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MERCY: TRANSFORMING GRACE AND MISSION

THE SECULAR FRANCISAN ORDER AND WORKS OF MERCY TODAY

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« Even if the Holy Door closes, the true door of mercy which is the heart of Christ always remains open wide for us. »¹

0. Introduction

Coming to the end of our essays on the principal theme of: Mercy: Transforming Grace and mission, we dedicate this last number to the theme “The Secular Franciscan Order and Works of Mercy today”. The corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to give to drink to the thirsty, to dress the naked persons, to welcome strangers, to assist the sick, to visit prisoners to bury the dead; and the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, to teach the ignorant, to admonish sinners, to console the afflicted, to forgive offenses, to bear the troublesome people, to pray to God for the alive ones and for the living and the dead, are founded on the Gospel and established by the Catechism of the Church. We want to consider in the first place, the novelty of the actual legislation OFS as regards works of mercy. Secondly, we will consider the corporal works of mercy and the spiritual works of mercy in the actual legislation OFS.

I. The novelty of the present Rule of the OFS

The OFS Rule, approved by the Blessed Pope Paul VI with the Apostolic Letter *Seraphicus Patriarca* of June 24th 1978 is deeply marked by the reform introduced in the Church by the Second Vatican Council. The present Rule “*Adapts the Secular Franciscan order to the needs and expectations of the holy Church in the conditions of changing times.*”² It is a concrete application of the teaching of the Council concerning specially the universal call to the holiness (cf. LG 5); and to the special place that the laity occupy in the life and in the mission of the Church (LG 4). A revolutionary element that is noticed immediately when we consider side-by-side the 1978 Rule and the preceding Rules of the Tertiary Franciscans, is the centrality of Christ and the Gospel. To begin

¹ Pope Francis Homily at the closing Mass of the Year of Mercy, 20th November 2016, cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161120_omelia-chiusura-giubileo.html

² OFS Rule, 3.

afresh from Christ and from the Gospel in its simplicity as did Saint Francis of Assisi is the sure way to achieve the renewal of the Church (aggiornamento) inaugurated by the Council.

The first article of the First Rule, otherwise known as the *Memoriale Propositi* is the following: "*The men that will belong to this fraternity will be dressed in humble non-coloured clothes, that do not go above six ravena pennies to the yard, unless ...*"³ So, attention was set immediately to the external appearance of the members. The same thing applies to abstinence, fasting, way of prayer, Sacraments, visits to the sick, funerals of members etc. everything is normative. In the Rule of Paul VI, instead, norms disappear. "*The rule and the life of the Seculars Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the centre and inspiration of his life with God and with.*"⁴ As source, the OFS Rule does not place a series of external devotional or charity practices to accomplish but the Gospel and the person of Jesus Christ to be observed. In effects, humanity cannot be saved even by doing all the good works she is capable of. Salvation is given freely by God in Jesus Christ. "*Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy of Father*"⁵. When one welcomes Jesus Christ as his/her Lord and Saviour and allows him/herself to be guided by His Spirit, the works of mercy are as fruits from a good tree (cf. Mt. 7,17); or like good wine that necessarily overflows from a full vase. Without this lordship of Jesus in the heart of man, due to the evil that is deep seated in the human heart, these outwardly good works can easily become a perversion of the same charity that they pretend to express. Graham Hancock bitterly denounces what he calls the "charity industry" which ends up making the poor more miserable and the rich richer;⁶ a corruption of goodness and of the Gospel.

The General Constitutions are much clearer in their affirmation on this centrality of Christ: "The spirituality of the Franciscan secular is a project of life centred on the person of Christ and on the following of the same rather than a detailed program to put in practice."⁷ This doesn't mean to give less importance to the works of mercy, but to watch that the Saviour may not be left out in when people get so busy doing good that alone cannot save the world. The Rule invites therefore Franciscans to a continuous conversion, a daily penitence, without specifying its form or nature. It is in the heart of the faithful and within the Church that such conversion is realised and the works of mercy are fruits of the conversion: "clean first the inside of the cup and then the outside of it will be clean as well" (Matt 23:26).

II. "I was hungry and you gave me to eat" (Mt 25, 35)

OFS and corporal works of mercy

"The preaching of Jesus presents to us these works of mercy so that we may understand whether or not we are living as his true disciples."⁸

Life in Fraternity in a universal Order such as the OFS provides an opportunity for collective works that are always greater than the sum of works that all the single components can do. The OFS Rule states that: "For the necessary expenses to the life of the Fraternity and for works of cult, of

³ Manual for the Assistance of OFS and YouFra, Conference of General Spiritual Assistants.

⁴ OFS Rule, 4.

⁵ Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 1.

⁶ Cf. Graham H. Lords of Poverty, Camerapix, 1989.

⁷ OFS General Constitutions, Art. 9.

⁸ Pope Francis, Bull, *Misericordiae vultus* 15.

apostolate and charity, each brother and sister should a commensurate contribution to his/her own possibilities."⁹ Charity in this context is understood both within and outside of the same Fraternity. An article of the First Rule clarifies for us this point: "And each contributes to the bursar a common amount. The bursar himself puts it together (the money) and, with the consent of the ministers, distributes them among the brothers and sisters in need and especially among the sick and those that could not have funeral honours; finally among the other poor; and they should also offer part of such money to the Church."¹⁰ In effect, a fraternity that runs out to help other people outside while its own members lack the basic necessities of life, contradicts itself and runs the great risk of scandalizing those that it had to evangelize; "From this they will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (*Jn 13,35*). The distinctive sign of a ecclesial community is mutual love. " *The local fraternity is to be established canonically. It becomes the basic unit of the whole Order and a visible sign of the Church, the community of love.*"¹¹ Charity in truth always sets priorities. In these times in which Pope Francesco, with his teachings and examples, calls all give particular attention to those most in need, the call is much stronger for every ecclesial community and even more for Franciscans. Pope Benedict XVI said that a society that does not take care of its poor members is an inhuman and wicked society. Without limiting the horizons of its charity, but because the means are always limited, the OFS Fraternity OFS has the obligation to take takes care most of all of its members in need.

Certain demands of the OFS General Constitutions on the matter: Secular Franciscans ...

- *are called to make their own contribution, inspired by the person and message of Saint Francis of Assisi, towards a civilization in which the dignity of the human person, shared responsibility, and love may be living realities*
- *They should deepen the true foundations of universal kinship and create a spirit of welcome and an atmosphere of fraternity everywhere.*
- *... they should actively put forward initiatives that care for creation and should work with others in efforts that both put a stop to polluting and degrading nature and also establish circumstances of living and environment which would not be a threat to the human person.*¹²

III. "Seeing the crowds, He felt sorry for them" (Mt. 9,36) OFS and spiritual works of mercy

Among the spiritual works of mercy, we want to dwell here solely on admonishing sinners. A sinner is in fact a blind person hurrying to ruin self and others whom he/she draws along. For this reason, to admonish a sinner is a great act of love, a grave responsibility to the prophet: "*If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand* (*Ez 33,8*). Silence is accomplice. In these days deeply marked by relativism and individualism, greater love and courage is required to admonish those who are in error.

The second part of the exhortation of Saint Francis to the brothers and sisters of penance, otherwise known as the letter to all the faithful, which constitutes the official prologue to the present Rule, is a strong admonition to sinners: "*all those men and women who are not doing*

⁹ OFS Rule 25.

¹⁰ Memoriale Propositi, 20.

¹¹ OFS Rule 22.

¹² GC OFS, Art. 18, 2-4.

penance and do not receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and live in vices and sin and yield to evil concupiscence and to the wicked desires of the flesh, and do not observe what they have promised to the Lord, and are slaves to the world, ...” Today, many will not have the courage to say these words before an audience, but everybody can spread this message on leaflets, for example. For Secular Franciscans to whom the Rule is given by the Church, spreading the Rule together with this writing of Saint Francis is a particular way of participating in the work of the Seraphic father desired so much to send all to Paradise. To admonish a person who is living in sin is to seek a greater good, not only for the individual, but for also for the society. Saint Francis who was aware that he was writing these things under the impulse of the Holy Spirit often gave special blessings to those who would spread them to many: “And all those who will receive this in good faith, will understand them and will send copies to others, if they persevere in them to the end, may they be blessed by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹³

By way of Conclusion; A Mercy with universal dimensions

In 2016, OFS has between 250-300,000 members spread in 116 countries in the world, amongst which 79 constituted National fraternities. The unity of the Order permits each member and every fraternity to realize works of mercy at a universal level. In this way, in 2009, the CIOFS presidency was able to send a delegation to console the brothers and sisters affected by the earthquake in Haiti. Following this, the Presidency carried on the Project Haiti by giving the contribution of the entire Order to help the needy there. Fraternities at different levels take various initiatives of works of mercy. Charity lived in fraternity at various levels can also be named solidarity, and the practice of solidarity within the Order has permitted the accomplishment of many projects in favour of the needy the world over. Finally, prevention is always more noble than cure, prevention of misery is more noble than curing it. Therefore, for the Secular Franciscan Order, the promotion of universal fraternity, of justice and peace, is a noble way of preventing misery that the present legislation also proposes to its members.

NEWS - CHAPTERS - VISITS - MEETINGS

Croatia – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS Croatia was celebrated from 7th to 9th October 2016 in the Tabor Franciscan Centre, in Samobor. The Chapter was presided by the General Minister, Tibor Kauser and, for the CAS, by Fr. José Antonio Cruz Duarte OFM, General Spiritual Assistant. 51 brothers and sisters took part in this Chapter in a spirit of prayer, fraternity, service and hospitality; amongst whom, 32 with right to vote. 3 National spiritual Assistants were present together with various regional Assistants of OFS and YouFra. On the 7th, Fr. José Antonio Cruz Duarte OFM gave a reflection on “Living mercy in fraternity”. On the 8th, Tibor Kauser gave a conference on “How to manage OFS: practical applications”. Branka Černugelj was elected National Minister; Vladimir Rosančić was elected InterNational Councilor and Samanta Jadreško InterNational

¹³ 2 Letter to the faithful, 88.

Councilor substitute. For installation, Mass was celebrated after the elections in the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Franciscan convent of Samobor.

France – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS-France was held from 8th to 9th of October 2016 in Bernay-en-Champagne. Present for the Chapter were delegates from 22 Regions, together with 8 regional Assistants and some observers. It was presided over by Attilio Galimberti, Presidency Councilor, delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS Minister General, Assisted by Fr. Eric Bidot, OFMCap., Provincial Minister of France, delegated by the CAS. All the Chapter work was done in a typical Franciscan climate of joy, of simplicity and of fraternity. According to Fr. Eric Bidot, it was a Chapter of transition even if this process still requires some years. The entire National council was re-elected. Minister and InterNational Councilor: Chantal Auvray; Vice-minister and InterNational Councilor substitute: Claire Déchenaux.

Rome, *Seraphicum* – CIOFS Presidency

The second CIOFS Presidency meeting for the year 2016 was held at the *Collegio Seraphicum* from the 15th to the 22nd of October as planned in the programming. It was a week of intense work, of listening, of sharing and of discussion; but also of prayer for the members of the Presidency. On the evening of Saturday 15th, the members shared a fraternal evening and supper with the National Council of OFS-Italy in Via delle Mura Aurelia, 9. On Tuesday 18th, they had a guided visit to the excavations of the Vatican.

Among the decisions made during this Presidency, we note:

- The Theme of the General Chapter: “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (*Jn 17,18*); Sub-theme: Animating and Guiding OFS in the world today.
- Invitees of the Presidency to the 2017 General Chapter.
- The emerging fraternity of Malaysia-Singapore is divided in two: the emerging National fraternity of Malaysia and the emerging National fraternity of Singapore, to be effective as from May 2017.
- The number of YouFra International Councilors will be six;
- The Presidency approves that the next election of YouFra International councilors and of the respective substitutes will be by email.

Tanzania – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS-Tanzania was held from 26th to 30th of October 2016 at the San Damiano Convent of the Capuchin Friars in Msimbazi – Dar es Salaam. It was presided over by Michel Janian, Presidency Councilor delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS General Minister. He was assisted by Felician Kavishe, OFMCap., Delegate for the CAS. Lucia Nambuo was elected National minister and Felix Mosha was elected International councilor. The opening and closing Masses were presided over by Fr. Sergi Tarimo, OFMCap., During the closing Mass, on Saturday 29th, Michel Janian installed the newly elected council. The atmosphere at the Chapter was fraternal, calm and transparent.

Canada – Fraternal and Pastoral Visits

At the request of the National council, the Fraternal and Pastoral visits to the National council of OFS-Canada were done together respectively by Tibor Kauser, General minister OFS, and Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFMCap., General spiritual Assistant OFS-YouFra from 27th to 28th October at the Spiritual centre of the Ursulines in Loretteville, Québec. This was immediately followed on the 29th and 30th by the National spiritual Chapter. Present at this fraternal moment were 9 members of the National council including two National spiritual Assistants. As of

September 2016, according to the demographic report submitted in preparation for the visit, the National fraternity of OFS in Canada has 12 regions (3 Anglophone and 9 Francophone). They do not yet have a National seat. The archives are kept in the convent of the Franciscans in Montreal. The visitors had sufficient time to listen privately to the members of the council and then to meet with all the council together. They were accompanied by Gilles Métivier, National minister, and Fr. André Chicoine, OFM^{Cap.}, National spiritual Assistant to, visit the Bishop of Québec, His Eminence, Cardinal Gérard Cyprien Lacroix. Fr. Marc Le Goanvec, OFM Provincial Minister also paid a visit to the capitulars. The visitors further appreciated the commitment of the council in their service to the National fraternity, with a great desire to work together in spite of the challenges posed by the two official languages. The elected treasurer, Leonarda Macnail, also requested to end her service to the National fraternity at the end of the current year due to the increasing demands at her jobsite.

Kotagiri, India – National Chapter

The National Chapter of OFS-India was held from 27th to 29th of October 2016, in the retreat house of the Capuchins in Kotagiri, in the district of Nilgiri, Ooty, Tamil Nadu. Some eighty persons were present including capitulars, 15 spiritual Assistants, 10 observers and other invitees, in addition to Augustine Yoon, Presidency councilor delegated by Tibor Kauser, General minister, and Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, TOR, General spiritual Assistant OFS-YouFra, for the CAS. In the morning of the 27th, before the Chapter, there was a meeting of the National council after which Augustine and Fr. Amando were invited to speak on the financial contribution of the National Fraternity of India to the CIOFS Presidency. Present for the opening of the Chapter were His Excellency, Dr. A. Amalraj, Bishop of the diocese of Ootacamund, in addition to a Provincial minister and a Vice-Provincial minister OFM^{Cap.}. The first part of the Chapter included several ceremonies and speeches, followed by the reports of the councilors and of the National minister and by presentations by Augustine and Fr. Amando. They also discussed on the amendments of the National Statutes and on the steps for its approbation by the CIOFS Presidency. In the afternoon of the second day, there was a visit to the Botanical garden and to the novitiate of the OFM^{Conv.}. Since the necessary conditions for an elective Chapter were not met, Augustine nominated, after private consultation, a minister, and a provisional National council with the task of organizing an elective Chapter within a year, and working for reconciliation between OFS members. Both members of the Presidency, Augustine and Fr. Amando, are grateful for the assistance and help given them by the two National spiritual Assistants, Fr. Saviour Karamveril, OFM^{Conv.}, president in turn of their conference, and Fr. Marion Pulichamakil, TOR and for the fraternal hospitality of the TOR and OFM^{Conv.} Friars.

USA, Orlando, FA – Fraternal and Pastoral Visits

Fraternal and pastoral visits to the National Executive Council (NEC) of the Secular Franciscan Order of the United States were made by Chelito Nuñez, OFS General Vice-Minister, and Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFM^{Cap.} General Assistant from 31st October to 6th November 2016 at the San Pedro Retreat Center in Orlando-Florida, at the invitation of the NEC. The first two days of the visit were dedicated to NEC. According to recent statistics, the National Fraternity of OFS in the US has 12,224 professed members and 1076 candidates. There are 30 regional Fraternities and 625 local fraternities, 131 of which are without local spiritual Assistants. The NEC has 8 elected members and the president in turn of the Conference of National spiritual Assistants (CNSA). After a first introductory meeting, the two visitors held private meetings with each of the members of the NEC. Regional ministers and delegates from all 30 regions joined in the following days for a National Chapter. Present also were delegates invited from Guam and from the Virgin Islands, the National spiritual Assistants, Fr. Robert Brady, OFM (president in turn of the CNSA); Fr.

Christopher Panagoplos, TOR, and Fr. Alessandro Escalera, OFM Cap. The diocesan Bishop of Orlando, Mgr. John Gerard Noonan, honored the invitation of the Council and was present to preside over the opening Mass on November 1st. This was an opportunity for the visitors to share with the Prelate on the interests of the OFS. In the course of the visit, Chelito took the necessary time to verify the books and then to sign those that had to be signed. The FPV were important fraternal moments of sharing and of work in an atmosphere of prayer. The closing Mass was presided by Fr. Francis Dor, OFM Cap. On Saturday November 5th.

Papua New Guinea – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS in Papua New Guinea was celebrated from 1st to 6th of November 2016 at the ST. Michael Parish in Lae City. The Chapter was presided over by Augustine Young, CIOFS Presidency Councilor delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS General minister. As witness of communion with the Franciscan Family, Fr. Joe Quentaip OFM was present, delegated by the CAS. In a spirit of belonging to the same family, of prayer, of fraternity, of service and hospitality, 20 capitulars and 13 observers participated at this Chapter. Also present was the National spiritual Assistant, Fr. Edward Meli, OFM. Erwin Maritua was elected National minister, Sabina Masiri, International councilor and Joel Masiri, International councilor substitute. The Mass for the installation of the new Council was presided over by Fr. Joe Quentaip OFM.

Uruguay – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS in Uruguay was held from 4th to 6th of November 2016. The Chapter was presided by Silvia Diana, Presidency councilor delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS General minister. She was assisted in this service by Fr. Dorvalino Fassini OFM, delegated by the CAS. He also gave a conference on “Being Secular Franciscan – our challenge today”. The Chapter was marked by an atmosphere of prayer, work, reflection, dialogue and Franciscan joy. Saturday was the election day. Fabrizio Martinez Dibarboure was elected National Minister, and Raul Giudice, Vice-Minister. Mass for the installation of the new council was presided by Fr. Dorvalino Fassini, OFM.

Albania – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS-Albania was held on 12th November at the Saint Francis of Assisi convent of the OFM, in Scutari. The Chapter was presided over by Ana Fruk, Presidency Councilor, delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS General minister, accompanied by Fr. José Antonio Cruz Duarte, General Assistant OFS-YouFra. 22 capitulars and 15 other brothers and sisters took were at the Chapter. Present also were: the OFS National spiritual Assistant, Fr. Vladimir Mamala, OFM, as well as the Custos, Fr. Aurel Gjerka, OFM, who participated in various ways and moments. The capitulars were particularly happy for the pastoral visit that was done just before the Chapter. Fr. José Antonio Cruz Duarte OFM, General spiritual Assistant OFS-YouFra visited the four local fraternities in Albania, three of which are constituted and one is emerging. The Chapter was marked by an atmosphere of prayer, of work and reflection, dialogue and Franciscan joy. Florinda Sterkai was elected National minister and Paulin Ndreka, National vice-minister. For the first time, an International councilor was elected in the person of Lazer Gega. The Mass for the installation of the new council was presided over by Fr. Aurel Gjerka, OFM.

Lebanon – National elective Chapter

The National elective Chapter of OFS-Lebanon was held at the Centre “Maison Saint François” in Kbannaya – Jal el Dib, the 19th and 20th of November 2016. Participants at this Chapter included 129 electors of the 155 invited, 3 National spiritual Assistants (including the out-going National spiritual Assistant, Fr. Nidal, OFM Cap.), the National spiritual Assistant for the YouFra, Fr.

Raymond, the major superior of the Capuchin Friars in the Near East, Fr. Tanios Rizk and some observers. The Chapter was presided over by Attilio Galimberty, Presidency councilor delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS minister General, assisted by Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFM^{Cap}. In the morning of the 19th, the visitors and some members of the National council paid a visit to the Apostolic Vicar of the Latin Rite, Mgr, Cesare Esseyan OFM^{Conv}. This was followed by the opening Mass presided over by Fr. Tony Chekri, OFM. After Holy Mass, followed a brief greeting to the visitors and then the reports of the spiritual Assistants and of the out-going National minister and some workshop. In the elections done on November 20th, Joseph El Turk was elected National minister and Marise Chami was elected International councilor replace Michel Janian, presently CIOFS Presidency councilor. Gina Chedid was elected International councilor substitute. Mgr Cesare Esseyan presided over the closing Mass at the end of which the newly elected council was installed by Attilio. The Chapter was marked by a very fraternal atmosphere and punctuality.

Havana, Cuba – Fraternal and Pastoral Visits

The Fraternal and pastoral visits (VFP) to the National council of OFS-Cuba were done by Ana Maria Raffo Laos, Presidency councilor delegated by the OFS General minister, Tibor Kauser; and by Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, TOR, from 24th to 28th November, 2016, in Havana. The visitors were hosted by the Capuchin Friars at the convent-church of “Cristo de Limpias” in old Havana quarter. Most of the meetings were held at the Church of Saint Francis in the historical center of the city, managed by the OFM^{Conv}. Friars. The visitors held various meetings with the minister and councilors together and then individually, in addition to a meeting with representatives of some local fraternities, a young Franciscan and with two delegates of the major superiors, Fr. Frank Miki, OFM and Fr. Silvano Castelli, OFM^{Conv}. The program of the VFP also included a visit to the Archbishop of Havana, His Excellency Juan de la Caridad Garcia, and another to the Apostolic Nuncio of Cuba, His Excellency, Giorgio Lingua. After dialogue with the brothers and sisters present at the meetings, and after having seen the registers and the minutes, the visitors concluded the VFP presenting some observations and concrete recommendations. Ana Maria and Fr. Amando are very grateful for the fraternal hospitality of the secular Franciscans and of the Friars who hosted them and assisted them to attain the objectives of the VFP.

Nigeria – National elective Chapter

The National Fraternity of OFS-Nigeria is one of the emerging National Fraternities. As of November 2016, they have 115 professed members divided into seven canonically erected local fraternities. Spiritual and pastoral assistance is provided solely by Capuchin Friars. They are till date the only friars Minors present on the National territory. This third National elective Chapter was held at the convent of the Capuchins in Olunde-Ibandan on the 25th and 26th of November 2016. 15 electors of the 19 invited, with many observers and three spiritual Assistant were at the Chapter. The Chapter was presided over by Genesi Ngwainbi OFS National minister of Cameroon delegated by Tibor Kauser, OFS General minister. He was assisted by Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFM^{Cap}. Before the elective session on the 26th, the participants had a conference from the new National spiritual Assistant, Fr. Anthony Essien OFM^{Cap}., on the theme of the Chapter: “Spreading the Gospel in charity as secular Franciscans.” The same brother had presided over the opening Mass in the evening of the previous day. At the elections done on the 26th, Obibuzor Jude Uche was elected National minister and International councilor for the second mandate, while Michael E. Edem was reelected as National vice-minister and International councilor substitute. The atmosphere at the Chapter was very fraternal and the work was done in a spirit of mutual respect and of faith. The afternoon of the November 26th, the newly-elected council was installed by Genesis Ngwainbi during the closing Mass that was presided over by Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFM^{Cap}.