that the founder, Antônia Martins de Macedo, is called and known by us as Mammy Cecília. She was the first Minister of the Secular Franciscan Order in Piracicaba (SP), and is in the process of Canonization. Our Charism is "To be the presence of the Maternal Heart of Mary."

As for my experience in living the Rule, it is not a question of doing a lot or a little, but in looking for the joy of doing so. I try to discover that 'point' so in everything I do, I discover the essential. This way, prayer, obedience, poverty, apostolate, community life, etc. become an expression of an essential vigor, the little cultivation to "be the presence of the Heart of Mary". Is it easy? Do I get 100%? Is it a "party"? No. But the "little" becomes the path for a little more.

For me, living the Rule does not have to be seen as something pleasant or unpleasant. Well, it does not lead to what I call the search for self-identity. That is, in the pursuit of living the Rule, I seek the formation of a strong personal self. Therefore, to create a happy environment, I need to create this energy, not just work based on pleasant and unpleasant things.

When I assume the Rule as "THIS IS THE LIFE OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST", I try to assume the Rule – Life in my life, trying to guide my life by the Rule. The Rule is the rule of my life. The Rule becomes a guide, an objective.

I seek to have the Rule as The Rule, the boundaries of my way of living. By following this Rule, my life is safe. The 'norm,' then, becomes the goal that gives security and firmness into my life. Life is the root; the Rule is the bud, the result, the solidification of life. Therefore, I seek to guide my life by the Rule. This gives me freedom! This generates life in my life. However, it generates a task, an effort, an exercise, but also the joy of knowing that I am on the path following Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Rule is the life of my life. Without it my life is meaningless. In praise of Christ. Amen.

Sister Claudenice Aparecida Sabadin
Franciscan Sister of Mary's Heart
Brasil

2

DISCERN:

Our Seraphic father, Saint Francis of Assisi had great esteem for the Rule because he knew it leads to holiness and happiness as well. Just before passing away, in his Testament, he says: "...this is a remembrance, admonition, exhortation, and my testament, which I, little brother Francis, make for you, my blessed brothers, that we might observe the Rule we have promised in a more Catholic way. (...) And whoever observes these things, let him be blessed in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and on earth with the blessing of His Beloved Son with the Most Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, and all the powers of heaven and with all the saints. 'And, as far as I can, I, little brother Francis, your servant, confirm for you, both within and without, this most holy blessing' (Test 34-41).

We would like to share some texts on this topic. The Franciscan Sources abound in stories showing the importance of the Rule for the first generation of friars.

He burned with great zeal for the common profession and Rule, and endowed those who were zealots about it with a special blessing.

He called it their Book of Life, the hope of salvation, the marrow of the Gospel, the way of perfection, the key of Paradise, the pact of an eternal covenant. He wanted all to have it, all to know it, in all places to let it speak to the inner man as encouragement in weariness and as a reminder of a sworn oath.

He taught them to keep it always before their eyes as a reminder of the life they should lead and, what is more, that they should die with it. This teaching was not forgotten by a certain lay brother whom we believe should be venerated among the martyrs, since he gained the palm of glorious victory.” When he was taken by the Saracens to his martyrdom, he held the Rule in his uplifted hands, and kneeling humbly, said to his companion: “Dear brother, I proclaim myself guilty before the eyes of Majesty of everything that I ever did against this holy Rule!” The stroke of the sword followed this short confession, and with this martyrdom he ended his life, and afterward shone with signs and wonders. This brother had entered the Order so young that he could hardly bear the Rule’s fasting, yet even as a boy he wore a harness next to his skin. Oh happy child, who began happily, that he might finish more happily!

(The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, by Thomas of Celano, chapter 158, n. 208)

“This is the place where the Order of Lesser Brothers was begun by Saint Francis under the prompting of divine revelation. For at the bidding of divine providence which guided Christ’s servant in everything, he built up three material churches before he preached the Gospel and began the Order not only to ascend in an orderly progression from the sensible to the intelligible, from the lesser to the greater, but also to symbolize mystically in external actions perceived by the senses what he would do in the future. For like the three buildings he built up, so the Church -where there is victory for the triple army of those being saved- was to be renewed in three ways under his leadership: by the form, rule, and teaching of Christ which he would provide. And now we see that this prophecy has been fulfilled.”

The Major Legend of Saint Francis, by St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Chapter 2, n. 8, in Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. The Founder, p. 541.

“First is the example we should imitate which, if we cannot imitate it perfectly, we should revere. For who could fully follow the footsteps of blessed Francis and of his companions who assisted him? For this reason, even he did not impose the same kind of rigorous poverty and perfection that he himself observed. Instead, he was instructed by a divine oracle to establish a most perfect Rule that could nevertheless be observed by all at all times. In observing it, one never departs from the discipline of our holy father, although some customs fluctuate with the change of climate. On the other hand, careful examination of the perfection of the saints possesses the power to incite virtue and to direct our behavior with their light.”

A Book of the Praises of Saint Francis, by Bernard of Besse, Introduction n.7, in Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. The Prophet, p. 32.

“Blessed Francis, the perfect zealot of the observance of the holy Gospel, burned with great zeal for the common profession of our Rule, which is nothing else than the perfect observance of the Gospel. He endowed those who are and were true zealots about it with a special blessing. He used to tell his imitators that our profession was the Book of Life, the hope of salvation, the pledge of glory, the marrow of the Gospel, the way of the cross, the state of perfection, the key of Paradise, the pact of an eternal covenant. He wanted all to have it, all to know it. In their conversations he wanted the brothers to speak of it often and to let it speak more often to the inner man, as encouragement in weariness and as a reminder of a sworn oath. He taught them to keep it always before their eyes as an encouragement and reminder of the life they should lead, and of the obligation of regular observance. What is more, he wanted and taught the brothers that they should die with it.”

A Mirror of Perfection, n. 76 in
Francis of Assisi. Early Documents. The Prophet, p.323.

The inviolability of Divine Law and of the Rule

“The story about the confrontation at the Emergency Chapter (AC 18) is thus about the very nature of the Franciscan Rule as set down in writing by Francis and his earliest brothers; the pericope under examination here (AC 17) shares a similar context and concerns about the desires of the Curia to have Francis and his brothers redraft that same Rule in order to be in stricter conformity with the juridical norms of religious communities established by the Church. And, in both instances, the two stories are about the obedience required of all friars to accept and observe the approved Rule of the fraternity.

This perspective is drawn out in the final part of our story (AC 17) during the colloquy between Francis and Christ – in the presence of the ministers – about the divine nature of the Rule. Indeed, the specific formulation of this interchange is important and the words of Christ are critical. For Christ is reported as saying: “Francis, nothing of yours is in the Rule; whatever is there is all Mine. And I want the Rule to be observed in this way: to the letter, to the letter, to the letter, and without gloss, without gloss, without gloss” (AC 17, p. 1496 [FAED 2, p. 132]).

These words, so familiar to those conversant with Franciscan texts, however, are, in fact, a reference to a similar statement about the Law made in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy. There are two echoes in our story to that book. In Deuteronomy 4,1-2, we read: “And now, O Israel, hear the commandments and judgements which I am teaching you so that, doing them, you may live... You shall not add to the word that I speak to you; neither shall you take anything away from it. Keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you” (Dt. 4,1-2).

"And in Deuteronomy 12,32: What I command you, only that should you do; neither add anything, nor take anything away from it."

Thus, the famous refrain in the story of the contesting of the drafting of the Later Rule – ad litteram, ad litteram, ad litteram, sine glossa, sine glossa, sine glossa – is, in fact, drawn from the Book of Deuteronomy reinforcing the parallel between the Law of the Old Testament, the New Law of the Gospel of the New Testament, and the Rule of the Friars Minor. It is to be observed just as it has been set down. But there is more to these resonances.

Michael Cusato, OFM, "The 'lost rule' of 1223: Francis, Elias and the ministers" , in Regula Fraților Minori, opt veacuri de istorie, spiritualitate și provocări. Actele Simpozionului Internațional, Roman, 30 septembrie – 1 octombrie 2022.

3 ACT:

Let us share in the local fraternity together with the local Franciscan family the following questions:

- How comfortable are you in 2023 following a Rule from 1223?
- Do you feel the fresh air of the Holy Spirit in the Rule?
- Can I repair the Church, somehow wounded, by living the Franciscan charism?
- Share your experiences.

4 CELEBRATE:

Once the Rule was approved by Pope Honorius III, on November 29th 1223, the Franciscan Order officially became a very important "evangelizing tool" in the Church spreading the Good News everywhere.

To celebrate this event, we would like to invite every local fraternity to find a proper time during this year (in the month which is most suitable) and make your presence felt in your local parish with a humble action (cleaning the church, the churchyard, the parish hall, etc), which normally nobody wants to do. Talk to your parish priest and prepare an hour of adoration in front of the Blessed Sacrament (inviting the whole parish community to participate) on the day which is closest to November 29th, in gratitude for being held worthy to serve the Church. Or, ask your pastor to celebrate an evening Mass on November 29th, or on a day which is most convenient for the parish community, and celebrate the event together.