



FRANCISCAN YOUTH TODAY

XIII General Chapter of the OFS

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Ana Fruk, Presidency councilor for YouFra

1. YOUFRA AS AN ANSWER TO THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME

When I was preparing this report, I was thinking about what the most important issues are for YouFra today. While I was reading different texts to prepare myself, I found words of blessed Pope John Paul II which he spoke during the Vigil for the Feast of Pentecost in 1998 and which also express a very clear call for Franciscan Youth: *“Thus we see an urgent need for powerful proclamation and solid, in-depth Christian formation. There is so much need today for mature Christian personalities, conscious of their baptismal identity, of their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world! There is great need for living Christian communities! And here are the movements and the new ecclesial communities: they are the response, given by the Holy Spirit, to this critical challenge at the end of the millennium. You are this providential response.”*

Keeping in mind this last sentence: *“You are this providential response”*, I thought of the responsibility that Franciscan youth has towards the Church and society in which we live. Reading different documents of the OFS on YouFra, I see this same message is recognized by the OFS. That is why in the past several years the attention has been given to YouFra and its development. Here I would like to say a few words on several issues about YouFra which mostly coincide with the Conclusions of the last General Chapter held in Hungary – formation, presence in the world, communication and emerging fraternities.

2. FORMATION THAT HELPS US TO BUILD THE KINGDOM OF GOD¹

Franciscan Youth is present in many countries and is extremely varied, i.e. there is little uniformity. The socio-cultural situation determines what it is to be young, what responsibilities young people can assume and what kind of formation and action are open to them. In the preparatory document for this General Chapter, there is a very thought-provoking passage about what I see as one of the goals of formation in YouFra: *“(…) the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today. (...) It calls us to engage in dialogue with this world, not remaining confined to our communities and our institutions, but accepting the challenge to take part in these realities so as to speak and bear witness in these sectors, from the inside. This is the form of Christian martyrdom in today’s world...”* Can you imagine the potential that Franciscan Youth has, and through YouFra, our Franciscan Family as well as the Church?

¹ This part is based on the text on YouFra from *Manual for Assistance to the SFO and t the Franciscan Youth*, Conference of General Assistants, Rome, 2006, p. 133-137.

I would like to share with you several thoughts about YouFra today, especially regarding the formation that has to be offered to YouFra so it can fulfil the task to which YouFra has been invited by John Paul II. Some basic thoughts about YouFra can be developed by reflecting on the *OFS Rule* which should be for YouFra members an inspirational document, a document of creativity and co-responsibility.

It is this way of life which the OFS “ought to be ready to share... with the youth who feel attracted to Saint Francis of Assisi.”² John Paul II said to the Italian YouFra that this vocational proposal is a “*journey that characterizes you as Franciscan youth; it helps you to become adults in the faith, to be apostles in the ecclesial community and to conduct yourselves in society as responsible persons, capable of courageously assuming the role to which Providence calls you.*”³

In the audience granted to the Italian Franciscan Youth in May 1998, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its birth, the Pope emphasized: “*Franciscan Youth is by its nature a vocation to grow in fraternity.*”⁴ Indeed, the form of life offered by the *OFS Rule* is an invitation to live the Gospel as Francis did, that is, in fraternity – “*community of love and privileged environment in which the sense of Church and the Christian and Franciscan vocation develop.*”⁵

The *Rule* is a document of inspiration to live the Gospel as Francis did, without forgetting, as the Pope reminds us, that “*each is called by name to make a special contribution to the coming of the Kingdom of God. No talent, no matter how small, is to be hidden or left unused.*”⁶ It is impossible to imagine YouFra apart from the OFS, just as it is difficult to think of the OFS as being indifferent to YouFra. All OFS fraternities ought to feel this need to share their experience of gospel life with young people who “*make up an exceptional potential and a great challenge for the future of the Church*”⁷ The future and creativity of the Church and the OFS is alive when they address the present culture of youth, transient and changing – yes, but also very capable of making a contribution.

The OFS must present to young people the Franciscan way of life and help them to attain maturity in their vocation and in the project of fraternal life, with the joy with which Jesus looked at the young man in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10:21). It must try to help them discover new horizons and grow “*in wisdom, age and grace before God and men*” (Lk 2:52). The OFS fraternities should consider the members of YouFra not just as passive subjects in their vocation, but as active ones. They should create a spirit of welcoming acceptance in the life of the fraternity and allow the youth to be engaged and involved in its meetings and activities.

The OFS should be generous in offering options to YouFra. It must not forget that the one who really calls is the Lord. YouFra is not the nursery of the OFS from which it will take members to transplant when it feels convenient for the fraternity. This is short-sighted and close-minded. On the contrary, the OFS should regard YouFra as a garden that can be cultivated and in which, with confidence, are sown the seeds of the many states of Christian life: family life, consecrated life, priestly life, OFS, Secular Institutes, and many other ways and forms in which the Franciscan Family expresses the same charism of its common Seraphic Father.

The OFS must go from theory to providing effective experiences in order to offer YouFra opportunities for human, Christian and Franciscan growth. As *Novo Millennio Ineunte* says, we trust that “*if Christ is presented to young people, as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross.*”⁸

² *Const.*, 96.1.

³ John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁴ John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁵ John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁶ CL, 56.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 46.

⁸ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 9.

Using the identity of the OFS as its starting point, the *Rule* offers YouFra a wide field of presence and mission: building a more fraternal and evangelical world (Art. 14), promoting human dignity (Art. 14), promoting justice, with concrete choices in harmony with their faith (Art. 15), work as an extension of God's creating hand (Art. 16), the challenge of family values (Art. 17), universal kinship and respect for the goods of creation (Art. 18), building peace through dialogue, love and pardon (Art. 19).

The above-mentioned challenges implicitly contain others: the world of politics, social reality, finance, culture, arts and sciences, research, social communication, and suffering. The General Ministers of the First Order and the TOR believe, as they say in their letter, "*Vocation and Mission of the Franciscan Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*" (1989), that the OFS and YouFra will be able to use, for a more creative and fruitful service, the spiritual and cultural heritage they have, and at the same time make use of the resources offered by the Franciscan tradition.

If young Franciscans are to carry out the creative and demanding mission presented to them by the OFS *Rule*, they will require a great deal of formation. It must be an integral and solid formation: human, Christian and Franciscan. Formation is one of the priorities of the OFS and YouFra. If formation reaches the base of YouFra fraternities, young Franciscans will be formed with a capacity for self-giving, for making good decisions, and for giving a Christian and Franciscan witness. In this, the YouFra council has an important role to play, along with the fraternal animator and the spiritual assistant.⁹

The Franciscan Family in general, but the OFS specifically, has many opportunities to relate with today's youth. This is provided, first of all, by the person of Francis of Assisi, his life and spirituality; second, by the heart of the OFS *Rule*, which beats in unison with the heart of youth who seek fraternity, justice, harmony with creation, peace, ecology etc..., always studying the living and acting person of Christ, aspiring to become His witness by their life and words;¹⁰ third, the Franciscan Youth expects the OFS to "*see to the vitality and the expansion of the Franciscan Youth fraternities.*"¹¹

This demands effort on the part of the OFS, which the *General Constitutions* describe as accompaniment of "*the youth in their journey of human and spiritual growth with proposals for specific activities and contents*".¹² Accompaniment includes promoting vocations and respect for life, while at the same time, respecting the young person's individuality. In accompaniment, one must pay close attention to the person's thoughts, feelings and ideas as well as being a good listener. One must know how to care for the seed, watering it as well as protecting it from the heat, so that too much water will not drown it or too much sun suffocate it.

The one who accompanies, who is usually also the "fraternal animator,"¹³ must become a companion. While he is accompanying the young Franciscan, he is growing at the same time. He identifies with the youth, while at the same time, being clear about their respective roles. The fraternity as well as the Fraternal Animator must meet frequently, not only with YouFra, but also with one another to evaluate the progress that has been made.

3. GUIDELINES FOR FRATERNAL ANIMATION

I will now address briefly the document *Guidelines for Fraternal Animation* that was prepared by the YouFra Commission and approved by the Presidency, in order to assist all those who need some direction around Fraternal Animation.

⁹ *Const.*, 97.2.

¹⁰ Cf. *Rule OFS*, 6.

¹¹ *Const.*, 97.1.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 97.2.

In 2007 YouFra members gathered in Barcelona to discuss, for the 1st time, their experiences of Fraternal Animators of the OFS and to share ideas on fraternal animation. They agreed on ideal characteristics of a Fraternal Animator and stated positive aspects of fraternal animation but also warned about situations that can cause difficulties in the relationship with the OFS. All of these things are included in the document that I am presenting to you now, with all due respect to the work done by the YouFra members, in response to the request of the capitulars of the XII General Chapter in Hungary to prepare adequate tools to help Fraternal Animators better fulfill their service.

The need to clarify the importance of fraternal animation becomes evident due to several issues: some YouFra groups have emerged without any relationship with the OFS while those that were born within the framework of the OFS may either experience identity crises or misunderstand their place and role within the OFS or the YouFra, due to the lack of adequate formation and/or proper animation.

The *Guidelines for Fraternal Animation* which I now present to you are based on some documents that speak of YouFra (OFS Rule n. 24, General Constitutions n. 96-97, YouFra: Way of Franciscan vocation, Conclusions of the 1st YouFra Assembly in Barcelona 2007, Incorporation of YouFra members into the OFS). It is addressed to the Fraternal Animators and to the Councils of both the OFS and the YouFra at all levels, to provide guidelines to ensure an effective fraternal animation of Franciscan Youth. The main goal of the document is to provide guidance and direction for the role of the Fraternal Animator who needs to guarantee a solid and effective fraternal animation to YouFra.

The Guidelines contain 7 chapters divided in the following order: (1) Introduction, (2) Fraternal Animation, (3) Fraternal Animator, (4) Relationship with YouFra, (5) Relationship with the OFS Fraternity, (6) Relationship with the Spiritual Assistant, (7) Conclusion. Each of these chapters is introduced by a quotation from different documents about YouFra that support the idea developed in the respective chapter.

When we wrote about fraternal animation we tried to offer an answer to the question: “what is fraternal animation and who is responsible for it?” The following chapter deals with with the person of Fraternal Animator – his/her role and tasks, characteristics, his/her service on different levels (putting the highlight on the local level) and his/her appointment by the OFS Council.

We wanted to emphasize the service of Fraternal Animator vis a vis the relationship with the YouFra Council, OFS Council and the Spiritual Assistant. Within the YouFra fraternity, his/her role is to support, guide and encourage youth allowing them to discover by themselves their own vocation and the best course of action where activities and programs are concerned. In the OFS, the Fraternal Animator can help the brothers and the sisters, to know what YouFra is and to welcome the YouFra members into the fraternity. In the end, the relationship with the Spiritual Assistant should be a positive one because this will make this service of animation to youth more effective. However, the service of the Fraternal Animator should not be confused with that of the Spiritual Assistant. They have different, although complementary, roles which are mentioned in more detail in the guidelines.

To be a Fraternal Animator is a gift and a privilege. It requires dedication, perseverance and shared responsibility which results in mutual enrichment for the YouFra, the OFS and the Franciscan Family as they fulfill their common mission in the Church and in society. To witness to the members of YouFra and help them to realize their own vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order is also a sign of the vitality of our fraternities.

All the aforementioned is the reason why I would like very much that you read this document and distribute it to the Fraternal Animators in your fraternities. Please, take to heart what the General Constitutions ask of you – to see to the “*vitality and the expansion of the Franciscan Youth fraternities and accompany the youth in their journey of human and spiritual growth*”¹⁴.

¹⁴ GG.CC., art. 97, n.1.

4. YOFRA SITUATION TODAY

4.1. Data on YouFra in the world

Since the OFS is responsible for the growth of YouFra, as I have just said, I'm going to present you what you/we have done so far together with the help of the Spiritual Assistants, in the past 63 years. Franciscan Youth has about 49,000 members and is present in 66 national fraternities, 35 of them recognized and 31 emerging fraternities. In several other countries there are some groups of youth that are interested in Franciscan Youth formation but this is only in an initial stage so we will see what will happen with this in the years to come. Unfortunately, I must say that the YouFra also has problems similar to the ones of the OFS regarding responding to surveys. That is why the data I am presenting at this Chapter might not correspond to the real situation. However, we are going to continue to work on this up to the next Chapter to complete the missing data. So, bearing in mind this problem with getting information from the national fraternities, due to which the presented data is incomplete, I would like to show you the map of YouFra fraternities in the world. As you can see, we have a lot of responsibility but also, a lot of potential.

4.2. YouFra Coordination Team

To be able to coordinate all these national fraternities of YouFra, the CIOFS established the YouFra Coordination Team in 2008. The first team has finished its term and the second one has just begun and it will last until 2014. I have already mentioned who they are but never the less its worth mentioning them again.

The YouFra Coordination Team is responsible for implementing the concrete actions decided by the CIOFS Presidency, for gathering the necessary data and for keeping regular communication with YouFra national fraternities. In order to do that, it is important that YouFra national fraternities appoint 1 representative who will have the role of international delegate of their country so he/she can be the connection between the YouFra national fraternity and the Coordination Team. Apart from that, YouFra international councilors are members of the International Council of the SFO. They have the same rights and responsibilities as any one of you with special attention being given to their responsibilities at the Coordination Team and YouFra fraternities in their area.

4.3. Challenges

4.3.1. Communication

Although YouFra consists of young people, who are characterized by their need to be connected with others through different means of communication, social networks etc., YouFra also has problems with communicating, for the same reasons, more or less, as the OFS (lack of means and possibilities, difficult (political) situations in their countries, lack of interest, irresponsibility etc.). Today a great deal of communication goes through the virtual space, i.e. internet. If we want to keep a pace, we have to use this tool to proclaim the Gospel to this generation of youth – this is also one of our challenges. That is why we are constructing a YouFra page within the CIOFS webpage and I hope it will soon be ready for use. Here we intend to put basic materials and documents about YouFra, news about different events of the Franciscan Family, and especially YouFra gatherings and projects, as well as contacts, texts and other things that could be of interest to the young people of today.

4.3.2. Knowing the documents on YouFra

I don't know how many of you have read the documents about YouFra. These documents are not “*just 'one more document' or the final stage of a journey, but an essential and dynamic instrument helping us to delineate our identity and to structure progressively our life and our vocation as Franciscans*” (as said by fra Giacomo Bini, former General minister OFM)¹⁵. In them we find lots of guidelines and encouragement on how to live in a fraternity and how to help YouFra members grow in their own personal maturity and in finding their own vocation in life.

As the prior General Minister wrote in sending out the first documents, “*these do not intend to exhaustively deal with the subject of the YouFra*”, its way of development and the methods of adequate formation. In fact, we have to leave space for the necessary *adjustments* in accordance with the concrete realities of each National Fraternity, taking into account the great differences in the environmental, socio-cultural, economical and ecclesiastical situations in which the OFS and YouFra live.¹⁶

It is essential to get to know these documents which are based not only on theory but primarily on the experience of many members of YouFra and OFS. This is the way St. Francis and St. Clare created their Rules. First there was the experience of life and only after that did they write it down in a Rule.

These experiences of life led to different documents which refer to YouFra:

- 1) *Rule of the OFS* (which is considered as an inspirational document for YouFra)
- 2) *General constitutions of the OFS* (especially art. 96 and 97)
- 3) *Franciscan Youth: the Way of Franciscan Vocation*
- 4) *Program of formation in Franciscan Youth*
- 5) *Draft of National Statutes of YouFra*
- 6) *International YouFra Regulation*
- 7) *Conclusions of the 1st International YouFra Assembly*
- 8) *Incorporation of the YouFra members into the OFS*
- 9) *Guidelines for Fraternal Animation.*

Knowing these documents is a very important aspect of our personal formation, but also the formation of YouFra fraternities.

5. CONCLUSION

With this report I wanted to reflect together with you what we know about YouFra today, what it is and what should be the relationship of the OFS towards YouFra. This might show us some difficulties the 2 fraternities may encounter, such as: (1) insufficient knowledge of the YouFra identity and its specific characteristics, (2) difficulties in the relationship between YouFra and the OFS, (3) the importance of simultaneously belonging to the OFS and to YouFra fraternity (which I didn't mention in this report but it is dealt with in documents I have mentioned), (4) communication. These are the main challenges we all must work on to achieve the fullness of Franciscan charism.

To conclude this presentation, I will use the words of Pope Benedict XVI written in the Youcat (Catechism for Youth) as an encouragement to young people to engage courageously in what is entrusted to them: “*Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord*” (Romans 12:11). When Israel was at

¹⁵ Letter of the Conference of General Ministers of the First order and the TOR (in the *CC.GG.*), January 1, 2001.

¹⁶ Circ 16/02-08, CIOFS Presidency, 2008.

the darkest point of its history, God called, not a great and renowned individual, but a young man named Jeremiah to their aid; Jeremiah felt he had been charged with a mission that was too great: “Ah, Lord God!’ I said, ‘I know not how to speak; I am too young’.” (Jeremiah 1:6). But God did not let Himself be dissuaded: “Say not, ‘I am too young’. To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak” (Jeremiah 1:7).¹⁷

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, Preface to Youcat (Youth Catechism), 2011.