

Final Message of the 3rd European OFS-YouFra Congress Lithuania 2018

Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within him (Jn 7:38)



Dear brothers and sisters,
May the Lord give you His peace!

We wish to share with you the joy of having celebrated the 3rd European OFS-YouFra Congress, from August 20-26, 2018, in Kaunas, Vilnius and other spiritually significant spots in Lithuania.

Our Congress was an itinerant one. It was a very nice and inspirational experience to visit so many different places, meet with local brothers and sisters, live for a short time with them and share each other's life.

We hear so many times today that Europe is in a crisis: our values, our historical and spiritual roots are challenged, secularism and individualism are endangering human dignity and the value of human life, some of our brothers and sisters are even facing war and terrorism. During the Congress, however, our conviction that our continent can be renewed and that we are to play an important role in this, was reinforced.

The Congress opened with the celebration of the Eucharist at the Kaunas Basilica. The celebrant was Archbishop Lionginas Virbalas, SJ who gave us a very warm welcome. During the first evening we got to know each other better, socialising with everyone who was there. In addition, we enjoyed the many good national dishes that the members of our international fraternity had brought.

The first working day was focused on formation. One of our general spiritual assistants, brother Alfred Parambakathu OFM Conv, presented to us, in a simple, although very profound, way the context and the symbolism behind the words of Jesus in John 7:38, the topic of our Congress, and tried to answer the question what it means to us, Franciscans, in today's world: *Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within him.*

We have learned, through Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, that the Holy Spirit lives in us and thus we become sources of the Spirit. Water is the element that maintains life and is thus a symbol of the Holy Spirit: if we are able to live in the Spirit, we shall bring life even if we find ourselves in the middle of a desert. And this should be taken not only in the spiritual sense: we, Franciscans, should be able to reach out and offer services to our neighbours in need. Br. Alfred called on us to express our faith in small acts of faith not only during the Congress, while walking on the streets,

doing social ministries, staying with families etc., but also after we return home, to our families and fraternities. Drinking the water that Jesus gives us means becoming more and more like him, thereby being a source of the Holy Spirit ourselves, letting him work in and through us.

These days have let us experience just this. As one of the fruits of it, this final message shall share with you some of the gifts, the Holy Spirit gave us. It is our desire to bring the faith, hope and love we shared in this Congress into our daily lives. In this way, we hope, the Spirit will live in and beyond all of us, leading us to concrete action and testimony, according to the Gospel we are called to live:

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The participation in this Congress has represented for us the answer to a call – both on a personal level and as a community. A call to satisfy our thirst through the living water the Holy Spirit provides for us.

We have accepted the invitation to *turn back to the first love*, to the essence of the charism of Saint Francis, from whom we have the grace and the responsibility to give testimony.

We feel the necessity to deepen our Franciscan vocation and confirm our identity as members of the OFS and YouFra by living it in a profound and an authentic way.

Then we will turn away from the temptation of empty activism – i.e. acting without the Holy Spirit and without constant and have great care for our relation to Jesus – as we were urged by the speech of the brothers Blužas in Šiluva – one of our destinations.

During her apparition, the Virgin Mary of Šiluva said: *once my son was worshipped here, now they are sowing and ploughing*. We have the commitment not to let Europe become a place where a lot of work is done but not for the salvation of our neighbours and ourselves.

Šiluva is a sacred place and a testimony to the power of belief. Strengthened by the motherly care of the Virgin Mary Lithuanians were able to withstand the difficult times of the Reformation and later of communism. Šiluva is now not only a symbolic place for Lithuanian Catholicism and longing for freedom, but also a source of spiritual energy for Europe and the whole world in times of secularism which is spreading quickly.

The visit to the Hill of Crosses was a further testimony of the power of the cross and of faith. Our greatest hope is that the Cross of the European Franciscan Family that has been set up and blessed at this unique location shall represent the joint strengths and the endurance of the charism of OFS, YouFra and all members of the Franciscan Family.

We shall regain our spiritual dimension by choosing evangelical life. And we shall regain the true sense of being human, as brothers and sisters of all creation, which leads us to our concrete social impact.

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The participation at the Congress of 130 representatives from 24 European countries and around 30 administrative staff has promoted a fruitful exchange of experiences. It has shown that, beyond the connections of a common faith and Franciscan vocation, relationships between individuals with different traditions, habits and cultures is always possible and has become very precious.

The thirst to live in community is in the heart of every individual, but, often, experiences of the temptation for personal enrichment and individualism lead to isolation and create distance, feeding fear of others, no matter if they are near or far away, similar to us or different. To meet, to approach someone, however, often requires courage and maybe even suffering – but as Nathanael was called by Philip, it is worthwhile to *Come and see*. In this context Bishop Kęstutis Kėvalas called upon us to see with our own eyes not only Lithuania but also the acts of the Holy Spirit and to become European apostles of the good news. This we did, for example in Kaunas during the Evening of Evangelisation realised through a flash mob and adoration.

Water is the image which has accompanied our Congress and has become a gift, assuring peace and justice, if we are willing to learn that water does not separate but connects the banks of a river. We consider reaching out to others as a rich source of water flowing out from the rocks. Based on our new relationship with God (vertical tie), we shall be able to renew our contacts with our neighbours and family (horizontal ties). This we feel may be the only stable basis of our acts of mercy in favour of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. During group discussions we saw a number of impressive practices from different countries on how such initiatives are realised. It is also important to mention the success achieved by the initiative *Well4Africa* proposed by the Lithuanian National Fraternity of OFS and YouFra to all European OFS and YouFra fraternities as a concrete fruit of the Congress.

We, participants of the Congress, had also the opportunity to put our love towards God and our neighbours into practice by visiting various social services and joining the fruitful work there.

We realised that any concrete deed to help others has to start with the *change of heart* – penance and conversion. This given, the Holy Spirit shall act in all of our actions and initiatives as *the one and only architect* of our projects, keeping us and our work simple but very effective.

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Based on what we experienced during the Congress we call upon all European fraternities of OFS and YouFra to become more concrete. Let's not only focus on the horizontal and vertical axis of our life (Tau) in a spiritual way but let it add greater depth and width in our daily life.

We therefore turn to you with the following suggestions, meant to inspire you:

Open up, so that the living water can spread: Do not cling to the past and to the ways we have always done things – do not let the Holy Spirit crash into closed windows!

Open your mind and arms towards your neighbour standing right in front of you and be not afraid to get in contact. Improve communications, both within Franciscan family and outside.

Emphasise the importance of *Human dignity* for example by urging European leaders overtly (possibly by writing a letter). This could be possibly a common project for OFS and YouFra in Europe.

Be concerned about the future of our society – i. e. get involved in the education of children and young people and work together with schools and families to underline the importance of making a commitment to the local community.

We emphasise once again: as we know and as we learnt, all these extremely important actions must begin with prayer, adoration and silent contemplation – from which the last was probably the only thing we missed a little bit during our Conference. We wish to refer here to the precious example of

Saint Clare of Assisi, who, by her manner of living maintained the balance between action and contemplation.

From the depths of our hearts we say thanks to the OFS and YouFra of Lithuania for the massive work and the outstanding organisation! You provided really inspiring days for us and made the Franciscan spirit live!

We would like to end this message by praising Mary, Mother of God. She was our companion from the beginning to the end of our Congress – her image, the icon *Regina Familiae Franciscanae* shall continue its journey among the European OFS and YouFra fraternities. Her willingness always to say yes and to be engaged is an inspiration for us. May she be with all of us and help us to live in a true Franciscan spirit.

Kaunas, on August 26th, 2018.