

REFLECTIONS ON THE GENERAL CHAPTER

November 15-22, 2008 in Hungary

by
*Robert Stronach, OFS
& Mary Stronach, OFS*



Fr. Ivan Matic, OFM, general spiritual assistant



Br. Felice Cangelosi, Capuchin vicar general



Fr. Marco Tasca, Conventual minister general



Encarnita del Pozo, OFS minister general

COVER: Aerial view of Esztergom Cathedral, where Chapter participants celebrated the feast of St. Elizabeth with Cardinal László Paskai, OFM, and brought to a close the 8th centenary of her birth in 1207. (iStockphoto by Dronandy)

Our November journey to Hungary actually began several months earlier when General Minister Encarnación del Pozo asked Mary to be a translator and Bob to be on the Communications Team at the General Chapter. We had met her at the National Chapter in Detroit a few years back, where Mary became an impromptu interpreter for the general minister (in both Spanish and Italian). They hit it off, and we all were won over by the general minister's infectious smile and laughter.

We looked forward to the trip to Budapest with some awe, but little did we realize how the Chapter would imbue in us an overwhelming sense of belonging to a world-wide Order. Part of it came from mingling with 111 attendees from 57 countries, speaking in a multitude of tongues and sharing their Franciscan vocations. Participating in the Chapter's deliberations was like being at the United Nations. We wore wireless headsets receiving simultaneous translations in four primary languages -- English, Italian, French and Spanish. We worked closely with Secular Franciscans and friar spiritual assistants from a number of countries, and came away not only with new friends, but with the realization we have family everywhere. Places like Chile, Spain, Argentina, Venezuela, Romania, France, Italy, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Great Britain, Hungary, Canada.

Other influences included:

- **Felice Cangelosi**, the vicar general of the Capuchin Franciscans, declaring that the Church recognizes Secular Franciscans as belonging to a real Order, and that profession in the Order is of the same importance as religious profession -- different, but of equal import.

- **Marco Tasca**, the minister general of the Conventual Franciscans, joking like he was a member of the family and offering a spiritual message that if we want our fraternities to grow and be alive, we need to see our brothers and sisters as gifts.

- **the International Council** expressing solidarity with suffering Secular Franciscans, such as in violence-torn Congo.

- **Encarnación** (or Encarnita, as she likes to be called) asserting that Secular Franciscans need to take charge of their identity as an Order, and act on the conviction that they are equal partners in the Franciscan family.

At first we got the impression the Order's leadership was obsessed with rediscovering the OFS charism as a movement -- something as vi-

able as it was 800 years ago, and as viable, or even more viable, than anything else going on today.

However, as the chapter progressed, we were struck by the joy of fraternity. On a global level. Piercing an array of individual hearts. If it were not being so presumptuous, we would even say, Spirit-led. The charisma, the movement was evident. Real. Now.

We got to see the Order through the eyes of our international leaders, who filtered and assimilated perspectives from scores of nations; who recognized the sheer wonder and vitality associated with 42 emerging national fraternities, anxious to join the 65 established national units (a united nations of the OFS); who long-recognized, with grassroots feedback, the vital importance of good formation, and in particular, of “forming the formators.”

We also got the sense that they were at the helm of a church institution, and that no matter how fast they spun the wheel, the ship’s response was slow and measured, not unlike an ocean liner. Perhaps that’s why they were so inspired by what was happening on the front lines with local and national fraternities, in Latin America and Asia and Africa, and why they were in love with YouFra, a thriving movement in so many areas. In fact, Franciscan youth were an intricate part of the General Chapter...a natural part of the family...it didn’t matter whether they were Secular Franciscans or not.

It was interesting to see the deference and affection the friars exhibited to Secular Franciscans. Perhaps General Minister Encarnita was on to something when she declared that because of our OFS Rule, because of our identity as seculars, we are a unifying force for the Franciscan family.

“I would dare affirm that, in this historic moment, the OFS feels more responsible than other members of the family,” and plays a unique “unifying” role, she told the chapter, and added: “I do believe that the First Order, the Second Order and the Third Order Regular at all levels need the knowledge that we can offer,” as people fully immersed “in the ordinary circumstances and problems related to work, family, politics, education and science, including situations of extreme poverty and all kinds of misery.”

Encarnita was re-elected by an overwhelming margin to serve another six years as general minister. The delegates’ affection for her was obvious. So, too, the four general spiritual assistants as they laughed and hugged her, along with the Conventual minister general, who presided

over the elections.

Speaking of the general spiritual assistants -- representing the OFM, OFM Cap, OFM Conventual and TOR branches -- they presided over daily liturgies with cultural flavors from around the world, parts often in Latin (the universal language) and music that sent our spirits soaring. The Eucharistic celebration was both an experience and an expression of joy. As Father Marco would say... with God reaching out to the human person, making it possible for two loves to meet and enter into relationship: "It's really a beautiful thing. God comes to save us."



General Spiritual Assistant Amando Trujillo-Cano, TOR



*General Spiritual Assistant
Irudaya Samy, OFM Cap*



*General Spiritual Assistant
Martin Pablo Bitzer, OFM Conv*



*General Spiritual Assistant
Ivan Matic, OFM*

AFTER ARRIVING IN BUDAPEST, a Secular Franciscan couple met us at the airport, along with their teenage sons, who were holding up a sign with an image of the Tau. Our party included U.S. International Councilor Anne Mulqueen, U.S. Spiritual Assistant Richard Trezza, OFM, and videographer Michael Eaton, pushing a heavy cart of equipment. Michael was there to tape the Chapter and some sites in Hungary for a documentary about St. Elizabeth of Hungary that New York Secular Franciscan Lori Pieper wanted to produce. With Elizabeth being patron of the Order, the Chapter was held in Hungary in conjunction with the closing of the 8th centenary of her birth. Lori, who also attended the Chapter, has been fascinated by St. Elizabeth since pursuing her doctorate in medieval history. In fact, her doctoral dissertation was about Elizabeth and was published by the Third Order Regular (TOR) friars at Loretto, PA. She was invited to speak at a conference on St. Elizabeth in Rome at Franciscan University of the Antonianum in February 2007, and in the fall of 2007, Lori published her book, “The Greatest of These Is Love: The Life of St. Elizabeth of Hungary.”

Our airport party piled into “his” and “her” cars. It took almost an hour to reach our mountain retreat -- Manréza Hotel and Conference Center in Dobogókő. The last leg of the drive was up a narrow mountain road, winding through leaf-carpeted forest. The site of the Chapter was nestled on a hillside among evergreens.

Our room was narrow and long, with a shower, two single bunks, and a deck that looked out on tree tops. The room key-card also plugged into a wall socket that activated the electricity so you could turn on the lights. When you left, you took the key-card and out went the lights. Great way to save energy.

We arrived just in time for lunch – served at 1:15 p.m. daily in the dining room, where most of the attendees already had assembled, and where we shook hands with or hugged too many Franciscans to remember. Among them were Encarnita; Consuelo “Chelito” Núñez, the international councilor for Spanish-speaking countries who chaired the planning committee, and members of the Secretariat (in charge of arrangements and translations) and the Communications Committee (responsible for daily news dispatches, photography and website).

Lunch is regarded as the main meal in Hungary. It included a daily dose of soup, served family style, followed by an entree consisting of a small amount of beef or chicken and ample servings of potatoes, rice



The view from our balcony.



Meeting Secular Franciscans in the dining room at Manréza.

or dumpling-like noodles (sometimes rice and potatoes). A few peas or beans were caught hiding in the starch. There were bottles of red and white wine on every table. The meals generally were tasty and filling. The desserts were superb. A different treat every day, from delicate

fruity pastries to sumptuous cakes. Dinner consisted of a simple dish, often a stew or gravy concoction. Breakfast was buffet style, but with no orderly buffet lines. The hungry morning throng, in dire need of coffee and nourishment, mobbed the buffet tables in complete chaos, nudging in and out in no apparent order. Big urns of coffee were a primary target. Dispensers of fresh juice were less crowded. There wasn't any cream for the coffee, but there was an urn of hot milk to add dairy to the morning java. It was at first distressing to discover coffee was only served at breakfast. Luckily, right next door was a coffee shop and bar where we adjourned after lunch and supper to savor a freshly made steaming cup of Hungarian espresso. Besides coffee and juice, the breakfast featured hot dogs, sausage, often scrambled eggs & ham, and an assortment of cold cuts and cheese. Bins of fresh rolls and thickly cut bread were there for every meal. There also was yogurt, almost as liquid as milk, that a number of Europeans liked to put in cereal.

After lunch, we managed to take our first showers in over 24 hours. And then it was off to work and to check out the conference center. Mary went to the Secretariat offices, located in another building, to work on translations, and Bob wandered around the facilities, snapping a few pictures, before meeting up with the Communications team, also operating out of the Secretariat offices (lined with a bank of computers and copiers). The other team members were Xavi Ramos of Spain, the outgoing international councilor for YouFra (Franciscan Youth); Michele Cannone of Italy, Luis Aburto of Chile, and Fred Schaeffer, a fellow American from Florida who is the Order's webmaster. Michele and Luis, who were both active in YouFra, were compelled to break into song throughout the day, with or without their seemingly ever-present guitars. They were a fun and energetic group. We immediately fell into a joyous Franciscan camaraderie.

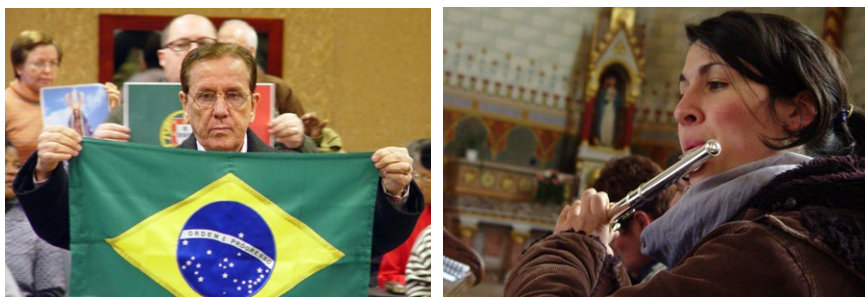
We discussed work assignments. Xavi was delighted to learn Bob used to write for newspapers. He declared Bob would be the primary writer, except for one or two stories he wanted to do, and Michele and Luis would translate them into Italian and Spanish, with Mary helping out as needed; and Michele Altmeyer from France, another translator, taking care of the French version. Then Xavi and Michele would send dispatches to select media outlets, and Michele and Fred would update the website. Bob would also be the primary photographer. On the day of the elections, the team would be lined up in the assembly hall, with com-

puters and cameras, ready to compose dispatches and translate them simultaneously as the events unfolded, and then upload the news to the website, within minutes. All the computers were linked via Skype, and as Bob would write a paragraph, it would appear on the other screens for translating. He also sent photos the same way, so Michele could grab and upload them with the text.

THE CHAPTER GOT UNDER WAY that first evening (Saturday) with Mass and a call to the Holy Spirit “to descend among us.”

“Without the Holy Spirit, we can do nothing,” main celebrant Irudaya Samy, OFM Cap., declared. “A General Chapter is always a time of grace for us -- a grace in meeting the brothers and sisters from all over the world, a grace in our mutual listening, which helps us to grow in real fraternity, and in all of us listening to the Spirit, who spurs us on and accompanies us towards the future.”

It’s a grace, Brother Samy added, that asks, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” It’s a grace “in finding ourselves together in our response to the challenges which come to us from society, from the Church, and from the world.”



Liturgies were joyful and culturally rich.



Communications team members Xavi Ramos and Michele Cannone.



Planning Committee Chair Chelito Núñez and Webmaster Fred Schaeffer.



Luis Aburto and Michele Cannone, always ready for a song.

ON SUNDAY, the general minister gave her state-of-the-order address, where she asserted the OFS as an equal partner in the Franciscan family. She gave a demographic overview: The number of professed active members remains constant at some 400,000. They belong to 65 established national fraternities, 42 emerging national fraternities, and three areas working toward canonical establishment of their first local fraternities. Franciscan Youth, or YouFra, is present in 64 countries as an organization. The Western World, particularly Europe, has seen a decline or stagnation in numbers, while so-called Third World countries, including some in Latin American, Africa, Asia and, Slavic nations as well, are seeing an astonishing growth in vocations. In one country there are young people in their 20s serving in leadership positions. She also urged continuation of the “China project,” and a commitment to support and collaborate with Franciscans International, which brings a Franciscan voice to the United Nations.

MONDAY ZEROED IN on the Chapter’s theme, *OFS Profession and Sense of Belonging*, with Brother Felice and past general minister Emanuela DeNunzio as keynote speakers.

Friars and sisters take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, Brother Felice said, and Secular Franciscans promise to be witnesses to Gospel living in secular society, but they are both gifts of God and they are both sacred acts recognized and blessed by the Church, within the context of Franciscan fraternity with a form of life or Rule. Both types of profession, he said, place the person totally at God’s disposal.

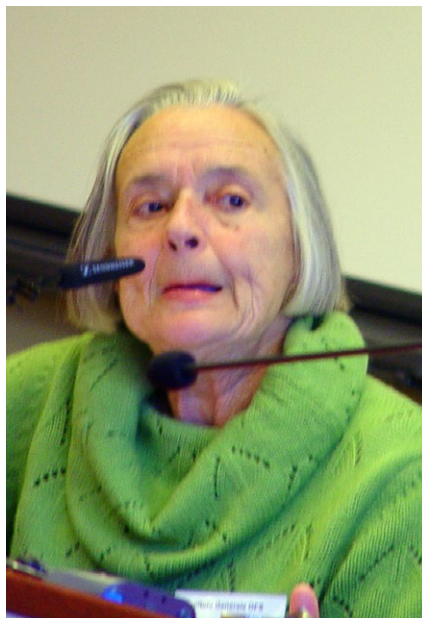
“This leads us to maintain that the *propositum vitae*, or promise of the Secular Franciscan penitents, is equivalent to a religious profession.”

Emanuela tackled the Secular Franciscan’s sense of identity and belonging, especially in a secular world often at odds with people of faith.

“A crisis over a sense of belonging is pervasive in society...so it naturally affects Secular Franciscans.”

From family values under siege to society dominated by what an OFM minister general once described as a “dictatorship of relativism,” she said, people of faith can experience an uphill struggle to find a right sense of belonging.

However, Secular Franciscans, by the nature of their profession, can have a clear vision of identity and a motivating sense of belonging.



Keynote presenters Br. Felice Cangelosi and Emanuela DeNunzio

“The vocation to the OFS is a vocation to live the Gospel in fraternal community,” Emanuela said, quoting the Order’s General Constitutions. “To this purpose, the members of the OFS reunite in ecclesial community that they call fraternities’ and these fraternities are cells grouped in organic union; that is to say, the large spiritual family of the OFS, scattered all over the world.”

The members “are co-responsible,” she noted, for the life of the local fraternity and the worldwide order through:

1. Personal presence, or regular participation.
2. Witness of Gospel life and of fraternal life (thus attracting vocations).
3. Prayer, as “it is the soul of this community of love.”
4. Active collaboration, for the good of the fraternity and for completing charitable and apostolic initiatives.
5. Being open to serve in various offices.
6. Economic contributions, based on one’s financial means, to provide resources for the life of the local and worldwide fraternities and their religious, apostolic and charitable work.

NOVEMBER 17TH BEING THE FEAST of St. Elizabeth, the Chapter adjourned to nearby Esztergom Cathedral, a 20-minute drive by bus, to celebrate the feast with Cardinal László Paskai, OFM, and bring to a close the 8th centenary of her birth in 1207. Secular Franciscans from all over Hungary and local faithful filled the expansive structure. Built over 200 years ago, the cathedral sits atop a hill, with a huge dome rising 100 meters into the air, visible for miles, and serving as a reminder that it is the mother church in Hungary. With a 19-meter high painting of Mary's assumption into heaven behind him, Cardinal Paskai recalled Elizabeth's holiness as a committed wife and Secular Franciscan who faced being ostracized from her noble blood for feeding the poor and building hospitals for the sick. At the conclusion of Mass, Encarnita reenacted Elizabeth's act of mercy by distributing to the congregation hundreds of loaves of bread brought up to the altar by local women dressed in traditional Hungarian garb.

Following the celebration, Secular Franciscans gathered in chairs under the dome to hear Michele Altmeyer deliver a dissertation on St. Elizabeth in her native French. Prior to the Mass, the group got to visit a modern sculpture of St. Stephen, Elizabeth's ancestor, being crowned king of Hungary by the pope. The larger-than-life sleek marble artwork sits on property adjoining the cathedral, on the edge of a cliff overlooking the winding Danube River as it separates Hungary from Slovakia.



Chapter attendees gather outside Esztergom Cathedral.



Cardinal László Paskai recalled St. Elizabeth's holiness, and General Minister Encarnita reenacted Elizabeth's acts of mercy by handing out hundreds of loaves



After the celebration, Secular Franciscans gathered in the cathedral (below) to hear Michele Altmeyer (left) give a talk on the life of Elizabeth.





Before Mass in Esztergom Cathedral (background), Chapter participants took the opportunity to pose for pictures under a statue of St. Stephen being crowned king of Hungary.



After Mass, women wearing traditional Hungarian garb brought loaves of bread up to the altar to be distributed.

MASS FEATURING a multitude of languages kicked off the fourth day of the General Chapter. Referring to the previous day's pilgrimage to solemnly celebrate the closure of the 8th centennial of the birth of St. Elizabeth, main celebrant Ivan Matic, OFM, reminded the 111 chapter attendees that "we entrusted to her protection our life and, especially, all the members of the Secular Franciscan Order and Franciscan youth." He then invited everyone to offer this day and "all our work" to the Lord. To continue that prayerful attitude, Fr. Ivan took Eucharist from the Mass and set up an Adoration Chapel, where attendees could take turns spending time in prayer and call on the Holy Spirit to guide the chapter, particularly with its election of leaders and councilors. After returning from the St. Elizabeth celebration the previous evening, the assembly had broken into several language groups to reflect on and discuss the

day's keynote presentations on OFS Profession and Sense of Belonging. The work groups commented on their discussions, and were expected to continue exploring the themes throughout the afternoon and evening.

"We are gradually becoming aware of the depth of our commitment in our profession," English Language Group 1 reported. "...By rediscovering our roots, we are discovering the value of prayer...the value of fraternity...the value of becoming involved in actions such as condemning injustice."

Like a three-legged stool, "there's a link between belonging, commitment and mission," noted the French Language Group.

The Italian and Portuguese Language Group saw fraternity "as the place where we meet God... and are able to give witness" and lead to "new initiatives."

English Language Group 2 reported that some fraternities were trying to overcome the problem of "signing up" members versus attracting quality vocations, and that there is "a need for formation of formators."

The German Language Group focused on St. Francis' attitude of always beginning again, or daily conversion, "for up to now, we have done little."

"The two (keynote) presentations," the German group said, "opened our hearts and were like a wind in our minds."

Emanuela, one of the previous day's keynoters, joined in the dialogue, noting: "Discernment of vocations...is of enormous importance. It has to do with the quality of vocations rather than quantity."

This discernment should take place in initial formation at the local fraternity, she said; if formation is not done right, it could actually discourage rather than attract quality vocations. "Formation must be liveable to be credible," she said. "Credibility is shown in our behavior, in our conduct in the fraternity... Our actions should enable people around us to give glory to God." She said fraternities need to give concrete experiences to people in formation – which may require a fraternity ministry or initiative, not just individual ministries. "It's a question of a real conviction...but we need to do this as a fraternity."

Long recognizing the need for quality formation, and the need to train quality formators or formation directors, the international office of the Order, known as the Presidency, has been conducting international workshops for national and continental formation directors, with the idea that national fraternities would in turn conduct their own training,

the Formation Commission reported. In conjunction with planning the workshops, the commission developed the Order's first-ever training manual for formators, commission coordinator Benedetto Lino of Italy announced. He distributed copies to delegates in four main languages – English, French, Italian, and Spanish – and noted that they plan to translate it into as many languages as possible.

THE NEXT DAY, Nov. 19, the chapter of elections took place, with attendees, including 68 voting delegates, giving Encarnita a standing ovation. The Order's international leadership, known as the Presidency, includes the general minister, general vice minister and the Presidency's international councilors. Seven councilors are elected according to a combination of major language groups and geographic areas, and one represents YouFra.

Doug Clorey of Canada was elected general vice minister. Doug was previously a Presidency councilor for English-speaking area 1 (North America and Europe), and before that, he was Canada's international councilor, or delegate. Clorey by avocation is a musician and song writer who sang one of his original compositions to the assembly when he was introduced as a candidate.

The newly elected Presidential councilors are:

- Consuelo Núñez of Venezuela, representing Spanish-speaking areas.
- Tibor Kauser of Hungary, English-speaking area 1 (North America and Europe).
- Lucy Almiranez of the Phillipines, English-speaking area 2 (Africa, Oceania, Asia).
- Michele Altmeyer of France, French-speaking areas.
- Maria Aparecida Crepaldi of Brazil, Portuguese-speaking areas.
- Ewald Kreuzer of Austria, German-speaking areas.
- Benedetto Lino of Italy, Italian-speaking areas.
- Ana Fruk of Croatia, YouFra (Franciscan Youth).

ON DAY SIX, we boarded buses once again -- this time to get a tour of Budapest. Tibor Kauser offered a history lesson on the ride there, explaining that a number of Hungarian tribes came together to form the state of Hungary in the year 1,000 – under the leadership of St. Stephen, who was crowned king by Pope Sylvester II. We got to see another



The Presidency and Secretariat.

statue of St. Stephen -- sporting a halo and mounted on horseback -- in the center of a square in one corner of Castle Hill. Encompassing an entire hilltop, Castle Hill “is more like a city than a fortress,” noted Tibor. Within the castle’s walls are houses, apartment buildings, stores of all stripes, churches, archeological digs, the former Royal Palace (which is now a royal art gallery and museum of natural history), and the offices of the president of Hungary. Castle Hill overlooks downtown Budapest, split in two by the wide winding Danube. The Hungarian seat of government, the Parliament, rises up from the far edge of the river, dominating the cityscape.

“It is one of the largest Parliament buildings in Europe,” said Tibor, after spewing off a few historical tidbits. The buses taking the group through Budapest whizzed by the ruins of a Roman amphitheater, a visible reminder that Hungary was once part of the Rome Empire, he said.

From Castle Hill, buses took us across the Danube, on a bridge guarded by twin stone lions on each end, and wound through downtown streets lined by immense buildings before coming to a stop at the Church of St. Elizabeth. A statue of Elizabeth, sculpted by Gyorgy Kiss, rises in front of the church. Her features appeared soft and youthful in the afternoon sunlight. We attended Mass there concelebrated by friar spiritual assistants. The three nave church was built over 100 years ago and sports huge stained glass windows in each of the naves. Outside,

towers rise 76 meters high. After Mass, the National Fraternity of the Order in Hungary treated us to a homemade dinner of chicken and dumpling-like noodles smothered in gravy. Homemade pastries, cookies, and espresso coffee were in abundance.

We made one last stop in Budapest – at Heroes Square -- before heading back to Manréza Conference Center. Arriving at dusk, our group fanned out over the Square. A light rain began to fall, and the YouFra contingent broke into dance and song. Suddenly, camera flashes lit up the square as many in the group turned into paparazzi.



CASTLE HILL SCENES

Clockwise from top:

Statue of St. Stephen, Royal Palace dome and statue, and street musician.

BELOW: Church of St. Elizabeth in Budapest.

RIGHT: Statue of Elizabeth in front of church.



YouFra contingent singing and dancing in Heroes' Square.



YouFra at General Chapter. At right is Anna Fruk, international councilor for YouFra.

ON DAY SEVEN, the General Chapter endorsed a recommendation to incorporate YouFra into the Order. With the endorsement, young people fascinated with St. Francis of Assisi who wish to pursue a vocation may begin the process within the YouFra structure and then continue with a regular Secular Franciscan fraternity. Such youth may begin a double journey, continuing with YouFra because of its dynamic experiences with other young people and at the same time getting spiritual nourishment for their vocation with the Secular Franciscan fraternity. Individual YouFra members, or even an entire YouFra unit, may be presented to a Secular Franciscan Fraternity Council for admission on the journey towards life-long profession.

The recommendation also encourages fraternities at all levels to journey with and help foster YouFra, with the hope that fraternity spiritual assistants would be available to the youth activities. During the discussion leading up to the endorsement, General Minister Encarnita told the assembly: “The young Franciscans are not the future of our Order. They are the present... with the exception that they need accompaniment in their growth.” She said Franciscan youth and Secular Franciscans learn from one another. While meeting with youth in Croatia, she said, “I told the young people I need to learn from them in living out my vocation.”

YouFra Spiritual Assistant Ivan Matic, OFM, called the endorsement an “important moment for the Chapter and for YouFra,” and said, “YouFra closes one chapter and opens another in its history.”

THERE WAS A LOT OF DISCUSSION, including small group break-outs, trying to zero in on what direction the Order should take, on what the Order should focus on for the next six years. The group reports covered a lot of areas, and it took a lot of parrying, negotiating and leadership skills to synthesize everything to the top five priorities (which the Chapter voted on):

1. Formation.
2. Communications.
3. Franciscan youth.
4. Presence in the world.
5. Emerging National Fraternities.

ON DAY EIGHT, it came time for us to depart -- amid a myriad of hugs and embraces. Our flight out of Budapest was delayed, which meant we had to make a nightmare dash from one terminal to another in Paris to catch the connecting flight to the USA. Mary caught a cold in Hungary, and it flared full-blown on the nine-and-a-half hour flight back. With Mary always willing to share, Bob began to succumb to its spell, too. Traveling was so exhausting that we rested at home the whole next day. But our spirits were soaring.

