

XVI General Chapter and VII Elective Chapter of OFS

Animate and guide with servant leadership

Opening Mass – 13 November 2021

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First of all, I would like to congratulate you for having the courage to organize and celebrate this XVI General Chapter and VII elective Chapter of your Order, despite the fact that various restrictions on international travel are still in force due to the prolonged pandemic. For some of you, getting to Rome was not an easy journey. You have been brave! This courage is undoubtedly born of trust in God, Lord of history, and is strengthened by the profound desire for a fraternal encounter around Christ and St. Francis.

Now, this General Chapter, postponed for a year for well-known reasons, is framed not only by this global phenomenon of the pandemic, but also by other events or phenomena of great importance, such as the VIII Centenary of the *Memoriale propositi* and the *Second Letter to all the faithful*, fundamental documents for understanding the origin and spirituality of Franciscan penitents. During this year in many countries the celebratory events of this centenary, studies and reflections on the meaning of the aforementioned documents and of our penitential Franciscan charism for our time have been multiplied. Furthermore, from 2023 to 2026 we will celebrate a great Franciscan centenary, now announced by the Conference of Ministers General of the Franciscan Family. This centenary will commemorate the Later Rule of the Friars Minor, the Christmas of Greccio, the Stigmata, the Canticle of the Creatures and the *transitus* of St. Francis to the glory of heaven. This celebration will be a great opportunity to deepen the knowledge of our identity and to bring the light of the Gospel to the world more consistently according to the charism of our common father, the saint of Assisi!

At the same time, humanity continues to live every day between noble aspirations and great suffering. Just think of the growing phenomenon of forced and massive migration to more developed countries, the alarming climate change due to irresponsible human activity, the strenuous aspirations for democracy and peace in so many nations, the insatiable business of arms, entertainment and of technology, necessary for everyone, but whose benefits often increase inequality and dependence among human beings and peoples. In this sense, Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, was able to grasp the great need of all humanity to stop the fratricidal and divisive dynamics between persons and peoples in order to return to the deep roots that unite us and push us to seek a common future of true brotherhood, peace and security for all, without exclusions. There is still time to repair these and many other damages, but not so much!

How can this General Chapter contribute to generating hope for a better future for our peoples and for the Church, the People of God? How can you contribute to the extension of the Kingdom of God in these times so tried, but also so charged with the desire for a new humanity?

The Lord gave me brothers... and sisters

One way to encourage the hope of humanity is to live these Chapter days as a true experience of fraternity, a gift from God that enlightens our hearts and pushes us to live in love.

With St. Francis, we too can say: "*The Lord gave me brothers*" (2Test, 14), and we must add: "and sisters"! Look around you: this assembly is an example of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Order, of the Church and of humanity, even if some capitulars are missing. Now, we are not here on human initiative, but because the Lord has called you and sent you to live the Franciscan charism in fraternity and in your secular state (cf. Rule 2). Living fraternity during a General Chapter means thanking God for this great gift and honouring him, that is, recognizing the great dignity of every brother and sister, not according to worldly criteria, but according to the Holy Spirit, who, through sacramental grace and profession in the OFS, distributed his gifts to all of you. Being true brothers and sisters means taking an interest in each other, conversing in truth and charity, knowing how to listen to each other, encourage and forgive each other. By the way, as you know, the Church has started a synodal journey, inviting its pastors to listen to all its members and also other believers and non-believers. In this chapter it is also very important to know how to listen to our brothers and sisters with an open heart and mind, to discern together the ways of the Lord, because no one has the monopoly of the Holy Spirit. You will not have to look for prefabricated solutions that exclude the inspired contribution of the capitulars. Celano reports the thought of the *Poverello* in this way: "*With God there is no preference of persons and the Holy Spirit, general minister of the Order, rests alike on the poor and the simple*" (2Cel 193).

Furthermore, the experience of praying, talking, eating and celebrating together is an antidote to isolation and individualism, so present in our society; it is like a balm that the Lord gives us for our wounds of the heart or to walk together as the psalmist says: "*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers – and sisters – dwell in unity. It is like precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, like forevermore*" (Ps 133, 1-3).

Remember the wonders the Lord has done

In addition to being a fraternal meeting, a General Chapter is also an opportunity to verify the work done by the previous Chapter. In making this verification you must not forget the dimension of faith and that is, what the Lord has done for you, in your local, regional, national and international families and fraternities. Psalm 104 that we have proclaimed has invited us to remember and meditate on all the wonders that the Lord has done, to sing to him with a joyful heart for his faithfulness in the midst of suffering. The passage from the Book of Wisdom that we heard told us of the wonders that God worked in nature to free his beloved children by making them cross the Red Sea and how they then celebrated the Lord with joy.

During each General Chapter, the careful and objective examination of the different reports is very important to learn from mistakes and imperfections, but above all to rejoice in the successes and generous efforts of the brothers and sisters, in whom God has manifested his faithful and liberating presence. For example, all the online activities that you have developed

in your fraternities to maintain communication, prayers and formation during the lockdown, in addition to the assistance and solidarity activities for those in need, who were most affected in these times, or the *Well4Africa* project that goes on for some years. On the other hand, after a long wait due to the pandemic, the fraternal and pastoral visits and national Chapters are resumed. Furthermore, in recent years the Church has recognized the holiness of life of several brothers and sisters of the Franciscan Third Order, including the Venezuelan doctor Blessed Giuseppe Gregorio Hernandez Cisneros; the Italian Blessed Olinto Marella; Blessed Maria Luigia of the Blessed Sacrament, Franciscan tertiary and foundress of the Adoration Sisters of the Cross; Blessed Armida Barelli, who was very active in the apostolate in favour of the Church and Italian society. Remembering the wonders the Lord still accomplishes with our cooperation helps us to remain confident in God and faithful in our service. So let us sing with joy to the God who accompanies us and gives us strength along the path of history: eight centuries of penitential Franciscan life that we are called to live today and to pass on to the next generations.

God does justice to his chosen ones

Celebrating the gift of fraternity and remembering the wonders of the Lord impel us to renew our commitment to serve him and the men and women of our time. As you well know, a General Chapter also has the task of discerning together the paths of the Lord for the Order in the coming years. We must therefore ask ourselves how to bring the light and joy of the Gospel to our world, aware that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). From your sharing, prayer, reflection and verification during these days and in the light of the Word of God, will emerge the priorities and guidelines for the coming years, and then you will elect the servants of the Order at the international level.

In this sense, it is very interesting that the Gospel that we have just heard tells us a parable of Jesus "*on the need to pray always, without getting tired*" (Lk 18: 1). It is very significant that the parable uses the figures of a dishonest judge and a widow in search of justice, that is, a powerful and haughty man and a suffering but resilient woman. This parable reveals, on the one hand, the great sensitivity of Jesus for human suffering, especially that of the most vulnerable, and on the other hand, the importance of persevering in prayer despite obstacles. The efficacy of prayer requires insistence, but is based on the goodness of the Father who listens to him like no other and responds, at times, quicker than we can imagine. However, to pray constantly and without ever getting tired you need to have true faith. Therefore at the end of the parable Jesus asks himself: "*But the Son of man, when he comes, will he find faith on earth?*" (Lk 18, 8).

So, I invite you to make your personal and liturgical prayer - these days and always - a true encounter of faith with the Lord, opening your heart to him with sincerity and letting the Word of God and the Holy Spirit do their work in every single person and in the midst of all of you. As you will recall, article 8 of the Rule of OFS says to the members of the Order: "*As Jesus was the true worshiper of the Father, let prayer and contemplation be the soul of their being and all they do. Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all in the Eucharist. Following one of the forms of liturgical prayer offered by the Church let this be a way of reliving the mysteries of Christ's life*". As we begin this chapter with the

Eucharistic banquet, let us allow ourselves to be nourished by the Lord's words of life and by the total gift of his person in his Body and in his Blood - food of eternal life. In this way you will have the spiritual strength to carry out well the intense and delicate work that a General Chapter requires.

If you pray well, during these days you would be able to fully live the gift of fraternity because God's love and truth will guide you in your interactions. If you pray with faith and docility, the Holy Spirit will enlighten and strengthen you so that you can discern how to animate and guide the OFS with a leadership of service in our times. If you open your heart and mind to God, you will be able to elect well the future members of the Presidency of the International Council of OFS, not guided by mere human calculations or political games, but by a true discernment in the Spirit that looks to the competences, but also to the demonstrated testimony of generous and self-sacrificing service. In many areas of today's society there is no room for God, for faith, or the freedom of faith and conscience is strongly threatened and believers are persecuted in different ways. If you pray with true faith, you will be able to respond to the challenges that the world presents to your identity and mission as Secular Franciscans, as n. 22.2 of your Constitutions: *"In the arena of justice and human development, let the Fraternities take up courageous initiatives in harmony with their Franciscan vocation and Church teaching. Let them take a clear stance against any threat to human dignity from every form of oppression or indifferences, whatever the source. Let them offer their fraternal service to victims of injustice"*. May this Chapter offer an effective, albeit modest, contribution to the question of Jesus: *"...When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"* (Lk 18, 8). May the words of Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti* on the importance of bringing religious values into the public debate, be a task also of the Secular Franciscans and help you to answer this question: *"It should be acknowledged that "among the most important causes of the crisis of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles. It is wrong when the only voices to be heard in public debate are those of the powerful and "experts". Room needs to be made for reflections born of religious traditions that are the repository of centuries of experience and wisdom"* (FT 275).

Happy Chapter to all, dear brothers and sisters!

Now, speaking of praying without getting tired, I invite you to sing the Prayer before the crucifix of St. Francis in the original version of the text:

Preghiera davanti al crocifisso

*O alto e glorioso Dio,
illumina le tenebre de lo core mio.
E damme fede diritta,
speranza certa e caritade perfetta,
senno e cognoscimento, Signore,
che faccia lo tuo santo e verace comandamento.
Amen.*