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...together on the journey

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«Walking with the young people: a vital challenge for OFS»

«Spiritual Assistant and YouFra: the art of vocational discernment»

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Introduction

The Synod on young people was on the theme «young people, faith and vocational discernment». Continuing our reflection on the journey with young people in this third issue of Koinonia, we focus on the role of the spiritual assistant in the vocational discernment of the Franciscan Youth (YouFra). All Christians are called to life, to friendship with God in Jesus and to holiness¹ in the current context as it is, “with its risks, its challenges and its opportunities”². YouFra shares the Franciscan vocation with other members of the Franciscan Family. However, being young, many are still in search of their own vocation and others try to mature in the vocation they have discovered. They need to be accompanied in discernment and maturation. The service of spiritual assistance recommended by the OFS legislation has this purpose as well. Therefore, as pastors and traveling companions for young people, the assistant should be an expert in the art of vocational discernment. Starting from the experience of Francis of Assisi, model of YouFra and from some indications offered by Pope Francis in the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, we propose here four elements which, in our opinion, should guide the assistants of YouFra in the vocational discernment for young people. These four elements are: identifying the dreams of young people, helping them to ask the question “Lord what do you want me to do?”, giving them opportunities to serve the poor and then propose some pathways.

1. Identifying the dreams of young people

In his youth, the life of Francis of Assisi is marked by dreams. He dreamed of becoming a Knight and he put all of himself into it. His father supported him with all the means at his disposal to succeed. Dreaming is proper to all young people. However, in a world of materialism and consumerism, many of them lose sight of their dreams and therefore the impulse to follow them. The assistant will see to it that the young Franciscans do not lose sight of their dreams and will help them to “persevere on the way of dreams”³. The experience of Francis of Assisi shows that following one’s dreams with commitment and sincerity can be a way to discover one’s vocation. Moreover, “Our best dreams are only attained through hope, patience and commitment, and not in haste”⁴. In fact, “in order to realize one’s vocation, it is necessary to develop, to make sprout and

¹ Cf. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Loreto, 2019, n° 286.

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Rome, 2018, n° 2.

³ *Christus Vivit*, n° 142.

⁴ *Idem*.

cultivate all that one is ... to find our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit”⁵.

“When we are called upon to help others discern their path in life, what is uppermost is the ability to listen”⁶. Accompanying young people means taking them seriously even their dreams. What are the dreams of our young people? What do they desire? Where do they want to arrive? What do they want to do for a better world? Francis, naked and misunderstood by the society and even by his own family, was received and covered with the mantle of Guido, Bishop of Assisi. Thus the assistant must create spaces in which young dreamers can feel welcomed, without judgments. Structures that are too rigid prevent young people from daring to discover new horizons of life and hinder them from the Holy Spirit. The assistant helps them to open up to the Spirit who is eternal novelty. Pope Francis gives us the example when he tells young people: “Live! Give yourselves over to the best of life! Open the door of the cage, to out and fly!”⁷. The young participants of the pre-synod assembly gave some characteristics that they expect from their mentors. These can be served as a mirror and for an examination of conscience for all those who are called to accompany young people in the process of discernment: “...being a faithful Christian who engages with the Church and the world; someone who constantly seeks holiness; someone who is a confidant without judgement. Similarly, someone who actively listens to the needs of young people and responds in kind; someone deeply loving and self-aware; someone who recognizes his or her limits and knows the joys and sorrows of the spiritual journey etc”⁸. Only such mentors could help the Franciscan youth to identify their dreams and persevere in them by listening to the Holy Spirit.

1. “Lord, what do you want me to do!”

Dreaming is human, but seeking the will of God is Christian. Identifying one’s dreams and committing oneself to realizing them expresses human maturity, but asking what God’s will is for me is a sign of spiritual growth. Francis of Assisi was going to the south of Italy for a war campaign, dreaming of the glory of becoming a knight. Once reached in Spoleto, Francis began to feel ill. “No less anxious about the trip, as he was falling to sleep, half awake, he heard someone asking him where he wanted to go. When Francis revealed to him his entire plan, the other said: “who can do more good to you? The lord or the servant?” When Francis answered him: “the lord”, he again said to him: “Then why are you abandoning the lord for the servant, the patron for the client?” And Francis said: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” “Go back to your land,” he said, “and what you are to do will be told to you. You must understand in another way the vision which you saw.”⁹. Facing one’s desire with the will of God is an indication of maturation in discernment. This can happen also as a crisis. Therefore, once reached in Spoleto, “Francis began to feel ill”. It is a moment in which a young person seriously wonders what he wants. It is the moment of important choices and therefore also of renunciation. It is also a time of fear and the assistant mentor is a great help for young people to take the step forward.

Returning to Assisi, the young Francis gradually discovered his vocation by listening to the Word of God. If a young man arrives to ask like Francis: “Lord, what do you want me to do”, is already willing to embrace a project that is bigger than his dreams. It is the moment to guide him to enter into dialogue with the Word of God. From the prayerful listening to the Word of God will be clarified His will for those who seek. It is appropriate that the fraternities offer young people not only space for entertainment, but above all spaces of prayer, of listening to the Word of God, and spaces of solitude and silence that allow young people to be in touch with themselves and to

⁵ *Christus Vivit*, n° 257.

⁶ *Christus Vivit*, n° 291.

⁷ *Christus Vivit*, n°143.

⁸ *Christus Vivit*, n° 246.

⁹ *Legend of Three Companions*, 6.

confront themselves with the Word of God that penetrates to the most intimate of man. “The Lord speaks to us in a variety of ways, at work, through others and at every moment. Yet we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God’s language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, to calm our anxieties and to see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light”¹⁰. When Francis had his first companions, he turned again to the Word of God to find out how they should live: “And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the holy Gospel”¹¹.

2. Offering the opportunity to serve the “lepers”

After having washed the feet of the disciples, Jesus said: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet, (Jn 13:14). Every Christian vocation is always a call to put oneself at the service of the Kingdom of God. It is precisely in this that true happiness and eternal life are found. But since the logic of service goes against the spirit of the world, it is necessary to give young people the opportunity to discover for themselves the joy of serving not only in the fraternity or in the communities but also to serve the last of society, the “lepers” of today. Indeed, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Mt 13:44). “When seeking to discern our own vocation, there are certain questions we ought to ask. ...If we are not to go astray, we need a different starting pint. We need to ask: Do I know myself, quite apart from my illusions and emotions?”¹². We all seek happiness, but often in the wrong places, in having perfect health, material wealth and fame. Francis of Assisi discovered happiness in the service of the last of his society, the lepers. He says it in his Testament: “The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body”¹³. In the free service, especially offered to the least, one experiences a happiness that opens the heart to the mystery of God.

Pope Francis urges us to run, “attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters”¹⁴. St. Francis of Assisi met Jesus in the leper. St. Camillus of Lellis saw Jesus in every sick person. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who is closer to our time, served Jesus in the sick last among the least. The YouFra Fraternities, under the guidance of the assistant, should provide such opportunities for young people to make such transformational experiences. The Pope warns against the danger of groups being closed in themselves: “At times, seeing a world so full of violence and selfishness, young people can be tempted to withdraw into small groups, shunning the challenges and issues posed by life in society and in the larger world. They may feel that they are experiencing fraternity and love, but their small group may in fact become nothing other than an extension of their own ego. This is even more serious if they think of the lay vocation simply as a form of service inside the Church: serving as lectors, acolytes, catechists and so forth. They forget that the lay vocation is directed above all to charity within the family and to social and political charity”¹⁵. We must not be satisfied with YouFra that does things only in the Church. The Pope proposes to young people to go beyond groups of friends to build “Social friendship, where everyone works for the common

¹⁰ *Christus Vivit*, n° 283.

¹¹ *Testament*, 14.

¹² *Christus Vivit*, n° 285.

¹³ *Testament*, 1-3.

¹⁴ *Christus Vivit*, n° 299.

¹⁵ *Christus Vivit*, n° 168.

good”¹⁶. They need to be accompanied in this, without taking away from them the possibility of making mistakes. Some guiding questions that can lead to the discovery of one’s vocation would be like: “Who am I? for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: For whom am I?”¹⁷.

3. Propose paths that are traced

“Come and see” (Jn 1:35). Jesus’ invitation to those two disciples of John the Baptist who wanted to know Jesus allowed them to spend the rest of the day with him to get to know him better. They became two of the first disciples. The vocation is also clarified by offering young people an experience of life in religious communities, with priests in parishes or with a Fraternity of OFS. It is obvious that God does not call all young people to start paths that are absolutely new. Indeed, many are called to follow paths already traced by saints and preserved by different Orders. It would be useful to offer young people opportunities to share the life of priests or religious communities without particular commitments. In fact, the founding idea for aspirants, postulants etc., is the same that is to offer possible candidates to see closely to learn more. Then, they will discern from the experience whether to follow this path or look for another. From listening carefully to the person, the Assistant who accompanies the young, after a first discernment, should also have the courage to propose to them an experience of religious life or an experience in the Parish or with an OFS Fraternity.

We know some initiatives of this form. They also exist on social media. In Cameroon, for example, many congregations have an experience called “live-in” in which young people are invited to experience life in a religious community for a few days without special commitments. Some Dioceses organize annual events called “vocations Camp” which give young people opportunities to get in touch with priests and different religious orders and congregations. These meetings allowed many to discover their vocation. The important thing is to offer young people the paths that can lead them to an encounter with the Risen and living Lord. This could also be in the form of a missionary experience or pilgrimage. Pope Francis warns that: “We should never underestimate the ability of young people to be open to contemplative prayer. We need only find the right ways and means to help them embark on this precious experience”¹⁸.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us simply remember some truths often taken for granted that Jesus Christ is always young; in fact he was only thirty-three years old when he offered the only sacrifice that saves the world. The Blessed Virgin Mary was only a young girl when she consciously submitted to the will of God to become mother of the Saviour. St. Francis of Assisi started the new evangelical life at twenty-five and died at forty-four. St. Clare of Assisi was 18 years old when she escaped from her father’s house to be welcomed by Francis into the penitential life. Indeed, the whole Franciscan movement could be called a Revolution of the Youth. St. Elizabeth of Hungary, patroness of the Secular Franciscan Order died at the age of only twenty-four, at the end of a life full of charity, a mother of three children and a widow. Moreover, many spiritual assistants of YouFra in the world are also young friars and nuns who have already made a definitive choice in the Consecrated life and who have made themselves available to accompany other young people. The examples are innumerable that prove that young people are the today of the Church, “the now of God”¹⁹. In the Franciscan Family, the YouFra is accompanied not as a future (means does not yet exist) of the charism but rather as **the now**, the present of the charism, but a present that carries within itself, in its fragility, the seed of the future.

¹⁶ *Christus Vivit*, n° 169.

¹⁷ *Christus Vivit*, n° 286.

¹⁸ *Christus Vivit*, n° 224. The underlining is of the author.

¹⁹ *Christus Vivit*, n° 64.

NEWS – CHAPTERS – VISITS – MEETINGS

▪ Egypt – National elective Chapter

From 29 July to 3 August, at the Convent of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the OFM in Mukkatam, the national elective chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Egypt was celebrated under the presidency of Michel Janian OFS, delegate of the Minister General Tibor Kauser OFS and assisted by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, member of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The program of the chapter, well prepared and planned, was however canonically thwarted due to the insufficient “quorum” of the chapter members. Therefore, the positions previously established were re-confirmed for another year and with a consultative vote Shehata Habib OFS was re-elected as the National Minister and International Councillor. The chapter took place in a fraternal atmosphere of prayer and sharing.

▪ Paraguay – National elective Chapter

The National Elective Chapter in Paraguay was held from 9-11 August, 2019 at Casa de retiro “Santa Maria de los Angeles“ in Caaguazu, of the OFM friars. The Chapter was presided over by Silvia Noemi Diana, member of the CIOFS Presidency and delegate of Tibor Kauser, Minister General of OFS. She was assisted by Fr. Alfred Parambathu OFMConv., General Assistant of OFS-YouFra. The theme of the Chapter was “Like Francis announcing Christ with the life and work“. 29 out of the 31 Capitulars and some 25 Observers were present for the Chapter. On Friday the Chapter was begun with the Holy Mass presided over by Fr. Edisson Cazali OFMCap., the Regional Spiritual Assistant of Alto Paraná. On Saturday morning Silvia Noemi Diana spoke about “double belonging of YouFra-OFS“. In the afternoon during the election Gustavo Benítez Vázquez was elected as the National Minister and International Councilor and Mirtha Ferreira was elected as the Vice-Minister and Substitute International Councilor. On Sunday morning Silvia and Fr. Alfred had a meeting with the new Council. The Chapter also fixed the priorities for the next triennium. During the concluding Holy Mass, presided over by Fr. Alfred, Silvia installed the new Council. Fr. Alvaro Gonzalez OFMConv., the National Spiritual Assistant was present for the whole Chapter and for the different moments of the Chapter 3 OFM and 3 OFMCap., Spiritual Assistants also came to interact with the Capitulars. The whole Chapter took place in a very fraternal spirit.

▪ Panama – National elective Chapter

The elective chapter of the OFS of Panama was held from August 16th to 18th at the Stella Maris Pastoral Center of the Carmelites in the city of Panama. The chapter was presided by Isabel Lima Perez, National Minister of OFS of Puerto Rico, delegated by Tibor Kauser, Minister General of OFS. She was assisted by Fr. José Roberto Centeno, OFMCap, delegate of the CAS. The main theme of the chapter was “The Family in the Encyclicals and in the Catechism of the Catholic Church”. The theme was presented by Fr. José R. Chavarría. 24 capitulars were present from the 28 summoned. The election of the new council took place on Saturday 17th in the afternoon. Ileana Vásquez was elected National Minister and International Councillor. The chapter took place in a climate of fraternity. The newly elected Council was installed by Isabel Lima on Sunday 18th August during the concluding Mass. Finally, the new Council met with the outgoing Council to vote on the proceedings of the chapter. The chapter works were concluded with a fraternal agape. Everything was conducted in a fraternal atmosphere.

▪ **Cameroon - National elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of the National Fraternity of OFS in Cameroon was held from 22 to 24 August 2019 at the Center Xavérien, Nyassa, Douala. 36 capitulars with the right to vote were present as well as some observers. The chapter was presided by Attilio Galimberti, Presidency Councilor delegated by the OFS Minister General, Tibor Kauser. He was assisted by Fr. Peter Tar Fonyuy, OFM^{Cap}, delegate of the CAS. The election of the new national council was held on Friday 23. The main theme chosen for the Chapter was: “Secular Franciscans as instruments of peace and charity in times of crisis”. The theme was presented by Fr. Peter Tar Fonyuy. Genesis Ngwainbi Aseh was elected National Minister (second mandate) and ex-officio international councillor according to the text that the chapter adopted. The new Council was installed by Attilio during the concluding Mass presided by Fr. Peter Tar. The chapter took place in a climate of prayer and serene brotherhood.

▪ **Slovakia – National elective Chapter**

The 8th National Chapter of OFS in Slovakia was held in the convent of Sestry Františkánky Premenenia at Melčice, from 30 August to 1 September, 2019. The Chapter was presided over by Andrea Karlović, member of the CIOFS Presidency and she was assisted by Fr. Jaroslav Čar OFM^{Conv.}, delegate of the CAS. There were 30 Capitulars present for the Chapter. During the election held on 31 of August in the afternoon, Josef Gazik was elected as the National Minister and Lucia Spodniakovà as the International Councilor. The whole Chapter took place in a very Franciscan fraternal way.

▪ **Togo – Fraternal and Pastoral Visits (FPV)**

The FPV at the OFS-Togo was carried out from 3 to 5 September 2019 by Michel Janian OFS, delegated by the Minister General Tibor Kauser and the Assistant General, Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor OFM^{Cap}. All the meetings took place in the Convent of the Franciscan Friars of Adidogomé - Lomé. On the first day, the visitors met the delegate of the OFM Provincial Minister, followed by meetings with the National Council, the Council of YouFra and the Southern Regional Council. On the second day, the visitors met with spiritual assistants and then individual members who had expressed the desire. For consolidating communion with the local Church, visitors paid a visit to the Archbishop of Lomé, H.E. Denis. In the evening, they held a meeting with the councils of the local fraternities. On the last day, the visitors prepared a summary of essential points that they presented to the National Council and then to the assembly of brothers gathered for this and for the closing Mass of the VFP. The Mass was presided over by Fr. Francis, concelebrated by the new national assistant, Fr. Christophe Honoré Tougouma OFM and by Fr. Clément OFM, a local assistant.

The St. Benoît Africain, OFS National Fraternity of Togo, was founded in 1961 by the OFM Friars. After a steady but very limited growth in the Lomé Capital region, the National Fraternity was constituted by a decree of the then General Minister, Encarnita del Pozzo, dated 11 November 2013. At the time of the FPV, the national fraternity recognizes 301 members among professed and candidates. These are grouped in 10 canonically erected local fraternities. Seven fraternities in the South are gathered in one region, St. Margaret of Cortona, while three northern fraternities are not yet united in one region. There are also three groups of YouFra followed by the OFM Friars with an OFS fraternal animator. All the fraternities have an appointed Assistant even if some fraternities have denounced the inactivity of the Assistants. The OFS Togo is very active in the local Church and in the Franciscan Family but should be seen a little more in society and get out of the strictly Franciscan circles. At the end of the FPV, the visitors left some recommendations for the National Council for improvement. Both are very grateful to the brothers and sisters of OFS in Togo for their welcome and to the OFM Fraternity of Adidogomé for their fraternal hospitality showed to them.

- **Burkina Faso – National elective Chapter**

The Emerging National Fraternity of OFS in Burkina Faso held an elective chapter from 6 to 8 September at the Parish of St. Francis of Assisi of the Capuchins in Ouagadougou. The chapter was presided over by Michel Janian, Councilor of the Presidency delegated by Tibor Kauser, Minister General of OFS, assisted by Fr. Vincent Babu, OFM^{Cap.}, delegate of the Conference of General Assistants, CAS. Denis Poda was elected National Minister and International Councilor.

- **Central African Republic – National elective Chapter**

The national elective chapter of OFS in the Central African Republic was celebrated from September 13 to 15, 2019 at the Jean XXIII Centre at the capital city, Bangui. The participants were about sixty, including 38 voters and twenty OFS and YouFra observers. The chapter was presided by Soulassengar Ange Gabriel Mehodjingar Abdoul OFS, the national minister of Chad, delegated by the Minister General, Tibor Kauser. He was assisted by Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor OFM^{Cap.}, general Assistant. During the work of the Chapter, after the ordinary reports of the National Minister and the treasurer, the participants reflected on two themes: (i) The participation of the OFS and Youfra of Central Africa in the efforts of peace, reconciliation and social justice; (ii) Relations between the YouFra and the OFS. The two themes were presented respectively by Fr. Rodrigue, OFM^{Cap.} and Soulassengar Ange Gabriel OFS. Each conference was followed by group work and a plenary session. A new national council was elected on Sunday 15 to the joy of all the participants, since it is from 2009 that the National Fraternity did not hold a chapter for political situation. This was the result of the election: National Minister: Magloire Désiré Malissaba; International Councilor: Maka Gbossokotto Lucienne; substitute: Gonda Lucien. The new National Council was installed during the concluding Mass presided by Fr. Francis, and concelebrated by two regional assistants. Everything took place in an atmosphere of joy and serene brotherhood. The presence of Fr. Jean Miguina OFM^{Cap.}, custos of the Chad-RCA General Custody, both at the opening Mass on the 13th, and the following day to preside himself at the Eucharist for the capitulars deserves a special note. It was a great encouragement for the chapter members. To the praise and glory of God!

- **Australia – National elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of OFS in Australia was held from 13-15 September, 2019 at St. Joseph's Centre for Reflective Living, Baulkham Hills, Sydney. The Chapter was presided over by Augustine Young Hak Yonn, member of the CIOFS Presidency and he was assisted by Fr. David Blowey OFM^{VConv.}, delegated by the CAS. There were 35 Capitulars who participated at the Chapter. Lola KELLY was elected as the National Minister for the second term and Leellen M LEWIS was elected as the International Councilor. The Chapter was held in a very fraternal atmosphere.

- **Ecuador – National elective Chapter**

The National elective Chapter of OFS in Ecuador was held in Centro de Espiritualidad “La inmaculada Concepción” at Quito from 13 to 15 September, 2019. Ana Maria Raffo, member of the CIOFS Presidency, presided over the Chapter and she was assisted by Fr. Jesus Eudoro Ceballos Benavides OFM^{Conv.}, delegate of the CAS. There were 50 Capitulars, out of 93, present for the Chapter. During the election held on 14th afternoon Martha Osorio was elected as the National Minister. The whole Chapter was conducted in a very fraternal manner.

- **Mexico – National elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of OFS in Mexico was celebrated in San Juan de los Lagos from 20 to 22 September. The chapter was presided over by Maria Consuelo Nuñez, Presidency Councillor delegated by Tibor Kauser, Minister General of OFS. She was assisted by Fr. Genaro Mayorga Reyes TOR, delegate of the Conference of General Assistants (CAS). Angel de la Rosa was re-elected National Minister and International Councillor. The Chapter was celebrated in an atmosphere of fraternal and Franciscan joy.

▪ **New Zealand – National elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of OFS in New Zealand was celebrated on September 21-22 at the Saint Francis Spiritual Centre of the OFM Friars in Auckland. 23 Delegates participated in the chapter presided over by Augustine Young Hak Yoon, Presidency Councilor delegated by Tibor Kauser, General Minister OFS. He was assisted by Fr. Sebastian Fernandes OFM Cap., delegate of the Conference of General Assistants (CAS). Domini Anderton was elected National Minister and Colleen Logan, as International Councillor. The chapter was celebrated with great serenity and Franciscan joy.

▪ **Poland – Fraternal and Pastoral Visits (FPV) and National elective Chapter**

The fraternal and pastoral visit, together with the National elective Chapter of OFS in Poland took place from September 25 to 29, 2019 at the “Centrum Franciszkanskie Klasztor O.O. Franciszkanów, OFM” in the city of Warsaw-Poland. Both the events were presided over by Attilio Galimberti OFS, delegated by Tibor Kauser, Minister General of OFS and by Fr. Pedro Zitha OFM. The visit began with the celebration of the Holy Mass in the Chapel of St. Maximilian which was followed by the meeting with the members of the Regional Council of Niepokalanów.

The following day there were several visits: to the National Council, to Mons. Michel Janocha, Auxiliary Bishop of Warsaw and to the National Council of YouFra, with the regional and local Assistants.

Saturday was dedicated to the National elective Chapter which was attended by many members from different parts of Poland, all with voting rights.

In the afternoon the election was held in which Emilia Urban was elected as National Minister and International Councillor. The closing of the visit was held on Sunday, with the celebration of the concluding Holy Mass and with the confirmation of the new National Council of Poland. Both the visit and the National Chapter were celebrated in a great climate of fraternal life and sharing, in which all the members participated.