

FRANCISCAN CENTENARY 2023-2026

2024: 800 YEARS OF THE STIGMATA



SECRETARIAT FOR FORMATION
CIOFS



PRESENTATION

This is the second of four years (2023-2026), in which the Franciscan Family is celebrating five centenaries. After anniversaries of the Later Rule (Regula Bullata) and Christmas in Greccio in 2023, this year we are celebrating 800 years of the gift of the Stigmata.

“ THE GIFT OF THE STIGMATA: 800 YEARS OF MYSTERY”

The purpose of celebrating the centenaries is to be open to God’s invitation here and now, as we walk together as sisters and brothers of local fraternities, as the whole Franciscan Family, and as the people of God. We are willing to draw inspiration from our brother Francis as we follow Christ, so that we may become more human, more Christian, and more Franciscan.

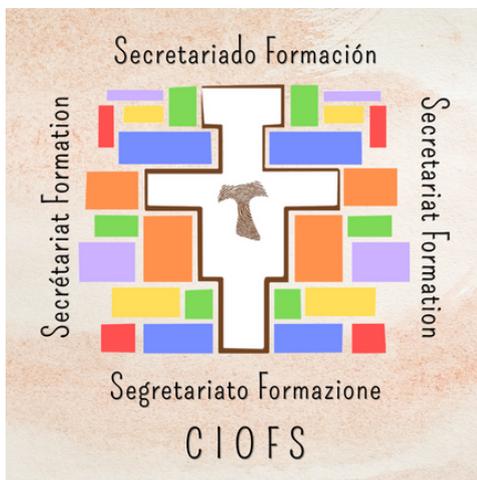
As proposed by the Conference of the Franciscan Family (CFF, 2022), the Formation Secretariate of OFS has prepared for all OFS and YouFra fraternities this material. The main theme is considered in its four dimensions: theological, anthropological, ecclesiological, and sociological – because we live in Christ, as sisters and brothers, in communion and in the world. This material is to be developed further by local fraternities, and „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” (CFF, 2022).

“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 out-wardly upon non-ecclesial social and cultural environments.” “Everyone who is attracted to the evangelical beauty of the Poverello (cf. Laudato si’ 10) [is invited] 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.” (CFF, 2022)

We encourage each national fraternity to use the following material for further activities during this year 2024. Let us be attentive and open to the mystery, experienced by our brother Francis at La Verna. Let us be touched and transformed by the same Crucified Love, which made him willing to imitate the Beloved and to become vulnerable.

With care and love,

Your sisters and brothers,



SECRETARIAT FOR FORMATION CIOFS

Silvia Noemi Diana OFS

Eremenciana Chinyama OFS

Fr. Stefan Acatrinei OFM Conv

Alonso Acevedo OFS

Diane Frances Menditto OFS

Lucia Hidveghyova OFS

Mayara Ingrid Sousa Lima OFS

May 2024

COLLABORATION:

Drawings from the document:

Alejandro Maldonado OFS

Layout of the document:

Ailén Lucía Natali OFS

Cover images:

Giotto di Bondone

In this material we use the methodology See/Listen, Discern, Act and Celebrate (Cf. Mater et Magistra, 236).

“ THE GIFT OF THE STIGMATA: 800 YEARS OF MYSTERY”

The stigmatization of St. Francis is not just an acceptance of the extraordinary signs of Christ's suffering in the flesh. It is also the great joy and consolation of God's closeness along with the pain of seeing the cross, shortly before receiving the stigmata. In the earliest sources these elements are found side by side and with equal intensity, so we will consider them together.

For Francis, the stigmata did not appear on his body during the mysterious vision, but after it was over, when he struggled to understand its meaning. At first he was filled with something beautiful and blissful both from what he was seeing and from the way the man on the cross was looking at him (that he was seen). Then came the pain when he realized that this man was tied to the cross. Only then did the stigmata become apparent. How can we understand this?

There are more possibilities. We could think of regret for our own failures that cause crucifixion-like torment in a person's soul. Or, reflecting on the wounds and pains, those of Christ 2000 years ago, and those now carried by his mystical body - the many lonely and sick in body/soul, members of minorities, marginalized, people without support or work, persecuted, abused, driven into insecurity by various circumstances.... We stand before the invitation to see Christ's kind gaze looking at us from the midst of this suffering.

We are invited to see God's presence in the midst of the wounds we carry and the wounds we touch. God looks at us and sees us in each of our sufferings, not just from the outside, as an observer, but as one who suffers with us. We bear his image in our souls, and he bears us in his heart, even with our vulnerability and wounds.

We are those whom God sees and looks at us with the same captivating and delightful gaze that he looked at Francis. A gaze that infuses joy and hope into our souls - when we expose ourselves to him and stay close to him, in the safety of his love; when we touch his glorified wounds, like Thomas in the Gospel.

When we allow this joy to permeate us, we will have the strength to suffer with those who suffer and to bear and carry the wounds on our own body (and in our soul), like Francis. Then we will not be destroyed by becoming vulnerable, it will be Christ in us who suffers, whose wounds are already glorified. His resurrection is our hope.



In this section there are personal reflections of five members of the Franciscan family. They represent three orders and show the richness of the Franciscan spirituality. Hopefully they will inspire all of us to reflect on the meaning of St Francis's stigmata in our own life, as we follow Christ in his footsteps.

AN OFS SISTER

When I was 7 years old preparing for the sacrament of confirmation I was learning also about St Francis because the parish where I grew up was run by the Franciscans. Later, when I finished my college education, I joined the OFS right away. Since then, my life has changed a lot. I decided to leave my country due to the political situation. The most difficult thing to accept about it was the separation from my fraternity and the church. However, I have assured myself everything I desire, and need is engraved in my heart.

The transit from Eritrea to Uganda wasn't easy. I had to be prepared for the worst scenario. I kept thinking of St Francis and he accompanied me on the journey.

Life of a refugee means the life on hold with no freedom at all to exercise any right to education, work, and other rights. Even with legal documents you are always under the shadows of so many uncertainties. During these years reflection on the stigmata of St Francis helped me and it is still helping me to regain my balance in life. St Francis loved Jesus and through him I always find guidance in what I could do, how I need to treat others in all kinds of situations. I live among people with various beliefs and cultures. We all deal with our fears and pain what often leads to hurting behaviors. Besides that, I deal with financial, employment and security problems. Yet I believe that suffering has a meaning, which is the participation in the mystery of Christ.

Like Francis, we will all encounter suffering on our journey with Christ. Let us never look at suffering as if God was absent. Rather, let us see together with St. Francis of Assisi that God works through our suffering, teaching us to love, to trust, and to bear our burden with humility and patience, because he is always with us, and we can draw on his love at any time.

Veronica Ghebrehiwet Mehari OFS
Kampala, Uganda

When I was a little girl, the first saint who became my friend was Francis of Assisi. I think he even preceded the Virgin Mary in timing. He won me over with his love for creation and with his desire to be united with God and thus to form a family with everything that breathes and praises the Lord.

As I grew up, Saint Francis also grew in me, and Christ did as well. Francis gradually began to call me to get to know Christ through his own eyes, ears, mouth, and hands more and more. And so, we have been slowly walking together on the path of peace and good. He teaches me to sing the song of Brother Sun and to put on new clothes – a habit – that is, the body of Christ and his cross. He introduces to me the blessed ones with a pure heart and the noble Lady Poverty, until it culminates with Sister Obedience, which welcomes Francis on Mount La Verna, while I am waiting below. Francis was obedient unto death, unto death to sin and unto the meeting with Sister Death. He teaches me that for God there is forever Sister Death as Brother Life, war as peace, darkness as light and pain as joy.

As I sit in my room in Bratislava, sometimes it seems to me that Francis on Mount La Verna is too distant and inaccessible. But when I get quiet, I hear him singing and calling me not to be afraid to leave the world of wealth and seductive chivalry of our time, but to ascend the mountain into silence, poverty, and solitude. And this song is so catchy and beautiful that I'm gradually getting it, and I must admit that the fool after all, is me and the world, not Francis. I am fascinated by how incredibly natural and authentic he is. And that's why his stigmata, and Christ's wounds, are slowly becoming more and more natural and meaningful for me. They are open – open to anyone who wants to put their finger in them and to believe. They are the living engraved tablets, brought to the world by Francis from Mount La Verna (like those two tablets of the Law, given out of love and brought by Moses from the Mount Sinai), so that we may turn away from the sin of idolatry and discover the nature and nearness of God's Law. They, the stigmata become a new creation in Francis, and although I know only a little about them, at least I understand that I can greet them as Sisters Wounds, because they were created by "God's finger", and they are good, beautiful, and creative.

Theresa Yungova, Slovakia

Our life is strewn with various encounters.

"The true love of Christ has transformed the lover into the exact image of the Beloved" (Major Legend 13: 5). Our lives are strewn with various encounters. Some are only momentary, some appeal to us for a time, others leave certain mark, but there are also those that last for a lifetime. Time seems to stand still... Not in the sense of stiffness, closedness, on the contrary, many things do happen, but the passage of time takes on a different dimension.

At the beginning of this encounter there is a touch, one feels the touch of love. If he responds to it, it will start guiding him. Perhaps each one of us has had this experience in some form. The touch of love is even more powerful when it comes from its source, from God. It was experienced by Francis, who met the Crucified in San Damiano and could not forget him any more..., it has been experienced by many of his followers. I have experienced it as well...

Years ago, as I was entering the side hallway adjacent to the Franciscan church, I saw a life-size statue. It represented Christ on the cross trying to embrace Francis and he was reaching out to him with all his being. It was a joy, every morning, to watch this silent, strong yearning of one for the other, this struggle of love to overcome the distance that was yet separating them. The short distance was full of silence, of gazes fixed at each other, of devotion and surrender, but also of the desire that it would no longer separate them. Love overcomes distances, but it does not walk alone. Its inseparable companion is pain. Love without pain could turn into complacency, and pain without love would be devastating. Both are the faithful guides on the journey to the Beloved. Francis asked for them at the end of his pilgrimage, on Mount La Verna. At that time Love and pain showed fully their power to transform wounds into the precious signs of Christ's love. That short distance, between Christ on the cross and me, is a journey of love in surrender, in participation in the life of the Beloved, in the good and in the difficulties. It is open to every pain, hurt, disappointment... which, in Love and with Love, acquire their meaning and true character.

Sr. Pacifika OSF, Rome, Italy

A POOR SISTER OF ST. CLARE

Francis meeting with Christ at La Verna

My experience of the stigmata is that in all truth you cannot be Christ's disciple without the Cross. The Bugambilia (Vogabilla) flowers in our Monastery constantly remind me of this beautiful reality. These flowers are not only beautiful in their multi – color but also resistant and strong. What is inspiring me and it's unique in them is the life that comes from their thorns. They bloom from the thorns. With that, they have taught me that if my life in the cloister is to be fruitful and meaningful, it has to be wounded in whichever way it pleases my Beloved Spouse. He brought me to the enclosure to be fertile, not to be barren. The difficulties of life have to be there in order to mature my faith in Jesus and to deepen my roots in the reality of my religious and Christian vocation: The time of adoration and prayer, when I listen to God, and entrust to Him all the hopes and anxieties of our world in living Silence and seclusion...that embrace the whole Church in heaven and on earth...these are mine most cherished moments in the cloister.

For me this is what means the stigmatization or the encounter of Francis with the Crucified Christ at La Verna on those special moments.

Sr. Maria Tamele, Zimbabwe



The stigmata of St Francis are the manifestation of Christ's wounds on a person who has a deep spiritual bond with him. I am a Zimbabwean priest and a Franciscan Capuchin, and I will reflect on the meaning and significance of the stigmata for my life and ministry.

Zimbabwe is a country that has faced political and economic crises, violence, and poverty for decades. I have seen the suffering and resilience of our people, especially the poor and marginalized.

I joined the Franciscan order, which follows the example and teachings of St Francis of Assisi. He was a man who renounced worldly riches and pleasures and embraced a life of poverty, simplicity, and service. He had a profound love for God, creation, and all creatures, especially the poor and the lepers. He also had a special devotion to the passion of Christ, which led him to receive the stigmata in 1224.

The stigmata of St Francis are the signs of his intimate union with Christ, who suffered and died for our salvation. They are also the sign of his compassion for the suffering of humanity, which he shared in his own flesh. The stigmata are not a reward or a privilege, but a gift and a responsibility. It is a call to follow Christ more closely, to imitate his love and humility, and to be his instruments of peace and justice in the world.

As a Zimbabwean priest, I find the stigmata of St Francis very relevant and inspiring for my ministry and mission. It reminds me that I am called to be a witness of Christ's love and mercy in a wounded world, especially among the poor and oppressed. It challenges me to live in solidarity with those who suffer, to share their joys and sorrows, and to offer them hope and healing.

The stigmata of St Francis are the universal message for the church and the world. They invite us to contemplate God's love revealed in Christ crucified and risen, to respond to his call to conversion and holiness, and to participate in his mission of reconciliation and transformation.

Fr. Elvis Gwangwava OFM Cap,
Zimbabwe

Below, there are portions of two early lives of St Francis. The first one was written by Thomas of Celano at the time of Francis' canonization (1229). Later it was replaced by another life, written by St Bonaventure (1260), while he was the General Minister. Suggested readings: 1 Celano 93-96, FF 483-486; Major Legend 13: 1-10, FF 1222-1236; 1-2, FF 261; Blessing for Brother Leo, FF 262; 2 Celano 49, FF 635.

The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano (1 Celano 94-96, FF 484-486).

94 While he (Francis) was staying in that hermitage called La Verna, after the place where it is located, two years prior to the time that he returned his soul to heaven, he saw in the vision of God a man, having six wings like a Seraph, standing over him, arms extended and feet joined, affixed to a cross. Two of his wings were raised up, two were stretched out over his head as if for flight, and two covered his whole body. Is 6:2 When the blessed servant of the most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest awe, but could not decide what this vision meant for him. Moreover, he greatly rejoiced and was much delighted by the kind and gracious look that he saw the Seraph gave him. The Seraph's beauty was beyond comprehension, but the fact that the Seraph was fixed to the cross and the bitter suffering of that passion thoroughly frightened him. Consequently, he got up both sad and happy as joy and sorrow took their turns in his heart. Concerned over the matter, he kept thinking about what this vision could mean and his spirit was anxious to discern a sensible meaning from the vision. Ps 143:4 [Vulgate, Ps 142:4]

While he was unable to perceive anything clearly understandable from the vision, its newness very much pressed upon his heart. Signs of the nails began to appear on his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little while earlier on the crucified man hovering over him.

95 His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the middle by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner part of his hands and on the upper part of his feet, and their points protruding on opposite sides. Those marks on the inside of his hands were round, but rather oblong on the outside; and small pieces of flesh were visible like the points of nails, bent over and flattened, extending beyond the flesh around them. On his feet, the marks of nails were stamped in the same way and raised above the surrounding flesh. His right side was marked with an oblong scar, as if pierced with a lance, and this often dripped blood, so that his tunic and undergarments were frequently stained with his holy blood.

...two years before he (Francis) returned his spirit to heaven, after a variety of many labors, he was led by divine providence to a high place apart called Mount La Verna. When according to his usual custom he had begun to fast there for forty days in honor of Saint Michael the Archangel, he experienced more abundantly than usual an overflow of the sweetness of heavenly contemplation...

... On a certain morning about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, while Francis was praying on the mountainside, he saw a Seraph having six wings, fiery as well as brilliant, descend from the grandeur of heaven. And when in swift flight, it had arrived at a spot in the air near the man of God, there appeared between the wings the likeness of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross. Two of the wings were raised above his head, two were extended for flight, and two covered his whole body. Seeing this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced at the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that He was fastened to a cross pierced his soul with a sword Lk 2:35 of compassionate sorrow. He marveled exceedingly at the sight of so unfathomable a vision, knowing that the weakness of Christ's passion was in no way compatible with the immortality of the seraphic spirit. Eventually he understood from this, through the Lord revealing it, that Divine Providence had shown him a vision of this sort so that the friend of Christ might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the enkindling of his soul. As the vision was disappearing, it left in his heart a marvelous fire and imprinted in his flesh a likeness of signs no less marvelous. For immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen a little before in the figure of the man crucified. His hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the center by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on the inner side of the hands and the upper side of the feet and their points on the opposite sides. The heads of the nails in his hands and his feet were round and black; their points were oblong and bent as if driven back with a hammer, and they emerged from the flesh and stuck out beyond it. Also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed, moistening his tunic and underwear.

... After true love of Christ transformed the lover into His image, 2 Cor 3:18 .

We encourage you to read the full version in the sources, not only the selected texts. We also recommend to compare them with contemporary critical life of Francis according to our choice.

3 ACT:

As sisters and brothers of the Franciscan family we will reflect, discuss and share about the following:

·Francis did not seek suffering, he sought Christ. He loved him and wanted to be united with him, even on the cross. This love transformed him – the lover – into the Beloved.

How can you be inspired by this in your daily life and ?

·What is your personal experience (or struggle) with silent prayer, with its challenges and beauty?

·Francis was filled with joy by the gaze of the Seraph. He was looking at him and he was seen by him. Then he experienced the sorrow, realizing the cross. When we seek the presence of God, in the midst of (our) pain it can be truly a transformative experience.

Can we share such enriching times of our life with our sisters and brothers?

·We are called by our Rule to let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all that we are and do and to relive the mysteries of the life of Christ (Cf. Rule 8). How can we deepen this dimension of our life, encouraged by the example of Francis, who was fasting and contemplating on the Passion of Christ before receiving the stigmata?

4 CELEBRATE:

This year we celebrate together as the Franciscan family the gift of the stigmata in various ways. Please, be creative in adjusting the proposals below according to our own local conditions. Let us be inspired by Francis, who “found it easier to do what is perfect than to talk about it; ...because words do not do what is good, they only point to it.” (1 Celano, 93)

·Prayer is a relationship with God, words are not always necessary. Silence is a space in which we can experience and celebrate God’s presence beyond words. Let us begin every private and communal prayer of this year with a minute of silence, aware of the Holy Trinity.

·Silence is a fundamental condition for listening to God, ourselves and others. Fraternities of the Franciscan family are invited to organize together a retreat or a recollection day.

·Let us recognize the “wounds“ in your surroundings and collaborate with the local Church on “healing“ them by reaching out to the needy and the least among us. We could visit together the elderly, homeless, prisoners, migrants, lonely or sick (depending on our conditions).

·Let us practice the art of contemplating Christ in our pain and in difficulties of the people we meet every day. We are never alone and his glorified wounds give us hope.

